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The pedagogy of the mosque

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

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CHAPTER 4

Pedagogies of Turkish Mosque Education in the Netherlands: An Ethno-case Study of Mosque Classes at *Milli Görüş* and *Diyanet*⁵

Introduction

Research on mosque education in Western societies, that is the supplementary Islamic education provided by mosques to children with immigrant background, is still in its infancy. This is a startling omission for a number of reasons. To begin with, providing Islamic education to the children in their congregation has always been one of the main tasks of mosques around the world. This is a task which arguably gains more importance in diaspora conditions which are defined by parental worries about value transmission, identity maintenance across generations, and the cultural and religious assimilation of their children (McCreery et al., 2007). Consequently, mosques become important actors in the value education and identity formation of Muslim children living in non-Muslim societies. Secondly, there is an indication that a greater number of Muslim children attend mosque classes than the number of Muslim children enrolled in Islamic primary schools. To illustrate, the latest figures from the Netherlands show that the total number of students enrolled in Islamic primary schools is 15,078 but do not specify ethnic background (DUO, 2018). On the other hand, mosque classes provided by only two of the Turkish Islamic communities in the Netherlands, *Diyanet* and *Milli Görüş*, are attended by approximately 20,000 students with Turkish background (Sözeri & Altinyelken, 2019). Last but not least, recent studies have raised major concerns over the quality and relevance of mosque pedagogies not only in the Netherlands but in other European contexts as well. Some have pointed out that drawbacks in quality are related to the lack of pedagogical training of mosque teachers (Sieckelinck et al., 2012), and the dominance of one-directional teacher-centered methods (Cherti & Bradley,

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2011; Pels et al., 2016). Others have suggested that they fail to connect to the experiences of students growing up in a non-Muslim societies, and counteract the pedagogical aims of mainstream schooling by inhibiting democratic dispositions, learner's autonomy and critical thinking (Coles, 2004; Halstead, 2018). Given the discrepancy in estimated student population and the gravity of the raised concerns, the lack of empirical research on mosque education is remarkable.

The aim of this study is to contribute to the research field of non-formal Islamic education by providing empirical insights on the pedagogical approaches employed at the mosques of two different Turkish Islamic communities in the Netherlands, namely *Diyanet* and *Milli Görüş*. They are two of the most influential Islamic associations among the Turkish diaspora abroad. Like the majority of Muslims in the world and in the Netherlands, they adhere to Sunni Islam. The main difference between them lies in their relationship with the Turkish state. While Islamic Association Netherlands (*Islamitische Stichting Nederland*) is the Dutch branch of the Turkish Presidency of Religious Affairs *Diyanet* since 1982, *Milli Görüş* has been set up as an Islamic association independently from the Turkish state in the 1970's by Turkish guest workers in Germany and in the Netherlands.

This paper aims to address the following questions: How does teaching and learning happen in the mosque classrooms? What kind of pedagogical approaches are practiced by the mosque teachers in their lessons? To achieve this, we use classroom observations and interviews with mosque teachers and imams collected during fieldwork at one *Diyanet* and one *Milli Görüş* mosque. Our approach relies on the ethno-case study method which combines characteristics associated with ethnography and case-studies. It aims to provide a detailed in-depth description while recognizing that the insights and conclusions drawn from the field constitute only a snapshot from a more complex and comprehensive picture. Our analyses of the data are guided by some of the fundamental concepts of Islamic pedagogy, such as *tarbiyah*, *ta'lim*, *ta'dib*, and *tajweed*, and the scholarly concerns about Islamic pedagogies with regard to student autonomy, critical thinking, discipline and authority.

Islamic pedagogy or Islamic pedagogies?

What is Islamic pedagogy? In their research on the madrasah concept of Islamic pedagogy (i.e. Islamic pedagogy as it is practiced in the Islamic institutions for religious sciences), Sabki and Hardaker (2013) argue that it is “the strategies employed by the teacher to

spiritually form the human person” (p.343). They complement their conceptualization by adding that it “is represented in the interactions between the teacher and learner through orality, facilitating memorization, and the didactic approach towards sacred texts” (p. 344). They also highlight an important principle of Islamic pedagogy: knowledge embodiment, or the expectation that the students will practice what they have learnt.

Going back to the primary sources like Alkoutli (2018) does, seems to be insightful. For her study of the classroom practices of a mosque school in Canada, she analyses Islamic primary source texts (theological literature on the pedagogies in the Qur’an and the Sunnah) and identifies three different types of Islamic pedagogies. Alkoutli calls these Relational Pedagogies, Pedagogies of Mutual Engagement, and Pedagogies of Conscious Awareness. The first category underlines the importance of building positive relationships between teachers and learners, and connecting to others in a warm, caring and compassionate way. Alkoutli maintains that differentiated learning and teaching is an important aspect of Relational Pedagogies as building positive social relationships in the classroom can only be achieved by being considerate of the different learning needs of every student. Pedagogies of Mutual Engagement, on the other hand, stress the participatory and life-long nature of Islamic education for both students and teachers. That entails doing together (joining social practices and rituals together), speaking together (dialogue as a pedagogy) and inquiring together (questioning or searching for answers together). Lastly, Alkoutli defines Pedagogies of Conscious Awareness as the teaching practices aiming to raise the awareness of the students about the meaning and purpose behind the Islamic knowledge, practices and principles. These are the pedagogies going beyond the classical teacher-centered instruction for the sake of “cultivating conscious awareness for individual and social development” through critical reflexivity (p.13).

