The pedagogy of the mosque

Portrayal, practice, and role in the integration of Turkish-Dutch children

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Publication date
2021
Document Version
Other version
License
Other

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Sözeri, S. Y. (2021). *The pedagogy of the mosque: Portrayal, practice, and role in the integration of Turkish-Dutch children*. [Thesis, fully internal, Universiteit van Amsterdam].

CHAPTER 1

General Introduction

Aim and scope

This dissertation aims to shed light on a very contentious, highly politicized, yet understudied field: mosque education provided to school-aged children with Muslim immigrant background in a non-Muslim country. To our knowledge, it is the first PhD study, nationally and internationally, to analyze the role of mosque education in the integration of Muslim youth in a Western context. The research is based on evidence from the Turkish Islamic communities in the Netherlands. Focusing on the Turkish mosques in the Netherlands is interesting for two reasons. First, the Dutch-Turks constitute not only the largest Islamic community in the country (CBS, 2018), but also are found to be more self-contained and isolationist than other migrant communities (Huijnk & Dagevos, 2012). Secondly, the Netherlands has repeatedly been singled out as the European country which has experienced the most pronounced paradigm shift in its integration policies and debates: from multiculturalist accommodation of minorities before 2000, to assimilationist integration policies after it (Vasta, 2007; Banting & Kymlicka, 2013; Entzinger, 2014). Duyvendak (2011) names the processes accompanying this shift "the culturalization of citizenship": i.e. defining citizenship, integration and migrants' belonging to the nation based on beliefs, cultural values and norms, rather than on civil rights and legal status. After the shift, Islam was framed as the main source of migrants' cultural "incompatibility" (Ghorashi, 2017, p.2429), and the influence of mosques on Muslims' lives in the Netherlands was seen as undesirable (Sunier, 2016).

In the last two decades, non-formal Islamic education provided in the mosques has attracted a lot of political and media attention due to allegations of mistreatment of the children (Van der Hulst, 2013), indoctrination with illiberal values, fears of youth radicalization and alienation from Dutch society (Isitman, 2018). Politicians both from the right and the left of the political spectrum have voiced their concerns about the influence of mosque education on the lives of the youth. For instance, chairmen of political parties Gert-

Jan Segers (*ChristenUnie*) and Klaas Dijkhoff (VVD) have suggested to the Parliament legal changes which would allow the educational inspection to monitor not only regular schools, but also forms of informal education such as the extracurricular mosque classes (Kouwenhoven & Holdert, 2019). Similarly, Lodewijk Asscher, former Minister of Social Affairs and Employment (2012-2017) and chairman of the Dutch Labour Party (PvdA), has repeatedly expressed his concerns about the influence of the Turkish Islamic organizations *Diyanet*, *Milli Görüş*, *Süleymanlı* and the *Gülen* movement on youth in the Netherlands, claiming they can have a frustrating effect on integration processes (Besselink, 2014). Femke Halsema, mayor of Amsterdam from the Dutch left-wing green party *GroenLinks*, has also voiced criticism about the quality of mosque education, pointing at bad physical conditions and the lack of qualifications of the mosque teachers, suggesting that there is a need for better control and inspection (Koops, 2019).

The public and political attention for mosque education and the role played by Islamic organizations in the lives of youth with migrant background is not surprising. Both in Western Europe and in the U.S., Islam has been seen as an obstacle to the integration of migrants (Foner & Alba, 2008). Moreover, there has been a perceived incompatibility of educational goals between citizenship education in schools, on the one hand, and the goals of Islamic education, on the other hand. Critics have claimed that the Islamic pedagogical practices encourage unquestioned acceptance of teacher authority and knowledge, and by relying on curricula imported from Muslim-majority countries fail to prepare the students for navigating life in pluralistic democracies (Halstead, 2004; Saada, 2013). Citizenship education in many European countries, on the other hand, aims at stimulating student autonomy, critical thinking, and promoting tolerance towards different worldviews and values (Schuitema et al., 2008). Connected to that, there has been a growing body of scholarly work studying the mainstream Islamic schooling in non-Muslim countries (Fuess, 2007; Berglund, 2015; Bourget, 2019), and particularly its interplay with citizenship education (Aslan, 2015; Al-Refai & Bagley, 2008). This work has revealed that perspectives on what citizenship education should entail are affected by sociopolitical discourses on Muslims and Islamic schooling taking place beyond the school.

