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How Can Islamic Primary Schools Contribute to Social Integration?

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Abstract: The first Islamic primary schools were established in the Netherlands in 1988. Since then, the schools have regularly come under fire. Critics fear that religious segregation hinders the social integration of children. In contrast, this article shows, based on the results of my previous research, how Islamic schools can contribute to the reciprocal process of social integration in the Dutch plural society.

1. Introduction

In the Netherlands, both public and private schools are equally funded. This Dutch 'freedom of education' is stipulated in Article 23 of the Dutch constitution. Article 23 offers private persons and organisations room to set up a school with government money, to shape them according to their own identity, and to provide education as they see fit—within legal frameworks. Although currently in dispute, partly due to this freedom of education, Dutch school boards have a relatively great autonomy in shaping their curriculum (Maussen and Vermeulen 2015; Neeleman 2019; OECD 2011).

Partly due to this law, the Dutch educational system offers a variety of schools; from public school to religion-based schools and schools based on a philosophy or an educational vision, such as Montessori or Dalton. Over 60% of all Dutch primary schools are religion-based; Islamic primary schools make up about 1% of the total amount (see Figure 1 below).
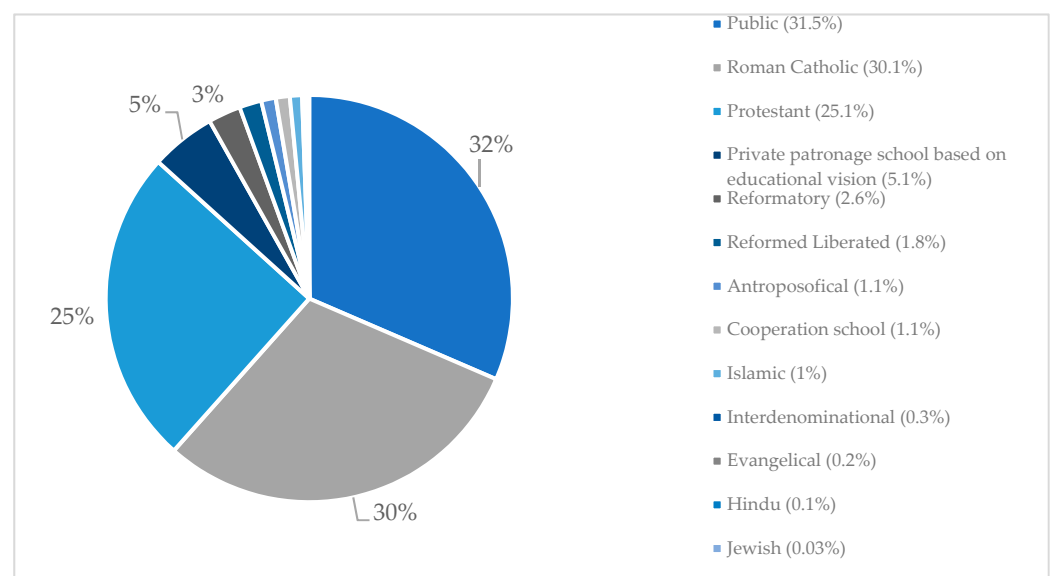

Figure 1. Number of primary schools in the Netherlands by denomination (3 January 2022) (based on Dienst Uitvoering Onderwijs 2022).

Opinions on religion-based schools differ fundamentally (Onderwijsraad 2021; Rietveld-van Wingerden et al. 2003). Proponents praise the Dutch freedom of choice in education and point to the possibilities for parents to choose a school that matches their parenting ideals.

Opponents of religion-based education advocate for a single form of public, secular education for children from all social classes and from all kinds of religious, ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. The first argument is that religion-based education leads to school segregation, by evoking an unequal distribution of children with a migrant background, high- or low-educated parents and parents with high or low incomes (Burgess et al. 2005, 2011; Inspectie van het Onderwijs 2018). According to the Dutch Inspectorate of Education, this school segregation mainly occurs in schools of 'minor religious movements'; they state that Protestant Christian and Roman Catholic schools generally do not contribute to segregation. In addition, the contribution of public schools to segregation differs greatly from school to school. Islamic, Hindu, Evangelical and Jewish schools, on the other side, bring together parents and children with specific ethnical and cultural backgrounds and, therefore, contribute relatively more to segregation (Inspectie van het Onderwijs 2018, p. 66; Onderwijsraad 2021, p. 15). According to the Dutch Education Council, this type of school segregation concerns only a several dozen schools (Onderwijsraad 2021, p. 15) of the total amount of 7309 primary and secondary schools in 2021 (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek 2021).

