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**Waarom stichten jullie niet een eigen school?: religieuze identiteitsontwikkeling van islamitische basisscholen 1988-2013**  
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## 12. Conclusion and discussion

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Prior to this study, partly through my own experience, I held the view that the identity of a school was determined by the school board. Management and staff would then implement the identity as described by the board. I was aware that this was not that simple in practice. However, I had no insight into the dynamics of identity formation in Islamic schools and its development over the years. As I delved into the literature and engaged in conversation with my respondents, it became increasingly clear to me how complex these dynamics and developments actually are.

This observation, incidentally, does not mean that we are dealing with an exceptional situation. In my research, it has become clear that Islamic primary schools are not an oddity, but fits neatly into the Dutch educational culture. After all, Muslims have followed the example of the Catholic, Protestant Christian and Jewish communities in establishing their schools. This was not entirely their own choice, by the way. The first two elementary school established in 1988 - al-Ghazali in Rotterdam and Tariq Ibnou Ziyad in Eindhoven - came into being because at the time the denominational elementary school could not or would not accommodate the request of some Muslim parents to pay attention to Islamic philosophical identity. These parents were advised to establish their own Islamic schools. Such advice may be called typical of the Dutch context which was apparently still firmly rooted in a compartmentalized way of thinking.

Although Islamic elementary school can be called typically Dutch, according to various authors their establishment and functioning was hindered by various factors and actors. In this study, this is confirmed by board members and principals of Islamic elementary school. That impediment has mainly to do with national and international events and incidents related to Muslims and Islam, which from the 1990s led to a fierce social debate in which doubts about the successful integration of Muslims in the Netherlands were central. Later, after the attacks of September 11, 2001 and the assassination attempt on Theo van Gogh in 2004, this discussion was increasingly held in terms of security.

These discussions around integration and security have caused a different dynamic in the identity development of Islamic elementary school than in, for example, Christian schools. In the literature on identity formation of Christian elementary schools in the Netherlands, we mainly read about the role of secularization, de-churching and individualization. In Islamic elementary schools, very different issues were at play. In the first 25 years of the existence of Islamic elementary schools in the Netherlands - the period from 1988 to 2013 - five consecutive turning points can be distinguished that have influenced the dynamics and development of their school identity.

The establishment of the ISBO in 1990 was the first turning point. This umbrella organization supported board members in founding and establishing new schools. In 1992, the second turning point, the political debate on the integration of Muslims and Islamic elementary school began that led to laws and regulations that hindered the growth of Islamic schools. The third turning point occurred in 1999, when the Education Inspectorate for the first time started inspecting all schools of a single denomination, namely Islamic, categorically (that is, collectively rather than individually). This had never happened before. The attacks of September 11 in 2001 were the fourth turning point. From then on, the so-called "securitization" of Islam played an important role. From then on, Islamic schools were critically assessed by politicians, the media and the Education Inspectorate for their contribution to promoting social cohesion in society. The fifth and final turning point in this 25-year period was the 2008 investigation into the administrative qualities of Islamic schools. This examination, incidentally, was the last inspection of Islamic schools that took place categorically: starting this year, Islamic schools were again inspected individually like other schools.

This context in which Islamic elementary school have developed their identity has led board members and principals to try to conform to four frameworks: in addition to the frameworks of "Laws and regulations" and "the Dutch context" they also had to take into account "the Islamic

tradition" and the "cultural and religious background" of all parties involved in the school.

But what does this all mean in a larger picture? I discuss this below from three different perspectives, namely: 1) social-societal, 2) pedagogical and educational, and 3) administrative.

### *Social-Societal Perspective*

As mentioned above, the integration debate and (inter)national events have largely determined the discussion about Islamic schools in the Netherlands. Non-denominational parties and movements saw and see Article 23 of the Constitution as a major obstacle to the modernization and improvement of the education system (more on this later). But in the case of Islamic elementary school, this obstacle was seen primarily in terms of integration.

Let us say first of all that the suspicion of poor integration of Islamic schools is paradoxical, since in 1988 Muslim parents were specifically told that they would be better off establishing their own school. But apart from that, this suspicion is at odds with the findings of my research: Islamic elementary school have explicitly and consistently set themselves the task of preparing their Muslim pupils for participation in Dutch society. That some schools have not always succeeded in this does not diminish their intention. The Islamic school primarily functions as a safe learning environment. This conclusion, incidentally, is fully in line with studies such as those of Beemsterboer (2018) and Merry (2018).

A particular feature of the Islamic elementary school that shows their degree of integration is their diversity: these schools employ Muslim and non-Muslim teachers, and students and teachers come from diverse national backgrounds and Islamic traditions. It is a diversity that, compared to other denominational schools in the Netherlands, can certainly be called unique. Diversity is not a hindrance, as Wallage (2010) also puts it, but more of an enrichment, and since that is the

future of Dutch society, Islamic elementary school will certainly be able to contribute to that.

