

Religious and Spiritual Engagement Among Muslim Students Experiencing School Bullying: Pathways to Coping, Resilience, and Wellbeing

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Abstract

Importance: School bullying can undermine students' safety, belonging, identity, and psychological wellbeing. For Muslim students, religious identity and spiritual engagement may constitute important resources for coping with adversity, yet their role in the experiences of students who have been bullied remains insufficiently understood.

Objective: This study examined how Muslim students experiencing school bullying understood and experienced their victimization and explored how religious and spiritual engagement contributed to coping, resilience, and wellbeing.

Methods: A qualitative case study design was employed involving 30 Muslim students who had experienced bullying at school. Data were generated through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, supported by observation and relevant document analysis. Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, combining inductive coding with theoretically informed interpretation based on social-ecological, religious/spiritual coping, meaning-making, and resilience perspectives.

Results: Five interconnected themes emerged: (1) bullying disrupted students' safety, belonging, dignity, and emotional wellbeing; (2) religious and spiritual engagement provided meaning, emotional regulation, hope, and perceived social support for some students; (3) religious resources contributed to coping and resilience when connected with supportive relationships and personal agency; (4) wellbeing was associated with gradual recovery, renewed confidence, hope, and reconnection; and (5) school climate, family relationships, peer support, institutional responsiveness, and the social meaning of religious identity shaped whether religious engagement became protective or challenging.

Conclusions: Religious and spiritual engagement can function as a context-dependent psychosocial resource for Muslim students experiencing bullying. Its contribution to resilience and wellbeing depends on the interaction between individual meaning-making and supportive interpersonal and institutional environments.

Implications for Practice: Schools should combine whole-school anti-bullying systems with culturally responsive psychosocial support. Counsellors, social workers, teachers, and other practitioners should assess students' self-identified religious

Introduction

Bullying remains a persistent social and public health concern in the school environment because its consequences go beyond isolated interpersonal conflicts to the psychological, social, and educational well-being of students. Bullying in the Indonesian Education environment shows an increasing trend. According to data from the Indonesian Child Protection Commission and the Indonesian Education Monitoring Network in 2025, bullying in schools reached 37.5% of the total complaints of violence against children (Noboru et al., 2021; Seknas JPPI, 2025). Longitudinal evidence suggests that victims of

bullying during adolescence are associated with depression, anxiety, rejection from peers, poor academic functioning, and low school connectedness, with some consequences lasting after the immediate period of victimization (Halliday et al., 2021). Thus, bullying prevention is not only a matter of controlling aggressive behavior but also protecting students' opportunities to thrive in a safe, supportive, and socially meaningful school environment.

The consequences of bullying are especially important when victimization intersects with aspects of a student's social identity. Identity-based bullying refers to the victimization of peers associated with characteristics such as ethnicity, race, religion, gender, disability, or other socially meaningful attributes in a given context. This kind of experience can involve not only interpersonal aggression but also processes of social exclusion, stigmatization, and unequal recognition. A systematic review of bullying based on racial, ethnic, civic, and religious status suggests that identity-based victimization can be embedded in broader patterns of prejudice, nationalism, xenophobia, and discrimination (Kuldas et al., 2021; Sapouna et al., 2023). Recent research has also shown that religion is a meaningful dimension of identity-based peer victimization and that the consequences of such experiences can include poorer well-being and psychosocial adjustment (Wenzling et al., 2024). Therefore, understanding bullying through the lens of student identity is important for developing prevention approaches that address individual experiences and the social environment in which bullying occurs (Moody & Stahel, 2025).

Religion is potentially important in this context because religious identity can be a source of significant meaning, belonging, moral orientation, social connections, and coping during adolescence. A systematic review over three decades of research found that religious and spiritual development is generally associated with adaptive outcomes during adolescence, including protection from some negative outcomes and the promotion of positive youth development and prosperity (Hardy et al., 2019). Previous reviews have also reported that religious and spiritual dimensions, particularly forms of spiritual coping and religious decision-making, are generally associated with positive adolescent health outcomes (Cotton et al., 2006; Iannello et al., 2022). These findings suggest that religion should not only be conceptualized as a demographic characteristic, but also as a potential psychosocial resource through which young people interpret and respond to difficult experiences.

However, the relationship between religion, hardship, and well-being is more complex than the assumption that greater religiosity inevitably results in better outcomes. Religious and spiritual engagement can operate through processes of meaning-formation, emotional regulation, social support, hope, and perceived connections to transcendent sources. (Krok, 2015). For example, found among late teens that religiosity and spirituality are related to ways of dealing with issues both directly and indirectly through global and situational meanings. In this perspective, religion can provide an interpretive framework within which stressful events become understandable and manageable. For students who experience bullying, religious beliefs and practices can help transform experiences of humiliation or rejection into experiences that can be interpreted, endured, and integrated into a broader understanding of self and life. Religious engagement can provide opportunities for prayer, reflection, seeking guidance, receiving support from religious communities, and maintaining hope during difficult times (Hefti, 2011).

The potential relevance of religious and spiritual resources becomes especially evident when considering bullying as an experience of social and psychological distress. A national study of more than 12,000 Canadian youth found that bullying victimization of bullying is associated with poorer mental health and examined whether spiritual health relationships can strengthen these relationships. The study conceptualized spiritual health broadly in terms of relationships with oneself, others, nature, and transcendence, suggesting that spirituality can serve as a protective asset when young people experience victimization (Massarwi & Gross-Manos, 2022; Shaver et al., 2022). These kinds of findings are important because they bring the discussion beyond the identification of harmful effects of bullying to the question of what resources enable victim students to cope with, recover, and maintain well-being. Nevertheless, the mechanisms by which religious and spiritual engagement become protective are still not well understood, especially from the perspective of the students themselves.

Recent evidence from high school students in Bandung, Indonesia, demonstrates the importance of this distinction: negative religious coping is associated with poorer mental health in stressful school conditions, while positive religious coping shows weaker protective tendencies and is statistically insignificant (Kadiyono et al., 2025). These findings caution against treating religion as something inherently protective and highlight the need to examine the lived and contextual processes in which religious involvement can support or complicate students' responses to bullying.