Another argument against religion-based schools is that it is the government's obligation to provide neutral and objective education, in order to form children into self-thinking democratic citizens. Critics claim that religion-based schools indoctrinate children and, therefore, do not offer space for free development and self-thinking or do so insufficiently (Dwyer 2001; Hand 2004; Kleinig 1982; Macmullen 2016; Philipsen 2018; Van Gool 2017; Van Roosmalen 2020; Van Schie 2017). This argument dominates the political discourse, often in response to situations at religion-based schools making headlines concerning the integrational value of the schools (e.g., the Islamic primary school *As Siddieq* (2009), the Islamic secondary school *Islamitisch College Amsterdam* (2004), the Islamic secondary school *Cornelius Haga Lyceum* (2019), the Jewish primary and secondary *Cheider school* (2019) and the Christian Reformed secondary school *Gomarus* (2021). From time to time, politicians look for opportunities to reform the educational system in a way that a diverse educational landscape continues to exist, while at the same time stimulating self-thinking, democracy and social integration (e.g., politicians Fortuyn (2002–2006), Hirsi Ali (2003–2006) and Wilders (2006–present)).

A new law came into effect in August 2021 that requires all schools in the Netherlands to promote active citizenship. The new law obliges schools to teach 'the basic values of the democratic constitutional state', "such as equality, tolerance and non-discrimination" (Inspectie van het Onderwijs 2020). The duty of the school to contribute to active citizenship translates into the school's obligation to stimulate the development of pupil competences that enable pupils to participate in, and contribute to, Dutch society.

The desire in politics and society to reduce religious segregation is based on the assumption that particularly denominational primary schools work against the social integration of pupils. This assumption stubbornly predominates political and social debate on Islamic education, even though the possibility to fight inequality and segregation with public education has regularly been scientifically challenged (Bell 1980, 2005; Chenoweth 2007; Darity 2005; Dobbie and Fryer 2011; Driessen et al. 2016; Merry 2013, 2020; Van de Werfhorst 2019) and was also refuted in both my previous research and later that of Bahaeddin Budak (Budak 2021).

Never before has research been conducted into the way in which the identity of Islamic primary schools is shaped. Previous research into Islamic primary schools in the Netherlands (Driessen 1997; Driessen and Bezemer 1999; Shadid and Van Koningsveld 1992a, 1992b, 1997) was mostly based on policy documents and reports from the Inspectorate of

Education. The research underlying this article was the first large-scale qualitative research into the identity of Islamic primary schools in the Netherlands.

The question addressed in this article is how Islamic primary schools in the Netherlands can contribute to the social integration of their pupils in the Dutch society.

2. Defining 'Social Integration'

The term 'integration' is conceptually elusive. Entzinger and Dourelijn describe the extreme shift from the Dutch view on integration in terms of multiculturalism between 1980 and 2000 to assimilationism after 2000 (Entzinger and Dourelijn 2008).

However, integration is scientifically defined as a two-way process between the native majority population and a minority (Givens 2007; Klarenbeek 2021; Sözeri 2021). In her dissertation on mosque pedagogy, Semiha Sözeri defines the integration of decedents of Muslims migrants as "a reciprocal process of cultural convergence between the native majority population and the Muslim minority with migrant background, in which accommodation of the cultural and religious differences of the minority by the native majority is as important as migrants' host language proficiency and identification with the host nation" (Sözeri 2021).

The term 'social integration' stems from Dutch educational law and refers to the cultural transfer necessary to successfully participate in society (Dijkstra 2012; Tweede Kamer der Staten Generaal 2019; Vaste commissie voor Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap 2020). Anne Bert Dijkstra, Professor by Special Appointment of Supervision and Socialisation, explains in his inaugural lecture that maintaining the open character of the democratic society is a primary task of the government. This justifies promoting certain values as 'public morality' in education. According to Dijkstra, schools expressing religions or views of life deviating from the majority view "are obliged to promote the rules of the game that make this plurality possible" (Dijkstra 2012). In this light, social integration in this article is defined as "contributing to the transfer of values that make a plural society possible".

