

Research paper

Perceptions of Muslim Culture and Religion among Greek Educational and Cultural Institutions

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Citation: Eleni, N., & Efcharis, M. (2026). Perceptions of muslim culture and religion among Greek educational and cultural institutions. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education and Society*, 14(2), Article 8. <https://doi.org/10.20897/apjes/19347>

Published: September 29, 2026

ABSTRACT

In the contemporary sociopolitical context, the relationship between Islam and the West is characterized by tensions shaped by historical and political factors. Within Western societies, these dynamics have contributed to the development of negative stereotypes that portray Muslims as backward, religiously oppressed, and culturally monolithic. Such representations extend beyond individual prejudice, influencing institutional attitudes, public policies, and dominant public discourse. This study examines the attitudes of Larissa's cultural and educational institutions toward local Muslim communities, focusing on how they conceptualize and engage with Muslim identity. It further explores how institutional practices shape public perceptions by promoting either the inclusion or exclusion of these populations. Drawing on qualitative data, the findings align with existing scholarship, indicating that although inclusion initiatives have been introduced, institutional practices largely reflect assimilationist tendencies, with Muslim cultural and religious representation remaining limited and often symbolic. Consequently, while cultural and educational institutions have considerable potential to foster intercultural understanding, this potential remains largely underutilized.

Keywords: Muslim culture, Muslim religion, educational institutions, cultural institutions, intercultural education, Greece

Understanding Islam: Islamic culture and religion

Islam is one of the world's major monotheistic religions, centered on the worship of Allah and guided by Sharia, the Islamic legal and moral system derived from the Qur'an and the Sunnah, the teachings of Muhammad, according to Muslims the final prophet (Hussain, 2011; Shaltout & Haddara, 2004; Asl, 2017). Muhammad's teachings, preserved in the Hadiths, morally guide faithfuls by promoting virtues such as justice, compassion, tolerance, and brotherhood (Ali, 2023; Karimov & Doniyorov, 2019). These values are also reflected in the Five Pillars of Islam, adopted by most Muslims: Shahada, Salat, Zakat, Sawm, and Hajj, which cultivate humility, discipline, generosity, respect for others, self-restraint, and unity among Muslims (Lewis & Churchill, 2009; Rahman & Ghamidi, 2024; Awang et al., 2018; Hossain, 2012), portraying Islam as a religion that promotes moral living and humanitarian values (Ali, 2023).

Although Islam provides a common religious and moral framework, Muslim cultures have evolved in diverse ways under the influence of historical, political, social, and cultural factors, adopting cultural practices that differ from main Islamic ideas (Yilmaz, 2014). Islam's vast expansion across different regions led to the formation of communities with distinct linguistic, ethnic, and cultural identities, while local traditions shaped different

expressions of Islamic practice (Ali, 2011; Ahmed, 2016; Esposito, 2011; Sagadeyev, 2002). Interactions with civilizations such as the Byzantine, Persian, Indian, Chinese, and Western worlds further enriched Islamic thought, while globalization continues to reshape Muslim identities through the interaction of religious beliefs, local traditions, and global influences (Kirabaev & Al-Janabi, 2019; Manger, 1999).

Western worldviews on Islam

Interaction between Europe and Islam has been happening for over a millennium, through which it has been viewed both as an enemy and ally, complicating European efforts to balance religious freedom with secular governance, with some fearing for Europe's identity and others emphasizing historical coexistence (Berger, 2014). Said's (1978) theory of Orientalism supports that Western representations of Islam are not neutral descriptions but rather historically constructed discourses that portray Muslim societies as exotic, backward, irrational, and fundamentally opposed to Western civilization. These representations have profoundly influenced academic knowledge, political discourse, media portrayals, and public perceptions of Muslims. Thus, according to literature, Western perceptions of Islam have long been shaped by negative stereotypes, with various challenges in Muslim societies to be attributed to religion (Mazrui, 1997). Since the 1980s, public discourse, such as media and important public figures in both Europe and America, have reinforced anti-Islamic narratives, portraying Islam as backward, monolithic, and resistant to modernity and diversity (Shadid & Koningsveld 2006; Lyons, 2014). Despite Islamic teachings that emphasize diversity and peaceful coexistence, Muslims are often misrepresented as violent or fanatical, ignoring the internal diversity of Muslim communities (Cesari, 2009; Green, 2019; Said, 1978).

Evidently, Orientalist discourse persists despite political, historical, and social transformations as its underlying assumptions remain relatively stable. According to Said (1978) this is a result of the interaction between latent and manifest Orientalism, with latent Orientalism compromising the underlying assumptions about the Orient, and manifest Orientalism referring to the explicit ways these assumptions are articulated in scholarship, media, politics, and institutional practices. These persistent underlying assumptions and its manifestation to public discourse often generate tensions between the West and Muslims communities, leading to the social and political exclusion of Muslims (Cesari, 2009; Green, 2019). Beyond exclusion, Muslims have often been recipients of racist actions, which threaten even their participation in Western societies (Shadid & Koningsveld, 2002). The research supports that islamophobia is a complex, politically sustained phenomenon that is being reproduced not only at the individual level but also by institutions. Thus, discrimination manifests in subtle and systemic ways across public institutions, taking various forms such as unequal access to services, biased treatment within the criminal justice system, and discrimination in education and employment. Such practices are often framed as politically "neutral" and are further reinforced through state policies, including restrictions on religious dress and Islamic practices. This can also be echoed in policies adopted by a state, such as restrictions to the dress code or other practices of Islam (Sayyid, 2014; Allen, 2010).

Greece and Islamism

Islam is also traced in Greece back to several centuries, since the Ottoman period (1453–1821), and is now one of the country's largest religious minorities. Protected under Greek law, Muslims in Greece include both historical post-Ottoman minority communities and more recent immigrants and refugees, reflecting the religion's longstanding and evolving presence in the country (Tsitselikis, 2004).

Greece, belonging to the West and having a strong Greek-Orthodox national identity, has also developed negative attitudes toward Islam despite its legal status of Muslim protection. Since the 2015 migration influx, during which the majority of arriving refugees were Muslims fleeing conflicts in the Middle East, public and political discourse has increasingly framed and established Islam as a threat. Political parties, Greek Orthodox Church figures, and media have influenced narratives to portray Muslims as an endangerment to national identity, Orthodox values, and state security (Sakellariou, 2023; 2017). Furthermore, the Ottoman rule has contributed to anti-Muslim sentiment in Greece, where Islam is often associated with Turkey and ethnic tensions (Huseyinoglu, 2021). Within this context, Muslims experience symbolic violence, as dominant Greek Orthodox norms are institutionally privileged while Islamic beliefs and practices are marginalized (Sakellariou, 2011). Further, refugee Muslims are usually more vulnerable and face discrimination to a greater extent, manifesting in various ways, with the more extreme ones going as far as vandalism of Muslim places of worship (Huseyionglu, 2021).

Models of integration

Having explored how Greek society views Islam, it becomes crucial to understand the approaches through which policies and legal frameworks regarding diversity are designed. Responding to the increasing diversity in

Western societies, three dominant integration models have shaped European policy and educational practice: assimilation, multiculturalism, and interculturalism. Assimilationist models deeply contrast with the latter two by suppressing diversity and promoting social cohesion through the conformity of migrant populations to dominant norms (Brown & Bean, 2006).