In short, Islamic schools are an important part of a healthy integration process. While maintaining their own identity, they want to participate in the Dutch community. In doing so, the focus is not on the country of origin, but rather on full citizenship in the Netherlands. Given the emancipatory role that Islamic schools play, or at least wish to play themselves, I would argue that policy makers would do well to view these schools not as a problem but as partners in creating a peaceful society.

The schools' efforts to become part of the Dutch educational landscape have failed to convince politicians and policymakers. Regularly, for political reasons, Islamic elementary schools have faced unequal treatment. For example, specific rules have been devised to prevent the growth of the schools, and for the first time in Dutch educational history there has been an inspection study of the content of religious education. The categorical inspection of Islamic elementary schools is a third example of this unequal treatment (by comparison, if a teacher at a public or Christian elementary school were to engage in child sexual abuse, for example, not all public or Christian schools would be inspected immediately). This unequal treatment has led to a growing suspicion of Islamic schools towards the government.

### ***The Future***

Islamic schools have thus had to struggle in recent years to gain a foothold, and with great difficulty they have succeeded. The first dilapidated school buildings have been replaced by new buildings, boards have been professionalized, and the quality of education has improved considerably. Because of the success of the schools, I therefore also foresee that, as long as the concept of special education is in force in the Netherlands, Islamic schools will grow in number and size in the future, despite all the discussion. This brings both challenges and opportunities.

The main challenge is the negative perception. Although the coverage of Islamic elementary schools can be called considerably more positive since 2013 (among other things because of the high results they score on the final group 8 test), the negative coverage of Islam and Muslims will most likely not end. This is evident, for example, from the way in which sexual education in Islamic schools was cast in a bad light in 2019. The schools will continue to suffer from this.

The example of sex education makes it clear once again that much of the negative coverage will be about religious education. One way to overcome this is for Islamic schools to jointly establish a mechanism for internal consultation regarding religious education and the implementation of religious identity at school. Cooperation with the Education Inspectorate should be sought in this regard. This consultation can help the schools to better shape their identity and thus prevent unnecessary external interference.

Islamic elementary schools also offer opportunities. For example, I believe that the existence of Islamic elementary schools contributes to good education. 'Good education' is a term used by Biesta and, according to him, includes three goal domains: qualification, socialization and subjectification (Biesta 2012; Biesta 2020a; Biesta 2020b). According to him, education and upbringing cannot only be about qualification (offering and acquiring existing knowledge and skills) and socialization (introducing and connecting to existing traditions and practices). There should always be a place for the formation of the person into an independent subject as well - the "dimension of subject-becoming or subjectification" (Biesta 2020a, pp. 105-106). This study - and others such as those of Beemsterboer (2018), Budak & Ter Avest (2012) and Driessen (2008) - show that this form of "good education" takes place in many Islamic elementary schools. Islamic schools offer Muslims in the Netherlands the opportunity to develop into how they want to be within Dutch society. Integration of Muslims is only possible if they are allowed to be



themselves and take responsibilities within this society, and that is exactly what Islamic elementary schools try to achieve.

### ***Pedagogical and educational perspective***

The first two Islamic schools in Rotterdam and Eindhoven in 1988 were the founders of Islamic primary education in the Netherlands. Their identity policy was copied by later schools. Since then, all schools have gone through a tremendous development in terms of professionalization. In the beginning, schools had no identity documents and no methods. Nowadays they do have them: comprehensive identity documents, colourful religion methods, methods for sexual formation, for artistic formation and all kinds of reading books and other supporting teaching materials.

School identity, however, is more than the ('formal') identity on paper. Principals have always tried, based on Islamic principles, and taking into account the wishes of parents on the one hand and government guidelines on the other, to shape the Islamic identity of their schools. Extreme religious demands of parents were often not given a place, on the one hand because it was simply not possible, but on the other hand because the board increasingly took into account the pedagogical wishes and expectations of Dutch society and aimed at teaching children to acquire their place in this society. In this we can observe a clear development; when interpreting Islamic principles, the board's focus in the early years was on everything that was forbidden, whereas now it is mainly focused on what is possible. This, now, is the internal dynamics of identity.

This dynamic has also evolved. Because of the religious diversity in the schools, over the years the different Islamic traditions were increasingly taken into account. This created schools in which those involved, from the different Islamic traditions, grow closer to each other. In this process - again, unlike in other denominational schools in the Netherlands - non-Muslim teachers and principals played an important role. And here, too, a development took place.

In the early years of Islamic elementary schools, almost all principals and teachers were non-Muslim. Indeed, Muslim principals and good teachers were hardly available at that time. However, this study has shown that being Muslim is not a requirement for a principal to construct the ideal identity of a school. A non-Muslim principal with good management skills can also shape the formal identity of a school. The ideal principal for Islamic elementary schools is, of course, a Muslim who also has good management skills. Despite the existence of Islamic primary education for over 30 years, there are unfortunately still few qualified Muslim principals in the Netherlands. Islamic school boards, for that matter, have no clear plans to address the shortage of good principals.