3. Results

The main conclusions of my previous research are that (a) there are major differences between Islamic primary schools, mainly due to the highly diverse Muslim population that gathers at the schools, leading to internal dialogues; (b) there is a tendency toward the increasing influence of the Dutch social context in Islamic primary schools; and (c) Islamic primary schools provide a sense of safety that enables them to address sensitive topics and contribute to the integration of Muslims in the Netherlands. These three conclusions are briefly explained and elaborated below.

3.1. Diversity within the School Population Leading to Internal Dialogues

The 59 Islamic primary schools in the Netherlands in 2022 (Dienst Uitvoering Onderwijs 2022) differ greatly, in both pupil and teacher populations as well as in in the field of identity praxis.

Although, in practice, almost all children are Muslim, the school population is far from homogeneous. On the contrary, the pupil population differs by ethnicity and, to some extent, also by social class. There are children of first-, second- and third-generation migrants and children and parents that feel a kinship with different Islamic schools of law. Moreover, the value families and children attribute to Islam in everyday life differs. This makes the school population of Islamic primary schools very diverse.

When principals and teachers are asked how they deal with this diversity, they indicate to follow 'the basics' on which all Muslims can agree and to look for common ground. Therefore, in all Islamic primary schools, the specific religious identity is reflected in the celebration of *Eid al-Adha* and *Eid al-Fitr*, and the oldest children perform a daily prayer together. Furthermore, the children are free on Friday afternoon instead of the more common Wednesday afternoon in the Netherlands, in order for them to be able to attend Friday prayers. Islamic schools often prescribe that women must wear clothes that 'cover

their body shape'. Some schools require that the headscarf is mandatory for all female staff, other schools only make it mandatory for Muslim women and another group of schools state that women are free to make their own choices regarding wearing a headscarf.

Besides similarities between Islamic primary schools, there are also differences in daily practice at Islamic primary schools. These differences arise from variations in the understanding of Islam between board members, school directories, parents and teachers, who are all united at one Islamic primary school. These variations of understanding Islam initiate a theological dialogue about what form of Islam the school adheres to.

An example of a point of contention is *mawlid*, the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad. This day is celebrated by certain groups of Muslims, while other groups decry the observance of this day as not an originally Islamic celebration but a later human intervention (*bid'ah*).

In conversations with teachers, religion teachers, principals and administrators, a number of topics emerged, which are point of discussion in most schools and also lead to debate again and again. In addition to the celebration of *mawlid*, the celebration of Father's Day, Mother's Day and birthdays also lead to discussion. This also applies to music education, the dress code (more specifically, the wearing of the headscarf by staff and children) and separating boys and girls. Another example is the depiction of living beings: while one pupil draws a doll without a conflict of conscience and poses in a school photo, another pupil considers this *haram* and is not allowed by their parents to be photographed.

Islamic schools face these kinds of contradictions, and these are discussed within the school. Every direction or school team then makes its own assessment and, in doing so, a school acquires its own identity.

3.2. Examples of Internal Dialogues: Music Education and the Dutch King's Games

To illustrate how such an internal dialogue takes shape, music education and the Dutch King's Games are elaborated as examples below.

Different aspects of music have engaged Islamic scholars in debate over the centuries. Music is not clearly spoken of in the Qur'an or in the *hadith* literature. There are both passages and recordings that would indicate that Muhammad avoided music and fragments that indicate that he allowed music (Bedford 2001; Ogretici 2021; Otterbeck 2004; Ter Laan 2016). Since different groups of Muslims use different techniques to interpret *hadith* passages, there is theological discussion resulting in diverse points of view among Muslims concerning music; there are Muslims who listen to the radio at home or in the car, but there are Muslims who avoid music and walk away from places where music is played.

