

Editorial

Epilogue of Special Issue “Islam in/and Education in The Netherlands”

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In the Introduction to this Special Issue, an overview of the Dutch ‘pillarized’ education system is presented based on freedom of religion (Article 6 of the Dutch constitution) and freedom of education (Article 23 of the Dutch constitution). In the 20th century, the Dutch education system consisted of three so-called ‘pillars’: Protestant, Roman Catholic, and a Liberal/Public pillar (including education for Jewish pupils). In the 1980s, a fourth pillar was added to this education system: an Islamic pillar.¹ Historically, parents played an important role in the creation of this pillarized system—notably Christian parents in the 19th century and Muslim parents in the 20th century. In the 1960s, Moroccan and Turkish guest workers were employed in The Netherlands, seen as a temporary solution to postwar labour shortages. Due to family reunification processes in the 1970s—wives and children joining their husbands/fathers—these men changed from guest workers to ‘newcomers’ to ‘fellow Dutchmen’ to Dutchmen with a hybrid identity. As a result of family reunification, the number of Muslims in The Netherlands increased from 1.399 in 1960, 53.975 in 1971, and 919.000 in 2003 to almost 1,000,000 in 2022, which is about 5% of the total Dutch population (*Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek*, CBS; Central Institution of Statistics). The arrival of children stimulated Muslim parents to found their own Islamic schools, resulting in the fourth pillar of the Dutch education system: the Islamic pillar.

Today, however, this pillarized education system is under pressure. Due to processes of religious pluralization on the one hand—with Islam as a major player alongside movements of multiple religiosity—and secularization on the other, there are motions to update Article 23 that stipulates freedom of education. In this context, it is the discourse of citizenship that monopolizes the conversations. It is within this context that this Special Issue explores the position of Islam in/and Education.

From their inception in 1988, Islamic schools have been the subject of heated discussions in The Netherlands; can Islamic schools contribute to the integration of Muslims in society or are they a breeding ground for fundamentalism and a source of polarization?

As a way out of polarization, between 1990 and 2000, a method of interreligious education was developed at a Christian primary school with a growing Muslim pupil population. Pupils received Christian religious education or Islamic religious education according to their religious socialization in the family. In addition, all pupils participated in so-called ‘encounter classes’, during which they learned from and with each other about and from Christianity and Islam. Through learning by doing, the pupils’ dialogicality was stimulated (Ter Avest 2003, 2009; 2023, in press).

Due to ongoing debates in the public domain and in the media, the Education Inspectorate published three reports on the position and quality of Dutch Islamic education over a four-year period (1999–2003) (Van der Meij 2009, p. 15). Bear in mind that this period was marked by (the threat of) attacks by Muslims or triggered by fear of Islamization, starting with the attack on the Twin Towers in New York and the Pentagon in Washington (2001), later followed by attacks in Madrid and Amsterdam (2004), London (2005), Paris (2015), Brussels (2016), and London (2017), among others.²



Citation: Ter Avest, Ina. 2023. Epilogue of Special Issue “Islam in/and Education in The Netherlands”. *Religions* 14: 973. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14080973>

Received: 13 July 2023

Accepted: 23 July 2023

Published: 28 July 2023



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The Inspectorate's first report in 1999 presented details on the quality of Dutch Islamic education. The conclusion stated that the quality of education in general satisfied Dutch standards (Budak 2021, p. 46), although it was recommended that more attention be paid to Dutch values and customs in the future (Van der Meij 2009, p. 15).

In 2002, a report was published by the *Algemene Inlichtingen en Veiligheidsdienst* (AIVD; Office of General Information and Safety) with a focus on possible international interference (e.g., through financial support) in Islamic education in Dutch schools, and its possible harmful effects on Dutch democratic society (Budak 2021, pp. 145–46). Did this viewpoint stem from a clash of cultures, a 'clash of civilizations'? Did it have to do with the fact that relatively young Muslim school leaders and board members must find their way in the Dutch landscape? Was this perspective—as expressed in the AIVD report 'From Dawa to Jihad'—rooted in a misunderstanding or misinterpretation of the core concepts in question and a focus on menaces? Was it possibly rooted in a fear of Dutch Islamic schools being misused by radical(ized) organizations? (Van der Meij 2009, p. 16; AIVD 2004, pp. 13–14). The AIVD concluded that "many schools stress the need to maintain their own ethnic and/or religious school ethos, their identity. This is done in a way that is comparable to the practices in Christian schools that emphatically give substance to their Christian-related identity. This focus on a school's own (religious) identity is one of the consequences of freedom of education (Article 23 of the Dutch Constitution)" (Van der Meij 2009, p. 19; AIVD 2004, p. 25).