While multiculturalism and interculturalism both seek inclusion, equality, and cohesion, they differ in their understandings of culture and identity, leading to distinct approaches in integration (Taylor, 2012; Modood, 2021). Multiculturalism emphasizes cultural pluralism by recognizing and supporting distinct group identities (Taylor, 2012; Modood, 2021), but it has been criticized for leading to social fragmentation and for adopting static conceptions of culture that overlook the complexity of individual identities (Meer & Modood 2012; Cantle, 2012; Govaris, 2011).

Interculturalism emerged as an alternative approach to multiculturalism, viewing culture as a dynamic, evolving process shaped through continuous social contact, rather than fixed inheritance (Maniatis, 2012). It emphasizes dialogue, shared civic values, and active engagement between groups, viewing cultural identities as fluid and mutually transformed through contact, aiming to cultivate a common public culture while respecting cultural diversity (Meer & Modood, 2012; Zapata-Barrero, 2017; Modood, 2013; Taylor, 1994). Scholarly debate continues regarding whether multiculturalism and interculturalism constitute competing or complementary models, with some arguing that their applicability depends on specific social and historical contexts (Meer and Modood 2012; Taylor 2012).

The Importance of cultural capital: Interculturalism in education and cultural institutions

Integration models are especially substantial in education, as schools function as key sites of interaction between host and migrant populations and promote inclusion, empowerment, and social participation (Hannah, 2008). Drawing on interculturalism, intercultural education seeks to ensure equal learning opportunities through inclusive educational reform, encouraging dialogue, cultural exchange, and the development of transcultural identities while respecting students' individuality and diversity (Markou, 1997; Govaris, 2011; Manousou, 2017). This emphasis on individuality is particularly important in multicultural educational contexts, where students' identities should not be reduced to single cultural, ethnic, religious, or linguistic categories. An intersectional understanding of identity instead recognises that different dimensions of identity may intersect and shape students' experiences in complex and individual ways (Scheffers, 2026). Central to this approach is the cultivation of intercultural competence, including empathy, tolerance of ambiguity, critical thinking, and communicative skills (Govaris, 2011).

Migrants' cultural and linguistic capital plays a crucial role in integration, as its recognition in education supports identity formation, academic engagement, and a sense of belonging without requiring the abandonment of heritage cultures (Yosso, 2005; Damaschke-Deitrick, 2021). Validating students' experiences and identities creates inclusive learning environments that frame diversity as an asset, bridge home and school contexts, and promote deeper learning and educational equity (Cummins, 2000; Cummins et al., 2011; Zulficar, 2019; Putera & Akid, 2022). More broadly, intercultural approaches to education emphasise the value of incorporating culturally situated knowledge and experiences into learning, allowing cultural diversity to function as a resource rather than an obstacle to educational participation (Oviedo-Berrocal et al., 2026).

Intercultural understanding and social cohesion are also promoted through cultural institutions such as museums. The European Union has consistently underlined the role of museums in fostering intercultural dialogue by including minority perspectives through participatory and inclusive practices (European Commission, 2007; Council of Europe, 2005; Stylianou-Lambert et al., 2014). Through such practices, the public understanding of minorities' cultural background is enriched while also migrants are being represented and embedded in society (European Commission, 2017).

Integration policies regarding muslim populations

While some measures regarding Muslim integration have been taken, Muslim identity is not fully accepted across Europe. According to Tariq Modood (2003), generally, liberal democracies in Europe, while they attempt to manage diversity by incorporating some intercultural features, they do so in conditional and controlling ways, meaning that cultural and religious diversity is only seen and accepted when it conforms to dominant norms. Additionally, following 9/11 and subsequent attacks, Muslim identity became increasingly associated with terrorism and security threats, fueling Islamophobia and enabling right-winged parties to apply tougher assimilation policies (Mohiuddin, 2017). This has marginalized Muslims in public discourse, as their diversity is often overlooked with media and governments focusing on Islamist organizations, not leaving space for moderate, secular or liberal Muslim voices, and thus further reinforcing stereotypes (Baran, 2010).

This is also reflected into educational contexts, as according to research, schools' policies and curriculums often adopt exclusionary practices towards Muslim migrant students (Shirazi 2018; Abu Khalaf et al., 2023). The marginalization of Muslim students also stems from teaching practices that may reproduce these institutional approaches (Shirazi & Jaffe-Walter, 2021). While research has shown that generally teachers find the management of cultural and linguistic diversity challenging and as a result cultural representation for those students remains weak (Ortega et. al., 2020), often Muslim migrant students face exclusion even more harshly as it relates to their religion and thus discrimination happens in the name of Islamophobia (Mourad, 2022; Abu Khalaf et. al., 2023; Torres-Zaragoza & Llorent-Bedmar, 2024).

Consequently, Muslim identity remains weakly represented in cultural contexts too, particularly museums, where research across Europe highlights persistent failures to present Islam in meaningful and inclusive ways. Influenced by orientalist and colonial legacies, museums often decontextualize Islamic objects by emphasizing their artistic or archaeological value while overlooking their religious and lived cultural significance (Shatanawi, 2021; Gonzalez, 2022). Islamic culture is frequently portrayed as exotic, monolithic, and external to Europe, with exhibitions privileging a romanticized medieval past and marginalizing contemporary Muslim voices (Grinell et al., 2019). Although some institutions have shifted from framing collections as "Islamic Art" toward "Muslim Heritage," genuine representation remains limited due to the exclusion of Muslim agency and participatory practices (Rey, 2022). As a result, museums continue to reinforce binaries between "European" and "Muslim" identities, underscoring the need for more inclusive approaches that recognize Muslims as integral to Europe's cultural and social fabric (Grinell, 2017).

The integration of Muslim and migrant populations may also be affected by broader legal and institutional conditions. In particular, statelessness can place individuals in vulnerable social and legal positions and create difficulties in accessing rights, public services, education, employment, and social participation. Research examining the experiences of stateless persons in Greece and the Netherlands highlights the ways in which legal status and institutional practices can contribute to processes of marginalisation and exclusion (Giousef et al., 2026). These findings point to the importance of considering integration not only in terms of individuals' participation in educational and cultural institutions, but also in relation to the legal, institutional, and societal conditions that shape such participation.

Integration of immigrants cultural capital in Greek society

Similarly, in Greece, while there have been some efforts to incorporate intercultural values into policy frameworks, the prevailing approach remains assimilationist. This tendency is often reflected in institutional practices.

One of the main mechanisms for migrant and refugees' cultural inclusion has been the establishment of Migrant Integration Councils (MICs). MICs operate as municipal consultative bodies, promoting dialogue between local authorities and migrant/ refugee communities (Ministry of Interior, 2021) while also providing a range of services such as legal counseling, language education, and employment support to those populations (Ministry of Integration & Asylum, 2022). Through these operations, MICs attempt to enhance their access to education, health care, and social welfare (European Commission, 2020) and to foster community engagement and social cohesion by designing integration programs tailored to the needs of local migrant populations (Hellenic Agency for Local Development and Local Government, 2021). However, their effectiveness remains limited due to inadequate implementation, resource constraints, weak administrative and political support, and their fragile institutional status, challenges intensified by Greece's prolonged economic crisis (Fouskas, 2013). Moreover, the heavy reliance on EU funding, NGO initiatives, and municipal discretion, combined with the absence of a coherent national framework, results in uneven reach and effectiveness across regions (Leivaditi et al., 2020).

