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Resilience and resistance: how young Northwestern European Muslims confront pedagogical Islamophobia

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how Islamophobia operates within educational institutions across the UK, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Norway. Drawing on 114 interviews, six focus groups, and survey data from 5501 respondents, it develops the concept of ‘pedagogical Islamophobia’ as a systemic form of discrimination produced through everyday educational encounters. The analysis identifies hostility from peers, biased conduct by staff, and the targeting of visible Muslim identity, alongside the influence of securitisation policies that frame Muslim students as suspect. These forms intersect and vary across national settings, shaped by distinct political and institutional environments. Survey results corroborate these accounts and show that Muslims are significantly more likely to report identity-based humiliation within educational settings. The paper also highlights the agency of young Muslims, detailing strategies of resilience and resistance that challenge exclusion and assert identity. The study offers a comparative account of how Islamophobia operates and is negotiated within contemporary European education.

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Introduction

Within the increasingly diverse societies of Northwestern Europe, educational institutions are pivotal arenas for social mobility, integration, and the cultivation of shared civic values (Durst and Bereményi 2024; Jaffe-Walter 2025; Merah et al. 2025; Osler and Starkey 2006). They are, however, also sites where broader societal prejudices and power imbalances are reproduced and experienced by young people (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Rana et al. 2022). For young European Muslims, navigating the educational system frequently involves confronting Islamophobia, a form of prejudice directed towards Islam and Muslims that has become a persistent feature of public discourse and institutional practice (Cesari 2011; Meer and Modood 2009; Ramadan 2025). Its manifestations in education range from subtle biases to overt hostility, impacting students’ learning environments, well-being, and sense of belonging during critical stages of

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identity formation (FRA (2024); Phalet, Fleischmann, and Hillekens 2018, Stevens and Thijs 2018).

This paper investigates these lived experiences of Islamophobia among young Muslims (aged 18–25) in the UK, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Norway. It seeks not only to explore the nature of such encounters but, crucially, to understand how young Muslims actively respond to adversity through strategies of resilience and resistance. The paper's central contribution to the field is the development and empirical grounding of the concept of 'pedagogical Islamophobia'. This is understood not as isolated incidents of prejudice but as a pervasive, systemic phenomenon that is both taught and learned within the power structures of educational institutions (Awan and Zempi 2020; Sayyid 2014). This framework moves the analysis beyond spectacular events to capture the chronic, everyday nature of anti-Muslim discrimination experienced by young people in schools, encompassing subtle biases, microaggressions, and structural inequalities (Allen 2010; Runnymede Trust 2017). Complementing this, the concepts of 'resilience' and 'resistance' are used to analyse the agentic ways young Muslims navigate and contest these environments, drawing on personal, social, and cultural resources to challenge discriminatory structures and assert their identities and rights (Boland 2024; Bottrell 2007; Ungar 2008).¹ By examining the dynamic between structure (pedagogical Islamophobia) and agency (resilience and resistance), this study provides a novel, cross-national account of the realities confronting young European Muslims in contemporary education.

Theoretical development

The concept of Islamophobia requires careful theoretical elaboration to capture its pervasive nature, particularly within institutional contexts such as education. Moving beyond a simple definition of fear or hatred, 'pedagogical Islamophobia' conceptualises a form of structural and cultural discrimination that operates systemically and is produced, learnt and replicated through educational interactions (Sayyid 2014).² This perspective challenges earlier definitions for potentially essentialising Islam or focusing on individual prejudice (Allen 2010), highlighting how Islamophobia functions as a governmental rationality and a set of practices that construct Muslims as a problematic 'other' within Western societies (Cesari 2011; Fekete 2004). It involves negative stereotyping, marginalisation, and exclusion from social, political, and civic life (Beydoun 2016), often manifesting in everyday interactions, institutional biases, and media representations (Awan and Zempi 2020; Runnymede Trust 2017). Such behaviour underscores its chronic nature, embedded within societal structures rather than merely episodic.

Educational institutions are key sites where Islamophobia is enacted and experienced by young people, with schools reflecting and reproducing dominant societal power relations and ideologies (Apple 2004; Bourdieu 1986; Farooqui 2025). Islamophobia can manifest through biased content or framing that perpetuates stereotypes, discriminatory practices by teachers or staff (conscious or unconscious), peer bullying fuelled by wider societal anti-Muslim sentiment, and institutional policies that disproportionately affect Muslim students (FRA 2024; Osler and Starkey 2006; Zine 2006). Controversies around religious dress (such as the hijab), requirements for prayer space, or assumptions about radicalisation risk,

lead to specific forms of targeting (Scott 2013). The school environment plays a critical role in shaping young Muslims' identities, and experiences of discrimination can lead to feelings of alienation, impact academic engagement, and influence their sense of belonging within the national context (Stevens and Thijs 2018).

The securitisation of Muslim communities across Europe has permeated educational settings, with policies aimed at countering violent extremism (CVE) increasingly framing Muslim identity itself as a security risk (Cesari 2009, 2012; Heath-Kelly 2013). Educational institutions, particularly schools and universities, have become key sites for implementing these policies, often mandating staff to monitor and report students deemed 'at risk' of radicalisation (Abbas, Awan, and Marsden 2021; Coppock and McGovern 2014; Mythen, Walklate, and Peatfield 2016). This securitisation discourse constructs Muslim students as inherently suspect, chills political and religious expression, fosters mistrust between students and educators, and contributes to a climate of surveillance and suspicion that disproportionately affects young Muslims (Abbas 2024; Ragazzi 2016). Such measures thus become instruments of discrimination and exclusion within the educational sphere.

In response to these adversities, the concept of resilience offers a potential framework for understanding how young Muslims navigate and adapt to challenging environments. Moving beyond simplistic notions of individual toughness, contemporary theories of resilience adopt a community-focused, ecological perspective, emphasising the interplay between individual capacities and environmental resources (Murray et al. 2024; Ungar 2008). For marginalised youth facing discrimination, resilience involves drawing upon protective factors within their families, peer groups, communities, and cultural or religious identities to mitigate stress and maintain well-being (Grossman et al. 2020). Religious identity, for instance, can provide a source of meaning, coping strategies, and positive group affiliation that buffers against the negative impacts of prejudice (Phalet, Fleischmann, and Hillekens 2018; Yip 2018). However, resilience is not solely about positive adaptation; it can also involve significant emotional labour or 'costs', where the effort required to overcome adversity takes a toll on mental or physical health (Howard et al. 2022).

Alongside resilience, resistance captures the agentic ways young people challenge and contest discrimination. Theories of resistance, drawing from work on subaltern studies and critical pedagogy, highlight how marginalised groups employ diverse strategies, from overt confrontation to subtle acts of defiance, to push back against oppressive structures and narratives (Ellefsen, Banafsheh, and Sandberg 2022; Solórzano and Delgado Bernal 2001). For young Muslims experiencing Islamophobia in schools, resistance can manifest as challenging stereotypes in classroom discussions, asserting their right to religious practice, creating alternative narratives about their identity, or engaging in forms of 'identity work' that reclaim agency amidst marginalisation (Bottrell 2007; Tuck and Yang 2013). Resistance is thus both reactive and proactive, incorporating processes of self-definition, critique, and social transformation, even within constrained institutional spaces (Hollander and Einwohner 2004; Kc 2024).