In 2002, the Inspectorate's report focused on the integration of Muslims in Dutch society (Inspectie van het Onderwijs 2002). The conclusion was that 90% of Islamic schools played a positive role or in many ways played a positive role in the integration process (Van der Meij 2009, p. 19). It also stated that more attention should be paid to religious education, among other things. "For example, there is not yet an official Islamic method of religious education, which means that religious education in Islamic primary schools takes on a life of its own" (ibid., p. 20).

In 2003, the Inspectorate published a new report (Inspectie van het Onderwijs 2003). Here, the question was addressed "to what extent Islamic education (focused on Islamic religious education) is in conflict with the democratic legal order" (ibid., p. 21). The conclusion was that Islamic education is not in conflict with the basic values of the democratic constitutional state; Islamic schools generally promote, to a greater or lesser extent, the conditions that favour the integration of pupils. In regard to Islamic Religious Education (IRE) in particular, nearly all Islamic schools opt for an open attitude towards Dutch society and play a positive role in promoting conditions for social cohesion (ibid., p. 21). More attention on Dutch language acquisition, active participation in society (e.g., visits to libraries), and clear information about Dutch values and customs was advised, as it is expected to contribute to the integration of Muslims in society (ibid., pp. 21–22).

The Inspectorate's recommendations are taken to heart, in particular the observation that there is not yet an official IRE method, which resulted in IRE taking on a life of its own in primary schools (ibid., p. 20). This resulted in an assignment from the Ministry of Education to ISBO/SLO³ to develop such a method. Several texts produced by (members of) teams of Islamic schools and Islamic school boards have been published in which the Islamic identity has been transferred into well-considered vision documents and methods. An example of this is the 2008 publication *Worden wie je bent* ('Becoming Who You Are'), which focuses on IRE in relation to the religious identity of Islamic schools (Aktaran 2008). Core values and fostering value orientation take centre stage. A key principle is: "we see each child as a unique creature of Allah, with an authentic aptitude for a good life" (Aktaran 2008, p. 55). Children's social-emotional development is seen as an important aspect of Islamic education, alongside their moral, physical, spiritual, and cognitive development. It is the whole child that is the subject of Islamic education, visualized in the so-called 'pearls of excellence': autonomy, justice, cooperation, transparency, tolerance, a sense of/relationship with Allah, and curiosity for knowledge (ibid., p. 73). The pedagogical aim is to become a good Muslim and a good member of Dutch society. The IRE publication

Op reis met de profeten ('En Route With the Prophets') is part of *Worden wie je bent. Op reis met de profeten*, which can be seen as a concretization of the latter, and was developed by Bahaeddin Budak (2021) and a number of teacher teams attached to the SIMON board of Islamic schools.

The Al Amana primary school, located in a small town in The Netherlands, in turn published the *Godsdienstmethode Al Amana* ('Al Amana Religious Education Method') (Al Amana n.d.).

In 2019, the publication of Asma Claassen (Claassen 2019) *Help! Ik word volwassen* ('Help! I'm Growing Up'), a method for sex education from an Islamic perspective with a separate booklet for Islamic sex education for girls and boys, again sparked heated debate on the non-integrative way in which Dutch values and regulations are presented as incompatible with Islamic life orientation. Much ado about nothing? In the case of a conflict between the school's and society's value orientation, this mainly has to do with equality of boys and girls and the attitude towards sexual diversity (Vogelzang 2016; 2020, p. 68). However, there is a limit to freedom of religion (Article 6 of the Constitution) and freedom of education (Article 23 of the Constitution). The learning content must not contradict the principles of the democratic legal order. Thus, there are limitations when it comes to adding one's own story to the content belonging to the compulsory, shared core (Hooge and van Leeuwen 2021, p. 63).⁴