Considering the heightened interest in the role of Islamic education in the lives of Muslim youth in non-Muslim societies, and allegations about low quality and relevance of mosque education, the scarcity of studies on mosque education is remarkable (Berger, 2014;

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Pels, 2014). This is particularly striking when taking into account that mosque classes are the most accessible and widespread form of Islamic education in Western countries: almost all mosques offer classes to the children in their communities.

There are a number of studies on mosque education in Western context. To name a few, the scholarly works of Östberg (2000), Maylor et al. (2010), Gent (2011), Berglund and Gent (2018), Rajabi-Ardeshiri (2011), Ahmed (2012), Rosowsky (2013), van de Wetering and Karagül (2013), Noh et al. (2014), Bartels and de Jong (2007) and Walseth (2016), dealing with different aspects of mosque education and mosque activities targeting migrant youth in various European countries, have been informative to the different studies in this thesis. This dissertation, however, builds primarily upon the pioneering research by Cherti and Bradley (2011) "Inside Madrassas: Understanding and Engaging with British-Muslim Faith Supplementary Schools", and the research on mosque pedagogies carried out in the Netherlands by Pels and colleagues (Pels et al., 2006; Pels et al., 2006a; Pels et al., 2006b; Pels et al., 2016). The research by Cherti and Bradley is particularly insightful as it is based on fieldwork including interviews with major stakeholders (e.g. parents, (ex-)students, mosque teachers, authorities from the community) and a survey of 179 madrassas (i.e. mosques providing extracurricular Islamic education) affiliated with different Islamic communities. It addresses three key issues uncovered through literature review and analysis of the media coverage of madrassas in Britain, namely: (1) lack of factual documentation about the educational activities of madrassas, (2) concerns about the role of madrassas in social cohesion and radicalization, and (3) impact of madrassas on children's education and welfare. The research findings indicate that the studied madrassas are oversubscribed, underfunded, have narrow curricula which make weak links to the British context, and rely mostly on pedagogically untrained imams and instructors. While the research fails to uncover any results with regard to the impact of madrassas on youth radicalization, it makes the controversial revelation that the use of corporal punishment in supplementary faith-school is legally allowed in Britain, and calls for its ban. Equally important is Cherti and Bradley's conclusion that the influence of madrassa education in the lives of Muslim children in Britain could be two-fold. It could either contribute to the development of a positive dual identity and social cohesion, or enlarge the divide between the different identities and communities, depending mainly on the skills and vision of the madrassa teachers. Non-British-born imams who are trained abroad are identified as less likely to be able to offer the children the

necessary guidance for developing their identity as British Muslims and navigating life in a diverse, multi-faith society.

In the Netherlands, Pels and colleagues first conducted municipality-commissioned research on the pedagogical practices in one Turkish mosque (affiliated with *Milli Görüş*) and two Moroccan mosques in Rotterdam in 2006, which a decade later was followed by another municipality-commissioned research on the pedagogical practices of a Utrecht-based Salafi mosque featured in media in relation to youth radicalization. While the first round of research aimed at supporting pedagogical innovation at the mosques and focused more closely on didactics, learning goals and teaching materials, the later research in Utrecht had a widened scope including attention to the role of the mosque classes in fostering social cohesion and integration of the children. Both rounds of studies were based on classroom observations and interviews with parents, mosque teachers, and (ex-)students, and had similar conclusions. The mosque education in the researched communities had the primary purpose of transferring Islamic knowledge, teaching Islamic norms and values, and reinforcing the religious and ethnic identity of the mosque students. Building links between the Islamic community and mainstream society, or the different identities of the children was secondary to that objective. Teaching materials were found to meet these objectives in varying degrees as there was no standardized curriculum for mosque education. Nevertheless, Pels and colleagues found evidence of some pedagogical changes as traditional teaching styles defining the Qur'an education in the mosques in the 80's seemed to be replaced with more child-friendly and play-based pedagogies. However, the researchers point out that dominant didactics are still based on one-directional initiate-response-evaluate techniques (i.e. there is little room for dialogue and critical discussion of the material). Moreover, particularly the second round of research in Utrecht signals concerns about the influence of education in the AlFitrah mosque: the content of the classes is said to contain dogmatic fundamentalist messages which require the students to limit their contact with their native Dutch peers and the broader Dutch society.