Another gap has to do with the mechanisms that link religious engagement to well-being. Quantitative research can establish links between religiosity, religious coping, bullying, and mental health. Still, those relationships do not necessarily reveal how students interpret religious experiences or why certain religious practices become meaningful during hardships. Therefore, qualitative inquiry is valuable because it can illuminate the processes by which students understand victimhood, seek spiritual comfort, mobilize religious values, access social support, and rebuild a sense of hope and self-worth. This approach is consistent with the broader orientation of bullying prevention research to understand contextual processes, school settings, and mechanisms by which protective resources can be translated into meaningful support for students (Pearce et al., 2024).

The study addresses this gap by examining the life experiences of Muslim students who have experienced bullying in school and exploring how religious and spiritual engagement becomes meaningful in their response to victimization. Rather than assuming that religion automatically protects students, this study examines the ways in which Islamic identity, faith, prayer, religious meaning, spiritual reflection, and religious or social support can contribute to protection, psychological strengthening, countermeasures, and recovery. The study also nonetheless remains concerned about the possibility that religious involvement may be ambivalent or inadequate in some circumstances. Thus, the study conceptualizes religion and spirituality as potentially dynamic psychosocial resources embedded in students' social lives, rather than as static individual characteristics.

The study was guided by the following research questions: (1) How do Muslim students experience and interpret bullying in their school life? (2) How do religious identities and spiritual engagement shape the

way Muslim students encounter and respond to bullying? and (3) How do religious and spiritual resources contribute to the well-being of Muslim students who experience bullying? By answering these questions, this study seeks to contribute to bullying prevention research in three ways. First, it expands research on bullying by highlighting religious identity as a meaningful dimension of students' life experiences. Second, it links bullying research with studies of religious and spiritual coping skills, resilience, and adolescent well-being. Third, it offers implications for school-based practices by considering how culturally and religiously responsive forms of support can complement existing bullying prevention and student well-being strategies without considering religious involvement to be universally protective. The main contribution is not to argue that religion eliminates the dangers of bullying, but rather to understand when and how religious and spiritual resources can help Muslim students survive adversity, regain strength, rebuild meaning, and move toward greater well-being.

Theoretical Background

A Social-Ecological Perspective on School Bullying

Bullying in schools is increasingly understood as a socially embedded phenomenon, rather than an isolated interaction between the perpetrator and the individual victim. The socio-ecological perspective conceptualizes bullying as arising from the interaction between individual characteristics and a variety of relational and environmental contexts, including peers, family, teachers, classes, schools, communities, and broader cultural norms. This perspective is particularly relevant to current studies because the experience of bullying among Muslim students cannot be adequately understood without considering the social environment in which religious identity, peer relationships, school norms, and support systems converge. Research published in the *International Journal of Bullying Prevention* also emphasizes that bullying must be examined across nested social contexts and that qualitative investigations can uncover meanings, relationships, and dilemmas that may remain invisible in purely individual-level analysis (Mishna et al., 2022; Rigby, 2024).

In a socio-ecological framework, schools represent a developmentally important microsystem because students spend considerable time in the classroom, peer groups, and teacher relationships. School climates, interpersonal relationships, social norms, and institutional responses can reproduce or limit bullying. Contemporary bullying research suggests that relationships in the classroom and school influence students' experiences of victimization and that effective prevention requires attention to the broader school system, rather than interventions aimed only at individual students (Dietrich & Cohen, 2019; Pearce et al., 2024). An ecological perspective allows religious identity and engagement to be placed within a broader relational environment: religious beliefs can operate at the individual level, interpersonal relationships, religious practices in family and school contexts at the mesosystem level, and cultural attitudes toward religion at the macrosystem level.

This perspective is critical to understanding bullying associated with religious identity. Religious identity can serve both as a source of a sense of belonging and as a potential marker of social difference. A

systematic review of the victimization of bullying as it relates to race, ethnicity, citizenship, and religious status suggests that religious identity can be involved in identity-based victimization, especially in contexts characterized by prejudice, xenophobia, nationalism, or religious intolerance (Sapouna et al., 2023). For Muslim adolescents, religious identity can have two significances: it can provide a meaningful social identity and a source of a sense of belonging while also potentially being the basis for exclusion, stereotyping, or harassment. This duality requires bullying research to go beyond a binary understanding of religion as a risk or protective factor and instead examine how religious identity operates within a particular social ecology.

Religious Identity, Religiosity, and Spirituality

Religious identity is an important dimension in the development of adolescent identity because adolescence involves an increasing reflection on personal values, belonging, meaning, and social affiliation. However, religious identity must be distinguished from religiosity and spirituality. Religiosity generally refers to involvement in organized belief systems, practices, rituals, and religious communities. In contrast, spirituality refers more broadly to a perceived individual relationship with transcendence, meaning, purpose, or something greater than the self. Recent developmental research emphasizes that these constructions may overlap but should not be automatically treated interchangeably (Buenconsejo & Datu, 2023). This distinction is theoretically important for this study because a student can identify as a Muslim while expressing religious involvement through prayer and worship together, while simultaneously experiencing spirituality through the formation of meaning, hope, transcendence, or a personal relationship with God.

Research on adolescent development generally suggests that religious and spiritual engagement can be associated with adaptive developmental outcomes. A systematic review spanning three decades of empirical research found that religiosity and spirituality are generally associated with protection from negative outcomes as well as the promotion of positive youth development and prosperity. However, the mechanisms and strength of these associations vary across different studies and contexts (Hardy et al., 2019). Research among Filipino adolescents also suggests that religiosity and spirituality are positively associated with positive youth development and that spirituality can strengthen the relationship between religiosity and developmental outcomes such as connection, character, and caringness (Buenconsejo & Datu, 2023). These findings are relevant for current studies because well-being should not simply be conceptualized as the absence of psychological distress; well-being can also involve positive relationships, meaning, confidence, connection, character, and the ability to continue to thrive despite adversity.

