

## Building Cultural Harmony and Self-Identity for Muslim Students in Darwin, Australia

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**Abstract:** This research explores the experiences of Muslim students in Darwin, Australia, in balancing religious obligations and academic demands and the impact this has on their identity formation. The method used is qualitative field research methods, including in-depth interviews, observation and documentation. The research results show that Islamic education contributes positively to students' identity, even though they face challenges such as limited prayer facilities, lack of halal food, and experiences of discrimination that affect emotional well-being. This research's recommendations include increasing support from educational institutions, including providing better facilities and training for teaching staff to understand students' religious values to create a more inclusive and harmonious learning environment.

**Keywords:** Cultural Harmony; Islamic Education; Self Identity

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## INTRODUCTION

Islam has experienced rapid growth not only in the East but also in the West. Australia is one of the Western countries that has had significant development of the Muslim community (Ali, 2022). According to the 2021 census data, the number of Muslims in Australia reached 824,348 people, or approximately 3.2% of the total population of over 25 million people (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022). which is described in the graphic below:

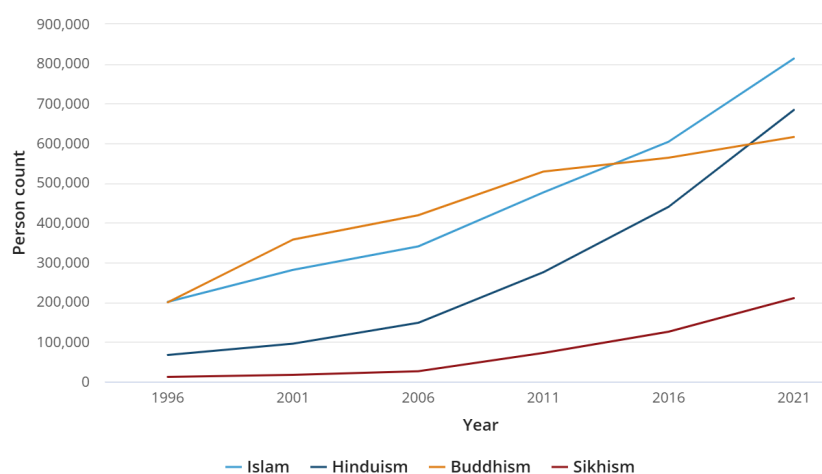


Figure 1. Affiliation with the main Other religions, 1996 to 2021

This graph shows a consistent increase in the last few decades. These increases reflect Australia's migration trends. In 2021, 93.8% of people were affiliated with Other religions, and the main religions in Australia's Other Religion category were Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. While the numbers of muslims continue to increase, Islam (209,150). These increases were largely a result of recent migration from Southern and Central Asia. The increase in Islamic affiliation can also be largely attributed to recent migration. Almost 126,000 people who arrived in Australia between 2016 and 2021 were affiliated with Islam. Their main countries of birth were Pakistan, Afghanistan, India, and Bangladesh (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022). This demographic shift has important implications for education, particularly in relation to how Muslim students negotiate religious identity within secular and multicultural contexts.

Within this context, Muslim students in Australia have to face concerns regarding prejudice, discrimination, and even acts of violence or verbal harassment motivated by a lack of understanding of the Islamic religion (Hussain, 2013). This phenomenon creates additional pressure, especially for the younger generation of Muslims who are searching for their identity in a complex multicultural context. These challenges often make Muslim students feel isolated or experience internal conflict between their Islamic identity and academic responsibilities (Scott & Franzmann, 2007).

The same challenges also occur in Darwin, the capital of Australia's Northern Territory, which has a significant Muslim population. The Muslim community in Darwin not only settles as permanent residents but also as international students pursuing education at various levels of institutions

(Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Within this context, Muslim students in Darwin also face distinct educational and identity-related challenges. As religious minorities, they must continuously negotiate between maintaining Islamic beliefs, practices, and moral frameworks and adapting to academic and social environments that may not fully accommodate religious difference (Ali, 2022). Previous studies have documented experiences of social pressure, marginalisation, and exposure to negative stereotypes, including Islamophobia, which can undermine students' sense of belonging and self-confidence (Kabir, 2020; Labibatussolihah et al., 2020; Ozalp & Ćufurović, 2021; Possamai et al., 2016).