In 2012, the report *Een verleden heb je, de toekomst moet je maken!* ('A Past You Have, the Future You Must Create!') (Van Velzen and de Vijlder 2012) was published, which provides information on the results of the *Kwaliteit Islamitisch Onderwijs* research project (KIO; Quality Islamic Education). In this project, the quality of education in the classroom and also the quality of school management were explored. The developed KIO monitor enables schools and their boards "to determine on the basis of critical self-reflection, in which area and to what extent progress has been made" (Van Velzen and de Vijlder 2012, p. 9). With the help of the KIO monitor, progress was determined over a year and recommendations were presented. The professionalization of teachers and board members is given priority in further improving the quality of education. Teachers are stimulated to organize their education practice on the basis of a pupil-monitoring system.

When Moroccan and Turkish guest workers started arriving in the 1960s, soon followed by their families, these newcomers and their new religion of Islam aroused suspicion in Dutch society. The Christian nature of this society became visible, a religious identity which persisted in spite of processes of secularisation. Today, issues such as whether or not hands are shaken, and whether or not a headscarf is worn, keep stirring up strong feelings among the Dutch (Berrin Koyunc Lorasdağı 2009).

From the 1970s, Muslim communities in The Netherlands started building mosques. Facilitated by Article 23 of the Dutch constitution, Muslim parents founded the first Islamic primary schools in 1988 (Budak 2021). Islam and its faithful came increasingly into view in Dutch society.

The confrontation with the new tradition of Islam also stimulated the curiosity of the indigenous Dutch about their own Christian tradition, as noticeable, for instance, in the revival of the custom of fasting in Christian faith communities; an example of learning from the other.

As we noted above, Islam in/and education is included in Article 23 of the *Constitution of the Kingdom of The Netherlands* (2019), stating that "education shall be the constant concern of the Government". Within this context shaped by constant government concern for the education of all children in the country, by a climate of suspicion and polarization, but also marked by curiosity and growing self-awareness—for Muslims and (secularized) Christians alike—the authors of this Special Issue enable us to take an inside view of Islamic formal, non-formal, and informal education. In schools, mosques, and within families, teachers and parents practice dialogicality to find their own way through the dilemmas arising from the challenging situation of integrating into Dutch society as a minority group.

Marietje Beemsterboer builds on the ‘integration issue’ as considered in the above-mentioned AIVD report. Beemsterboer explores the ways in which Islamic primary schools contribute to the integration of Muslims in society. She points to the diversity in the pupil population at Dutch Islamic schools. The pupils differ by ethnicity and, to some extent, by social class. There are children of first, second, and third generation migrants in the classrooms, as well as children and parents who feel kinship with different Islamic schools of law. Although all Muslims agree on the basics of their Islamic faith, there are differences about father’s and mother’s days, celebration of birthdays, music lessons, and dress codes. Beemsterboer notices an increasing internalization of the Dutch context by parents, teachers, and school administrators. Pupils feel safe and understood in the school’s Islamic culture. This increases students’ self-confidence, contributes to educational achievement, and has a positive effect on integration when sensitive topics are discussed. Beemsterboer concludes that Islamic confessional religious education indeed contributes to the integration of Muslims in Dutch society.

Sara Kaya-Postema addresses a specific issue related to integration. Since 2012, sex education has been a compulsory subject in Dutch schools. Kaya describes the way teachers in Islamic primary schools move back and forth between the vision and concrete regulations from the Islamic tradition and the obligations regarding sex education as stipulated by the Dutch government. Through interviews, she has learned that teachers want to include the elements of the Dutch progressive context (with its diversity of views), sexual diversity, and dealing with feelings in their sex education. They provide a safe space for their pupils by offering gender-segregated sex education, so that boys and girls feel free to ask all their questions. The aim of these teachers is to prepare their pupils for the situation they will be confronted with in secondary education: boys and girls attending sex education classes together. They strive to develop their pupils’ self-awareness and resilience in regard to Islamic values and norms which deviate from the Dutch progressive mentality. Liberal Islamic positions, regarding homosexuality for example, cannot be included in sex education because the Islamic community in The Netherlands is not ready for this yet. Based on her interviews with teachers, Kaya-Postema recommends including topics like sexual diversity, different perspectives on sexuality, respect and tolerance for these diverging perspectives, shared sexual values, and the influence of the environment in the curriculum of Islamic primary schools. To avoid reluctance on the part of teachers, courses on Islamic pedagogy and didactics on sex education situated in the Dutch context are a requirement.