Pedagogical Islamophobia, resilience, and resistance provide nuanced lenses for analysing the experiences of young Muslims in Northwestern European education. Encounters with systemic Islamophobia, amplified by securitisation policies within

schools, create contexts of significant adversity. Young Muslims respond to these not merely as passive victims but as active agents who employ diverse strategies of resilience, drawing on personal, social, and cultural resources to cope and adapt, and resistance, challenging discriminatory structures and asserting their identities and rights. These responses are context-dependent, shaped by the specific nature of the Islamophobia encountered (peer vs. staff, active vs. permissive), the resources available to the individual, and the broader school and societal climate in each national setting. Understanding this dynamic interplay between structure (pedagogical Islamophobia) and agency (resilience and resistance) is central to appreciating the realities of young European Muslims navigating contemporary educational landscapes.

Methodology

This study adopts a critical interpretivist paradigm to explore the lived experiences of young Muslims navigating Islamophobia within educational settings across Northwestern Europe. This paradigm acknowledges that social reality is shaped by power relations and socio-historical contexts and is particularly suited for understanding sensitive phenomena such as discrimination, identity negotiation, and resistance from the perspective of those directly affected. Consequently, a primary qualitative methodology was employed, prioritising depth, richness, and contextual understanding over generalisation. Such an approach allows for an in-depth exploration of the nuances of young Muslims' encounters with pedagogical Islamophobia and their agentic responses, capturing complexities that quantitative methods might overlook if carried out on their own. The research elicits and analyses the participants' narratives, treating their accounts as valuable insights into their experiences and sense-making processes within educational and societal structures (Alhazmi and Kaufmann 2022).³

The research employed a comparative qualitative design across the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Norway. These countries were selected due to their significant Muslim populations, diverse approaches to integration, secularism, and managing religious diversity, and documented challenges related to Islamophobia and social cohesion. This comparative dimension allows for identifying both common patterns and context-specific variations across different national settings (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña 2014).⁴ The primary data source consists of 114 in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with young Muslims aged 18–25, as well as six follow-up focus groups with 31 interviewees. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling strategies, targeting young people who self-identified as Muslim, were aged between 18 and 25, and had recent or ongoing experiences within the educational systems (secondary or tertiary) in the UK, Netherlands, Denmark, or Norway. Snowball sampling techniques were utilised, whereby initial participants helped identify further potential interviewees within their networks. Data collection relied predominantly on semi-structured interviews, allowing for consistency across the comparative design while maintaining flexibility to explore emergent themes and individual narratives (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). Interviews were conducted by trained researchers with shared linguistic or cultural backgrounds where possible in the language preferred by the participant (English, Dutch, Danish, Norwegian, and others where necessary, potentially involving

interpreters). Emphasis was placed on establishing rapport and creating a trusting environment where participants felt comfortable sharing potentially sensitive or difficult experiences.

The interview data was analysed using thematic analysis, following the reflexive approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019).⁵ This method provides a flexible yet systematic way to identify, analyse, and report themes within data. The analytical process involved several iterative stages: (1) Familiarisation with the data; (2) Generating initial codes systematically across the entire dataset; (3) Searching for potential themes; (4) Reviewing and refining these potential themes; (5) Defining and naming the final themes and developing detailed analytical narratives for each. Qualitative data analysis software, AtlasTi, was utilised to facilitate data management, coding, and theme development across the large dataset. The comparative analysis involved systematically examining how themes manifested across the four national contexts, noting convergences and divergences (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña 2014). Throughout the analysis, the researchers aimed to remain close to the participants' accounts while interpreting them through the established theoretical lens.

Rigorous ethical procedures were followed throughout, adhering to the guidelines of the EU H2020 framework and relevant national/institutional ethical review boards. Prior to each interview, participants received detailed information about the study's aims, the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality measures, data usage, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Anonymity and confidentiality were paramount; all identifying information was removed from transcripts, and pseudonyms were assigned. Data was stored securely in accordance with GDPR and project protocols. Given the sensitive nature of discussing discrimination and Islamophobia, researchers were mindful of potential participant distress and prepared to offer signposting to support services if needed. A reflexive practice was deployed throughout to enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings by making biases transparent and actively working to mitigate their impact (Berger 2015).

To complement the qualitative data and provide broader contextual insights, this study also draws on quantitative analyses of survey data from the larger EU H2020 DRIVE project dataset ($N = 5501$ after initial cleaning). Statistical analyses were conducted using RStudio. Key variables included religious identification (comparing Muslim respondents [$N = 222$] with non-Muslim respondents), reported experiences of humiliation based on identity, the setting where discrimination occurred (recoded to identify educational contexts), perceptions of religious treatment, perceived trust from other faith groups, ethnic identity importance, and demographic controls such as age, education, gender, and country. Statistical techniques included Welch Two Sample t-tests to compare group means, Pearson's Chi-squared tests for associations between categorical variables, Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression to model perceptions, and logistic regression to model the likelihood of experiencing humiliation and its occurrence within educational settings, controlling for demographic factors. Interaction effects between religious identity and country were also explored regarding the location of discrimination. Analyses involving specific discrimination settings focused on the subset of respondents who reported experiencing humiliation ($N = 922$). See [Table 1](#) below in relation to the variables used in the modelling.

Table 1. Variables in the analysis.

Full Item Description	Variable Name (in Dataset)	Type and Coding
Binary variable derived from 'Please specify which best describes your religiosity'	is_muslim (Muslim)	Binary: 1 = Muslim, 0 = Other
'Others are treating my religion badly'	ReligionTreatedBadly	Ordinal: 1–7 scale from 'Strongly Disagree' to 'Strongly Agree'
Binary variable derived from 'During the past 3 months have you been treated in a way that made you feel humiliated because of your ethnicity/religion/gender/race?'	humiliation_experienced_binary (FeltHumiliated)	Binary: 1 = Humiliation experienced ('Yes, once' or 'Yes, several times'), 0 = No humiliation
Binary variable derived from 'If you have experienced any form of discrimination, please select all the settings where this took place':	humiliation_location_edu (DiscriminationSetting)	Binary: 1 = Response text includes 'educational setting', 0 = Otherwise
'What is your age?'	agebracket	Ordinal: 1 = 18–23 years old, 2 = 24–29, 3 = 30–35, 4 = 36–41, 5 = 42–47, 6 = 48–53, 7 = 54–59, 8 = 60+
'What is the highest degree or level of education you have completed?'	EducationLevelsALL	Ordinal: 1 = Primary or less, 2 = Secondary, 3 = Post-Secondary, 4 = Completed Tertiary (bachelors/undergraduate), 5 = Post-graduate
'Gender: What gender do you identify as?'	gender	Categorical: 0 = Female, 1 = Male, 2 = Other, –99 = Prefer not to say
'Before continuing, please indicate where you live'	RespondentCountry	Categorical: Text variable listing country (United Kingdom, Netherlands, Denmark, Norway)

This table provides a detailed specification of the variables utilised in the regression analyses, with descriptions and coding schemes drawn directly from the survey codebook. The primary independent variable, *is_muslim*, is a binary indicator derived from the respondents' self-identified religiosity. The dependent variables measure perceptions of negative treatment (*ReligionTreatedBadly*), the experience of humiliation (*humiliation_experienced_binary*, recoded from the *FeltHumiliated* item), and the specific location of that humiliation (*humiliation_location_edu*, derived from the *DiscriminationSetting* text field). The models also incorporate standard demographic control variables for age (*agebracket*), education (*EducationLevelsALL*), gender (*gender*), and country of residence (*RespondentCountry*). This transparent presentation of variable construction and coding ensures the replicability and clarity of the subsequent statistical analysis.