For young Muslims in particular, these experiences occur during a critical period of identity formation, where religious, cultural, and academic identities intersect. The need to reconcile Islamic values with expectations of secular education can generate internal tensions, leading to feelings of isolation or identity conflict.

Islamic education plays a crucial role in supporting the identity formation, moral development, and sense of belonging of Muslim students (Sahin, 2018). Theoretically, Islamic education aims to foster holistic development by integrating faith (īmān), ethical conduct (akhlāq), and intellectual growth ('ilm) within learners' lived realities (Saepudin, 2024). Ideally, Islamic education in multicultural contexts should provide students with the conceptual and moral tools to engage constructively with diversity while maintaining a confident and reflective Islamic identity (Aulia Rahman & Azzahra, 2024; Hamzah & Jusoh, 2025).

However, in practice, Islamic education in Darwin faces several constraints, including the relevance of the curriculum to local contexts, limited institutional support, teacher preparedness, and competing influences from digital media and informal religious learning sources (Interview and Observation, 2024). This combination of social, academic, and religious pressures makes their educational journey full of challenges (Zulfikar & Emawati, 2020).

Despite a growing body of literature on Muslim minorities and education in Western societies, there remains a limited empirical focus on how Islamic education contributes to identity formation among Muslim students in smaller, less-studied multicultural cities such as Darwin. Existing studies often concentrate on major metropolitan centres or focus broadly on discrimination and integration, with less attention to students' lived educational experiences and the role of Islamic education in shaping identity within everyday academic life (Apriana et al., 2025; Diallo, 2017; Haveric, 2019; Hefni et al., 2022; Possamai et al., 2016). This gap is particularly evident in relation to international Muslim students, whose transnational backgrounds further complicate identity negotiation processes.

Accordingly, the research problem addressed in this study concerns how Muslim students in Darwin experience and navigate identity formation within secular educational environments, and how Islamic education functions as a resource for negotiating cultural harmony, belonging, and academic engagement. While demographic data highlight the growing presence and

diversity of Muslim students, there is insufficient analytical understanding of how these students make meaning of their religious identity in relation to educational structures and sociocultural pressures.

This study aims to explore the lived experiences of Muslim students in Darwin, Australia, with a particular focus on the role of Islamic education in shaping their identity formation within a multicultural and secular context. By examining how students interpret, negotiate, and sustain their Islamic identity in the face of social, academic, and cultural challenges, this research makes a significant empirical and conceptual contribution to Islamic education scholarship. Specifically, it advances our understanding of identity formation among Muslim minorities in non-metropolitan Western contexts and offers insights for developing more inclusive and contextually responsive educational approaches that support the well-being and academic success of Muslim students.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to explore how Muslim students in Darwin, Australia, negotiate their Islamic identity while fulfilling academic responsibilities within a minority Muslim context. A qualitative approach was selected because the research objectives focus on understanding lived experiences, meanings, challenges, and adaptive strategies.

Darwin was selected because it represents a unique multicultural context in which Muslims constitute a relatively small religious minority and ISD functions as a central hub for religious education, community activities, and social support for Muslim students, making it an appropriate context for examining the harmonization of Islamic education and formal education.

This qualitative approach allows researchers to collect in-depth information through interviews and observations to see how Muslim students live their religious and academic identities in social and cultural contexts (Syah, 2014). Participants were selected using purposive sampling, as the study required individuals with direct experience in Islamic education and Muslim student life in Darwin. In total, 13 participants were involved in the study, which will be described in the following table:

**Table 1. Research Participants and Selection Criteria**

Research Participants	
Muslim students (n = 10). The student participants included: 8 Muslim students from government schools and 2 Muslim students from Islamic schools	Parents, religious leaders, and Islamic school teachers are affiliated with the Islamic Society of Darwin (n = 3)
Selection Criteria	
1. Active Muslim students enrolled in formal education in Darwin.	1. Active members of the Islamic Society of Darwin.
2. Having lived and studied in Darwin long enough to experience its academic and social environment.	2. Directly involved in supporting Muslim students' Islamic and formal education.
3. Representing different educational settings (government and Islamic schools).	3. Holding roles as parents, religious leaders, or Islamic school teachers

4. These students were selected because they directly experience identity negotiation, academic demands, and religious practice in both secular and faith-based educational contexts.