Religious and Spiritual Coping as a Response to Bullying

The protective function of religion becomes particularly relevant when students experience stressful or adverse events. The perspective of religious and spiritual coping proposes that individuals can draw on faith, prayer, religious beliefs, spiritual meaning, and relationships with religious communities when trying to understand and manage difficulties. (Krok, 2015) suggests that religiosity and spirituality can be

linked to adolescent coping through the process of meaning-formation, suggesting that faith can provide a framework of interpretation within which stressful experiences become understandable and psychologically manageable. In the context of bullying, this theoretical proposition suggests that students are unlikely to simply respond through conventional coping strategies such as avoidance, confrontation, or seeking help from teachers; they may also interpret bullying through religious meaning, seek solace through prayer, turn to God, rely on religious teachings, or obtain emotional and social support from religious communities.

Importantly, religious coping should not be conceptualized as something uniformly positive. The distinction between adaptive and maladaptive religious coping is crucial because religious beliefs can provide comfort and meaning. Still, they can also be associated with spiritual struggle, guilt, feelings of abandonment, or perceptions of divine punishment. This difference is theoretically significant for this study because the central question is not whether Islam "protects" Muslim students from bullying automatically or universally. Rather, the study seeks to understand how students themselves mobilize religious and spiritual resources in the face of victimization and whether those resources help them maintain meaning, hope, emotional stability, social connection, and self-esteem. The broader adolescent literature also suggests that religious and spiritual processes are heterogeneous and that their consequences depend on the particular form of engagement and the social context in which the process occurs (Hardy et al., 2019; Krok, 2015).

Religion, Social Resources, and Student Wellbeing

Another theoretical proposition is that religious engagement can affect well-being not only through personal beliefs but also through relational and social resources. Religious communities can provide a sense of belonging, interpersonal support, adult guidance, moral frameworks, role models, and opportunities for meaningful participation. The relational spirituality perspective argues that religious and spiritual contexts contain ideological, social, and transcendental resources that can support adolescents' positive development. These resources may be particularly important for adolescents facing social difficulties because they can overcome experiences of rejection by providing alternative sources of identity, acceptance, connection, and meaning (Buenconsejo & Datu, 2023). For Muslim students who have experienced bullying, then potential religious protection may arise not only from belief in Islam but also from connection with parents, peers, teachers, religious mentors, mosques, Islamic educational environments, or other supportive relationships that affirm the student's dignity and sense of belonging.

The well-being of students in this study was then conceptualized as multidimensional and relational. These included psychological functioning, emotional safety, self-esteem, social connectedness, a sense of belonging in school, and the ability to maintain a positive developmental trajectory despite adversity. Evidence suggests that victimization in schools is associated with poorer psychological well-being and that belonging in school may play a mediating or protective role in these relationships (Arslan & Allen, 2021). Similarly, research on social identity suggests that identification with valued social groups can

contribute to a sense of belonging in school and emotional well-being among adolescents (Brown et al., 2025; Dunstone et al., 2024). These findings provide an important bridge between religious identity and bullying research: when religious identity is experienced as a source of meaningful and affirming belonging, it can provide psychological and relational resources that help students cope with victimization. Still, when it becomes a stigma or is targeted, this can actually strengthen vulnerability.

Methods

Participants and Research Focus. The study focused on the lived experiences of thirty Muslim students who had experienced bullying at school, with particular attention to how religious identity and spiritual engagement shaped their responses to bullying and their perceptions of well-being. Participants were selected because they had experienced firsthand one or more forms of bullying at school, including verbal, relational, social, psychological, physical, or identity victimization. Qualitative focus on students who had personally experienced bullying was considered appropriate because bullying is a complex relational and contextual phenomenon whose meanings can differ depending on the student's social position, relationships, school environment, and personal interpretation (Mishna et al., 2022). Qualitative research is valuable in the study of bullying because it allows researchers to access children's and adolescents' own voices, including experiences, emotions, interpretations, coping strategies, and perceptions that may remain invisible in standard quantitative measures. In these studies, participants were approached not only as recipients of bullying-related harm but as active meaning makers interpreting their experiences through personal, interpersonal, cultural, religious, and spiritual resources. This orientation is consistent with the study's theoretical framework that conceptualizes bullying in a socio-ecological context while examining religious and spiritual involvement as potential psychosocial resources in the face of adversity (Mishna et al., 2022). Particular attention is paid to participants' Muslim identities because religion can be an important component in adolescents' identity, meaning-making, social relationships, and psychological development. The unit of analysis is a participant's story of experiencing bullying and then negotiating safety, identity, coping mechanisms, social relationships, and well-being in schools and the broader social environment.

Research Design. The study uses a qualitative case study design to develop an in-depth and contextual understanding of how Muslim students experience bullying and how religious and spiritual engagement is incorporated into their responses to those experiences (Flyvbjerg, 2011; Yin, 2014). The case study design is particularly appropriate because the phenomenon being investigated is examined in a real-school context, rather than separate from relationships, institutional environments, peer cultures, and social circumstances in which bullying occurs (Pearce et al., 2024). Qualitative case study research is well-suited to complex educational and social phenomena because it allows researchers to integrate multiple sources of evidence and examine the interactions between individual experiences and contextual conditions. In bullying research, this contextual sensitivity is particularly important because bullying is embedded in interconnected systems involving students, peers, teachers, families, class relationships, school climate, and broader cultural norms (Mishna et al., 2022). These case studies thus treat students' experiences as being within a broader social ecology, rather than as isolated individual

issues. This design also allows researchers to investigate not only what happens to students but also how they interpret what happens, how they respond, and why certain religious or spiritual resources become meaningful in certain circumstances. This interpretive orientation is consistent with contemporary bullying studies that argue that a culturally and contextually bound understanding of bullying is important for developing meaningful prevention and intervention strategies (Lundberg & Hellström, 2024). The study adopts an embedded qualitative case study orientation in which the overall case relates to Muslim students experiencing bullying at school.

In contrast, individual students represent the unit of experience embedded in the case. This design allows for analysis of individual narratives as well as cross-participant comparisons of recurring patterns related to religious identity, spiritual coping, social support, resilience, and well-being. Similar qualitative case study approaches have been used in bullying research to illuminate the complexities of school contexts and identify mechanisms that cannot be adequately understood through quantitative measurement alone (Pearce et al., 2024).