This dissertation aspires to build upon these studies and contribute to the scant knowledge about mosque education, and its role in the integration of Muslim children with Turkish migrant background, by examining five interrelated aspects of mosque education with the following questions:

1. Portrayal: Media portrayal has a significant effect in shaping the attitudes and opinions of the audiences (McCombs & Reynolds, 2002). What can the Dutch public learn about mosque education from the media? Specifically: what are the major discourses on mosque education in the Dutch press?

2. Practice: How is mosque education in the Turkish communities organized with regard to its curriculum, learning objectives, content of teaching materials and language policies?

3. Pedagogies: How does teaching and learning happen in the Turkish mosque classrooms in the Netherlands? What kind of pedagogical approaches are practiced by imams and mosque teachers in their lessons?

4. Training of Dutch imams: Imams trained abroad are often accused of inability to connect to the life-worlds of Muslim youth growing up in Europe and to provide appropriate support with the challenges the children face as Muslims in a non-Muslim society. How to explain the lack of imams educated in the Netherlands? What are the reasons behind the failure of the state-funded Islamic theology programs and imam-trainings at Dutch universities?

5. Role in integration: What is the role of mosque education in the integration of the Turkish-Dutch youth according to their parents, imams, mosque teachers and major stakeholders? In what ways could it be aiding or frustrating the integration of the youth?

Central theoretical concepts

The five studies in this dissertation are underpinned by multidisciplinary theoretical approaches: they employ conceptualizations from media studies, educational sciences, Islamic philosophy of education, political science, sociology and migration studies. Similar to the British research by Cherti et al. (2011), this dissertation starts by locating the investigated question within the public and political debates in the media. The first study, dealing with media discourses on mosque education, is based on a framework which integrates insights from studies on media portrayal and framing of Islam and Muslims, and a review of the scholarly literature on mosque education in the West. The four dominant representation frames developed by van Drunen (2014) in her study of Muslims in Dutch newspapers,

namely "problematization", "homogenization", "otherness" and "fear and threat", have been informative for the analyses of the discourses on mosque education.

The next study, addressing the actual practice of mosque education, is guided by a heuristic device based on Walker's (2003) ideas of the fundamentals of curriculum. Central concepts guiding this exploratory study are content (subjects, themes, ideas and tasks included in the teaching and learning activities), purposes (objectives and learning goals), and organization (the optimal coordination of content for achieving the desired purposes). Special attention is paid to the dual function of language policies as a medium of instruction and a learning goal in the mosque curricula. Furthermore, the theoretical framework of this study also integrates conceptualizations from the Islamic philosophy of education which are essential for understanding the principles on which Islamic teaching and learning are based. These are *tarbiyah*, referring to the nurture and care for the formation of the moral personality of the child including attention for (context-appropriate) identity development, and *ta'lim*, referring to the transfer of knowledge from teacher to student.

The third study, zooming into the pedagogical practices in the mosque classrooms, beside *tarbiyah* and *ta'lim*, introduces the Islamic educational concepts of *ta'dib* and *tajweed*. The first concept is concerned with teaching the students to act and live according to the Islamic behavioral norms, and the latter highlights the centrality of memorization and recitation practices to teaching Islam. The analyses in the study are also informed by the Islamic primary-source pedagogies identified by Alkouatli (2018), namely, Relational Pedagogies, Pedagogies of Mutual Engagement, and Pedagogies of Conscious Awareness.

Study four delves into the delicate dynamic between the right of religious communities for Islamic (higher) education and the boundaries for state-intervention in that realm imposed by the principle of separation of church and state in the Netherlands. The intellectual and cultural vision of the imams is often seen as defining for the messages transmitted in the mosque classes, and hence, the training of imams (just like training of teachers and principals in regular schools) is highly relevant to the study of mosque education. In the British study on madrassa education, for example, 75% of the mosques relied on imams to teach the lessons, and the most common criterion for recruitment of mosque teachers was a completed theological training (Cherti & Bradley, 2011). Similar to other European countries, the Netherlands has also attempted to create academic programs

for Islamic theological education, yet, without success. This chapter analyses the reasons behind the failure of state-funded Islamic theology and imam-training programs in the Netherlands in the light of de-pillarization processes in Dutch society and different theoretical accounts on secularism. Habermas' (2008) concept of post-secularism is instrumental in the interpretation of the findings.