This combination of participants enabled the study to capture perspectives at the student, family, institutional, and community levels (Sugiyono, 2016). This way, the data obtained directly relates to the main research topic. The primary data collection method is semi-structured interviews conducted in person or remotely. These interviews helped to explore the experiences and views of Muslim students regarding the balance between religious and educational responsibilities. Additionally, non-participant observations were conducted to complement the interview data, providing a more comprehensive picture of student interactions within the school and community environments (Sugiyono, 2018).

Data analysis followed an interactive qualitative analysis process consisting of three stages: 1. Data reduction consisted of Interview transcripts and observation notes that were read repeatedly and coded to identify key patterns related to identity formation, academic challenges, coping strategies, and support systems. 2. Data display. The coded data were organized into thematic categories and presented in narrative form to highlight relationships across participant groups. And 3. Conclusions were drawn by interpreting the emerging themes in relation to the research objectives. Verification was conducted through constant comparison across data sources and participant groups (Moleong, 2005).

To ensure credibility and trustworthiness, triangulation was applied by comparing data from Muslim students, parents, educators, and religious leaders, as well as by integrating interview and observational data. Member checking was also employed to confirm the accuracy of participants' statements.

## **RESEARCH RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **History, Development, and Education of the Muslim Community in the Northern Territory**

The Northern Territory has the second smallest Muslim population in Australia. Geographical proximity to Southeast Asia, especially Indonesia, provides a strategic position in regional relations, especially between Darwin and Muslim regions in Asia. Evidence of contact between Muslims and the Northern Territory dates back to 820 AD, when Muhammad Ibn Musa al-Khwarizmi made a nautical map of Java covering the Cape York Peninsula, Gulf of Carpentaria, and Arnhem Land. (Hussain, 2013).

Since the 16th century, Muslim sailors from Makassar, known as Macassans, traded with Aboriginal tribes in the Northern Territory, although this interaction ceased in 1906 due to South Australian government policy. Muslim immigrants from various countries, including Indonesia, Pakistan, and India, began to settle in Darwin in the 20th century. In 1972, the Islamic Society of the Northern Territory (ISNT) was formed to strengthen the Muslim community in this region. ISNT is a forum for Muslims to socialize and carry out religious activities, such as Eid al-Fitr prayers and other holiday celebrations (Nurul Huq, 2009).

The development of the Muslim community in Darwin was triggered by the increasing number of Muslim families who arrived in the 1970s. In 1972, ISNT was officially registered as an association and was involved in various religious and social activities. The first mosque in Darwin, a symbol of Muslim unity and identity in the city, was also built with support from various parties. This mosque not only functions as a place of worship but also becomes a center for educational and social activities for the Muslim community in the Northern Territory (Hussain, 2013).

The number of Muslims in the Northern Territory, according to the 2021 census, is only 0.3% of the total population, making it one of the smallest religious communities in the region. While Christians still dominate religious affiliation in the Northern Territory, the number of Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists continues to increase. Apart from that, Indonesian Muslims who live in Darwin also form a relatively large community, making Darwin one of the Muslim population centers in the Northern Territory (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022).

In the education sector, although the majority of students in Australia still attend government schools, there is a significant proportion of Muslim students who participate in non-government schools. Based on 2021 data, around 8.4% of students in non-government schools identify as Muslim. However, the percentage of Muslim students attending Islamic schools in Darwin remains relatively small, with only 37 primary and secondary school students (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022).