The lack of a homogeneous Islamic standpoint regarding music, which means that there is no homogeneous Islamic music culture, is reflected in an internal dialogue in Islamic primary schools. The following quote illustrates the extent to which Islamic primary schools can differ from each other in this regard:

> *During one of the performances [in an occasion where several Islamic schools were united] a pupil picked up an electric guitar and sat down to play it. Some adults then stood up and walked away. They were like: this is not okay. [. . .] We have now said that no musical instruments should be used during similar occasions. Otherwise, we would be excluding certain people. [. . .] Also, for example, with photos at the national Islamic knowledge quiz: we have a location that also has a balcony, so people who don't want to be in a picture can stand on the balcony for a while.*

(board director, convert, born in The Netherlands)

In most of the Islamic primary schools included in my research, the tension around music is solved by slightly adjusting the content of the music lessons. For example, there are schools that do not work with melody instruments because their use is debated (Al-Faruqi 1989; Bedford 2001; Halstead 1997; Otterbeck 2004; Otterbeck and Ackfeldt 2012). These schools mainly use a cappella singing, rhythm instruments and religious hymns (*anasheed*) during music classes. There are also schools that do not shy away from the sensitivity

surrounding music and, perhaps, even consciously seek out this sensitivity by bringing children into contact with melody instruments such as piano and guitar and with Western music (classical, pop, blues, etc.). These Islamic primary schools believe that, in the context of living in the Netherlands where the use of melodic instruments is normal, children should be introduced to Western cultural heritage and should learn to know different musical instruments.

Another example of an internal dialogue that emerged at several Islamic primary schools is the discussion about the Dutch King's Games. The King's Games, a national sports day for Dutch primary schools, have been held annually since 2013. Before 2013, Queen's Day was considered a day off, and Islamic primary schools could suffice with a lesson about the Dutch holiday. This changed with the introduction of the King's Games as a national sports day for schools. During the King's Games, three different areas of tension come together. First of all, the King's Games are linked to the king's birthday. Muslims differ in their views on birthdays: some Muslims celebrate their birthdays, while others see the celebration birthdays as a human innovation (*bid'ah*) that has no Islamic basis and is, therefore, not permitted. Secondly, the nature of a sports day where boys and girls play mixed sports and dance is problematic for some parents. Finally, organising a day in the name of or in honour of the Dutch king is sensitive to a small number of parents, because they feel it is the veneration of a person.

These three areas of tension that come together in the King's Games are a reason for principals, teachers and parents involved in Islamic primary schools to discuss the interpretation of the King's Games. Similar to the way the tension around musical education is solved, an internal dialogue takes place, discussing how children can be part of this national King's Games celebration for all Dutch children in a way that it feels 'in line' with the school's identity, which satisfies most parents, as one of the principals explained in an interview:

> *Principal: Parents have difficulty with the fact that the King's Games are organized because of a birthday. That applies to some, maybe half [of our parents]. And other [parents] have a hard time with it because the celebration may seem royalist. But you are in the Netherlands. [. . .] These parents object because they say that the only one you must answer to is Allah. [. . .] As a principal I respect their point of view. I took the point on celebrating the king's birthday more serious because that is a point of view that half of the [Islamic] movements recognize. I [then] have to discuss that with the identity committee, regardless of what I think about it myself.*
>
> *Interviewer: How many parents have difficulty with the King's Games?*
>
> *Principal: 2 out of 250, and trouble with birthdays: 10 out of 250. But within the identity committee, which represents all schools, it's really been 50/50.*
>
> (principal, convert, not born in The Netherlands)

These and similar internal dialogues sometimes lead to relatively minor adjustments in the education programme, for example, regarding the choice of songs during music lessons and the instruments that the school purchases. More often than actually making adjustments, internal dialogues lead to the school management team taking a decision and informing parents with extra attention and caution, because of their differences of opinion about the way in which 'sensitive' lessons are given content at school and why the school considers such education necessary. This was the case with the King's Games. All the schools that were part of my research participated in the King's Games, but made an extra effort to inform parents about the how and why of the day's activities, as shown in this quote:

> *We think it is very important to celebrate the King's Games together with the rest of the country and to stimulate healthy behaviour, with the school breakfast and the exercise like on a Sports Day. The King's Games are not about the king's birthday and a birthday celebration is not the intention with the King's Games. We really have to emphasize that*

to the parents, that you do not celebrate the king's birthday. And also, for example, that starting the day with a dance to music is not a disco but a joint opening that is designed in the same way in all schools throughout the country.