Education has been one of the Greek state's most effective tools for the integration of migrants and refugees (Syrigos, 2012) and thus various policies followed to accommodate these populations into the Greek educational system. Intercultural Education was introduced to Greece in 1996, with the founding of 26 intercultural schools where courses in diverse languages were provided for culturally and linguistically diverse students (Government Gazette, 1996). Later in 1999, 'Reception Classes' were introduced to public schools which operated parallel to the mainstream ones offering Greek lessons to migrant/ refugee students, (Ministry of National Education and Religious Affairs, 1999). Finally, in 2016, Reception Facilities for Refugee Children (DYEP) were enforced, which were afternoon classes for the refugee students residing in reception centers, aiming at student's smooth integration to morning classes (Simopoulos & Alexandridis, 2019).

Although Greece's educational system has taken steps to address increasing diversity, research highlights significant challenges and inconsistencies in implementing intercultural education (Palaiologou & Faas, 2012). A central critique concerns its limited application: formal intercultural programs exist in only 26 schools, restricting broader integration and leaning towards ghettoization (Kakos & Palaiologou, 2014). While reception and DYEP

classes facilitate migrant and refugee students' transition to mainstream classes, they often emphasize assimilation into Greek culture, marginalizing students' linguistic and cultural heritage. Recent research on refugee and migrant language education in Greece emphasizes that language learning is shaped not only by learner's individual motivations but also by school policies, social relationships and wider ideological structures (Rizou & Kostoulas, 2026). Thus, the emphasis on Greek-language acquisition can also reflect broader institutional approaches to integration. Educators also face challenges in managing diverse classrooms, such as inadequate materials, high illiteracy levels, and students' low motivation due to their temporary stay in Greece (Palaologou et al., 2019). Consequently, despite policy frameworks, Greek education largely operated within an assimilationist paradigm that prioritizes migrant conformity in its pre-existing structures over cultural inclusion, reflecting policymakers' and educators' interpretations of interculturalism (Gropas & Triandafyllidou, 2007; 2011). These practices are deeply rooted in Greece's national identity, historically framing immigration as a threat to cultural cohesion and ethnic continuity and thus reinforcing exclusionary attitudes toward migrants (Palaologou & Faas, 2012; Triandafyllidou, 2009).

METHODOLOGY

Research questions

As research suggests, Western, and consequently Greek, public discourses have often portrayed Muslims unfavourably. Although institutions have introduced measures to promote inclusion in an attempt to comply with European intercultural trends (Mohiuddin, 2017), Islamophobia and persistent stereotypes continue to shape Muslims' everyday experiences (Mazrui, 1997; Shadid & Koningsveld, 2006; Green, 2019; Cesari, 2009; Sakellariou, 2017, 2023; Hüseyinoğlu, 2021), while integration policies frequently lean towards assimilation (Modood, 2003; Mohiuddin, 2017; Shirazi, 2018; Abu Khalaf et al., 2023; Mourad, 2022; Grinell, 2017; Shatanawi, 2021).

Building on the argument that while European policy increasingly promotes interculturalism (Council of Europe, 2008; Council of Europe, Committee of Ministers, 2022), institutional practice often remains assimilationist (Modood, 2003), this study examines the attitudes and practices of educational and cultural institutions in Larissa toward Muslim communities. As Larissa hosts a significant Muslim population, partly due to the presence of a refugee camp, it provides an appropriate context for exploring whether local institutions adopt genuinely intercultural or predominantly assimilation-oriented approaches.

Furthermore, the study investigates how these institutional approaches shape public perceptions of Muslims by examining whether they foster cultural interaction, mutual understanding, tolerance, and allow the representation of Muslim identities and cultural capital, consistent with intercultural principles (Yosso, 2005; Damaschke-Deitrick, 2021; Meer & Modood, 2012), or instead reinforce stereotypes, social exclusion, and Islamophobic attitudes. In doing so, it assesses the role of local institutions in either promoting intercultural coexistence or reproducing existing social boundaries and prejudices.

Consequently, the main questions that will be answered will be:

- 1) What are the beliefs and attitudes of educational and cultural institutions towards Islam and Muslim people?
- 2) How do these institutions attempt to influence the public's views towards Islam and Muslim people?

Sampling

Participants of this study were selected according to their characteristics, experiences, and thus their relevance on the research's aims. In this case, participants were chosen for their institutional roles and their direct involvement in matters of cultural diversity and social inclusion. For the purpose of the research, fourteen participants from a range of sectors were interviewed. These were seven school principals, of whom four were primary education principals and two Gymnasium principals, managing schools with a significant number of Muslim students; two museum directors; two educational coordinators working in Larissa's refugee camps; and three representatives from the Center for Migrant Integration under Larissa's Municipality. Although fourteen individuals participated in the study, twelve interviews were conducted, as the head of the Migrant Integration Center (MIC) invited two additional staff members to join his interview and assist in answering the questions. Thus, their contributions were treated as part of the same institutional interview. These individuals were selected because, due to their positions in the institutions, they could provide insight into how institutions engage Muslim communities, how they perceive them, and how their views shape and implement policies and practices that affect Larissa's Muslim populations, particularly in educational and cultural settings.

Table 1*Participants and their relevance in the study.*

Participants	Professional Role	School Level/ Institution	Professional Context Related to Muslim Communities
P1	Principal	Primary	DYEP and Reception classes
P2	Principal	Primary	DYEP and Reception classes
P3	Principal	Primary	Reception classes
P4	Principal	Primary	Reception classes
P5	Principal	Gymnasium	DYEP and Reception classes
P6	Principal	Gymnasium	Reception classes
P7	Principal	Gymnasium	DYEP classes (Reception classes were offered in the previous years)
P8	Coordinator of Education A	All school levels	Coordinator of Education at Koutsochero (Controlled Temporary Accommodation Facility for Asylum Seekers). Coordinator of education at Urban schools, Larissa
P9	Coordinator of Education B	All school levels	Coordinator of Education at Koutsochero (Controlled Temporary Accommodation Facility for Asylum Seekers).
P10	Museum Director A	Museum A	4 projects for Muslim communities
P11	Museum Director B	Museum B	1 specific but consistent project for Muslim communities
P12	MIC's principal and stuff	Larissa's MIC	4 project for Muslim communities

Data collection

The study employed semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method to explore institutional perceptions and practices concerning Muslim culture and religion. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as a data collection method because they allow participants to elaborate on their views while still focusing on specific thematic (Bryman, 2016). The interview questions were adapted to participants' professional roles to ensure contextually relevant data. Accordingly, a distinct set of questions was developed for the primary school principals, education coordinators, museum directors, and municipal staff; thus, their distinct functions and responsibilities were reflected in the data.

Accordingly, interviews with school principals examined how Muslim students' cultural and religious identities are included or excluded within school settings. Specifically, the interview questions were designed to understand whether school policies and practices reflected an intercultural approach by recognizing and incorporating students' cultural capital into the educational environment, as advocated in the intercultural education literature (Zulficar, 2019; Putera & Akid, 2022; Cummins, 2001; Cummins, Early, & Stille, 2011; Govaris, 2011). Questions focused on ruling perceptions of Muslim students within the school's community, experiences of discrimination, and institutional responses to diversity. Participants were also asked about inclusive practices, educational programs, or curricular initiatives aimed at integrating Muslim culture and religion in the mainstream program. These interviews sought to reveal both formal inclusion strategies and underlying institutional attitudes.