Bahaeddin Budak describes and argues for the contribution of non-Muslim teachers to the ideal identity of Islamic schools. In his view, an Islamic school is one that supports the pupils, based on the Islamic tradition, in their development into conscious servants of Allah (*abd*) and responsible world citizens (*khalifa*). Budak interviewed teachers at SIMON Islamic primary schools about their contribution to their schools’ identity. Non-Muslim teachers start the day by asking a pupil to read or recite a surah. Non-Muslim teachers refer to the appeal to Islamic values in case of naughty behaviour. The presence of a non-Muslim teacher at an Islamic primary school in itself enables pupils to come into contact with other life convictions, as well as to develop positive affective relationships with non-Muslim people. This provides them with an understanding of similarities and diversity. Precondition is, according to Budak, to develop a broad Islamic identity, which means that Islamic values and regulations are not limited to IRE classes but are carried as far as mathematics, biology, and language classes; encouraged by parents; and, last but not least, foster an open attitude towards non-Muslim colleagues.

Kamel Essabane, Paul Vermeer, and Carl Sterkens explore the precarious relationship between IRE and Citizenship Education (CE) in The Netherlands. By means of focus group interviews, Essabane et al. invited teachers to discuss the possible relationship between IRE and CE. During these focus groups, the teachers brought up concepts and goals central to IRE which argue for an integration of IRE and CE; they explored possible tensions and formulated solutions to them. All teachers turned out to be in favour of connecting

IRE and CE. Moreover, according to the teachers, universal values are recognizable in Islamic tradition and in the Dutch society. Mentioned shared values were freedom, equality, solidarity, respect, hospitality, love, compassion, and individual responsibility. A didactic tool preferred by teachers is storytelling, drawing from the Qur'an and the Hadith. The key concepts they mention here are '*abd*' or '*abdullah*' (servant of God) and *khalifa* (steward), referring to the serving of God (*Allah*) and serving His creation. In this way, the argument is made that awareness of an Islamic identity leads to service, which is both an Islamic and a civic virtue. In the focus groups, tensions arose over the desirability of a foreclosed and open religious identity, respectively—the latter being generally favoured by Dutch society and its position on issues of sexuality, gender, and LGBTQI rights. A challenge for a connected IRE/CE subject is the fact that some Islamic concepts and ideals are interpreted in an exclusive way, which might clash with an inclusivist ideal of citizenship. A second challenge arises when exclusive or narrow views of citizenship are subscribed to, which exclude or alienate Dutch Muslims.

In his contribution on social-cultural work in mosques, Hasan Yar describes the positioning process of young people in the Milli Görüş mosque in Amsterdam. According to Yar, young people who volunteer in a mosque are engaging in a form of out-of-school learning. Taking up such volunteer responsibilities in mosques contributes to young people's social awareness and the development of their social skills, and is positively related to setting up activities with non-Muslim organizations. Young volunteers learn to develop networks both internally—within their own community, 'bonding'—and externally—with groups and associations in the mosque's neighbourhood in Amsterdam-West, 'bridging'. Notably, volunteering stimulates the development of citizenship skills. These young volunteers are inspired by role models, like the Prophet, their (grand)parents, or their teachers. In the buddy project, called *abi-kardeş* ('big brother–little brother'), they themselves become role models for a younger generation.

Semiha Sözeri, Hülya Kosar Altinyelken, and Monique Volman investigate non-formal IRE as attended in the mosque. They present Turkish–Dutch mosque pupils as negotiating a sense of belonging in Dutch society and their self-identification as Muslim; a highly contested and recognizable topic in discourses about fear of radicalization or allegiance to the Turkish state. These are discourses that alienate young Muslims from Dutch society. From the interviews, Sözeri et al. learned that children at a very young age are quite often confronted with questions about their 'otherness', which some of them find irritating. The interviewed children see themselves either as half Dutch–half Turkish, as 80% Dutch and 20% Turkish, or as bi-cultural, apologetically adding: "It's not a bad thing to be both". What matters most to them is being Muslim, a finding that might be related to the context of the interviews, namely the mosque, where children learn to attribute more meaning to being Muslim than to being Turkish and Dutch. Some interviewees struggle with living between two cultures. Most of them are friends with co-ethnics; however, this might be rooted in residential and school segregation.