Analysis

This section focuses on the empirical heart of the study, analysing the narratives of 114 young Muslims (aged 18–25) across the UK, Netherlands, Denmark, and Norway regarding their experiences of Islamophobia within educational settings. The analysis illuminates the character of 'pedagogical Islamophobia' as a lived reality and explores the diverse ways participants demonstrate agency through strategies of resilience and resistance. Findings are presented both thematically and comparatively, addressing key manifestations of Islamophobia identified in the data at the same time as taking note of the contrasts between the four countries within each theme: peer-to-peer interactions, encounters with staff, the targeting of visible Muslim identity markers, and the impact of securitisation policies. The analysis explores the interconnectedness of these forms and concludes by examining the participants' agentic responses. Throughout this section, participant voices, presented through direct quotations, are foregrounded and interpreted through the theoretical lenses of pedagogical Islamophobia, resilience, and resistance. The analysis seeks both to document experiences and also to understand the meanings participants ascribe to them and how these encounters shape their educational

journeys and sense of self. The pervasiveness of these encounters is starkly captured by one participant:

I don't think a single year went by – I'm talking about secondary school – where my Muslim identity wasn't attacked. It's just something that was always brought up. (UK, Male, 18–25, London)

This quote underscores the chronic, persistent nature of the Islamophobia experienced, framing it not as isolated incidents but as a constant feature of the educational landscape for some young Muslims. It is on this chronic feature of Islamophobia as reported in an educational environment that we seek to understand and map pedagogical Islamophobia across the four case study countries.

Peer-to-peer Islamophobia – overt hostility and exclusion

A prevalent theme in the interviews was the experience of overt hostility and racism from peers within the educational environment, often linked to specific negative framings of Islam (Garner and Selod 2014). One major lens was the securitisation discourse connecting Islam with violence and terrorism, which filtered down into peer interactions. This was found throughout all four case study countries, although the general manner of their articulation was recorded as changing within each case study country.

Participants in Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom all described instances of peers mimicking Arabic phrases or associating Islamic terms with violence:

No one really understood it at the time, but a lot of people were shouting Arabic phrases or like Allahu Akbar on the playground, which was like, I didn't understand why they were doing it, but it did feel like demeaning and insulting. (Netherlands, Male, 18–25, The Hague)

I think then a lot of people would shout phrases that usually Muslims say like Allahu Akbar. And they would shout it all the time. Like they would shout it and then make an explosion noise. (Netherlands, Male, 18–25, Focus Group)

These accounts illustrate how geopolitical events and media narratives portraying Muslims as inherently violent or threatening are absorbed and reproduced within youth peer cultures. The appropriation and mocking of religious phrases, linking them to 'explosion noise[s]', directly reflects the dominant, often Islamophobic, association between Islam and terrorism prevalent in public discourse (Cesari 2011; Kundnani 2014). This form of peer hostility functions to 'other' Muslim students, marking their identity as something to be mocked and feared. The bullying could also be intensely personal and directly linked to global events:

So, when I was younger, there was a family friend . . . His name was Osama . . . he actually left school because the kids were bullying him about his name. They were saying Osama bin Laden, this and that. (UK, Male, 18–25, London)

This shows how global political events were directly translated into playground bullying, in this case forcing a young person out of education in a clear instance of racialised Islamophobia impacting educational access and participation (FRA 2024).

Another lens involved framing Islam as inherently ‘backwards’ or oppressive, leading to intrusive questioning and stereotyping. While such thinking was evident in all four case study countries, we noted greater instances of this framing in Denmark and Norway:

... one of the girls in my group asked, ‘now I hope I don’t ask too difficult a question but are you going to be a housewife after high school?’, and I just laugh thinking do you really mean that ... (Denmark, Female, 18–25, Copenhagen)

This demonstrates the intersection of gendered and Islamophobic stereotypes, where the young Muslim woman is automatically assumed to conform to a regressive, patriarchal trajectory solely based on her perceived identity (El-Tayeb 2011; Scott 2009). The peer’s underlying assumption reflects deeply ingrained biases about Muslim women’s roles and aspirations, contributing to stereotyping within the educational environment. This perhaps was more evident in Nordic countries because of the dominance of liberal conceptions of gender equality within national debates, which have framed Islamic identity as in conflict with, and opposition to, liberal European or national ‘values’ around gender equality (Hassani 2023).

A third pattern, particularly noted in Nordic countries but also present elsewhere, involved social exclusion linked to normative youth practices like drinking alcohol. Participants described being ostracised or questioned for not participating in parties or drinking culture:

For example, when I’m asked for a drink and I say no thanks I don’t drink and then they just look at me stupid like ‘why are you here then?’. (Denmark, Female, 18–25, Copenhagen)

... when I’ve been with white Danish girls or boys, they for example ask ‘do you want to go to a party? And if I’m at a party [NAME], why don’t you drink? So ‘what are you doing here and you don’t understand the point of partying’. (Denmark, Male, 18–25, Focus Group)

These instances highlight how adherence to religious principles can lead to social exclusion when dominant peer cultures centre around specific activities. The questioning implies that participation in the social space is contingent on conforming to majority norms, framing the participant’s religious observance as deviant or incomprehensible. This subtle form of exclusion reinforces feelings of not belonging and can pressure young Muslims to compromise their values to fit in or face marginalisation within peer groups (Awan and Zempi 2020). It also demonstrates how experiences of pedagogical Islamophobia differed on a peer-to-peer level across countries, with Muslims in Nordic countries reporting more instances of marginalisation and isolation based on ‘regressive’ tropes around Islam than in Britain and the Netherlands. These findings are further explored through the lens of bias and discrimination within the classroom and by educational staff.

Staff-related Islamophobia – bias and discrimination

Islamophobia in an educational context not only involved peer-to-peer interactions; interactions with teachers and staff were often fraught with bias. While some participants

noted overt hostility, much of the negative treatment was described as subtle, involving differential treatment, lowered expectations, or stereotypical assumptions, making it difficult for students to pinpoint or challenge at the time.

I could see from her that she thought something certain about us - I think she was prejudiced against us because we were Muslim. She started answering in a much shorter way every time we had questions and said that we should be able to figure this out ourselves, but she helped the others. After we handed in our report, she was very surprised that we did so well . . . And we were like, 'why did you expect anything else from us?' (Denmark, Female, 18–25, Aarhus)

This quote illustrates the perception of underlying prejudice from staff, manifesting as an unwelcoming atmosphere or differential academic support. The Danish female student's experience highlights the insidious nature of lowered expectations based on identity (Gillborn 2008). This constitutes a form of symbolic violence, where authority figures subtly communicate doubt in the students' abilities (Bourdieu 1986). The scapegoating mentioned by another Danish participant ('as soon as the smallest thing happens . . . it's the Muslim children who are taken as scapegoats' - Denmark, Male, 18–25, Aarhus) points to a more direct form of discriminatory targeting within the classroom.

One of the differences between the interview sets was how gendered forms of Islamophobia manifested. In the Nordic countries of Denmark and Norway, interviewees were more likely to hear reports of pedagogical Islamophobia from young Muslim women linked to the targeting of how they dressed and framed as part of a liberal narrative of emancipation. These were tied to longstanding tropes implying Muslim women lack sufficient agency and access to freedoms because of their Muslimness (Hassani 2023). In contrast, interviewees in the Netherlands and the UK seemed more likely to report gendered instances of Islamophobia based around the problematising of Muslim men as representing a threat to societal security. This prejudice similarly draws on racialised stereotypes, which cast Muslim men as irrational or violent, but is notably also rooted within patterns of counterterror security, which are articulated more overtly in the UK and the Netherlands than in the other case study countries (Abbas, McNeil-Willson, and Vostermans 2023; Vlieg and de Koning 2023).