Sources of Data. The primary data source consisted of semi-structured in-depth interviews with thirty students who experienced bullying, while additional information was obtained from relevant school and program documentation where available. The use of student narratives as the primary source of evidence was intentional because the study aimed to understand bullying from the perspective of those who experienced it firsthand and identify the subjective meanings they associate with religious and spiritual involvement. Qualitative interviews provide opportunities for children and adolescents to articulate experiences, feelings, relationships, and interpretations in their own words. They can uncover nuances that may not have emerged from predefined survey categories (Mishna et al., 2022). Interview data explored five broad domains: experiences and forms of bullying; emotional and social consequences; coping responses and strategies; religious identity and spiritual engagement; and the perceived effects of religious and spiritual resources on well-being. Questions about religion were deliberately opened to avoid the notion that Islam automatically functions as a positive or protective resource. Participants were invited to explain whether and how prayer, Qur'anic teachings, religious beliefs, religious practices, relationships with religious friends or adults, and personal faith influenced their responses to bullying. Researchers also examined whether religious involvement posed difficulties, such as spiritual questions, guilt, anger toward God, or feelings of religious inadequacy, as ways of dealing with religion can include both positive and negative forms (Krok, 2015). Where relevant and ethically permissible, school-level documents regarding anti-bullying policies, student support mechanisms, religious or character education, and welfare programs were examined as secondary sources to contextualize students' stories. Several sources of evidence strengthen the design of the case study by allowing individual narratives to be interpreted in the institutional and social contexts in which the bullying occurred (Pearce et al., 2024). Given the sensitive nature of underage bullying experiences, interviews were conducted in a private and psychologically safe environment, with participants being told that they could refuse to answer questions or terminate participation. Appropriate parental or guardian consent and student consent were obtained, in accordance with ethical

expectations for research involving children and adolescents as well as well-established qualitative bullying research practices (Mishna et al., 2022).

Data Collection. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, observation and document review, to obtain rich descriptions of the participants' experiences and the context in which they occurred. The semi-structured format provided sufficient consistency among the thirty interviews to answer the research questions while allowing participants to introduce unanticipated experiences and meanings in the interview protocol. This approach is particularly suited for bullying research because students can interpret bullying differently depending on the nature of the incident, relationships with perpetrators and peers, school responses, family support, and personal coping resources (Mishna et al., 2022). The interviews begin with less sensitive questions regarding the student's experiences at school before gradually moving on to bullying incidents, emotional consequences, coping responses, religious identity, spiritual practices, and perceptions of well-being. Investigator questions were used to encourage participants to develop important experiences, clarify meaning, and describe changes over time. The interview process specifically explored whether religious and spiritual engagement was perceived as something protective, reinforcing, healing, neutral, or challenging. Questions also examined how participants viewed the relationship between faith and social support, including help from parents, peers, teachers, religious leaders, and other members of the religious community. This relational approach reflects a socio-ecological understanding that students' responses to bullying are shaped by interactions between individual characteristics and layers of their social environment (Mishna et al., 2022). Interviews were recorded audio-wise, transcribed verbatim, and cross-checked with original recordings to ensure accuracy. Field notes were created during and immediately after the interview to document contextual observations, emerging interpretations, emotional responses, and potentially important non-verbal information. Data collection and initial interpretation take place iteratively, allowing new issues to inform subsequent interviews while retaining the core questions of the research. This kind of iterative qualitative process is consistent with contemporary case study research in bullying, where data collection and interpretation are strongly related to contextual meanings that emerge from participants' explanations (Pearce et al., 2024).

Data Analysis. Interview, observational, and documentary materials were analyzed using reflective thematic analysis to identify patterns of repeated meanings related to bullying experiences, religious and spiritual engagement, coping, resilience, and student well-being. The analysis began with a re-reading of transcripts to achieve an understanding of the data, followed by the systematic coding of meaningful segments related to the research questions and participant accounts (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The initial codes were inductively developed from the participants' narratives while also being informed deductively by the study's theoretical concepts of social ecology, religious/spiritual coping, and well-being. Examples of initial codes include feeling insecure at school, social exclusion, loss of belonging, prayer as emotional regulation, trust in God, formation of religious meaning, support from religious friends, forgiveness, hope, spiritual struggle, and rebuilding confidence. The researchers then examined the relationships between the codes and conceptually grouped the related codes into broader candidate categories and themes. The candidate themes were reviewed based on a complete dataset to determine

whether they adequately represented similarities and differences among the 30 participants. Particular attention was paid to negative or contradictory cases so that the analysis does not portray religion as something inherently or universally beneficial. This is important because qualitative bullying research emphasizes the value of capturing complexity, contradictions, and contextual differences in young people's experiences (Mishna et al., 2022). The analysis then shifted from descriptive explanations to interpretations, examining how religious and spiritual engagement operate within students' socio-ecological environments and how these resources relate to perceived coping and well-being. Cross-case comparisons were used to identify patterns shared by many participants as well as different experiences regarding differences in peer relationships, school responses, family support, and individual interpretations. The final theme was refined through repeated comparisons between raw data, codes, categories, and research questions, following rigorous thematic analysis principles (Neuman, 2014). To strengthen credibility, the researchers kept track of coding audits and thematic decisions, revisited interpretations of the original transcripts, and considered alternative explanations for emerging findings. This analytical strategy allows studies to go beyond simply documenting that students use religion after experiencing bullying, and instead examine how, why, and under what contextual conditions religious and spiritual engagement becomes meaningful in the way they cope with and prosper.

Results

Overview of the Findings

Analysis of interviews, field notes, and supporting documents identified five interrelated dimensions of the participants' experiences: (1) experiences of bullying and disruption to safety and belonging; (2) religious and spiritual engagement as sources of meaning and emotional support; (3) the development of coping and resilience; (4) the changes in well-being perceived by some students; and (5) the contextual conditions that shape whether religious and spiritual resources become helpful or challenging. Among thirty Muslim students, bullying was experienced not only as an isolated interpersonal event, but rather as an experience that affected students' sense of security, dignity, togetherness, and participation in school life. At the same time, religious and spiritual engagement emerged as important resources that some students could potentially use to interpret their experiences, regulate emotions, maintain hope, and rebuild a sense of personal worth.