(principal, Muslim, not born in The Netherlands)

3.3. Increasing Influence of the Dutch Context

At all Islamic primary schools studied in my previous research, respondents reported that the Dutch context of the school was increasingly given weight in school policy and daily practice. It may be more accurate to describe this process as an increasing internalization of the Dutch context by parents, teachers, principals and school administrators (Beemsterboer 2018; Budak 2021). Successive generations of migrant parents, teachers and administrators tend to develop educational ideals closer to the educational goals of Dutch parents without a migrant background (Bucx and De Roos 2015; Eldering 2006; Entzinger and Dourelijn 2008; Pels et al. 2009; Van Keulen and Van Beurden 2010).

These changing educational ideals of parents, teachers and principals are reflected in the development of the identity of Islamic schools. Bahaeddin Budak studied the identity development of Islamic schools from the start of the first schools in 1988 to 2013 (Budak 2021). Budak indicates three reasons for the change in school identity. First of all, the direct influence of imams in schools has decreased, and schools increasingly focus on imams who know the Dutch context. Secondly, Muslim principals and administrators from different schools of law have started working together towards an Islamic pedagogy focussing on the Dutch context. Thirdly, the political pressure on Islamic education has led to a self-reflective approach, which Budak identifies as highly influential (Budak 2021).

The increasing influence of the Dutch context within the identity of Islamic schools can be illustrated by three examples.

First, the interviews reflect a growing number of schools that are consciously looking for teachers with a Dutch background. In recent years, the Dutch government has increasingly required schools to contribute to 'active citizenship and social integration'. This might have stimulated some schools to attract Dutch teachers, but, in many Islamic primary schools, this wish also comes from directors, teachers and parents. In recent years, competencies such as assertiveness and autonomy play a greater role in the educational ideals of Muslim parents. Muslim children receive more freedom of movement, and their upbringing increasingly takes place amidst more open communication (Bucx and De Roos 2015; De Koning 2008; Eldering 2006; Entzinger and Dourelijn 2008; Pels 2000, 2010; Pels et al. 2009; Van Keulen and Van Beurden 2010). With this change in educational ideals, the expectations that parents have for primary schools have shifted, which is reflected in different education policy than that in the first 30 years of Islamic education.

Second, the interviews reflect a similar shift around the obligation to wear the headscarf; 30 years ago, at the time of the first Islamic primary schools, this was often the norm for all female teachers—including teachers who were not Muslims. Nowadays, teachers are increasingly free to make their own clothing choices, meaning that Muslim teachers can be found with and without a headscarf at Islamic primary schools.

Third, parallel to the changing parental ideals of education, many Islamic schools have shifted the emphasis from Islamic expressions to an internalization of Islamic values. Besides the obligations of the headscarf, the interviews reflect less emphasis on memorising a large number of Qur'anic verses in religion class nowadays and more focus on knowledge of the Qur'an and the ability to translate its meaning into everyday life. Furthermore, instead of completely avoiding the portrayal of living creatures, schools nowadays see this more and more as an essential part of a child's development, taking into account the sensitivity around this theme among parents.

3.4. Using the Sense of Safety to Consiously Address Sensitive Topics

Contrary to the idea that dominates national media in the Netherlands (f.e. Beemsterboer 2014; Boersema 2020; Khaddari and Soetenhorst 2021; Schneider 2019;

Stekelenburg 2021; Van Baars 2016, 2021; Vermeer 2020; Verstraelen 2013), Islamic primary schools can actually contribute to the social integration of pupils in society (Beemsterboer 2018; Merry 2007, 2013). One reason for this is that Islamic primary schools offer parents and children a sense of safety: the Islamic identity of the school provides parents and children a place where they do not have to explain themselves or apologise because, for example, they do not celebrate birthdays at home, they wear a headscarf or they prefer not to shake hands. All teachers at least have some basic knowledge of Islam, and the Islamic identity of the school makes teachers sensitive to any areas of tension between the often-Islamic home culture and the norm at school. This sense of safety is the foundation for a close-knit school community, which increases the children's involvement in education (Smit et al. 2007). Both parents and pupils sense that they are safe and understood, which increases pupils' self-confidence and contributes to educational achievement. This has a positive effect on integration when discussing sensitive topics (Fricker 2009), if the teachers recognise that they have a responsibility towards social integration (Sözeri 2021).