Education coordinators working within refugee camps in the Larissa region were also interviewed due to their role in supporting refugee students' integration into local schools. Their interviews provided a broader perspective on schools' general attitudes toward Muslim students, the challenges of inclusion, and the extent to which educational and cultural institutions adopt culturally inclusive practices. Coordinators were also asked to evaluate the role of museums and municipal bodies in promoting the cultural inclusion of Muslim communities, aiming to reveal the systematic attitudes of institutions towards Muslim communities, further disclosing whether their practices truly reflect inclusion or are merely symbolic.

Museum directors from the Folklore Museum of Larissa and the Diachronic (Historical) Museum were also included in the qualitative study to explore cultural inclusion beyond education. As key institutions of cultural preservation and public education, museums play a central role in promoting intercultural understanding and social cohesion. By representing diverse cultural narratives and enabling cultural dialogue between communities, museums enhance public understanding of minorities cultures while at the same time, strengthen their sense of

belonging (Council of Europe, 2005; European Commission, 2007, 2017; Stylianou-Lambert, Bouka, & Christodoulou-Yerali, 2014). Questions focused on whether museums had organized exhibitions, events, or educational programs incorporating Muslim heritage or cultural programs that specifically targeted Muslim populations. These interviews examined whether museums function as inclusive spaces that acknowledge Muslim identity within local cultural narratives.

At last, a group interview was conducted with the principal of the center for Migrant Integration (KEM) of Larissa Municipality, along with two staff members. Given the Center's coordinating role in migrant and refugee integration (Ministry of Interior, 2021; Ministry of Integration and Asylum, 2022; European Commission, 2020; Hellenic Agency for Local Development and Local Government, 2021), the interview explored municipal initiatives promoting cultural and religious inclusion, including public events and community programs. This provided insight into the municipality's stance toward diversity and the institutional recognition and accommodation of Muslim identity within the city.

Data analysis

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a qualitative method for identifying and interpreting recurring patterns within textual data. This approach was selected because the study seeks to explore not only institutional practices toward Muslim culture and religion but also the meanings, assumptions, and broader social contexts that shape them. Following Braun and Clarke's (2017) six-phase model, interview responses were systematically coded to identify shared themes, differences across educational, cultural, and municipal institutions, and the values and biases underlying institutional attitudes. By examining both explicit accounts and underlying meanings, thematic analysis provides a nuanced understanding of how institutional discourses shape the representation of Muslim culture and religion and contribute to broader public perceptions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Through the thematic analysis of the interviews, four themes resurfaced through which institutional patterns in attitudes towards Muslim identities and integration measures were reflected. These included: (1) institutional policies and practices followed for the inclusion of Muslim communities, (2) the way those acknowledged and represented the Muslim identity, (3) challenges and barriers to inclusion institutions encountered, and (4) explicit and implicit institutional biases present in institutional stances toward Muslims.

Policies and practices these institutions followed regarding inclusivity and diversity

Participants across all institutional settings referred to either formal or informal policies and practices designed and implemented to support diversity and cultural inclusion. Thus the first emerging theme focused on how schools, municipalities, and cultural institutions implement legal frameworks, develop their own initiatives, and incorporate intercultural values into everyday practice. While most schools heavily relied on the existing legal framework regarding integration, other institutions adopted their own initiatives towards inclusion, with efforts to support Muslim communities varying considerably in scope and consistency.

Legal and institutional frameworks

In Larissa's educational framework, all participants from all levels of education, including the educational coordinators, consistently emphasized the role of formal structures in supporting culturally and linguistically diverse students. Reflecting the broader demographics of Larissa, where the majority of Muslim communities also have migrant or refugee identity, often schools heavily rely on national educational programs to facilitate the integration of these students to the school settings. Specifically, schools frequently implemented practices mandated by the relevant legislation, notably the DYEP (Δομές Υποδοχής Εκπαίδευσης Προσφύγων) program (Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs, 2016) and Reception classes (Ministry of National Education and Religious Affairs, 1999). In all cases, these were perceived by participants as core tools for integrating refugee and migrant students in mainstream education.

Among the seven schools that participated in the research, three schools (two primary schools and one middle school) had operated both DYEP and Reception Classes over the years. Another three schools (again, two primary schools and one middle school) offered only morning Reception Classes. Finally, while one middle school had exclusively operated an evening DYEP class (while in the past Reception classes also operated in their premises).

However, while these classes aided to the linguistic integration of these students, their predominant focus on language acquisition has as a result constricted the expression of Muslim students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds, resulting in exclusion, marginalization, and assimilation rather inclusion (Gropas & Triantafyllidou, 2011; Palaiologou, 2004; Kakos & Palaiologou, 2014; Palaiologou & Faas, 2012). Recent research further

emphasizes that refugee and migrant language education is shaped not only by language-learning needs but also by school policies, social relationships, and the wider educational and social environment (Rizou & Kostoulas, 2026). Moreover, data revealed that most schools placed significant reliance on the teacher assigned by the Ministry of Education to lead these classes, meaning that the responsibility for refugee students' integration and, by extension, their cultural inclusion, is usually concentrated on a single individual, rather than being distributed in all the teaching staff. This practice suggests that refugee students are only “seen” within the confines of the Reception Class, as there, in many schools, is the only space where instruction is tailored to their needs. As a result, they often remain simple observers of the educational process during regular classes rather than active participants. This indicates that Muslim/refugee students are not being holistically integrated into the broader educational and social fabric of the school. Instead, they are expected to adapt within fixed structures. With the educational system not truly altered to adhere to their needs, it becomes apparent that intercultural values are not truly adopted (Meer & Modood, 2021).

Furthermore, this represents a top-down approach to migration integration whereby public policies are made without consideration of the cultural parameters for Muslim students (Damaschke-Deitrick & Wiseman, 2021). Additionally, cultural institutions (especially museums but also MICs) often do not possess concrete legal parameters regarding the inclusion of Muslim-related narratives, creating inherent possibilities of continued passive engagements with multiculturalism (Palaiologou & Faas, 2012; Fouskas, 2013). Without clear legal mechanisms and mandates, restrictive forms of institutional practices are similarly nebulous and may serve to affirm rather than challenge existing biases.

Informal practices of inclusion

Schools

Aside from the mandated structures and policies regarding diversity, several institutions from the educational sector mentioned initiatives and voluntary practices that were followed to promote diversity and support the inclusion of Muslim/ refugee populations. The majority of interviews with principals of Muslim attending schools, revealed recurring patterns of such practices.

- Five out of seven schools reported fostering inclusion through informal, or in some cases more structured cultural exchanges, embedded in various curriculum subjects.
- Five schools also emphasized principles of equality and mutual respect through activities that promoted the interaction of DYEP/ Reception Classes students with students attending mainstream classes, such as games, school events, or lectures with an anti-racism focus.
- Two schools provided in-service training sessions for their teaching staff, aiming at equipping educators with more inclusive pedagogical approaches.
- Three schools reported the participation of Muslim students in national celebrations, and other Greek traditions, symbolizing an effort to include them in broader aspects of Greek civic life.
- Two schools organized events specifically oriented around Muslim identity and culture, indicating a limited institutional focus on the cultural representation of these students.
- Three schools reported establishing direct communication with refugee parents, including some visits to refugee camps, in an effort to understand and address their concerns.