Theme 1. Bullying Experiences: Disruption of Safety, Belonging, and Personal Dignity

The first theme relates to how students experience bullying and the consequences for their sense of security and belonging at school. Participants described bullying through various forms, including verbal insults, taunts, social exclusion, rumor spreading, physical aggression, and derogatory comments about personal characteristics or religious identity. Although the intensity and frequency of these experiences varied, participants generally described bullying as evoking feelings of shame, fear, sadness, anger, loneliness, and reluctance to participate in school activities. Some participants indicated that the most difficult aspect was not an individual bullying incident but a sustained anticipation that bullying could

happen again. This creates a persistent sense of insecurity in classrooms, school corridors, peer groups, and other social spaces.

For some participants, bullying also affected their willingness to communicate with peers and teachers. Students reported becoming more reserved, avoiding certain classmates, withdrawing from group activities, or spending breaks alone. In this record, bullying transformed the school from a place associated with learning and friendships to one that required sustained emotional alertness. These experiences went beyond direct psychological distress to affect students' daily social participation. These findings are particularly important from a socio-ecological perspective because bullying is embedded in relationships between students, peer groups, classes, teachers, families, and the broader school culture. The record also suggests that students' interpretations of bullying are shaped by whether adults recognize the problem and respond to it. When students feel the teacher is intervening, listening, or providing protection, the experience is more likely to be interpreted as manageable; When the response is perceived as weak or non-existent, students describe greater feelings of helplessness and isolation.

For Muslim participants, religious identity sometimes becomes part of the social meaning of bullying. Some students describe situations in which perceived religious practices, appearances, expressions of faith, or religious differences become the subject of jokes, comments, or social distancing. However, not all religiously identified experiences are negative. For some students, Muslim identity provides a sense of continuity and a sense of belonging outside of the immediate peer environment. Thus, religious identity occupies an ambivalent position: it can be a marker through the experience of difference, but it can also provide an important source of personal identity and social meaning.

Theme 2. Religious and Spiritual Engagement: Meaning, Faith, and Emotional Regulation

The second theme relates to how participants use religious and spiritual resources when dealing with experiences of bullying. Religious engagement is expressed through a variety of practices and beliefs, especially prayer, remembering God, reading or meditating on the Qur'an, trust in God, religious teachings on patience and forgiveness, and seeking support from religiously meaningful relationships. Importantly, participants did not simply describe these practices as formal religious obligations. Instead, they often understood them as personal resources that helped them process difficult emotions and understand experiences that they had difficulty controlling.

For some participants, prayer represents a personal space in which they can express sadness, fear, anger, and hope. The act of praying allows students to temporarily withdraw from stressful circumstances and feel emotional calm. Religious beliefs also provide a framework within which participants interpret hardship as something bearable, rather than as evidence of personal failure. In this case, religious engagement seems to operate through the formation of meaning, helping students build interpretations of their experiences that are less dominated by powerlessness.

But the narrative suggests that religious engagement did not work identically for all participants. Some students perceived faith as soothing and uplifting, while others reported periods of questioning, disappointment, or uncertainty. Some participants had difficulty understanding why bullying occurred even though they tried to remain religious or behave according to Islamic values. These kinds of experiences demonstrate the importance of distinguishing positive religious coping from negative or spiritually disruptive coping forms. Rather than assuming that greater religiosity automatically results in better well-being, these findings suggest that the meaning given to religious experiences determines whether religion is a supportive or challenging resource. This interpretation is consistent with previous research that suggests that spirituality can amplify positive developmental processes when combined with meaningful religious involvement. In contrast, religious struggles may be associated with poorer psychological outcomes.

Theme 3. Religious and Spiritual Engagement as a Resource for Coping and Resilience

The third theme relates to the relationship between religious/spiritual engagement and the way students cope and build resilience. Participants described several coping responses, including seeking emotional support, avoiding confrontation, communicating with trusted adults, maintaining religious practices, praying, trying to forgive the perpetrator, and developing a determination to continue their education. Religious and spiritual engagement is most meaningful when connected to these broader coping resources, rather than functioning independently. In this case, faith appears to contribute to resilience by helping some students maintain hope, regulate emotional reactions, and maintain a sense of future orientation.

A recurring pattern is the development of a belief that bullying does not have to determine a student's identity or future. Participants who described religion as helpful often emphasized ideas such as patience, perseverance, self-control, forgiveness, and trust in God. These beliefs seemed to provide psychological distance from the experience of direct bullying. Instead of responding only through anger or retaliation, some students described an attempt to control their emotions and focus on long-term goals. The formation of religious meaning seems to serve as a mechanism by which difficulties are incorporated into broader personal narratives.

However, resilience should not be interpreted as an individual's responsibility to tolerate bullying. The availability of supportive relationships and institutional responses strongly influences participants' capacity to cope with problems. Religious coping appears most constructive when students simultaneously have access to a parent, trusted teacher, friend, religious mentor, or other supportive adult. These findings reinforce the socio-ecological perspective underlying the study: the process of individual coping is embedded in interpersonal and institutional conditions. Therefore, religious involvement should be conceptualized as one component of a broader resilience system, not as a substitute for effective anti-bullying interventions.

Theme 4. Student Wellbeing: From Emotional Distress Toward Recovery and Reconnection

The fourth theme relates to participants' perceptions of well-being after the experience of bullying. At the point of victimization, students generally describe decreased emotional well-being, insecurity, sadness, loneliness, anger, and decreased self-confidence. Some also describe changes in school participation and interpersonal relationships. However, participants who experienced a supportive religious and social environment described a gradual improvement in emotional stability, confidence, hope, and willingness to reconnect with others.

For these students, well-being is not understood simply as the absence of negative emotions. Rather, well-being involves feeling secure, accepted by others, maintaining meaningful relationships, having hope for the future, and regaining confidence in oneself. Religious and spiritual engagement contributes to this process primarily by reinforcing meaning, emotional regulation, hope, and perceived connectedness.