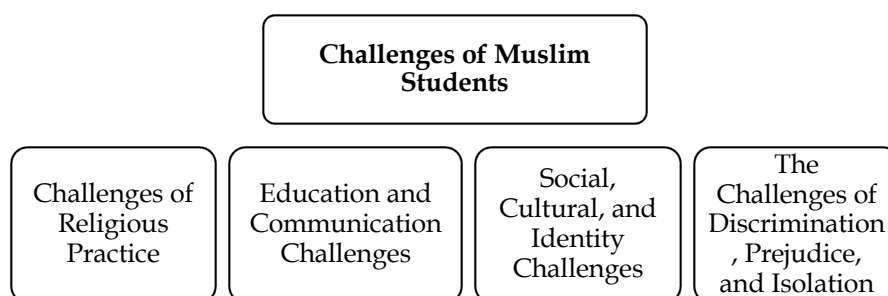
Apart from formal schools, informal educational institutions such as madrasas teach the Koran, Arabic, and Islamic studies. These institutions play an essential role in maintaining the religious and cultural identity of Muslim children in Darwin. The existence of these institutions is also supported by the mosques in Darwin, Palmerston, and Alice Springs, which are the centers of Muslim community activities in the area (Hussain, 2013).

The Islamic Society of the Northern Territory (ISNT) and other institutions are important in organizing Muslims in the Northern Territory. This community consists of more than 25 different ethnic and linguistic groups, including native Muslims from countries such as Indonesia, Pakistan, and India. Even though the number of Muslims in the Northern Territory is relatively tiny compared to other states, they have succeeded in building a solid community and have had a significant impact on social and religious life in the region (Nurul Huq, 2009).

Although the Northern Territory has a small Muslim population, Muslims in the region have managed to form a well-organized and growing community. Their success in building educational institutions, mosques, and religious organizations shows a solid commitment to maintaining religious and cultural identity in Australia's multicultural society.

### **Challenges of Muslim Students in Maintaining a Balance Between Self-Development as Muslims and Academic Achievement**

Based on the results of the research data triangulation, Muslim students in Darwin face various challenges in their daily lives. The various challenges are described in the image below:



**Figure 2. Challenges of Muslim Students in Darwin**

Based on Figure 2, it can be understood that one of the main challenges is balancing religious practices with a busy school schedule. They often have to find the right time and place to carry out religious services, such as prayer, without disrupting academic activities (Interview, 2024). Difficulty in balancing religious practices with academic demands is a common problem among Muslim students in non-Muslim countries (Sanusi et al., 2021). They often face pressure to fulfill these obligations, which can add to their stress and affect their psychological well-being (Ahmed, 2016).

Furthermore, Students often feel stressed when managing their time between busy academic activities and religious practices, affecting their academic performance and emotional well-being. Dilemmas also arise when exam schedules coincide with prayer times (Interview, 2024). Schedule mismatches often force students to decide between fulfilling academic and religious obligations, leading to stress and guilt. Feelings of guilt can also arise if students postpone worship because of urgent school assignments.

Conflicts can become more complex when students have to choose between attending essential school events such as events or carrying out religious services. Decisions like these often create emotional stress, as students must prioritize academic commitments and religious obligations. During Ramadan, students also experience difficulty participating in school activities due to fasting. Students often have to make difficult choices between activities that support personal and religious development, which can add to feelings of stress. Apart from that, students are sometimes hesitant or confused about whether to participate in school events or activities at the mosque if both are at the same time. Often, feeling guilty when praying late because you have to participate in school activities is also a common problem.

Apart from that, finding a comfortable and quiet place to pray at school can also be a problem because not all schools provide a particular room for prayer (Interview, 2024). Access to adequate prayer space at school can influence Muslim students' comfort, satisfaction, and participation in academic and social activities (Kabir, 2020). The inability to find a suitable place can add stress and discomfort to the school environment.

Additionally, finding halal food in the school canteen can be a challenge because not all establishments provide options that meet Muslim dietary requirements. The availability of halal food in schools is often insufficient, which affects students' ability to adhere to their dietary practices easily. These

limitations may force students to bring food from home or seek alternatives outside of school, which may not always be practical (Interview, 2024).