These findings underscore a mixed picture of voluntary inclusion efforts, where notable practices exist, but cultural responsiveness and parental engagement remain areas of limited and uneven implementation. Even though initiatives to include Muslim populations have been made, these practices have often been inconsistent, and in some cases, poorly structured. However from an intercultural perspective, inclusion extends beyond the occasional acknowledgement of cultural diversity. Intercultural education calls for the transformation of educational policies, practices, and schooling environments so that students' cultural capitals, linguistic resources are being permanently embedded into everyday school life, creating sustained opportunities for dialogue, cultural exchange, and the development of shared, evolving identities (Markou, 1997; Govaris, 2011; Manousou, 2017; Damaschke-Deitrick, 2021). Only one school attempted to holistically include the refugee Muslim population in the broader school environment by adjusting activities, events and even school's material and decorations to culturally and linguistically diverse students' needs (Gropas & Triadafyllidou, 2011).

As the coordinator of education A noted *“only after six-seven months of attendance in school...these students are seen by educators. The majority of schools realize that they must do some kind of activity where Greek students and Muslim/refugee ones can interact (meaning conduct some kind of cultural exchange), such as organizing a food-festival or a dance day or organize an event where students coming from different countries can talk about their customs and traditions, in the end of the year. This usually happens just before the closure of the academic year”*.

Municipality

Larissa's Migrant Integration Center (MIC) has also contributed, to some extent, to the integration and, in one case, cultural representation of the Muslim community by organizing a number of events in collaboration with other institutions and NGOs.

- The food festival where all foreign communities residing in the city presented their traditional dishes.
- The book-reading programme in collaboration with Larissa's Public Library in which popular Greek books were translated into English and Arabic to increase accessibility for non- Greek-speaking communities.
- Smaller-scale activities included guided visits to local museums and an arts and crafts workshop attended by Muslim children, themed around the Greek Easter celebration.

Museums

Each of the two museums that participated in the study organized guided tours for various groups of Muslim visitors, in collaboration with the Municipality of Larissa, educational coordinators, and staff members from the refugee camp in Koutsochero.

Museum A hosted a guided tour centered on the general exhibition, with a particular focus on folklore patterns evident in the displayed objects. As noted by museum staff, the tour emphasized motifs *"influenced by Islamic art and heavily inspired by the East"*, allowing for the identification of shared aesthetic elements between Greek and Islamic artistic traditions. Throughout the experience, both Muslim visitors and museum guides engaged in discussions that highlighted cultural intersections and common artistic heritage.

Similarly, Museum B organized four thematic guided tours, all revolving around Greek culture, to which four different groups within the Muslim community attended. Across all the museum guided tours and activities, Muslim participants from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds actively engaged in identifying and highlighting cultural parallels between their own heritage and Greek traditions. Greece has had a long history under Ottoman rule and thus Larissa accommodated amongst other Muslim communities throughout history, some of the exhibits included inscriptions in Arabic, which allowed Muslim visitors to contribute with their own knowledge and perspectives during the guided tours, enriching the overall interpretive experience.

Acceptance and representation of the Islamic culture and religion

The place of religion in institutional discourse

While most institutions stated their acceptance of Muslim identity, Muslim identity was only represented symbolically, meaning that while various initiatives appeared inclusive, they did not challenge deeper systemic issues such as deeply rooted stereotypes about Muslim, nor did they provide meaningful engagement or equity. A great example of the superficial acceptance of Islam is how in most interviews religion was treated as a taboo theme and in many cases institutions adopted a politically neutral stance regarding the inclusion of Islam (Zine 2004).

Across the various institutions involved in the study, religion, meaning Islam, was consistently treated as a sensitive subject. When asked about the cultural and religious expression of Muslim students, most institutions tended to focus exclusively on cultural aspects, often avoiding direct reference to religion. Several schools expressed that they respected religious diversity, which was primarily reflected in their accommodation of specific dress codes and dietary requirements, for example in some cases, school menus were adapted accordingly. Additionally, all participating schools acknowledged and respected Muslim students' decision to abstain from the daily Greek Orthodox morning prayer, a routine that is held in all schools nationwide. However, none of the institutions reported offering designated spaces or opportunities for Muslim students to engage in their own religious practices, such as prayer.

Accordingly in museums, when sporadically Muslim culture was included it was stripped of its religious aspect. This leads to the secularization of Islamic displays with museums focusing on the aesthetic, historical, or technical aspects of Islamic artifacts ignoring their religious purpose or context, while any discussion regarding the theological/ devotional significance of the works is usually avoided. Ironically, this reinforces Western stereotypical perceptions on Islam as its rich theological and philosophical dimensions are not explored in depth (Gonzalez 2022; Shatanawi, 2021).

Finally, one educational institution and Larissa's Migrant Integration Center (MIC) explicitly described religion as a highly sensitive issue and consequently refrained from incorporating Islamic religious elements into any public events or activities.

"For the religious part we haven't taken any action because we consider it a highly sensitive theme...it is a fine line that we are careful not to cross" (MIC).

“Specifically, regarding (the integration of) the Muslim culture I disagree...we learn about other religions of the world in (Greek) religious courses and that’s it” (Participant Primary School 4).

This selective representation contrasts interculturalism, as it encourages culturally diverse populations to express those aspects of their identity that are socially accepted within the dominant culture. Consequently, diversity is only recognized conditionally and is accepted only when it conforms to prevailing social norms (Modood, 2003).

Visibility and expression of Muslim Identity

Analysis of the data suggests that these practices that institutions used to promote the integration of Muslim communities can be grouped into three broad categories based on their character.

Exclusion of Muslim Identities

In the first category, are included attitudes of exclusion which were either adopted either purposely *“...there aren’t any targeted actions...I am negative towards the inclusion of Muslim culture in school” (Participant Primary School 4)* or in some cases various factors and challenges that institutions met contributed to Muslims exclusion.

While nearly all institutions participating in the study made at least a symbolic effort to include Muslim/refugee individuals, many also reported that, due to various challenges, they did not actively incorporate the culture and religion of Muslim students *“I don’t think their culture and religion are integrated (in school). We do not take much influence from those children (as in they do not leave their print on the rest of the school’s population)” (Participant Primary School 2).*

Specifically, when asked whether Muslims culture and religion has been represented in schools’ programs through activities and events, six out of the seven participating schools reported negatively. Findings as such, reconfirm previous research indicating that schools adopt exclusionary practices resulting in limited representation of Muslim students’ cultural and religious identities within the curriculum (Shirazi, 2018; Shirazi & Jaffe-Walter, 2020; Abu Khalaf et al., 2023). They also reflect broader concerns that cultural diversity in education should be incorporated meaningfully rather than treated as supplementary or symbolic content (Oviedo-Berrocal et al., 2026). This limited visibility reflects broader challenges in addressing cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity and may contribute to the marginalization of Muslim students (Mourad, 2022; Ortega et al., 2020; Torres-Zaragoza & Llorent-Bedmar, 2024).

Inclusion through Equal Participation

The second category includes activities occurring throughout institutions that emphasized equal participation, where Muslim and refugee students were regarded primarily as members of the broader student body and were granted equal access to school events, extracurricular activities, and excursions. Thus, equal participation in activities and events emerged as the most common inclusion method by the majority of institutions.