The fifth study addresses the perceived role of mosque education in the integration of Muslim youth with a Turkish background. The theoretical framework of the study takes into account the transition from multiculturalism to assimilationism in the Dutch integration debates and policies, and the conflicting findings about the role of Islam in the integration of descendants of Muslim migrants. While the study acknowledges the elusiveness of the term "integration", for analytical purposes it nevertheless adopts an operational definition informed by the conceptualizations of Givens (2007) and Klarenbeek (2019). That is: "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" [Chapter 6].

Data collection and methodology

This dissertation consists of qualitative studies defined by an exploratory and interpretative methodology. To set the stage for our fieldwork and data collection, I first conducted a content analysis of the portrayal of mosque education between 2006 and 2016 in the largest Dutch daily newspapers: *De Telegraaf*, *AD*, *De Volkskrant*, *NRC Handelsblad* and *Trouw*, by analyzing 45 newspaper articles containing references to mosque education in the Netherlands. The sample was obtained using the Lexis Nexis database. This was an important step which allowed me to map the competing discourses used by the media when communicating news about this topic to the public.

This was followed by a round of semi-structured interviews with experts and major stakeholders such as imams, mosque teachers and chairs of the largest Turkish Islamic organizations in the Netherlands, representatives from secular Turkish migrant organizations, senior policy advisors on integration from the Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, municipal policymakers in the field of diversity and radicalization in education in Amsterdam and Utrecht, academics with expertise on Islamic communities and Muslim

youth in the Netherlands, lecturers from the Dutch imam-training programs. The interviews took place between July 2016 and January 2017. The data collection was based on a combination of expert sampling (Dorussen et al., 2005) and heterogeneous purposive sampling techniques (Etikan et al., 2016). In other words, some participants were chosen because of their expertise on the researched subject, and others because of their relevant but different perspectives, experience, or insider knowledge.

The networking during the first round of data collection has paved the way for additional sources of data. For example, I was invited by one of the participants and allowed to take fieldwork notes during an expert meeting on mosque education organized by CMO (*Contactorgaan Moslims en Overheid*) which is an official governmental lobby organization for more than 380 mosques and 10 Islamic umbrella organizations in the Netherlands. The expert meeting was not open to the public, and took place on 15 September 2016 in The Hague, with key representatives of all major Islamic communities with Turkish, Moroccan and Surinamese background. The expert meeting on mosque education has provided me with the opportunity to meet personally the chairs and representatives of the Turkish Islamic organizations which I wanted to include in my PhD research. Following it, I was allowed by representatives of the *Milli Görüş* and *Süleymanlı* communities to join two roundtable meetings on improving the quality and relevance of mosque education organized for their own mosque teachers and imams. Both communities were informed about the aims and scope of my research on mosque education in the Netherlands and allowed me to take fieldwork notes.

While all high-profiled participants have been very cooperative in agreeing to being interviewed, gaining access to conduct case-studies with classroom observations and interviews with the mosque teachers, mosque students and their parents, has been the product of a long and effortful negotiation process. The reasons behind the difficulty of access to the mosques are partially already known in this field of study: Islamic communities which are the constant object of negative media portrayal, often question the intentions of researchers and are cautious about allowing the gaze of perceived outsiders in their private realm (Bolognani, 2007; Gent, 2011; Scourfield et al., 2013). During the fieldwork for this dissertation, however, the situation was compounded by two political events: (1) the failed Turkish coup d'état attempt on 15 July 2016, and (2) the escalated diplomatic tensions between the Netherlands and Turkey following the expulsion of a Turkish minister who was banned from

attending a Turkish electoral rally in Rotterdam on 12 March 2017. The aftermath of both events was characterized by increased tensions and polarization within the Turkish migrant communities which became distrustful towards each other and extremely careful not to be linked to the Gülen-movement which was allegedly behind the coup attempt (for general description of the different Turkish Islamic communities, see Chapter 3).