The second challenge is related to education and communication. Based on the triangulation results, it is known that explaining aspects of the Islamic religion to non-Muslim friends is also a significant challenge. Students often have to spend time educating themselves and their peers about Islamic teachings and practices so that they better understand and accept these differences (Interview and Observation, 2024). Because education about religion can help reduce stereotypes and increase intercultural understanding, but this process often requires extra effort from students who may feel burdened (Ahmed, 2022).

The third challenge is related to social, cultural, and identity challenges. Based on the triangulation results, it is known that overcoming misunderstandings about Islam among their peers often requires extra effort from students to correct erroneous views. They also have to face negative stereotypes about Islam that often appear in the media, which can influence how other people view and treat them (Interview and Observation, 2024). Media stereotypes can worsen intercultural relations and increase feelings of alienation among Muslim students (Rehman & Hanley, 2023).

Furthermore, maintaining an identity as a Muslim while integrating into Australian society is a significant challenge, as students must balance religious practice and adapt to local social norms. Muslim students often face the dilemma of maintaining their cultural identity while trying to be accepted into broader society, which can impact their social and emotional well-being. Additionally, a sense of isolation and a lack of Muslim representation in schools can make students feel alienated. They often feel they lack support or are invisible in the wider school environment (Interview, 2024). A lack of representation can negatively impact students' sense of belonging and academic motivation, and exacerbate feelings of isolation.

Muslim students at school also face various ways and challenges in expressing their religious identity. Some students feel open enough to show their identity, such as wearing the hijab at school. Open expressions of religious identity, such as wearing the hijab, can strengthen their self-confidence and connectedness to their religious community. However, it can also attract unwanted attention or even create stigma. On the other hand, some students choose to keep their religious identity more private to avoid unnecessary attention. Some students feel more comfortable reducing their religious expression in unfamiliar social settings to avoid conflict or discrimination.

There are several ways Muslim students in Darwin can express their identity. Some students express their identity through daily behavior and ethics that reflect Islamic teachings. Behavior that is consistent with religious teachings, such as honesty and concern for others, can be an effective way to demonstrate religious identity in daily activities. In addition, they felt that sharing knowledge about religion could help increase understanding and reduce stereotypes among classmates. Depending on the situation, some students choose to express their religious identity selectively to adapt to the social context and reduce the risk of conflict. They also express their identity through involvement in inter-religious



dialogue at school. In addition, they also strive to demonstrate exemplary academic achievement and behavior to help promote a positive image of Islam and overcome negative stereotypes.

Furthermore, the fourth challenge is discrimination, prejudice, and isolation. Some Muslim students report experiences of discrimination or negative stereotyping related to their identity. One experience that is often faced is getting negative comments about their hijab. Although these incidents are rare, these comments can affect a student's feelings and self-confidence (Interview, 2024). Negative comments regarding religious symbols such as the hijab can affect students' emotional and social well-being. Some students have never experienced discrimination directly, but sometimes feel they are seen as different.

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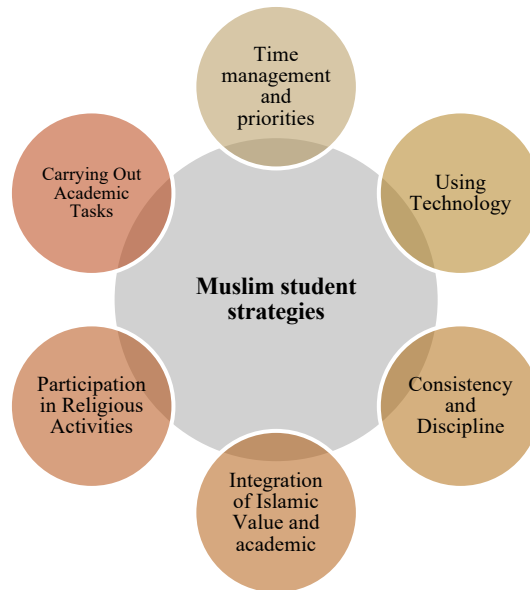
Some students report feeling like "outsiders" even though they have not experienced direct discrimination. This alienation is often caused by a lack of representation and understanding of their religion in the social environment. Suspicious stares in public places while wearing the hijab is also an experience reported by some students. Suspicious glances or treatment of religious symbols, such as the headscarf, can create a feeling of discomfort and affect feelings of security in public spaces (Stubbs & Sallee, 2013).