Teachers sometimes made comments that explicitly racialised students or measured their success by perceived proximity to dominant cultural norms:

. . . a teacher I had . . . I got into trouble for something, and he said something along the lines of, 'I'm so disappointed in you because you're not like the other Asian boys'. And like, there was a lot of comments like that from teachers where it was like reminding me that I'm particularly articulate for someone of my race and faith . . . It was like my proximity to traditional forms of whiteness, secular whiteness was kind of seen as like my success in some way . . . (UK, Male, 18–25, Focus Group)

This narrative reveals how even seemingly positive comments ('you're not like the others', 'particularly articulate') can be deeply problematic, reinforcing stereotypes about the student's racial/religious group and implicitly valuing assimilation to 'whiteness' (Leonardo 2010). The teacher's disappointment stems from the student failing to conform to the 'good minority' stereotype, highlighting the conditional nature of acceptance. This reflects institutional biases where success for minority students is often framed in terms of transcending their background, rather than being valuing for it.

Other interactions involved teachers directly invoking stereotypes or singling students out based on current events:

... one time, when in Saudi they had allowed women to start driving, he just straight away went to me and he was like, 'What's your thoughts on that?' (UK, Female, 18–25, London)

... whenever there'd be a lesson on homosexuality, she'd look straight to the Muslims, as if she was lecturing just us. (UK, Female, 18–25, Manchester)

These examples show teachers projecting geopolitical events or controversial social issues onto individual Muslim students, demanding they account for or represent the entire group. This reinforces their 'otherness' and places undue burden on them within the classroom (Zine 2006). It also shows the particularly gendered focus on the Muslim male as threatening or oppressive, within the specific cases.

Compounding direct bias was the frequent experience of staff indifference or failure to provide support when students faced Islamophobia, particularly from peers. This lack of action from authority figures was deeply felt and seen as implicitly condoning the discriminatory behaviour.

I was getting bullied and I always felt like I didn't have the support of the teachers at all ... They always see my white counterparts as their children, or like their nieces or their nephews and their own. But I have never been made to feel like that. (UK, Male, 18–25, Focus Group)

I got bullied in school, so I'd get into physical altercations ... they would literally just call me a Paki ... But the teachers relate more with the white females that I was fighting with than me ... when I'm in the isolation room, I felt isolated, but they didn't ... the teachers would sit there and be like, 'So Molly, how was your mum? How's your dad?' (UK, Male, 18–25, Focus Group, London)

These excerpts highlight a perceived differential empathy and relatability from teachers based on perceived cultural background. The feeling of not being seen or supported and the observation that teachers related more easily to 'white counterparts' points to systemic issues of bias within the school environment (Rollock et al. 2014). This lack of unbiased support during conflict situations demonstrates institutional failure and reinforces the student's sense of marginalisation. The perception that teachers 'didn't see that side' suggests a wilful blindness or inability to recognise the impact of racism/Islamophobia.

Furthermore, teachers sometimes actively enabled peer hostility:

[Islamophobia] was mainly from students. But whenever the students would make comments like that, the teachers would like laugh or stuff, or they'd like not encourage it, but they'd have like sly, like they, they'd snigger and stuff like that. (UK, Male, 18–25, Manchester)

This participant's observation of teachers 'sniggering' at Islamophobic comments, even if not overtly encouraging them, sends a message that such behaviour is acceptable. This data supports the finding that peer hostility is linked to contexts where authority figures legitimise the targeting, creating permissibility for Islamophobia to operate and be replicated by students. Bias and discrimination against Muslims were evident across the four case study countries, and although this prejudice consistently intersected with gendered tropes linked to Islam, it was shown to have different orientations across the

case study countries. This bias is also evident in the targeting of visible articulations of Muslimness.

Targeting visible Muslimness

The hijab frequently emerged as a specific target, embodying the tensions around Muslim visibility in European societies. Young women described facing peer harassment directly related to their headscarf:

I felt something hard behind my head, like a hand, trying to pull off my hijab, and then I screamed very loudly, so the teacher saw it, so they tried to stop it (Norway, Female, 18–25, Kristiansand)

... one of my friends used to wear a hijab from like primary school. And then like, she used to always get like, loads of people like, saying stuff to her, like, ‘why is that on your head?’ and all that stuff. And like asking, ‘Are you not hot during the summer?’ (UK, Female, 18–25, London)

The first quote describes a direct physical assault targeting a religious symbol, highlighting the vulnerability experienced. The second illustrates constant questioning and ‘othering’ directed at hijab-wearers. These interactions function as micro-aggressions that constantly call attention to the wearer’s difference (Sue et al. 2007) and ties into the normalisation of anti-hijab sentiment in public discourse (Scott 2009). The normalisation of ‘jokes’ about terrorism linked to visible Muslimness was also noted:

I think it’s become so normalised to joke about being a terrorist or throwing a bomb or doing this, and it’s become quite ingrained into school culture. (UK, Female, 18–25, London)

This normalisation creates a hostile backdrop where visible markers such as the hijab can make individuals feel judged and insecure, linking their identity directly to negative, securitised stereotypes. Teachers also played a significant role in scrutinising the hijab, often questioning the student’s agency or framing the hijab as incompatible with national values:

From a very young age, [my sisters] loved wearing headscarves ... but then a new Danish teacher came ... started asking how things were going at home ... it turned into a question about whether anyone forced them to wear a headscarf ... she kept asking again, and again, and again ... later on, my sisters were told in elementary school that they had to take off their headscarves. (Denmark, Female, 18–25, Aarhus)

... she would say to me in PE, ‘just between the two of us, I just want you to know that you don’t have to wear a scarf in PE it’s too hot’. When I replied that I would like to wear it, it was something I had chosen myself, she said ‘well, you live in Denmark, you don’t have to wear that’. (Denmark, Female, 18–25, Copenhagen)

When we were in middle school ... One put on the hijab, the other took it off ... Our contact teacher didn’t comment on the girl who started wearing the hijab, but went to the girl who took it off and said to her ‘I’m so proud of you for making such a great choice’ (Norway, Male, 18–25, Focus Group)

These examples demonstrate how teachers often pathologise the hijab, assuming coercion ('forced on me at home') or framing it as incompatible with national identity ('you live in Denmark; you don't have to wear that'). The differential treatment observed in praising the removal but ignoring the adoption reveals an institutional bias against this form of religious expression. Intervention by authority figures into personal religious choices constitutes a manifestation of gendered Islamophobia, reinforcing the idea that acceptance is conditional on conforming to secular norms (Cesari 2011; Scott 2009). Dramatic changes in a teacher's behaviour ('he was an angel to me before I started wearing hijab ... it completely turned around as soon as I started wearing hijab' – Norway, Female, 18–25, Kristiansand) starkly illustrate how visible Muslim identity can trigger prejudice, even from previously supportive staff. It also further suggests that Muslim women faced instances of pedagogical Islamophobia that were intertwined with narratives which pitted a supposed progressive European identity against an assumed regressive Islamic one (Curinier et al. 2024).

Difficulties extended to other practices, particularly prayer. Accessing space and time for prayer was a significant point of contention, often met with resistance or suspicion from school authorities. Even though reports on the difficulty of conducting prayer were evident in all case study countries, it was a concern that was reported with most consistency in a British context – many young British Muslims retelling experiences of being implicitly or actively prevented from engaging in prayer within an educational environment.