Nevertheless, two of the largest Turkish Islamic organizations providing mosque education in the Netherlands, *Diyanet* and *Milli Görüş*, agreed to participate in the research by approving access for fieldwork at one *Diyanet* and one *Milli Görüş* mosque (for an overview of the characteristics of the case-study mosques, see Chapter 3). The fieldwork at the *Diyanet* mosque has been conducted between March and May 2017, and has resulted in four classroom observations, and interviews with one imam, three mosque teachers, 14 students and 12 parents. The fieldwork at the *Milli Görüş* mosque was conducted between October and December 2017, and has resulted in five classroom observations, and interviews with one imam, four mosque teachers, 15 students and 16 parents (one of whom was also the educational coordinator of the mosque). The interviews with the students have been insightful for the studies in Chapter 3, Chapter 5 and Chapter 6, however, for the sake of sharper focus on the studied issues and limitations of space, student data has not been included in the analyses.

For a more complete overview of the teaching practices in the Turkish mosques, I have contacted the *Süleymanlıs* as well, however, this community chose to limit their participation to the expert interviews and a roundtable discussion on the subject. Table 1 displays all collected data in the PhD project, and Table 2 provides an overview of the data used at each study (see the appendix for the classroom observation framework used during the fieldwork at the mosques).

Table 1. Data collected in the PhD project "The Pedagogy of the Mosque: Portrayal, Practice, and Role in the Integration of Turkish-Dutch Children".

Methods	N	Recorded as	Average duration	Profile of the participants
Semi-structured interviews	99	Audio files; verbatim transcribed	40 minutes	104 participants in total: imams (N=10), mosque teachers (N=9), parents (N=28), students (N=29), Islam experts and key stakeholders (N=28)
Classroom observations	9	Filled in a classroom observation framework	75 minutes	Imams, mosque teachers and students attending the mosque classes at *Milli Görüş* and *Diyanet* case-study mosques
Roundtable meetings on the pedagogy, didactics & social relevance of mosque education	2	Fieldwork notes	2 hours	Imams and mosque teachers affiliated with *Milli Görüş* and *Süleymanlıs*
Expert meeting on mosque education organized by CMO	1	Fieldwork notes	3 hours	Imams, education coordinators, representatives and chairs of the major Islamic organizations affiliated with CMO (including *Diyanet*, *Milli Görüş* and *Süleymanlıs*).

The methodological approach guiding the fieldwork at the mosques can be described as an ethno-case study design. It has been developed by Parker-Jenkins (2018) who suggests that this new design allows researchers to blend characteristics of traditional ethnographic research with case-studies. Differently than ethnographic research which requires longer immersion in the field ranging from months to years, and case-study design which might be based on observations ranging from hours to weeks, ethno-case study offers a middle ground in which the researcher spends longer time in the field than during a traditional case-study but still recognizes that the insights from the observations are embedded in a richer and wider context than the one captured within the chronological boundaries of this design.

To perform the qualitative content analyses in each study, the texts were coded using the qualitative data-analysis software Atlas.ti. A combination of inductive and deductive approaches to data coding was employed. That entailed developing and applying a primary

coding list based on theoretical concepts from the literature, while keeping the research design reflexive so that new concepts can emerge from the data through rereading the texts for discovering new patterns of meaning (themes) (for detailed discussion of thematic analysis see: Braun & Clarke, 2012; Altheide & Schneider, 2013).

Table 2. Overview of data used at each study.

Study 1: Portrayal	**Articles from the Dutch press selected from the Lexis Nexis database (N=45).**
Study 2: Practice (Curriculum, learning objectives, content of teaching materials and language policies)	Semi-structured interviews with experts and stakeholders (N=38); Ethno-case study data: 9 classroom observations and 9 semi-structured interviews with the imams and mosque teachers (N=9); Fieldwork notes from the expert meeting on mosque education and roundtables.
Study 3: Pedagogies	Ethno-case study data: 9 classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with the imams, mosque teachers, and an educational coordinator (N=10).
Study 4: Training of Dutch imams	Semi-structured interviews with 38 experts and stakeholders (N=38).
Study 5: Role in integration	Semi-structured interviews with 38 experts and stakeholders (N=38); Ethno-case study data: semi-structured interviews with the imams and mosque teachers (N=9); Semi-structured interviews with the parents (N=28).