There are also cases where students are ignored in group work because of the assumption that Muslims do not like to socialize. These negative assumptions can affect students' opportunities to participate actively in academic and social activities. Some students also experienced racial comments that disparaged their ethnic and religious backgrounds. Disparaging comments about their beliefs are also common.

Based on the various challenges that have been explained previously, it can be understood that the challenges faced by Muslim students in the city of Darwin are mostly also experienced by Muslim students in Australia, as has been studied in various previous studies.

## Muslim Students' Strategies for Maintaining a Balance Between Self-Development as Muslims and Academic Achievement in a Minority Muslim Environment in Darwin, Australia

Many Muslim students in Darwin, Australia, adopt various effective strategies to balance religious obligations with academic duties. Based on the results of the study using interviews, observation, and documentation techniques, several strategies are known to be frequently used by Muslim students in Darwin, which will be described in the following image:



**Figure 3. Muslim Student Strategies to balance religious obligations with academic duties**

Figure 3 illustrates the most commonly used strategy, which involves creating a daily schedule that includes specific times for worship and study. Students also often prioritize tasks based on urgency while still fulfilling their mandatory worship obligations. Prioritizing urgent tasks while maintaining religious obligations is an effective way to manage time and reduce stress (Interview, 2024). This helps students maintain a balance between their academic and spiritual demands.

They also try to be efficient in worship and studying. Efficiency in worship, such as performing worship mindfully yet quickly, and learning, such as utilizing productive study techniques, can help students achieve both goals more effectively. They also revealed that making a daily task list is a method to ensure that worship and school obligations run smoothly (Interview and Observation, 2024). Creating a detailed to-do list can help students organize their activities and ensure that all academic and religious obligations can be completed on time (Imani et al., 2024).

In addition, using reminder applications for prayer schedules and academic assignments is a modern approach that is often applied. Technology like reminder apps can help students stick to their schedule, reminding them of prayer times and assignment deadlines, and reducing the chance of missing out (Interview, 2024). Consistency in daily devotions and doing tasks little by little

are also effective strategies to help manage their time better and reduce workload.

Muslim students in Darwin also often find differences between the values taught at school and Islamic values. Some students overcome these differences by focusing on universal values that align with Islamic teachings to help build bridges between religious teachings and social norms at school, ultimately making adaptation easier without sacrificing faith.

Students also try to understand the context behind different values and adhere to Islamic teachings. Understanding different values' social and cultural contexts is essential so students can adapt without losing their religious identity. Seeing differences as an opportunity for dialogue and mutual understanding is the approach they often take. Open dialogue about differences in values can increase understanding and tolerance between students with different religious backgrounds and enrich students' experiences in learning about different perspectives (Interview and Observation, 2024).

Some students feel that the values taught at school are good and in line with Islamic values. Perceiving school values aligned with religious principles can help students feel more comfortable and integrated in their educational environment. Additionally, discussions with teachers about grade differences are another way to seek mutual understanding. Discussing it with educators can open constructive lines of communication and help find common ground between different values.

Students also see differences as an opportunity to learn critical thinking and tolerance. This can strengthen students' ability to think reflectively and develop a tolerant attitude towards diversity. Apart from that, there are students who feel there is no significant difference because the values taught at school also include the principles of goodness in Islamic teachings.

Muslim students in Darwin use various effective strategies to maintain religious practices while at school. One often used strategy is asking permission to pray during class hours and fasting as usual. In this case, open communication with teachers regarding prayer needs can help ensure that prayer times are respected and accommodated in the school schedule.