- Four out of seven schools presented the participation of Muslim students by invitation in national celebrations as an inclusive practice
- Two schools reported including Muslim students in school projects outside of the classroom in which they were called to collaborate with peers from mainstream classes. One school even noted that they tried to include Muslim students in field trips.
- The educational coordinators further highlighted their efforts to ensure Muslim refugee students could participate in extracurricular activities such as football and swimming classes, as well as offering them placements in local summer camps, aiming for their integration into Larissa’s community.

While these efforts are important and commendable, they should also be seen as fundamental rights as Muslim communities are part of the city and, accordingly, Muslim students are part of the school’s student bodies, and thus are entitled to participate in all mainstream activities and services. Furthermore, while many of those activities provided chances for social inclusion and integration, most of them had no intercultural character nor fostered such values (Modood, 2013; Govaris, 2011). The majority of institutions, through its practices of inclusion indicated to follow mostly assimilative approaches as they primarily promoted Greek culture and asked from Muslim/refugee students to comply with the Greek educational system (Gordon, 1964), without altering some aspects of it to accommodate their needs and become more inclusive (Gropas & Triadafyllidou, 2011; Markou, 1997).

Cultural institutions participating in the study followed a similar approach. As the coordinator of education A highlighted *“I do not think that institutions in our city adopt an inclusive culture regarding different cultures. There haven’t been any exhibitions regarding otherness”*. Even though certain guided tours led to a level of intercultural exchange as Muslim participants recognized familiar elements in the exhibitions that reflected parts of their culture, the tours centered on Greek heritage. While museums, as agencies of cultural representation and public pedagogy, have

the power to shape public perceptions (Damaschke-Deitrick & Wiseman, 2021) and foster intercultural understanding, Muslim representation remains limited, fragmented, and largely symbolic (Gonzalez, 2022; Shatanawi, 2021; Palaiologou et al., 2019). Additionally, the absence of Muslim voices often leads to Islamic culture being presented through generalized and secularized lenses that neglect its religious and lived dimensions (Gonzalez, 2022). As a result, museums miss opportunities for meaningful dialogue, reinforcing stereotypes and prejudice rather than fostering a deeper understanding of Islam's rich theological and philosophical dimensions (Gonzalez, 2022; Sakellariou, 2017).

Larissa's Migrant Integration Center (MIC) also made efforts to integrate Muslim communities adopting a similar philosophy with the above institutions. Its initiatives largely reflected an assimilationist rather than an intercultural approach, as they mainly focused on adaptation to Greek culture and only selectively recognizing aspects of Muslim identity, considered socially acceptable (Modood, 2003; Portes & Zhou, 1993). Cultural inclusion was limited to only a few initiatives, as the MIC primarily focused on administrative support: guidance on legal procedures, benefits, and public services. As the education coordinator noted, *"the municipality does little to no actions, while according to the Ministry of Migration, the municipality is the primary body that should enable all the internal resources and processes, to educate people so that the integration of migrants and refugees can be possible. But generally, this, in the smaller cities of Greece, is in primitive form. In Athens it is more developed..."* (Coordinator of Education A). This limited engagement reflects the vaguely defined role of Municipal Integration Councils, which has restricted their capacity to promote meaningful intercultural dialogue and the public representation of Muslim communities (Fouskas, 2013). Although intended to support multicultural inclusion, MICs have generally produced few substantive initiatives capable of influencing public perceptions of Islam or fostering sustained engagement with Muslim communities (Gropas & Triandafyllidou, 2011; Palaiologou & Faas, 2012).

Inclusion through cultural recognition

Finally, adopted activities, in the third category, actively incorporate students' cultural identities into school life. However, such practices were limited, with only two schools organizing events that enabled Muslim students to express aspects of their cultural and linguistic identities, while two others reported intentions to implement similar inclusive initiatives.

The first school reported organizing a year-end celebration in which Muslim students presented traditional songs and dances from their cultural heritage. While this offered a valuable opportunity for cultural representation of Muslim community, it remained a one-off event, despite the continuous presence of Muslim students at the school, albeit with changing individual participants.

The second school stood out as the only institution that implemented consistent and sustained inclusive practices. In the specific school Muslim students were seen as integral members of the school community, and their representation was not limited to one-off events but rather became part of the school's identity. The school regularly organized intercultural events while classroom activities in mainstream classes, extracurricular events (fieldtrips, cultural/educational events) and even school's displays were designed with consideration for the diverse needs of all students, ensuring inclusive representation and meaningful participation for every learner, reflecting most intercultural values (Govaris, 2011; Manousou, 2017).

It has to be noted that all educational institutions mentioned as culturally inclusive practice the sporadic, every-day small initiatives of individual teachers towards inclusion that manifested as learning phrases in students' native languages, discussing and showcasing interest about their customs, encouraging in that way participation, and highlighting similarities between Muslim and Greek cultures during relevant lessons. However such practices, while valuable, were not a part of a structured approach, and as one principal highlighted, depended largely on individual teachers' goodwill, as curricular pressures often left little room for meaningful inclusion: *"...to give them space (for expression of their cultural identities during the mainstream lessons) the teacher must make a great effort and many times because of the pressure to catch up with the syllabus they usually ignore the integration part"* (Participant Primary School 1). Consequently, Muslim identity was represented only through sporadic activities, such as discussions, food, or dance, rather than being systematically embedded in everyday school life. Such inconsistent practices fail to incorporate Muslim students' cultural capital into the educational environment, limiting their inclusion and participation (Damaschke-Deitrick, 2021; Yosso, 2005) and reflecting a conditional acceptance of diversity rather than the principles of intercultural education (Modood, 2003).

The distinction between latent and manifest Orientalism by Said (1978) provides a particularly useful analytical framework for interpreting institutional practices regarding integration and inclusion of Muslim communities. Most institutions did not express overly Islamophobic or exclusionary attitudes, instead they explicitly endorsed principles of inclusion while some even occasionally attempted intercultural dialogue. However, at the same time, Muslims were often framed as groups requiring adaptation, integration, or instruction in the dominant national culture, while treating Islam as a sensitive or problematic subject that is largely absent from educational and cultural representation. These practices may reproduce latent Orientalist

assumptions by implicitly representing Muslim identities as culturally different and in need of accommodation within the prevailing social and institutional context. Consequently, Orientalism operates not only through explicit prejudice but also through seemingly neutral or benevolent institutional practices that reproduce hierarchical distinctions between the West and the Muslim "Other."

Table 2

Institutional approaches to the acceptance and representation of Islamic culture and religion

	Inclusion through Equal Participation	Occasional Cultural Recognition	Consistent Cultural Recognition
P1 Primary	Participation of Muslim students in Christmas celebrations. Curriculum adjustments enabling Reception Class students to participate in mainstream subjects (e.g., physical education, art, music) and interact with peers.	One annual multicultural event. Teacher-initiated, spontaneous cultural references during classroom instruction.	-
P2 Primary	Invitation of Muslim students in national celebrations.	Offered seminars to the teacher in inclusivity matters. Teacher-initiated, spontaneous cultural references during classroom instruction and school life.	Recognition of the weak inclusion and declaration of intentional change of schools operation in the near future. This principal had just started working in that position.
P3 Primary	Invitation of students and their parents in one closing celebration Curriculum adjustments enabling Reception Class students to participate in mainstream subjects (e.g., physical education, art, music) and interact with peers.	Discussions and lectures with anti-racism focus Teacher-initiated, spontaneous cultural references during classroom instruction and school life.	
P4 Primary	Relied on the Reception Class teacher to support the inclusion of culturally diverse students.	Visits to the Koutsochero refugee camp to facilitate communication between teachers and migrant parents. Provision of food aligned with students' religious and cultural dietary practices.	Rejected proposals for cultural exchange, opposing the representation of Muslim culture within the school setting.
P5 Gymnasium	Systemic participation in school projects beyond the classroom.		Multicultural events throughout the year, including Erasmus-related activities. Integration of diverse languages and cultures into school activities and the school environment. Visits to the Koutsochero refugee camp to promote parental involvement. Coordination of communication and joint activities with nearby refugee camps.
P6 Gymnasium	Participation in school projects beyond the classroom.	Teacher-initiated, spontaneous cultural references during classroom instruction and school life.	Stated intent to expand cultural inclusion and parental involvement following the establishment of Reception Classes.