These findings suggest that recovery from bullying is experienced as a gradual process, rather than a single event. Participants described a shift from emotional distress to greater acceptance, confidence, and engagement with school and peers. Religious practices sometimes become part of this recovery process by helping students rebuild a positive sense of self. Nevertheless, recovery rates differed among participants, suggesting that religious engagement alone is not enough to determine well-being outcomes. Students' experiences in support, school responses, peer relationships, and family relationships remain important conditions that shape recovery.

Theme 5. Contextual Conditions: When Religious Resources Become Protective—or Challenging

The fifth theme identifies the contextual conditions that shape the role of religion and spirituality in students' responses to bullying. Three conditions stand out: supportive interpersonal relationships, school responsiveness, and the social meaning inherent in religious identity. Students are more likely to experience religion as a source of protection when their religious practices are respected, when they have supportive family or peer relationships, and when adults respond appropriately to bullying. In contrast, religious engagement can become less effective when students feel socially isolated, misunderstood, or blamed for the bullying they experience.

These findings challenge the simplistic assumption that Muslim identity or religiosity automatically protects students from the dangers associated with bullying. In contrast, religious and spiritual engagement appears to function through relational and psychological mechanisms. Prayer can provide emotional regulation; religious beliefs can facilitate the formation of meaning; religious communities can provide social support; and spiritual practices can strengthen expectations. However, these mechanisms depend on the surrounding social environment. This contextual interpretation is consistent with the ecological orientation of contemporary bullying research, which emphasizes that students' well-being is influenced by interactions between individuals, peers, classes, schools, families, and broader cultural systems.

Overall, the findings show sequential but non-linear relationships between bullying victimization, religious/spiritual engagement, coping and resilience, and well-being, which are moderated by contextual conditions. Bullying initially disrupts students' sense of security, community, and dignity. Religious and spiritual resources then provide some participants with mechanisms to create meaning, emotional regulation, hope, and social connection. These mechanisms contribute to coping and resilience, which in turn supports aspects of well-being and recovery. However, the strength and direction of these processes vary depending on students' interpersonal relationships, school responses, and individual religious experiences. The key finding is not that religion "cures" the consequences of bullying, but rather that religious and spiritual engagement can be a meaningful psychosocial resource when embedded in a supportive relational and institutional environment.

Discussion

First, the most important finding of this study is that religious and spiritual engagement does not serve as a simple protective factor that automatically neutralizes the consequences of bullying; rather, it serves as a contextual psychosocial resource that Muslim students use to interpret, manage, and reconstruct their experiences as victims. These findings distinguish this study from substantial research pools that tend to conceptualize religiosity or spirituality primarily as a common adaptive characteristic associated with better adolescent adjustment (Hardy et al., 2019). Participants' records suggest that prayer, belief in God, religious reflection, religious values, and support from religious relationships can contribute to emotion regulation, meaning-building, hope, and resilience. Still, these resources are neither uniformly available nor do they provide uniform benefits. This interpretation is consistent with the religious/spiritual coping perspective, which distinguishes adaptive forms of religious coping from forms that involve spiritual struggle, divine punishment perceived as punishment, guilt, or feelings of abandonment. These findings are particularly significant because recent evidence in Indonesia on bullying and religious coping also suggests that negative religious coping may be associated with poorer mental health outcomes. In contrast, positive religious coping does not necessarily result in statistically significant improvements in well-being among students who experience bullying (Kadiyono et al., 2025). Thus, the contribution of this study is not to claim that Islam protects students from bullying, but to show how Islamic identity and spiritual engagement can be a source of meaning, coping, and recovery when they are embedded in supportive social relationships and school environments.

Second, these findings can be interpreted as the result of previous experience as well as the beginning of a potentially longer developmental path. Students' religious engagement does not arise in a social vacuum; rather, it appears to reflect the processes of religious socialization, family influence, peer relationships, school culture, and personal identity development that preceded the experience of bullying. Adolescence is a developmental period in which religious and spiritual commitments can be increasingly integrated with identity, values, relationships, and interpretations of important life events (Hardy et al., 2019). Therefore, the way students respond to bullying may partly reflect the meaning and practices of religion that preceded the occurrence of victimization. At the same time, bullying appears to be able to alter the meaning of those religious resources: practices such as prayer and belief in God can

become more prominent personally precisely because students face difficulties. These findings therefore suggest developmental processes rather than static relationships: previous religious and relational experiences become preconditions, bullying becomes disruptive events, and subsequent formation of religious/spiritual meanings can influence the direction of coping and recovery. This interpretation is compatible with the perspective of ecological development, in which individual development is generated through continuous interactions between various social systems over time. Recent systematic evidence also suggests that bullying research requires greater attention to ecological systems and longitudinal processes because existing studies disproportionately examine individual and direct social factors and are more often cross-sectional rather than longitudinal. In this regard, current findings should be understood not as the end point of the student experience, but rather as a potential turning point in the sustainable development of identity, resilience, a sense of belonging in school, and well-being.

Third, these findings help explain why religious and spiritual engagement generates these patterns by identifying the mechanisms by which religion becomes meaningful in students' responses to bullying. Three mechanisms appear to be particularly important: the formation of meaning, emotional regulation, and social connection. First, the formation of religious meaning allows some students to interpret bullying as an enduring hardship without allowing it to fully define their identity or future. Second, prayer and other spiritual practices provide mechanisms for emotional regulation by creating opportunities for reflection, psychological distance, and hope. Third, religious identity can connect students with parents, peers, religious adults, and the broader community that provide emotional and relational support. This mechanism is particularly consistent with the literature on adolescent religious and spiritual development, which identifies values, social relationships, norms, and meaning-related processes as important pathways through which religiosity and spirituality influence adolescent outcomes (Hardy et al., 2019). These resources also complement the perspective of meaning in life and a sense of belonging in schools in bullying research: bullying can undermine a student's sense of belonging, self-efficacy, and meaning in life, while this resource can mediate the relationship between victimization and well-being (Seon & Smith-Adcock, 2021). This study expands on this logic by showing that, for some Muslim students, religious and spiritual engagement can be one of the pathways through which meaning and expectations are reconstructed after being victimized. Importantly, however, this mechanism is conditional: religion becomes more likely to support resilience when accompanied by supportive relationships and an environment that recognizes, rather than stigmatizes, students' religious identities.