The schools involved in my research gave several examples of moments when teachers, religious teachers and principals of Islamic primary schools consciously contributed to the social integration of Muslims into Dutch society, using this sense of safety. The school principal in the quote below gives an example:

> We are very much aware of the fact that the children will soon be working and studying in Dutch society. We feel that we must prepare them well for this, that everything we do should be dominated by the thought that they will soon be part of and must maintain themselves in society. [So, we tell the children:] 'When you start applying for a job, you know that in the Netherlands you have to shake hands, you know that you have to look the person in the eye and start a conversation'.

(principal, convert, born in The Netherlands)

At this school, the children were, therefore, asked what they would do the moment they were offered a hand at the start of a job interview. "How do you feel about shaking hands? Would you accept a hand if you would feel an objection? Do you accept the hand (once) and then explain that you would rather not do that in the future? And how can you politely decline the hand if you would feel more comfortable doing so?" According to the principal, during an open discussion that was held within the safe context of the classroom, none of the outcomes were favoured. The principal explained that such an open conversation might not have been possible in some of the children's homes. For these children, such a conversation contributes to the development of pupils' competencies, which are preconditional for their part in the process of social integration. This, and other similar examples, often involve moments when the school took a step further towards the Dutch context than would have been taken at home. It was precisely the sense of safety the Islamic school offers in such situations that ensured that the message effectively reached the children.

Another example of a situation where an Islamic primary school contributed to the integration of Muslims is related to sexual diversity. 'Sexual diversity' has been a mandatory part of the curricula in all Dutch primary schools since 2012, meaning schools have to get children acquainted with different identities, including gender identities, to put heteronormativity into perspective, in order for them to treat different people and different relationships with respect (Bron et al. 2015). In the Islamic primary schools included in my research, the topic of 'sexual diversity' was addressed by the religion teacher. Respondents painted a picture in which the religion teacher would tell the children that having a same-sex relationship is allowed in the context of the Dutch pluriform society and that it is not up to the children to disapprove of it. When such a message is given by the religion teacher at an Islamic school, the children know that the message is especially meant for them. The religion teacher is regarded as a religious authority in the eyes of the children and their parents. A message coming from this teacher really is received by the children (Beemsterboer 2018; Budak 2021; Sözeri 2021).

Similarly, in Islamic schools, conversations are held about how to relate to non-Muslims and non-Muslim activities, such as drinking alcohol or celebrating birthdays. When schools, within the sense of safety they offer, consciously address subjects that are sensitive or taboo because of the religious identity of the pupils at home, religious segregation can, therefore, contribute to integration. The effectiveness of education stands or falls with the assessment that the school makes between Islam on the one hand and the social context on the other (Beemsterboer 2018) and with the quality of the teachers (Ter Avest and Rietveld-van Wingerden 2017).

3.5. Sensitive Topics at Non-Islamic Primary Schools

Since Islamic primary schools constitute only about 1% of the total number of schools in the Netherlands, the vast majority of Muslim pupils attend public, Catholic and Protestant Christian schools (Metselaar 2005; Smit et al. 2005; Ten Broeke et al. 2004). At those schools, it is likely that the Muslim children also come into contact with children of other faiths. Is that situation not more desirable for social integration? Research shows that this is not necessarily the case. 'Meeting each other openminded' is a precondition for this, and Muslim children often appear to be stigmatised at school, just as in the rest of society (Buijs 2009; Distelbrink and Pels 2012; Entzinger and Dourelijn 2008; Kunst et al. 2012; Merry 2018; Merry and Maussen 2018; Smeekes et al. 2011; Strabac and Listhaug 2008; Verkuyten 2013; Verkuyten and Thijs 2002; Zuidhof 2009). The harmful consequences of internalising the beliefs associated with stigmatisation are far-reaching. Stigmatisation leads to a lower self-image, lower educational performance and, ultimately, fewer social opportunities (and, in turn, a greater chance of social failure) (Fricker 2009; Goffman 2018).