Ethics

Prior to data collection, the research has been granted approval from the Ethics Review Board of University of Amsterdam on 1 June 2016 (ERB number: 2016-CDE-7099). All participants have been informed about the aims and scope of the research, and the confidential and voluntary nature of their participation via bi-lingual informed consent letters in Turkish and Dutch. The children in the mosque classrooms have also been informed about the research before the start of the classroom observations. They have been allowed to ask questions about the research in an informal and accessible environment. Considering the sensitivity of the studied subject, the names of the participants have been anonymized numerically (e.g. Imam1, Parent2) instead of pseudonyms to avoid any unwanted association with actual people.

On positionality and reflexivity

In all social studies the positionality of the researcher, i.e. researcher's stance towards the social and political context within which the study is conducted, and researcher's personal characteristics, beliefs and attitudes, are likely to have an influence on the way the research is conducted (e.g. on the chosen analytical lenses, and the way research questions and interviews are formulated). This is even more true for qualitative research which depends on a researcher's subjective observation of the field and interpretation of the findings. Scholars agree that the best way to deal with researcher's reflexivity and positionality is to acknowledge it exists and it may have an effect on the analyses of the findings (Berger, 2015; Pillow, 2003; Palaganas et al., 2017).

In the context of this research, it is possible to talk of dual researcher's positionality. On the one hand, lack of previous links or affiliation with any of the studied Islamic organizations, and showing signs of secular/non-religious Turkish identity (as seen in my non-Islamic dress code outside of the mosque, and respectful abstinence of participation in Islamic rituals such as fasting and prayers) might have positioned me as an outsider to the studied religious population. On the other hand, my identity as a native Turkish speaker, who has grown up as a member of a Turkish minority in another European country (Bulgaria), and who has taken mosque classes herself as a child may have situated me in the position of a perceived insider to the studied Turkish Islamic communities. The shared ethnic identity and demonstrated understanding of the experiences of Muslim minority youth may have had a conducive effect on building trust with formal gatekeepers granting access to fieldwork in the mosques.

Also, mosques are considerably male-dominated spaces. The special areas for women are segregated from the larger prayer spaces for men. Almost all classrooms except one at the studied *Milli Görüş* mosque, were also segregated by sex. It is very likely that my identity as a young woman conducting research in mosques, might have influenced the characteristics of the participants I could reach. This might be the reason behind the underrepresentation of fathers in the sample (only three out of 28 parents), and male mosque teachers (two out of nine). Nevertheless, I have not perceived this as an obstacle in conducting observations in the mosque classrooms as they were equally divided into four boys' classrooms, four girls' classrooms, and one mixed classroom. Neither I noticed unwillingness on the part of imams

(who are by default all men) in conducting individual interviews with me. This, however, does not exclude the possibility that not only imams, but all participants might have formulated their answers differently if they were talking to a male researcher.

Last but not least, during the fieldwork at the *Milli Görüş* mosque I was visibly pregnant. In many Islamic communities, including the studied population, motherhood is attributed a sacred meaning (Wadud, 2006). My image as a pregnant woman might have had a facilitating impact on connecting with the participants in *Milli Görüş* mosque as particularly the female mosque teachers have been very accommodating in introducing me to parents and assisting with the scheduling of interviews. This helping attitude has eventually resulted in the collection of more data in shorter time at the second case-study mosque.

Structure of the thesis

In the next chapters, this thesis follows the outline of the studies presented above: study 1 addressing the discourses on mosque education in the Dutch press is reported in Chapter 2. Study 2 examining the organization of Turkish mosque education in the Netherlands with regard to its curriculum, learning objectives, content of teaching materials and language policies, is presented at Chapter 3. Study 3 focusing on the pedagogical approaches in the Turkish mosque classrooms is reported in Chapter 4. Study 4 analyzing the reasons behind the failure of the state-funded Islamic theology programs and imam-trainings at the Dutch universities is presented in Chapter 5. Finally, study 5 exploring the perceived role of mosque education in the integration of the Turkish-Dutch students is reported in Chapter 6. The dissertation ends with Chapter 7 which brings together the findings of the different studies and presents reflections on the contributions of this PhD research to the field. The last chapter also addresses the limitations of the studies in this thesis, and offers recommendations for policy, practice and future research.