Fourth, this study differs from previous studies in both population, conceptual integration, and interpretation of religious engagement. Existing studies of bullying have established that victimization is strongly associated with poorer psychological well-being and that a sense of belonging in school may serve as an important protective or mediating factor (Arslan & Allen, 2021; Xu & Fang, 2021). Meanwhile, research on religion and adolescence generally shows a positive association between religiosity/spirituality and adolescent development, although researchers increasingly emphasize the complexity and multidimensionality of these relationships (Hardy et al., 2019). Studies involving Muslim adolescents also suggest that religious identification can contribute to psychological adjustment but

can also interact in a complex way with experiences of religious discrimination (Wenzling et al., 2024). The study combined the literature by examining Muslim students specifically as young people who had experienced bullying, rather than examining religiosity and well-being in the general adolescent population. The qualitative approach also shifted the analytical emphasis from asking whether religiosity statistically predicts well-being to how students themselves experience and interpret religion during and after bullying. This distinction is theoretically important because recent meta-analysis evidence suggests that the longitudinal positive association between religion/spirituality and mental health is relatively small, suggesting that the broad measure of religiosity alone cannot adequately explain individual experiences (Aggarwal et al., 2023). The current findings therefore support a more nuanced conceptualization in which religion is neither inherently protective nor harmful; the consequences depend on the form of religious attachment, the meaning inherent in the faith, and the social conditions that surround the student.

Fifth, the "Now what?" question that emerges from these findings is that bullying prevention and intervention should not treat religious and spiritual life as irrelevant to students' well-being, but neither should schools use religion as a substitute for formal protection, psychosocial intervention, or institutional accountability. The priority should remain bullying prevention and detection through a school-wide socio-ecological approach involving students, teachers, parents, school leaders, and the broader community. This is consistent with evidence that bullying is embedded in school relationships and organizational contexts and that effective prevention requires school-wide capacity building, rather than interventions aimed exclusively at individual victims or perpetrators (Pearce et al., 2024). Religious and spiritual resources can then be integrated as culturally responsive optional components in student support, especially when students themselves identify faith as meaningful. School counselors, social workers, teachers, and religious educators can provide opportunities for students to discuss faith, meaning, hope, forgiveness, identity, and coping without imposing specific religious interpretations. At the same time, professionals should be trained to recognize ways of dealing with negative religious issues, including interpretations of bullying as divine punishment, feelings of abandonment by God, excessive guilt, or the belief that victims should only endure suffering. This distinction is particularly important because evidence suggests that negative coping with religion can be associated with poorer mental health outcomes. At the same time, spiritual well-being and some forms of religious practice may be protective (Aggarwal et al., 2023). For Muslim students, culturally responsive support may involve collaboration between school counselors, social workers, families, and trusted religious leaders, provided that the collaboration respects student autonomy, confidentiality, protection principles, and religious diversity. The practical goal is to create a school environment where students are protected from bullying, their religious identities are respected, and their own cultural and spiritual resources can be mobilized as part of recovery, rather than being used to place the responsibility of confronting victims in the face of problems.

Finally, the broader theoretical contribution of this study is the proposition that the relationship between bullying, religious/spiritual engagement, resilience, and well-being should be understood as dynamic ecological processes, rather than simply victimization relationships to outcomes. These findings can be

conceptually represented as: victims of bullying → disruption to safety, belonging, and meaning → formation of religious/spiritual meanings as well as social support → coping and resilience → well-being reconstruction, with school climate, family relationships, peer support, and institutional responsiveness shaping each stage of the process. This formulation integrates the socio-ecological theory of bullying with religious/spiritual coping theory, meaning creation, and resilience perspectives. This formulation also expands on existing models of bullying and well-being that identify a sense of belonging in school, self-efficacy, and meaning in life as pathways between victimization and well-being (Seon & Smith-Adcock, 2021). A distinctive insight here is that religious and spiritual resources can participate in the reconstruction of meaning and sense of belonging after bullying, but only in conditions where students experience their faith as a source of agency, connection, and hope, rather than guilt, punishment, or isolation. This interpretation also responds to the ongoing need for bullying research to examine cultural and ecological contexts more systematically rather than treating individual-level characteristics as isolated predictors. Thus, this study contributes to the evolving literature on religion and bullying in schools by placing Muslim students not only as vulnerable victims but also as young people who actively face difficulties through intersecting personal, relational, cultural, and spiritual resources. Implications for future research are to examine these processes longitudinally and across different religious and cultural contexts so that researchers can determine when religious/spiritual engagement drives resilience, when it becomes a source of vulnerability, and how schools can ethically integrate culturally meaningful resources into comprehensive anti-bullying systems.

Implications for Practice

These findings have several implications for bullying prevention and intervention in schools, particularly for schools serving faith-diverse student populations and for practitioners who support Muslim students who experience bullying. First, schools should move beyond approaches that conceptualize bullied students primarily as vulnerable individuals in need of protection and develop a comprehensive social-ecological prevention and support system in schools. These findings suggest that bullying affects students' safety, belonging, dignity, and emotional well-being, suggesting that interventions should address not only offender behavior but also peer relationships, classroom climate, teacher responsiveness, family involvement, and school organizational practices. Therefore, schools should establish clear reporting mechanisms, prompt responses to reported incidents, systematic monitoring of bullying hotspots, recovery opportunities where appropriate, and psychosocial support that is easily accessible to students. Importantly, religiously informed support should be incorporated into this broader protection system, not a substitute for formal anti-bullying procedures.

Second, school counselors, social workers, psychologists, and teachers should receive training in religiously and culturally responsive bullying interventions. Current findings suggest that some Muslim students utilize prayer, belief in God, religious teachings, and spiritual reflection to regulate emotions and build meaning after experiencing bullying. Therefore, practitioners should be prepared to ask students if religion or spirituality is meaningful to them and, if so, how it contributes to the way they deal with problems. Such conversations should remain student-led and should not assume that religious

involvement is always beneficial. This principle is consistent with research showing that adolescents' religious and spiritual development is multidimensional and can affect a child's identity, relationships, meaning-making, and adjustment through a variety of pathways.