Nowadays, however, many Muslim teachers are available. But despite the fact that some schools thus have the option to choose exclusively Muslim teachers, there are schools that still deliberately employ 50% Muslim and 50% non-Muslim teachers. Indeed, non-Muslim teachers, according to the principals of these schools, can make an important contribution to the desired identity of the school and the objective of integration of the students. The increase in Muslim teachers, however, my research further shows, does not mean that the desired identity naturally becomes lived identity. Nor has it been shown that the increase in Muslim teachers has led to a stronger social aloofness.

A special position is occupied here by the religious teacher, who is always Muslim and often the only one with a thorough knowledge of Islamic theology. He therefore appears to be an important factor in all Islamic schools when it comes to the construction of the school's identity. In the early years, the religion teachers were mainly imams who were not proficient in Dutch, and religious education was mostly provided in Arabic and Turkish. But nowadays the religious education in all Islamic elementary school is in Dutch. Schools indicate that particularly because of InHolland's Islamic teacher training program, the pedagogical and didactic quality of these teachers has improved. However, this training was discontinued in 2017, and there is no

alternative at the time of writing. It is remarkable that both the ISBO and the Education Inspectorate do not put this on the agenda. Muslims, like all other denominations, have the right to a subsidized and recognized teacher training program in Islamic religion. Incidentally, schools themselves could take the initiative to develop a sound Islamic pedagogical vision in the meantime, which could be taught in such a teacher training course.

### *Administrative perspective*

The first two elementary school in 1988 were started by pioneers who barely knew how to run a school and who did not even speak the Dutch language. At these and subsequent schools, the first school board members were often also board members of the mosque. The imam of the local mosque was a member of the school board and in the early years also a religious teacher, and he had a prominent role in shaping the school's identity.

That situation has changed dramatically in a relatively short period of time. Compared to 1988, board members are better educated, know Dutch laws and regulations, have better communication skills, and have much less of a management position at a mosque than before.

Conversely, few imams are still formally involved with the schools. However, it is striking that within the board of Islamic elementary school there are few educationalists, pedagogues and theologians. These three experts are necessary for the further development of the identity of Islamic schools.

These changes also affect the dynamics of the formation of school identity, especially when it comes to its Islamic interpretation. All schools indicate that they shape their school identity according to the Sunni tradition. To this end, they do not follow one of the four Sunni schools of law (madhâhib), as is the case in Morocco or Turkey, but board members say they observe the rules of all four schools of law. This means, however, that choices regularly have to be made between law schools that may contradict each other on certain points. On top of

this, there is religious diversity among parents and board members, particularly in the distinction between Turks (who follow the Ḥanafi school of law) and the Moroccans (who follow the Mâlîki school of law), but in addition there are also children from Indonesian, Surinamese, Pakistani or Somali backgrounds, each with their own cultural and religious traditions of Islam. This has repeatedly led to discussions between board members, principals, teachers and parents. Previously, imams had a decisive voice in this, or foreign scholars whose opinions were cited in school discussions. But nowadays, school boards and principals increasingly make their own decisions in this regard.

Among parents, these discussions about school identity play out between two extremes: the literal interpretation of Islamic sources (especially Moroccan parents), and the contextual interpretation (especially Turkish parents). This internal discussion will not disappear in the future. Nevertheless, in practice, the increase in cultural and religious diversity of staff and students has led to broader identity policies, with schools trying to reach a consensus among the views and traditions of all law schools. By now, most of the discussion has crystallized and, for example, during a staff job interview or as a result of a student's application, the school's guidelines can be clearly stated.

This internal denominational diversity of religious school identity distinguishes Islamic elementary schools from many other denominational schools. However, what both school types have in common again is the influence parents have on the formation of that identity (for Christian schools, see especially Van Koeven 2011).

The diversity plays out not only within each Islamic primary school, but also between Islamic schools. In this research it has become clear that the statutory direction of an Islamic elementary school and also of many other denominational schools does not fully reflect the lived identity. For this reason, it is difficult to speak of a homogeneous identity of an Islamic elementary school. This is because the identity of the school has multiple colours. Therefore, categorizing Islamic

elementary schools as the Ministry of Education does or as described in scholarly literature, in terms of in liberal, orthodox, conservative, open, closed or pragmatic does not do justice to the reality of the school. First, the schools themselves do not use these terms, with the exception of liberal and orthodox, in their bylaws or even in policy documents. Second, all schools are open to all students and parents (see also Beensterboer 2018, p. 80). I consider it important that schools can account for what vision they have and how they shape their school vision in practice. This view, incidentally, is also shared by the government, as evidenced by the bill 'More space for new schools'.