Obviously, there are also plenty of examples of Muslim children who feel comfortable in a non-Islamic school; in most cases, they are supervised by teachers who recognise and respond to their needs. Articles by Bill Banning provide a good example (e.g., Banning 2021).

Learning from good practice with Muslim pupils in non-Islamic schools and in order to create a safe environment for all children, teacher-training courses should train future teachers to reflect on behaviour and social interaction within the school and the context in which they operate, placing these interactions in a broader social framework. In this way, teachers give pedagogical meaning to sociological and social developments and analyses (Enthoven et al. 2021). This professionalism can be described as 'context conscious' (Gaikhorst et al. 2020). Context-conscious teachers realise that behaviour and interactions in the classroom partly arise from the broader context around the school—the home culture and neighbourhood in which the children grow up as well as the education system and (changing) society—and they adjust their pedagogical–didactic actions accordingly, in order to promote resilient development (Enthoven et al. 2021). With context-conscious training; teachers might be able to create a sense of safety for children and parents of diverse backgrounds, enabling them to discuss sensitive topics with appropriate tact.

4. Methods

In the Netherlands, education is compulsory for children from the age of 5 to 16. However, most children begin their education at the age of four. Dutch primary schools have eight grades, ranging from the first grade (4 year olds) to the eighth grade (12 year olds). After primary school, children follow secondary education, consisting of different levels with different durations.

This article is based on my doctoral research, a qualitative study into the identity of Islamic primary schools. Starting from a social constructivist perspective, 75 interviews were conducted, in 2013 and 2014, with principals, religion teachers and group teachers at 19 Islamic primary schools. The conclusions in this article reflect their views on Islamic education and, thus, represent an insider perspective. Their views were complemented with school documents such as guides and policy documents and my observations around the conduct of the interviews.

Participating schools were selected based on their location, size and year of founding, and they represented different school boards. Respondents represented different functions within the schools, religious backgrounds, countries of birth and countries of origin, as shown in Tables 1–3.

Table 1. Respondents' background characteristics.

		Number (N = 75)
1. Function	Group teacher	39
	4–8 year-old children	20
	8–12 year-old children	21
	Principal	17
	Religion teacher	12
	Special needs coordinator	5
	Other	5
2. Educational experience (average)	13 years	
3. Employed at this school (average)	7 years	
4. Gender	Female	47
	Male	28
5. Age (average)	41 years	
6. Religious background	Muslim	46
	Converted Muslim	9
	Christian	15
	Agnostic	6
	Other (including atheist/Hindu)	8
7. Country of birth	The Netherlands	47
	Morocco	11
	Turkey	5
	Suriname	6
	Other/unknown	6
8. Parents' country of origin	The Netherlands	30
	Morocco	16
	Turkey	18
	Suriname	6
	Other/unknown	5

Table 2. Background data by function (group teachers, directors and religion teachers).

Background Characteristics	Group Teachers	N = 38	Principals	N = 17	Religion Teachers	N = 13
1. Educational experience	12 years		19 years		8 years	
2. Employed at this school (average)	7 years		6 years		8 years	
3. Gender	Male	6	Male	8	Male	11
	Female	32	Female	9	Female	2
4. Age	38 years		47 years		45 years	
5. Religious background	Muslim	17	Muslim	9	Muslim	13
	Converted Muslim	4	*Converted Muslim*	3	*Converted Muslim*	1
	Christian	12	Christian	3	Christian	
	Other	9	Other	5	Other	
6. Country of birth	The Netherlands	27	The Netherlands	12	The Netherlands	4
					Morocco	5
	Other	11	Other	5	Other	4
7. Parents' country of origin	The Netherlands	19	The Netherlands	10	The Netherlands	1
	Morocco	4			Morocco	8
	Turkey	9				
	Suriname	5				
	Other/unknown	1	Other/unknown	7	Other/unknown	4

Table 3. Background data on schools.