Third, interventions should strengthen the relationship between religious/spiritual resources and the broader resilience-building process. Findings suggest that religious engagement becomes most meaningful when combined with supportive relationships, regulation of emotions, expectations, and opportunities for students to regain confidence and control. Schools can develop optional well-being activities that allow students to explore meaning, hope, values, compassion, self-esteem, and coping in culturally appropriate ways. For Muslim students who identify faith as important, collaboration with trusted religious educators or community leaders can provide additional sources of support. However, this kind of collaboration should be done within the framework of professional safeguards and with respect for the autonomy and confidentiality of the student. Religious practitioners should not be placed in place of trained mental health or social work professionals; instead, they can complement professional services by providing culturally meaningful forms of social and spiritual support.

Fourth, schools should explicitly address religious identity as part of bullying prevention and inclusion policies. Findings suggest that religious identity may have an ambivalent role: it can be a basis for exclusion or ridicule, but it can simultaneously provide students with a sense of belonging, identity, and social support. Therefore, anti-bullying policies should explicitly acknowledge identity-based bullying, including bullying related to religion, religious practices, appearance, or perceived religious differences. Teachers should be equipped to distinguish the usual differences between peers from repeated identity-based harassment and should respond consistently when religious identity is subjected to insult or exclusion.

Fifth, families should be involved in the intervention process, especially when students are experiencing persistent bullying or significant emotional distress. Parents and caregivers can be an important bridge between students' religious identities, emotional well-being, and school experiences. Schools should establish communication mechanisms that allow parents to understand the nature of bullying, recognize signs of withdrawal or stress, and support constructive coping without encouraging retaliation or passive resilience.

Finally, these findings imply that effective practice requires a coordinated multi-actor model in bullying prevention and student well-being. School leaders, teachers, counselors, social workers, parents, peers, and—if students request it—religious or community actors should act as complementary components of a broader support system. The practical goal is to create conditions in which students are protected from bullying, listened to when victimization occurs, supported in rebuilding relationships and confidence, and allowed to mobilize personally meaningful resources for recovery. This approach shifts the emphasis from the question "How can religion make bullied students stronger?" to more appropriate practice questions: "How can schools create an environment where students' cultural and spiritual

resources can safely contribute to coping and well-being while institutions remain accountable for preventing and stopping bullying?"

Conclusion

The study suggests that religious and spiritual engagement can be a meaningful psychosocial resource for Muslim students who experience bullying at school. Still, its protective value is neither automatic nor universal. The main lesson, or wisdom of the research, is that students do not only experience bullying as an interpersonal problem; victimhood can disrupt their sense of security, belonging, dignity, identity, and future orientation. In response to these experiences, some students mobilized prayer, trust in God, religious reflection, spiritual meaning-building, religious values, and faith-based social support to regulate emotions, maintain hope, and rebuild a sense of self-worth. However, the findings also suggest that religious involvement can involve uncertainty, spiritual struggle, guilt, or feelings of abandonment, suggesting that religion can serve as well as a source of difficulty depending on how students interpret their experiences and the context around them. The broader lesson is that resilience after bullying is not just an individual's psychological capacity and should not be reduced to religious beliefs; resilience develops through the interaction of personal meaning, spiritual resources, relationships, school responses, and social environments.

This study contributes to the study of bullying and student well-being by combining three perspectives that are often examined separately: socio-ecological perspectives on bullying, coping and the formation of religious/spiritual meanings, and resilience/well-being perspectives. Instead of treating religiosity as a static individual variable that predicts positive or negative outcomes, this study conceptualizes religious and spiritual engagement as a dynamic process in which students interpret hardship, mobilize coping resources, construct meaning, and potentially rebuild well-being. It provides a deeper understanding of the relationship between religious identity and the victimization of bullying, especially among Muslim students whose experiences are still relatively underrepresented in international bullying research. Methodologically, the qualitative case study approach provides an experiential perspective that complements quantitative research by examining not only whether religion is related to well-being but how, why, and under what conditions religious and spiritual resources become meaningful to victimized students. The study then sharpens the research question from whether religion "protects" bullied students to a more analytically productive question: under what interpersonal, institutional, and cultural conditions can religious and spiritual engagement contribute to coping, resilience, and well-being without shifting the responsibility of addressing bullying to the victim? This perspective expands the ecological approach to bullying by placing students' cultural and spiritual resources within a broader system of family, peers, schools, and communities.

However, some limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study involved 30 Muslim students who had experienced bullying, and the qualitative case study design limited statistical generalization to other student populations, religious groups, regions, or national contexts. The findings should be interpreted as context-based explanations, not universal claims about Muslim students or religions. Second, the

study relied heavily on participants' retrospective records and self-reports, which may have been influenced by participants' memories, emotional states, social desires, or willingness to disclose sensitive experiences. Third, because this study focused specifically on Muslim students, it cannot determine whether the mechanisms identified here are typical of Islam, shared across religious traditions, or primarily related to spirituality and meaning-building more broadly. Fourth, the cross-cutting nature of qualitative design limits the ability to establish how religious/spiritual engagement and well-being may change over time after bullying. Longitudinal design can better examine whether religious resources contribute to sustainable resilience or whether their significance changes as students go through different stages of development. Finally, although this study emphasizes contextual conditions, the available qualitative evidence cannot establish a cause-and-effect relationship between religious engagement and improved well-being. Therefore, future research should combine longitudinal qualitative design with comparative or mixed-methods approaches, examine diverse religious and cultural populations, and investigate how schools can integrate culturally responsive spiritual resources into evidence-based anti-bullying systems while still maintaining students' autonomy, protections, and professional ethical standards.

Declarations

Author Contribution

Contributor Statement: Author 1: Research design (lead), introduction (lead), conceptualization (support), methodology (support), investigation (support), data collection (support), writing–review and editing (lead), validation (support), data analysis (lead), data triangulation (lead), and job diversification (support). Author 2: Research design (support), introduction (support), conceptualization (lead), methodology (lead), investigation (support), data collection (support), writing–review and editing (support), validation (support), data analysis (support), data triangulation (lead), and job diversification (support).

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