We have to fight a battle about whether we can pray at their school or not ... [mimics arguments against prayer rooms:] 'yes but there are some who might be pressured into it and it might be harmful'. (Denmark, Male, 18–25, Copenhagen)

So back in college ... a teacher walked in [to the quiet room where a friend was praying] and they had a little altercation, and he threw the prayer mat away ... we went to go tell some other teacher and her response was, 'he's having a really difficult time right now and you should just, like, let it be'. (UK, Male, 18–25, Focus Group, London)

The Danish participant's quote highlights how requests for basic religious accommodation are framed as potentially harmful or coercive, reflecting a suspicion towards collective Muslim practice (Modood 2007). The UK focus group narrative describes an act of direct aggression towards prayer by a teacher, compounded by institutional indifference. This dismissal of a serious incident involving the desecration of a religious item demonstrates a profound lack of respect and failure of care. The struggle for adequate prayer space often resulted in students praying in unsuitable conditions, with some forced to pray in cupboard, corridors, or even outside on the playing field:

... a tiny area ... this tiny corridor with no lights ... dirty ... then they closed that area down because the lights weren't working. Instead of just fixing the lights. (UK, Female, 18–25, Manchester)

... we would have to pray in the corridors, without praying on the stairs ... we just gave up and we just started praying in the middle of the asphalt at times within of the middle of the corridor. (UK, Male, 18–25, London)

The provision of inadequate facilities and the subsequent closure rather than repair, alongside the administrative hurdles ('so many excuses'), suggests institutional

reluctance to accommodate Muslim prayer needs. Forcing students to pray in corridors or outdoors is degrading and highlights how basic religious practices become sites of struggle and marginalisation within the school environment. One headteacher's justification ('[there is] plenty of time for me to pray later on in my life and that I shouldn't be focusing on praying while I'm studying' - UK, Female, 18–25, Manchester) reveals a secularist bias that delegitimises religious observance during school time, framing it as incompatible with academic focus.

When visible Muslimness was targeted, therefore, we found that Islamic forms of identity in Nordic countries were often assumed to run counter to gender equality, whereas in Britain and Denmark, the focus was on Muslim men as being threatening and securitised. This was further nuanced in Britain and Denmark with experiences of active disruption when attempting to engage in prayer, suggesting that such narratives intersect with wider national discussions on secularism and the acceptance of (non-Christian) religious belief in Northwestern European societies.

Securitisation in education

The Prevent Duty in the UK and similar preventative counter-extremism discourses across the four case study countries were explicitly mentioned as sources of anxiety and direct targeting.

During sixth form . . . Prevent Duty was first enforced . . . One of my teachers actually pulled me aside and said that, . . . we're getting some new form of training where we're going to have to monitor Muslim students and you being the only Muslim student, you have to sort of watch what you say and how you talk about your Muslim identity. (UK, Male, 18–25, London)

. . . we're getting some new form of training where we're going to have to monitor Muslim students and you being the only Muslim student, you have to sort of watch what you say and how you talk about your Muslim identity

CVE policies directly translate into the surveillance of Muslim students, as explicitly communicated by a teacher. Such behaviour creates an immediate chilling effect and positions the student as inherently suspect due to their identity (Coppock and McGovern 2014; Heath-Kelly 2013). The second quote illustrates the hypersensitivity and misinterpretation that can occur within this climate, where an innocent comment referencing a video game is immediately framed through the lens of terrorism. This highlights the danger of securitisation discourses creating a default suspicion around young Muslims (Mythen, Walklate, and Peatfield 2016). The wide potential for reporting, and the impact this could have, were also noted in the Netherlands:

. . . everything that can be interpreted as anti-democratic or anti integration by a teacher can call this hotline and give up this student . . . But maybe Student X got it from social media or from the streets . . . (Netherlands, Male, 18–25, Rotterdam)

This points to the broad scope of mechanisms associated with CVE across case study countries, fostering an environment of mistrust and potential denunciation within schools (Ragazzi 2016).

This climate of suspicion led to self-censorship and a feeling that acceptance was conditional on being perceived as a ‘good Muslim’.

I remember I sat with my deputy head . . . Even things like Prevent, I said to him [that] I like to debate . . . ‘Look, to what extent can I actually have these discussions without me getting like a Prevent referral? . . . And he said, ‘Look, you’re one of the good ones. We know that you’re having an academic discussion, so that’s fine’. (UK, Male, 18–25, Manchester)

This interaction reveals the chilling effect of Prevent on academic discussion, forcing the student to seek explicit permission to engage critically without fear of referral. The deputy head’s response (‘you’re one of the good ones’) reinforces the idea that Muslim students are inherently suspect unless proven otherwise. This illustrates how securitisation policies stifle intellectual curiosity and create a two-tiered system of trust within the educational environment. The linking of religious practice to being against national values also surfaced:

. . . we would just mouth the words [of Christian songs] . . . she took us to the side, and she was like, how dare you not say the words? . . . we got letters home saying that . . . this is against British values (UK, Male, 18–25, London)

Here, a minor act of navigating religious difference is escalated into an issue of national values, reflecting how minority religious practices can be framed as oppositional or threatening within a dominant cultural and implicitly securitised framework. As further demonstrated here, securitisation of young Muslims was reported to a greater extent in the UK and the Netherlands, potentially reflecting the more overt counterterrorism structures in place in these countries (Abbas, McNeil-Willson, and Vostermans 2023; Vlieg and de Koning 2023). These findings may also be in comparison to the less overt counterextremism approaches evident in Denmark and Norway, grounded in existing structures of societal support, as well as the greater emphasis on programmes of integration rather than counterextremism in Nordic countries (McNeil-Willson et al. 2017).

Interconnectedness and cumulative impact

The narratives consistently showed how these different forms of Islamophobia intersected, creating a cumulative burden. Peer mockery might be ignored by teachers, while anxieties about securitisation could amplify the stress of hijab scrutiny.

. . . they just say stuff like Allahu Akbar, or they just say random remarks about Islam, but it would be hidden in and as jokes . . . But then sometimes I’d just be like, ‘That’s a bit weird’ in my head. I was a lot younger, so I didn’t really say anything because it was more like earlier times in high school. So, it was just kind of like trying to . . . fit into it. (UK, Female, 18–25, Manchester)

This quote captures the cumulative effect of seemingly minor incidents (‘jokes’, ‘random remarks’) and the pressure to ‘just fit into it’, highlighting the normalisation of

microaggressions and the difficulty faced in challenging them, especially as young people. The cumulative impact could lead to significant mental health issues:

At school, I have always experienced racism and differential treatment from when I was small. It has given me social anxiety and agoraphobia. (Norway, Female, 18–25, Kristiansand)

This stark statement links long-term exposure to racism and Islamophobia directly to severe mental health outcomes, underscoring the profound harm caused by pedagogical Islamophobia in educational settings (Wallace, Nazroo, and Bécaries 2016). The interconnectedness of these experiences creates a pervasive environment of exclusion that goes beyond isolated incidents.

Resilience and resistance

Despite these challenges, participants employed various resilience strategies. Seeking support from trusted networks was key, as was drawing strength from identity.