P7 Gymnasium	Invitation of Muslim students in national celebrations.	Teacher-initiated, spontaneous cultural references during classroom instruction and school life (when the Reception class operated). Two joint activities between DYEP and mainstream students, including the exchange of Christmas wishes and gifts and participation in the Vasilopita tradition.	
P8 CoE A	Suggested greater participation of DYEP/Reception class students in mainstream school activities and field trips. Supported migrant students' participation in extracurricular community activities (e.g., swimming, football).		Guidance and support for schools on the inclusion and management of refugee and migrant students. Encouraged schools to promote the linguistic, cultural, and social inclusion of refugee and migrant students through multicultural celebrations, projects, and active participation in the school community.
P9 CoE B	Suggested greater participation of DYEP/Reception class students in mainstream school activities and field trips.		Guidance and support for schools on the inclusion and management of refugee and migrant students.
P10 Museum A	Participation in four projects on Greek cultural heritage and the history of Thessaly.	Informal/ spontaneous facilitator-encouraged cultural exchange highlighting historical links between Thessaly and the Middle East.	-
P11 Museum B	Guided tour of the main exhibition	Facilitated discussions on cultural similarities during guided tours.	-
P12 MIC	Greek-reading program Easter workshop Museums visits	Food festival	-

Challenges and Barriers the institution met in engaging with the Muslim communities

While some institutions demonstrated commitment to inclusion, participants also reported a range of barriers that limited their engagement with the Muslim community.

Mobility of refugee families

The high mobility of Muslim students was the most frequently cited barrier to cultural integration, with five out of the seven participating schools identifying it as the primary challenge. It is true that frequent displacement of refugee families disrupts educational continuity and convinces schools that it is difficult to implement effective and sustainable integration programs (Yohani et al., 2019). Although student mobility constitutes a genuine challenge, it should not be viewed as the sole barrier of inclusion. Given that the refugee camp has been operating since 2016 and thus Muslim students have been enrolling in local schools for nearly a decade, the argument of unpredictability loses some of its weight. Rather than relying on ad hoc responses, institutions should adopt systematic policies and support structures, as inadequate institutional provision contributes to educational discontinuity and social exclusion (Millere & Dobelniece, 2018). Consequently, this mobility issue is a systemic problem that requires intervention, such as policies, resourcing for schools, and community engagement so that everyone can feel stable and included (UNESCO, 2019).

Lack of teacher training

A major barrier to inclusion is the lack of teacher training in intercultural competence. Research indicates that many teachers are inadequately prepared to respond to the diverse and complex needs of refugee students, limiting their ability to create inclusive learning environments (Demir et al., 2025; Zaidi et al., 2021). Research on

teacher preparation also highlights the importance of examining educators' perceptions of multilingual learners and developing culturally and linguistically responsive practices that can support their inclusion in educational settings (Halpern et al., 2025). This was also acknowledged by the education coordinators, who noted that, despite some inclusive initiatives, schools lack the pedagogical frameworks to systematically embed intercultural inclusion. Consequently, as a participant principal reported, teachers often rely on traditional practices that fail to address refugee students' needs (Celik et al., 2021), highlighting the need for specialized intercultural training (UNESCO, 2020; Zaidi et al., 2021), *"We, educators must change our mindset. Because young teachers have experienced it through courses in their universities, with master's degrees. They have the necessary cognitive background. But for old-school educators, it is very difficult. Certain perceptions are deep-rooted, not necessarily negative or aggressive. Cognitively, they cannot support it."* (Participant Primary School 1).

One school also attributed the exclusion of Muslim students to teachers' lack of familiarity with their cultural and religious backgrounds, as they reported it presented a challenge in the design of inclusive activities/ events. While two schools identified linguistic diversity as a barrier to communication and integration, highlighting the urgency of teacher training. However, as one education coordinator emphasized, the inclusion of such populations does not require teachers and students to have a shared language or culture. Intercultural education by definition aims to form a pedagogy that goes beyond cultural differences while at the same time, recognizing culture as dynamic and co-constructed through dialogue and exchange (Govaris, 2011). Therefore, inclusive education depends on recognizing, validating, and utilizing migrants' cultural capital to create learning environments where students' identities and experiences are acknowledged, fostering in that way participation and academic achievement (Cummins, 2001, 2019; Cummins et al., 2011; Zulficar, 2019; Putera & Akid, 2022).

Bias and stereotypes

Bias and stereotypes greatly inhibit inclusive thinking and practice in educational and non- educational settings alike. If negative perceptions of refugees become embedded in public narratives and policy frameworks, the possibility for positive integration becomes diminished (McIntyre & Hall, 2020). Reports of participants in this study give a great example on how bias and negative perceptions of Islam and Muslims have hindered their integration: three schools noted resistance from parents, two from staff, and four institutions, three schools and Larissa's MIC, identified cultural differences between Muslim communities and dominant Greek norms as barriers to integration. These perceptions often result in assimilationist practices that place the burden of adaptation on minority groups (Portes & Zhou, 1993).

Furthermore, the reluctance of institutions to engage with the religious aspects of Muslim identity reflects and reproduces stereotypes that demonize Islam, further contributing to the marginalization of Muslim communities through the exclusion of a central aspect of their identity (Fouskas, 2013; Sakellariou, 2023). Rather than fostering authentic representation, institutions often offer only superficial inclusion under the guise of tolerance (Gropas & Triandafyllidou, 2011), thereby reinforcing stereotypes and limiting meaningful interaction between public and educational spheres, which ultimately sustains processes of exclusion and isolation (McIntyre & Hall, 2020).

Institutional biases and perspectives toward alignment

Apart from a few institutional leaders who expressed views aligned with intercultural values and recognized the shortcomings of integration process ruling their institutions (Kakos & Palaiologou, 2014; Gropas & Triandafyllidou, 2007), personal biases towards Muslim identities were evident across many institutions. Some participants explicitly opposed to Muslim communities cultural and religious inclusion, while others revealed more subtle stereotypes about Islam and Muslims.