Background Characteristics	Total Number of Islamic Schools at the Time of Fieldwork	N = 49	Research Group	N = 19
1. Socio-geographic position	Suburban area	30	Suburban area	10
	Rural area	19	Rural area	9
2. School size by number of pupils	Small (<100)	11	Small (<100)	4
	Medium (100–250)	22	Medium (100–250)	7
	Large (>250)	16	Large (>250)	8
3. School board	SIPO	3	SIPO	1
	SIPOR	4	SIPOR	1
	SIMON	11	SIMON	5
	El Amal	5	El Amal	1
	El Amana	5	El Amana	2
	Noor	4	Noor	0
	15 smaller school boards	17	15 smaller school boards	9
4. Moment of founding	1985–1990	11	1985–1990	4
	1991–1995	18	1991–1995	6
	1996–2000	1	1996–2000	1
	2001–2005	9	2001–2005	5
	2006–2010	3	2006–2010	1
	2011–2015	7	2011–2015	2

The interviews were recorded and then transcribed verbatim. After that, codes were assigned to the interviews. This coding process had several phases. Firstly, in vivo codes were assigned to the data, codes that remain relatively close to the respondents' exact words. Examples are: 'Islam says' or 'Islam prescribes'. Secondly, thematic codes were assigned, such as 'religion class' or '*Id al-Adha*/Feast of the Sacrifice'. Thirdly, a number of codes were assigned with the help of a search within the interviews (auto codes). For example, when one of the interviews showed that, in some schools, parents have a great influence on the schools' identity, all interviews were searched for the word 'parent(s)' and the thematic code 'parents' was assigned to almost all the computer-selected segments. Fourthly, subcodes were added to refine earlier codes. When coding the 18th interview, I felt the need to clarify whether the earlier code 'headscarf' was worn compulsorily as part of the dress code or not. Codes were then changed into 'headscarf: compulsory' or 'headscarf: not compulsory'. After this first coding round, I searched the initial code list for relationships or patterns. Both the code list and the found patterns were designed during coding and analysis and were not fixed prior to the study.

The research was a qualitative study into the way principals, religion teachers and group teachers balanced between connecting with the Islamic identity of the pupils' home culture, on the one hand, and preparing pupils for the pluriform Dutch society, on the other. A comparison between schools or development of school identity over time was not part of my research. However, I did interview principals, religion teachers and group teachers who had worked in several schools or had significant work experience in Islamic schools. In the interviews, my respondents made comparisons and outlined historical developments based on their personal experiences. Some comparisons and developments were mentioned so often that a pattern became visible. Whenever a development is outlined or a comparison is made in this article, it is based on this data.

All conclusions and examples discussed in this article go back to my previous research, which I refer to here once, as it provides more examples and context (Beemsterboer 2018).

5. Conclusions

This article addresses the question how Islamic primary schools can contribute to the social integration of their pupils. Critics of confessional education sometimes find it hard to believe that a school can both strengthen the identity of pupils and contribute to the

integration of these pupils at the same time. However, based on my previous research, this article states and substantiates that introducing children in an Islamic school into Islam and strengthening their religious identity does not hinder discussing educational content sensitive to their parents. Paradoxically, it is precisely this religious segregation that enables teachers to handle sensitive messages with appropriate tact, hence stimulating the children to integrate into Dutch society through their confessional education.

6. Suggestions for Future Research

This study limited the data to educational professionals. However, it showed that parents can also be influential in shaping school identity. In order to better understand the dynamics in Islamic primary schools, it would be interesting to include parents in follow-up research.

Subsequently, pupils are what education is all about. It is important to understand how pupils internalise what teachers are telling them about their faith and their role in Dutch society. Does what teachers think they are imparting to pupils actually gain traction? Moreover, interviews with former pupils of Islamic schools and Islamic pupils who did not take Islamic education can help in better understanding how pupils believe Islamic primary education can add to their development.

Finally, broader research into school identity is possible at different religion-based schools. Islamic schools are often mentioned in one breath along with reformed, Hindu, evangelical and Jewish schools, under the flag of schools with a 'strong religious identity'. A similarity these other schools might have with Islamic schools is the tension between religious perspectives and societal demands. The Inspectorate of Education describes that too much emphasis at these schools on religious convictions can lead to intolerance and insufficient promotion of autonomy, equality and space, to allow children to make their own choices (Inspectie van het Onderwijs 2020, p. 24). It is interesting to see whether similar processes occur within those schools and if they are strongly linked to the religious identity of the school. Similarities and differences are relevant in the discussion about freedom of education and the social and political desire to achieve just one form of public education that all children can attend.

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