[Participant describing needing to be well-educated to notice subtle racism] when you're an immigrant family, it's all about survival . . . (UK, Female, 18–25, Birmingham)

While this quote highlights the difficulty in identifying subtle racism, the framing of 'survival' points to a form of resilience rooted in navigating adversity as a norm for immigrant families. Another strategy involved striving for excellence to counter negative stereotypes:

. . . somehow, I had to hide my identity. And in relation to the language, I felt that no one should hear me speak bad Danish, I tried to push myself to speak perfect Danish. (Denmark, Female, 18–25, Aarhus)

This individual demonstrates resilience through high effort and striving for perfection, potentially as a way to pre-empt criticism or prove worth in a context where identity feels scrutinised (Howard et al. 2022). This connects to the idea of needing to be a 'good minority' but frames it as an internalised coping strategy. Affirming identity was also crucial:

I think part of it is that I want people to see Muslims and women with headscarves . . . Achieve the things you want first, and then wear a scarf afterwards. But I was like 'no, achieve the things I want to achieve with a scarf'. (Denmark, Female, 18–25, Aarhus)

This powerful statement showcases resilience through identity affirmation. The participant explicitly rejects the notion that she should postpone expressing her identity until after achieving success, instead integrating her identity into her aspirations. This reframes the hijab not as a barrier but as part of her journey, drawing strength from her identity in the face of societal pressure.

Participants also engaged in active resistance. This included direct confrontation and education:

. . . it's just me and my teacher and then you have to fight all the racist battles yourself, and it's just extra difficult when it's an authority . . . Then you have to stand up and say 'I don't feel that you respect what I say' . . . (Denmark, Female, 18–25, Copenhagen)

... at my school, we had a chemistry teacher. He was ... passive aggressive against Muslims. I took it onto myself ... I wanted to work on, something that I want to speak to him about, something that I wanted to mention, educate him, etcetera ... and I feel like for me, it worked ... later on it sort of improved. (UK, Male, 18–25, Focus Group)

The first quote highlights the difficulty of ‘fighting battles’ and ‘standing up’ against authority figures, framing resistance as a possibility despite the power imbalance. The second quote details a deliberate strategy of engaging with a biased teacher, demonstrating resistance through dialogue aimed at changing attitudes and behaviour. Resistance also involved asserting rights, as seen in the case of the student who successfully campaigned for a proper prayer room after a prejudiced headteacher retired (UK, Female, 18–25, Manchester). This shows collective agency and persistence in attaining religious accommodation (Tuck and Yang 2013).

However, not all responses involved active coping or confrontation. For some, the cumulative impact of pedagogical Islamophobia led to disengagement from the educational process and potentially wider society:

I think most importantly, it’s about the way that people feel about themselves because if they feel like nobody cares about them and nobody gives a shit or they’re going to get treated a certain way, then you’re not going to want to get involved in society. (UK, Female, 18–25, Manchester)

This quote links feelings of being uncared for and discriminated against to withdrawal from societal engagement. While not ‘resistance’ in the active sense, withdrawal is a significant response to a hostile environment, highlighting the detrimental impact Islamophobia can have on social integration and participation, potentially creating the exclusion that CVE policies claim to prevent (Abbas, Awan, and Marsden 2021; Heath-Kelly 2013). This underscores the interactions between experiencing discrimination, institutional barriers and societal prejudice, and the varied ways young people respond. Resilience and resistance were deployed by young Muslims across the four case study countries in response to experiences of pedagogical Islamophobia, reflecting a variety of means for mitigating racialisation, discrimination and social exclusion.

Quantitative insights from survey data: patterns of discrimination and identity

While the qualitative interviews provide rich detail on the lived experiences of pedagogical Islamophobia, analysis of the broader DRIVE project survey data offers quantitative evidence that corroborates and contextualises these accounts. Comparing Muslim respondents ($N = 222$) with non-Muslim respondents ($N = 5279$) reveals statistically significant patterns regarding discrimination, its settings, and perceptions of identity, as shown in Table 2 below.

Consistent with interview accounts of encountering prejudice and hostility, Muslim respondents reported significantly higher agreement that their religion is treated badly by others compared to non-Muslims (mean 4.12 vs. 2.98 [7-point scale], $p < 0.001$), a difference remaining significant after controlling for demographics. Muslims also perceived significantly lower trust from those of different faiths (mean 3.93 vs 3.49, $p < 0.001$), aligning with qualitative themes of ‘othering’ and social exclusion. Furthermore,

Table 2. Regression models of perceived discrimination and humiliation.

VARIABLES	Model 1 (OLS)	Model 2 (Logistic)	Model 3 (Logistic)	Model 4 (Logistic)
Muslim	0.90 (0.14)***	1.91 (0.23)***	1.93 (0.42)**	1.30 (0.44)
Age Bracket	-0.09 (0.01)***	0.73 (0.02)***	0.76 (0.04)***	0.76 (0.04)***
Education Level	0.02 (0.02)	1.11 (0.04)***	1.12 (0.10)	1.11 (0.10)
Gender	-0.01 (0.00)***	0.99 (0.00)***	1.01 (0.01)	1.01 (0.01)
Country (Ref: UK)				
Denmark	-0.31 (0.08)***	0.93 (0.15)	0.74 (0.28)	0.77 (0.30)
Netherlands	-0.14 (0.05)**	1.20 (0.10)**	0.52 (0.10)***	0.40 (0.10)***
Norway	-0.16 (0.10)	1.07 (0.17)	1.33 (0.43)	1.35 (0.44)
Interaction Effects				
Muslim × Netherlands			3.59 (1.47)**	
Muslim × Denmark			0.51 (0.61)	
Muslim × Norway			0.53 (0.65)	
Constant	3.55 (0.11)***	0.62 (0.11)**	0.30 (0.13)**	0.33 (0.14)**
Observations	5,272	5,272	922	922
R ²	0.04			
Adj. R ²	0.04			
Pseudo R ²		0.097	0.067	0.077
AIC		4429.96	659.85	658.93

Note: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$. OLS model reports robust standard errors. Logistic models report MLE standard errors.

This table presents the results of four distinct regression models designed to quantify the relationship between Muslim identity and experiences of discrimination. Model 1, an Ordinary Least Squares regression, demonstrates that identifying as Muslim is a significant predictor of perceiving that one's religion is treated badly. Model 2, a logistic regression, calculates the odds of having experienced identity-based humiliation, confirming that being Muslim significantly increases these odds. Model 3 narrows the focus to the subset of respondents who reported humiliation, showing that for this group, Muslim identity significantly increases the odds that the incident occurred within an educational setting. Finally, Model 4 extends this analysis by introducing an interaction term, revealing that the increased likelihood of humiliation occurring in education for Muslims is particularly pronounced in the Netherlands when compared to the United Kingdom. All models control for age, education level, gender, and country, thereby isolating the specific effect of religious identity on these outcomes.

Muslims were significantly more likely to report feeling humiliated due to their identity (ethnicity/religion/gender/race) in the past three months compared to non-Muslims (40.1% vs. 16.5%, $p < 0.001$). Logistic regression confirmed that being Muslim significantly increased the odds of reporting humiliation (OR = 1.93, $p < 0.001$) controlling for age and education. Interestingly, higher education level was also associated with slightly higher odds of reporting humiliation overall ($p = 0.001$).

Crucially, the survey data highlights the specific role of educational institutions as sites of discrimination for Muslims, supporting the qualitative focus on pedagogical Islamophobia. Among respondents who reported feeling humiliated ($N = 922$), Muslims were significantly more likely than non-Muslims to identify an 'educational setting' as the location where the humiliation occurred (23.6% vs. 11.2%, $\chi^2 p = 0.0013$). Logistic regression confirmed that, within this group of humiliated respondents, being Muslim significantly increased the odds of the discrimination happening in education by approximately 81% (OR = 1.81, $p = 0.040$), controlling for age, education, gender, and country. Analysis of interaction effects suggested this pattern might vary by country, with the difference between Muslims and non-Muslims potentially being more pronounced in the Netherlands compared to the UK ($p = 0.06$), highlighting the importance of national context.