### **Support from Families, Schools, and Muslim Communities in Facilitating Harmonization of the Development of Islamic Education and Formal Education for Muslim Students in Darwin, Australia**

This research reveals the critical role of three main stakeholders in facilitating harmonization between Islamic education and formal education for Muslim students in Darwin, Australia: parents, religious communities (Islamic Society of Darwin/ISD), and educational institutions or schools. These findings indicate the existence of comprehensive supporting factors in maintaining and developing Muslim students' religious identity and academic achievement at school.

Research identifies four main dimensions of the parent role. **First**, financial support and motivation are reflected in parents' willingness to pay for additional religious education and encourage participation in religious activities. They were

**second**, instilling Islamic values from an early age, emphasizing the importance of balance between religious and general knowledge. **Third**, supervision and support in the implementation of worship amid busy academic activities. **Fourth**, an example is the activities of religious organizations (Interview, 2024).

This finding aligns with the concept of parental involvement in education, which was put forward by experts, where parental involvement is not only in academic aspects but also in forming children's values and identities. The dual role of parents as financial supporters and role models shows the importance of parents' active involvement in the child's holistic education process (Epstein, 2011). In the context of parental involvement, cooperation between the school and the family is built through an agreement on rules as a basis, which is then realized in routine interactions between teachers, parents, and students (Epstein, 2011).

The Islamic Society of Darwin (ISD) plays a role as a catalyst in creating an environment that supports the development of Muslim students' religious identity. The weekend madrasa program, which includes learning the Koran, fiqh, hadith, and Arabic, is a form of concrete support in meeting religious education needs. It is interesting that ISD focuses on aspects of religious education and plays a role in building intercultural and interreligious bridges by involving various community leaders in its activities (Triangulation, 2024).

This research also reveals two different approaches to accommodating the needs of Muslim students. Government public schools implement an inclusive approach by providing equal accommodations to all students regardless of their background. Meanwhile, the Australian International Islamic College (AIIC) adopts a more integrated approach by combining the Australian national curriculum with Islamic values (Interview and Documentation, 2024). This difference in approach shows the Australian education system's flexibility in accommodating religious education's needs while maintaining high academic standards. The AIIC model, which integrates Islamic values into the formal curriculum, is a clear example of how harmonization between religious and formal education can be realized systematically (Triangulation, 2024).

The most significant finding from this research is the importance of collaboration between the three stakeholders. Parents provide the foundation and personal support, ISD provides community infrastructure and religious education programs, and schools provide the formal framework that accommodates religious needs. This synergy creates an environment that supports the academic and spiritual development of Muslim students in Darwin. The harmonization created is not only beneficial for Muslim students but also contributes to the formation of a more inclusive multicultural society. This is reflected in the involvement of various stakeholders in activities organized by ISD and the inclusive approach implemented by public schools.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that building cultural harmony and self-identity among Muslim students in Darwin occurs through an ongoing process of negotiation between religious commitments, academic demands, and

multicultural school environments. As a minority group, Muslim students face practical and social challenges related to time, facilities for worship, dietary requirements, and exposure to stereotypes. However, these challenges actively shape their identity development rather than merely constraining it. The findings demonstrate that Muslim students exercise agency through adaptive strategies, including structured time management, technology-assisted religious practices, selective expression of their religious identity, and constructive dialogue with teachers and peers. Crucially, the study highlights that cultural harmony and educational resilience are sustained through a triadic support system involving families, Muslim community institutions, and schools, which together enable the integration of Islamic values with formal education. By illuminating how Islamic education functions as a lived and relational resource in everyday schooling, this study advances understanding of Muslim students' self-identity formation and educational experiences in a multicultural context such as Darwin, Australia.

Future research should delve deeper into the experiences of Muslim students in Darwin, focusing on the adaptation strategies they employ to overcome challenges and the active role of communities and schools in supporting them. Additionally, it is essential to conduct broader studies on the long-term impact of such experiences on the identity and emotional well-being of Muslim students in multicultural environments.

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