Rosanne Aantjes goes at length into informal IRE taking place in Dutch–Turkish Muslim families. She describes the positions and motivations of a small group of Dutch–Turkish Muslim parents in the plural Dutch society in relation to their efforts to negotiate between two diverging goals in IRE. These are, on the one hand, protecting their children's religious tradition by way of a directive religious upbringing, and on the other hand, bearing in mind the child's right to an autonomous identity development (religious direction vs. the child's religious autonomy). From her data, Aantjes concludes that in the education practice of these parents, five ways to enact an entanglement of children's agency with raising children religiously arise: entering into dialogue with their children, setting an example of religious life themselves, choosing a school system/participating in the school curriculum, and not forcing but rewarding their children's participation in religious practices (like wearing a headscarf or fasting). This entanglement reveals a deeper complexity in the tension between religious direction and the child's autonomy. This is illustrated by the

child's 'docile agency'—children nevertheless create their own meanings and individual experiences while complying with their parents' religious actions.

In his submitted and accepted after revisions text—but for editorial reasons not included—Ömer Gürlesin explores non-formal IRE in the mosque, focusing specifically on Friday sermons. By reading and re-reading Friday sermons, he tries to find answers to two questions: 'What are the characteristics of civil religion internalized in Friday sermons?' and 'What kind of Muslim identity does this civil religion suggest?' Gürlesin believes that the greatest challenge today is to foster the development of 'pluralist Turkish–Dutch citizens' who can navigate various conflicting worlds of meaning, while still maintaining a strong sense of personal and communal Muslim identity. Gürlesin's full text will be published in due time in *Religions*.

From its inception in 1988 to now, Islam in/and Dutch education has been in full motion, as evidenced by the above-mentioned KIO research project publication and the studies on Islam and/in Dutch Education presented above. What about Dutch society? Is it in full motion as well, ready to reflect on its role in the process of integration as a two-sided process? The scholars in this Special Issue present the steps Muslims have taken to adjust to their position as a religious minority in a Dutch secularized society. Given these experiences, the next step is for Dutch society to take.

To do justice to the right of every child to be educated for life in a plural(izing) society, more research is needed on the pedagogies and didactics of dialogical encounters in education, which aim to teach—and enable every child to learn—to be(come) a religiously inspired participative citizen, skilled in dialogicality in a plural(izing) society. To this end, more research is also needed on what is coined as the 'pedagogic civil society': a community of teachers, parents, and workers in local community centres who—on an equal footing—come together for the education and well-being of their young people as whole persons.

The authors of this Special Issue link up with what has been researched and published before and encourage their readers to do the same; to make use of their findings and join them in their innovative ways to enrich Islamic education in The Netherlands and abroad. Feel free to build on their thoughts and to participate in the ongoing process of positioning Islamic education as a worthy interlocutor in the educational landscape, in your own context, emerging from current discourses, and situated in the local and national history of education. We strive to contribute to the shaping of a warmly welcoming educational context, which creates developmental opportunities finetuned to each and every child.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ There have been a handful of Jewish schools in The Netherlands for centuries. In addition, there exist a few schools based on the Hindu tradition. The number of these schools is too small to coin them as separate 'pillars' however.
- ² For a chronological overview of radical Islamist and jihadist attacks between 2004 and 2021, see <https://www.aivd.nl/onderwerpen/terrorisme/tijdlijn-van-aanslagen-in-het-westen> (accessed on 6 January 2023) (In Dutch).
- ³ Respectively, the Islamic School Boards Organisation (ISBO) and the National Curriculum Expertise Centre (SLO).
- ⁴ In her public lecture '*Menswording in een Laagvertrouwen Samenleving*' ('Becoming Human in a Low-Trust Society'), Gerdien Bertram-Troost strongly opposes this restriction. According to Bertram-Troost, such restrictions should not be in place; a school's (religious) identity should imbue the entire curriculum and the school community (Bertram-Troost 2022, pp. 14–16).

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