The survey data also offered insights related to ethnic identity, a key theme in resilience and resistance narratives. Overall, respondents who reported experiencing humiliation showed significantly higher levels of ethnic identity importance

compared to those who did not (mean 4.65 vs. 4.45, $p = 0.0016$). However, the specific location of humiliation (educational vs. elsewhere) was not significantly associated with ethnic identity importance among those humiliated ($p = 0.119$). Furthermore, a distinct pattern emerged within the Muslim group: contrary to the overall trend, Muslims who did *not* report recent humiliation had significantly *higher* mean scores for ethnic identity importance compared to Muslims who *did* report humiliation (mean 5.00 vs 4.45, $p = 0.028$). This finding may suggest that strong ethnic identification could potentially act as a buffer against reporting experiences as humiliating for some Muslims, or that experiences of humiliation interact with identity in ways not fully captured by this measure, warranting further investigation.

To address the potential for intersectional dynamics, the analysis was extended to investigate whether the experience of humiliation varied by socioeconomic status. An initial logistic regression model suggested a marginal trend, indicating that the relationship between Muslim identity and humiliation might be attenuated for low-income individuals ($p = 0.078$). However, to ensure the reliability of this finding, particularly given the substantial number of missing cases for the income variable, a more robust, non-parametric bootstrapping procedure with 2000 replications was performed. The bootstrapped 95% confidence interval for the interaction term's odds ratio was (0.12 to 1.09). As this interval contains 1.0, the initial finding is not statistically significant. Therefore, based on this rigorous analysis, the study cannot conclude that the effect of being Muslim on the likelihood of experiencing humiliation systematically differs across income levels within this dataset.

Overall, these survey findings quantitatively reinforce the qualitative narratives. They demonstrate statistically significant patterns of heightened perceived discrimination and humiliation among Muslims, strongly pointing to educational institutions as disproportionate sites for these negative experiences, particularly for Muslim respondents. While the link between discrimination context and identity importance requires further exploration, the data provides robust context for the detailed accounts of pedagogical Islamophobia and the varied responses of young Muslims presented in this paper.

Discussion

The findings presented in the analysis section offer empirical support for the conceptualisation of a 'pedagogical Islamophobia' within educational settings across Northwestern Europe. The narratives of young Muslims depict schools and universities not as neutral sites of learning but as arenas where societal prejudices are encountered and negotiated daily. The pervasiveness suggested by participants aligns with theoretical understandings of Islamophobia as a chronic condition embedded within social structures, rather than just isolated incidents (Runnymede Trust 2017). Such instances also reveal important information about national discourses of securitisation, Islamophobia and racialisation in relation to structures of counterextremism and integration.

The prevalence of peer-to-peer Islamophobia, encompassing both overt hostility and subtle exclusion, underscores the extent to which societal anti-Muslim discourses permeate youth cultures (Bleich 2011; Maliepaard and Phalet 2012). This aligns with survey

findings where Muslim respondents perceived significantly higher levels of negative treatment towards their religion ($p < 0.001$) and lower trust from those of different faiths ($p < 0.001$) compared to non-Muslims. The linking of religious phrases to violence or the stereotyping of Muslim women reflects dominant media and political narratives (Kundnani 2014). The finding that such peer behaviour was often perceived as legitimised or ignored by authority figures is particularly concerning, creating a permissibility for the continued articulation and further amplification of Islamophobia. This institutional inaction contributes toward an environment where discriminatory norms are reproduced among students, impacting the social and emotional well-being of targeted youth (Juvonen and Graham 2013). Addressing peer Islamophobia therefore requires not only tackling student behaviour but critically examining the attitudes and actions (or inactions) of school staff in shaping an inclusive and equitable school ethos.

The role of educators and school staff emerged as profoundly influential, capable of both perpetuating and potentially mitigating Islamophobia. Experiences of lowered expectations, differential treatment, and stereotypical assumptions show how schools can reproduce social inequalities through institutional practices and biased interactions (Gillborn 2008). The concept of symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1986) is pertinent here, with teachers' subtle biases or explicit prejudices communicating messages about the belonging and worth of students and the permissibility of targeting Muslims. The significance of educational institutions as specific sites of discrimination for Muslims was starkly evident in the survey data, where, among those reporting humiliation, Muslims were significantly more likely than non-Muslims to identify education as the setting (OR = 1.81, $p = 0.040$), even after controlling for demographic factors. The reported lack of support from some staff when students faced discrimination further highlights potential systemic failures (Rollock et al. 2014). The situation underscores the urgent need for comprehensive anti-racism and cultural competency training for educators, focusing not only on overt prejudice but also on unconscious bias and the importance of equitable support for all students (Gorski 2016; Van Maele and Van Houtte 2011).

The targeting of visible markers of Muslim identity, particularly the hijab and prayer, highlights the intersections of religion, culture, gender, and national identity within European educational contexts (Boland 2021). The scrutiny and pathologisation of the hijab, often framed through lenses of coercion or incompatibility with national/secular values, reflect broader political debates and anxieties surrounding Muslim presence in Europe (Scott 2009). Similarly, the difficulties encountered in seeking accommodation for prayer demonstrate institutional reluctance or failure to navigate religious diversity effectively, often forcing students into marginal or degrading situations. Educational institutions often reinforce assimilationist models, demanding conformity to dominant secular norms in ways that disproportionately burden visibly Muslim students and infringe upon principles of religious freedom and multicultural inclusion.

The intrusion of securitisation discourses and counter-extremism policies such as Prevent into educational spaces represents a significant contemporary dimension of pedagogical Islamophobia identified in this study. These policies create sites of surveillance and suspicion for Muslim youth within educational institutions (Heath-Kelly 2013). The direct monitoring and interpretation of behaviour through a security lens, as well as the resulting chilling effect on free expression, create a hostile environment

undermining trust and academic freedom. The conditional acceptance offered to ‘good Muslims’ further reinforces the idea that Muslim identity itself is inherently suspect (Ragazzi 2016). These findings raise serious concerns about the compatibility of security measures with the goals of fostering inclusive education and promoting critical thinking (Busher et al. 2017).

Despite the pervasive nature of the discrimination described, the study illuminates the agency of young Muslims. Their responses were multidimensional, ranging from internal coping mechanisms to active resistance against injustice, aligning with theories of resilience. Affirming religious and cultural identity emerged as a key resource, providing strength and counter-narratives to combat negative stereotypes. While identity affirmation emerged qualitatively as a crucial resource, the survey analysis presented a nuanced picture; overall, experiencing humiliation correlated with higher ethnic identity importance ($p = 0.0016$), yet within the Muslim group specifically, those who did not report recent humiliation showed significantly higher ethnic identity importance ($p = 0.028$). This finding suggests that acts of resistance, such as confronting biased teachers, educating peers, or demanding rights like prayer space, demonstrate a refusal to passively accept marginalisation. These actions represent important forms of ‘identity work’ and contestation within oppressive structures. However, the study also highlights the potential costs of this constant navigation and the reality of disengagement as a response to overwhelming adversity.