In several interviews, including those from educational institutions and Larissa's MIC, a sense of fear and mistrust towards Islam and the religious aspects of Muslim identities surfaced. Islam was often associated with fundamentalism, intolerance, or resistance to other religions, especially Orthodox Christianity, reflecting broader Western narratives of Islam that associate it with violence, backwardness, and religious oppression (Mazrui, 1997; Shadid & Koningsveld, 2002; Lyons, 2014), despite Islamic teachings emphasizing diversity and respect (Wani et al., 2015). Muslim communities were also sometimes portrayed as incompatible with modernity with school leaders attributing student absences to Islamic values. They were also perceived usually as homogeneous entities, despite the significant internal diversity among Muslim families in Larissa as one of the education's coordinators noted. Such representations of Muslim identity as a fixed and homogeneous category are consistent with broader critiques of how dominant expectations can shape perceptions of what constitutes an acceptable or appropriate Muslim identity (Kolakkadan, 2024). Overall, while cultural diversity was generally acknowledged, religious identity remained sensitive or avoided, with limited institutional provisions for religious expression despite accommodations for dress and dietary needs (Rissanen, 2021). Similar perceptions were also evident

among MIC staff which expressed the view that Islam itself hinders integration, reinforcing monolithic conceptions of Muslim identity. Findings as such reflect Orientalist representations of Islam, in which it is portrayed as homogeneous, irrational, and inherently opposed to Western values (Said, 1978; Cesari, 2009; Green, 2019).

The above institutional perceptions of Muslim identity were also reflected in practice, with cultural representation remaining fragmented and religious aspects of Muslim identities frequently being dismissed or treated as taboo. Although diversity was formally accepted, it was frequently conditional and aligned with dominant Greek norms (Modood, 2003). As Sayyid (2014) and Allen (2010) argue, such institutional Islamophobia often operates subtly under the guise of neutrality. This manifested in institutions in various ways: it was evident in the reported limited knowledge of Muslim culture among school staff, avoidance of religious representation in MIC activities and some schools, and the overall minimal presence of Muslim identities across institutional settings. The interaction of personal biases and institutional constraints reinforced fear-based attitudes, contributing to cultural exclusion and marginalization, which as research shows can result in both overt and covert discrimination against Muslim youth (Shadid & van Koningsveld, 2002; Abu Khalaf et al., 2023), perpetuating patterns of educational neglect that undermine social and academic inclusion (Green, 2019).

Limitations

As with all qualitative research, this study has certain limitations. First, its findings cannot be statistically generalized, as they are based on a relatively small, purposefully selected sample of participants from educational, cultural, and municipal institutions in Larissa. Instead, the study aimed to provide in-depth, context-specific insights into how these institutions perceive and engage with Muslim communities. Second, although participants were selected because of their leadership roles and institutional responsibilities, their narratives reflect personal interpretations alongside institutional perspectives. Finally, because the interviews addressed sensitive issues, including religion, inclusion, and migrant integration, participants may have moderated or self-censored their responses. Consequently, some views or institutional practices may not have been expressed openly. A further limitation is the study's exclusive reliance on institutional perspectives. The study did not include Muslim community members, and none of the participating institutions employed Muslim staff who could provide insider perspectives. Future research should incorporate Muslim community voices to develop a more comprehensive understanding of institutional inclusion and representation.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings indicate that the attitudes and practices of Larissa's educational and cultural institutions largely reflect dominant societal perceptions of Islam. Although a willingness to support diversity was expressed by most institutions and some inclusive initiatives were identified, they were generally limited, sporadic, and predominantly assimilationist, prioritizing adaptation of Muslim populations to existing Greek cultural norms and frameworks rather than meaningfully recognizing their cultural and religious identities. Muslim identity was often acknowledged only superficially and religion was mostly treated as a sensitive or taboo subject while its exclusion was commonly justified through claims of political neutrality. These practices and stances suggest a conditional acceptance of diversity and reflect broader institutional efforts to preserve a dominant national identity.

The study further demonstrates that institutional policies and practices shape public perceptions of Muslims by influencing collective narratives and opportunities for intercultural interaction. In schools, where the existing legal frameworks that dominate emphasize language acquisition over intercultural inclusion, Muslim representation is largely dependent on efforts of individual educators. To actually foster an inclusive schooling environment and further promote an intercultural collective narrative, Muslim identities should be integrated into everyday school life through curriculum, intercultural activities, linguistic diversity, parental engagement, and teacher training (Dressler, 2014; Cummins, 2005; Cummins & Early, 2011; Epstein, 2001; Ortega et al., 2020; Shirazi & Jaffe-Walter, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). This includes incorporating Islamic holidays and other cultural references into school calendars, embedding Muslim perspectives in subjects such as literature, history, and art (Shirazi & Jaffe-Walter, 2020; Torres-Zaragoza & Llorent-Bedmar, 2024), and implementing recurring intercultural activities, such as storytelling and identity-text projects, that enable students to share their cultural backgrounds (Cummins & Early, 2011). Linguistic diversity should be also recognized by incorporating students' home languages into classrooms and shared spaces (Dressler, 2014; Cummins, 2005; UNESCO, 2006), religious expression should be facilitated through appropriate spaces, Muslim families could be actively involved in school life and decision-making (Epstein, 2001; González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005), while teachers could be provided with ongoing training to recognize and address unconscious bias, religious discrimination, and cultural exclusion (Ortega et al., 2020).

Likewise, museums and Municipal Integration Councils should move beyond symbolic inclusion by authentically representing Muslim heritage, involving Muslim communities in cultural programming, and promoting dialogue through exhibitions, educational initiatives, and community events (European Commission, 2017; Fouskas, 2013; Gonzalez, 2022; Rey, 2022; Stylianou-Lambert et al., 2014). Museums should explicitly acknowledge the Islamic origins and influences of relevant artifacts, incorporate the perspectives of Muslim scholars and community members, and develop exhibitions and educational programmes highlighting the shared cultural heritage of Greek and Muslim communities, for example during the Ottoman period, to challenge monolithic perceptions of Islam and foster inclusive representation (European Commission, 2017; Gonzalez, 2022; Rey, 2022; Stylianou-Lambert et al., 2014). Municipal Integration Councils can further support inclusion by organizing heritage days, cultural festivals that will promote cultural exchange, and religious awareness initiatives that will improve understanding of religious diversity among public officials, reducing in that way unconscious bias, and reinforcing the religious freedom of Muslim communities (Fouskas, 2013). Finally, achieving intercultural inclusion requires clearer policy frameworks, sustained institutional support, and adequate resources to embed intercultural principles into everyday practice rather than isolated initiatives.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank all the participants who generously contributed their time and perspectives to this study. The author also acknowledges Professor Nektaria for her valuable contribution and guidance, as well as the educational and cultural institutions in Larissa that facilitated access to the research context. Finally, the author would like to thank the editor for their valuable time, feedback, and support throughout the publication process.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Ethical statement

Ethical protocols were followed throughout the study. Participants were informed about the study's purpose, their voluntary participation and right to withdraw, and provided written informed consent. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured through participant codes and the anonymization of institutional affiliations. Finally, given the sensitivity of topics concerning religion, culture, and migrant inclusion, interviews were conducted in a respectful, neutral, and non-judgmental manner.

Competing interests

The authors declare that there are no competing interests that could have influenced the research, analysis, or reporting of the findings.

Authors contributions

The first author contributed to the research concept and design, the collection and assembly of data, data analysis and interpretation, and the writing of the article. The second author contributed to the research concept and design, critically revised the article, and provided final approval of the manuscript.

AI disclosure

Artificial intelligence (AI)-based tools were used in a limited and supportive capacity during the preparation of this manuscript. Specifically, AI tools were used to format the references identified and selected by the author according to APA 7th edition guidelines and to assist with correcting grammar, syntax, and phrasing.

Biographical sketch

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