When we compare the experiences of young Muslims between country case studies, we find trends which help us to understand how patterns of pedagogical Islamophobia sit within national debates and structures. Within Britain and the Netherlands, we find evidence for greater experiences of securitisation as linked to expressions of counterextremism, reflecting the pervasive nature of the Prevent programme and similar pre-criminal counterextremism mechanisms. In Denmark and Norway, meanwhile, we found evidence for more focus on experiences of gender-based pedagogical Islamophobia against young Muslim women, in which Islam was framed as sitting in opposition to liberal articulations of ‘national’ values. Furthermore, engagement in prayer within an educational setting was reported as being most disrupted in Danish and British schools, hinting at a central debate within these countries over secularism and the legitimacy of (non-Christian) displays of religiosity. These trends showcase the different focuses within each country, on security, migration, integration and religion, that are taking place. All, however, were shown to negatively impact young Muslims, as well as create broadly similar patterns of response from young people seeking to manage and mitigate the impact of pedagogical Islamophobia on their day-to-day lives and education.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the realities of pedagogical Islamophobia as experienced by young Muslims within educational settings across the UK, Netherlands, Denmark, and Norway. Drawing on rich qualitative data and corroborated by quantitative survey analysis, it demonstrates that schools and universities frequently function as sites where young

Muslims encounter multi-layered discrimination, with survey data confirming that Muslims disproportionately identify educational settings as locations for identity-based humiliation. This discrimination manifests through hostile peer interactions often fuelled by securitised framings of Islam; biased or indifferent treatment from staff; the specific targeting of visible markers of Muslim identity such as the hijab; and the pervasive impact of counter-extremism policies that foster climates of suspicion (Heath-Kelly 2013; Ragazzi 2016). The findings underscore how these various forms intersect to create challenging and often alienating educational environments for young Muslim students.

Crucially, this research highlights the agency exercised by young Muslims in response to such adversity. Participants employed a wide array of strategies of resilience and resistance, showcasing them not as passive victims but as active agents negotiating their identities within often hostile institutional contexts. Resilience was evident in efforts to draw strength from personal identity and community support networks (Ungar 2008), while resistance manifested in active efforts to challenge discrimination, from directly confronting biased teachers to asserting rights to religious accommodation (Tuck and Yang 2013). The study also acknowledges that for some, the cumulative weight of this discrimination led to disengagement and poor mental health outcomes, underscoring the significant costs associated with navigating such environments (Wallace, Nazroo, and Bécares 2016).

In its comparative dimension, the research identified both convergences and divergences across the four national contexts. The intrusion of securitisation narratives into peer interactions and the challenges surrounding visible Muslim identity were common features. However, specific national policies appeared to mediate experiences. The formalised nature of the Prevent Duty in the UK, for instance, created distinct forms of surveillance anxiety not articulated in the same way elsewhere (Busher et al. 2017). The quantitative analysis further revealed that the heightened likelihood of humiliation occurring in an educational setting for Muslims was most pronounced in the Netherlands. These variations suggest that while pedagogical Islamophobia is a transnational phenomenon, its local expression is contingent upon national policy frameworks and political discourses.

Theoretically, this study's novelty lies in substantiating the concept of 'pedagogical Islamophobia' (Sayyid 2014), illustrating its utility for understanding systemic discrimination in education. Empirically, it provides detailed, cross-national qualitative evidence triangulated with quantitative findings. However, limitations must be acknowledged. The qualitative findings are not statistically generalisable, and the survey data relies on specific measures. Furthermore, an exploratory intersectional analysis using income as a proxy for class was hampered by significant missing data, preventing robust conclusions on that specific dimension.⁶

The consistent findings across both qualitative narratives and quantitative data underscore the urgent need for robust anti-Islamophobia strategies. This includes professional development for staff on understanding cultural racism and unconscious bias; ensuring diverse representations of Muslims in the curriculum; and establishing clear procedures for addressing Islamophobic incidents. Institutions must also critically evaluate the impact of CVE policies on student well-being. Future research should build on these findings by conducting longitudinal studies and further exploring the intersectional dynamics of class, race, and geography that shape these critical educational experiences.

Notes

1. The authors acknowledge that the concept of 'resilience' is not without its critics. Scholars have noted its potential co-option within neoliberal and securitisation discourses, where it can function to individualise systemic problems by placing the onus of adaptation and coping upon the marginalised subject (Evans and Reid 2013; Zebrowski 2015). This can divert attention from the structural sources of adversity, such as institutional racism or discriminatory state policies. In this study, however, the concept is employed not to celebrate individual fortitude in the face of oppression, but rather to analyse the agentic and often collective strategies young Muslims use to navigate hostile environments. The focus is on the mobilisation of social, cultural, and religious resources as a direct response to, and a means of surviving, structural discrimination, aligning with an ecological rather than an individualistic understanding of the concept (Ungar 2008).
2. The concept of 'pedagogical Islamophobia' is introduced here to describe a specific modality of racism within educational institutions. It is distinct from, although related to, broader concepts such as the 'hidden curriculum', which typically refers to the unstated norms, values, and beliefs that are transmitted to students through the underlying structure and organisation of schooling (Apple 2004). Pedagogical Islamophobia is more specific, referring to the ways in which anti-Muslim discourses are actively produced, legitimised, and replicated through what can be termed 'educational interactions'. These interactions are not confined to formal pedagogical content but encompass the full range of relational dynamics within the institution, including peer-to-peer dialogue, staff conduct, disciplinary procedures, and the implementation of institutional policies. It also connects to the idea of 'public pedagogies', where institutions such as schools become sites where societal-level narratives about race, citizenship, and threat are taught and learned (Giroux 2004).
3. The research team for the DRIVE project was composed of individuals from diverse national, ethnic, and disciplinary backgrounds. The authors of this paper are male social scientists with extensive experience in security studies, sociology, and research concerning Muslim communities in Europe. We recognise that our positionalities inevitably shape the research process, from the formulation of research questions to the interpretation of data. To mitigate potential biases and enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, a commitment to reflexive practice was maintained throughout the project (Berger 2015). This included regular team discussions to critically examine interpretive choices, ensuring that the analysis remained grounded in the participants' expressed experiences, and involving researchers with shared cultural or linguistic backgrounds in data collection where feasible to foster rapport and a more emic understanding.
4. The comparative analysis was conducted systematically following the completion of the primary thematic analysis. An analytical matrix was developed to map the manifestation and prevalence of each major theme (such as peer-to-peer antagonism, staff bias, securitisation) across the four national contexts: the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Norway. This process involved comparing excerpts and coded data segments for each country side-by-side to identify patterns of convergence, where experiences appeared remarkably similar across borders, and divergence, where specific national policies or public discourses appeared to shape the local expression of pedagogical Islamophobia. This method allows for a nuanced understanding that accounts for both the transnational nature of Islamophobia and its context-specific articulations.
5. The thematic analysis involved a hybrid inductive and deductive coding process. The initial coding stage was primarily inductive, involving an open, data-driven approach to identify recurring patterns and meanings within the interview transcripts without being constrained by a pre-existing coding frame. Following this, a more deductive process was employed, where the initial codes were organised, reviewed, and refined in relation to the study's core theoretical concepts of pedagogical Islamophobia, resilience, and resistance. For instance, initial codes such as 'teacher ignored bullying' or 'unfairly questioned about hijab' were grouped and abstracted into the higher-level theme of 'Staff-Related Islamophobia'. This

iterative process, moving between the data and the theoretical framework, allowed for the development of themes that were both empirically grounded in the participants' narratives and analytically robust.

6. The authors acknowledge that a significant limitation of this study is the inability to conduct a comprehensive intersectional analysis across variables such as socioeconomic status, specific geographic location (urban versus non-urban), and ethnicity. While the qualitative data provide some insights into these dynamics, the survey data did not permit a robust statistical examination. For instance, an exploratory analysis of the intersection between religious identity and income was attempted, but a substantial number of missing values for the income variable ($N = 2,252$) rendered the results inconclusive and potentially unreliable. Consequently, while the findings presented offer a robust overview of pedagogical Islamophobia as experienced by young Muslims, future research using dedicated sampling strategies and more complete socioeconomic data is required to systematically investigate how these experiences are mediated by the intersecting axes of class, race, and geography.

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