To avoid essentializing Islamic pedagogy as a single approach applied in the same way across all Muslim communities, it seems to be more appropriate to talk about diversity of Islamic pedagogies which are likely to vary not only across sectarian and ethnic, but also across congregational lines. Nevertheless, there are a number of fundamental concepts which are discussed in the literature on Islamic education and which lay the ground for the different understandings of Islamic pedagogy. Among those, we rely on *tarbiyah*, *ta’lim*, *ta’dib*, and *tajweed*, which are all central to teaching Islam to children. To aid our analyses, we define mosque pedagogy as teaching Islamically: it is comprised by the teacher and student

activities and interactions, as guided by the principles of *tarbiyah*, *ta'lim*, *ta'dib*, and *tajweed*, and as such, it encompasses both the content and the aims of educational instruction, guidance and nurture.

Tarbiyah, *ta'lim* and *ta'dib* are all used to signify education in Arabic, however, they are conceptually different (Halstead, 2004). While *tarbiyah* defines the activities of the teachers (and parents) directed to upbringing, nurturing growth and development of the personality (Ahmed, 2012), *ta'lim* refers to teacher instruction and the acquisition of knowledge by the students (Bagheri & Khosravi, 2006). *Ta'dib*, on the other hand, refers to teaching *adab* or good manners and proper code of conduct in accordance with Islamic norms and values. Memon and Alhashmi (2018), for example, state that *adab* is a distinctive characteristic of Islamic education which is concerned with guiding the students to think, act and talk Islamically in all situations in their daily lives.

Some scholars have pointed out that the Islamic understanding of education is both cognitive and spiritual in character because belief in Allah is integral to the pursuit and nature of knowledge (Ariffin, 2012; Nasr, 2012). In that sense, a teacher teaching Islamically is expected to care equally for the transmission of knowledge, moral upbringing and the spiritual growth of the student.

Differently than the other concepts, *tajweed* is not an Islamic understanding of education, but it carries nevertheless great importance for the pedagogy of the mosque classes, as it refers to the rules governing the proper pronunciation and recitation of the Qur'an. The mosque teachers are expected to teach reading and reciting the Qur'an according to *tajweed*. Hence, the students are expected to memorize the prayers also according to *tajweed*. Sabki and Hardaker (2013) who discuss the centrality of recitation and memorization as traditional pedagogical methods in mosque education, suggest that memorization is used as a pedagogical method which entails the embodiment of the Qur'anic knowledge (p.348). Moreover, *tajweed* is considered a religious duty for all Muslims reciting the Qur'an. Berglund and Gent (2018) point out, for instance, that "it is vital to recognize that, for Muslims, Qur'anic memorization and recitation constitutes a form of literacy that is essential to ritual, devotional practice and identity formation" (p.128).

Today the use of memorization as a pedagogical approach in Islamic education is perceived as contentious by outsiders. Memorization and recitation, albeit prevalent in

literature and language classes in the past, are no longer popular pedagogical methods in mainstream education. Rosowsky (2013), for example, has criticized mosque pedagogies for their reliance on memorization as this might lead to normalizing learning a language without understanding its meaning. It is argued that this might have undesirable consequences for the Muslim students who are often coming from migrant families and lag behind their native peers in proficiency in the majority language.

What is more, critical scholars such as Halstead (2018) analyzing Islamic pedagogies from a Western liberal reference point have voiced concerns over the potential of mosque classes for alienating the students from the mainstream society by creating a tension between the “diverse and incompatible” values taught at school and in the mosque (p.10). Halstead has also been critical of Islamic pedagogies for attributing unchallenged authority to the teacher, discouraging student autonomy and critical questioning. Similarly, Coles (2004) and Sieckelinck et al. (2012) have criticized mosque education for relying on untrained teachers who are unfamiliar with the Western context in which the children are growing up and using outdated teacher-centered and discipline-oriented pedagogical approaches. These are seen as problematic because critical thinking, respect for diversity of opinions, open classroom discussion with no pre-determined right or wrong answers are seen as some of the main pedagogical goals of citizenship education at schools (Schuitema et al. 2018).

Mosque education in the Netherlands

Empirical research on mosque education in the Netherlands is scarce. The first research on the topic was commissioned by the municipality of Rotterdam to Pels and colleagues (Pels et al., 2006; Pels et al., 2006a; Pels et al., 2006b) who investigated the pedagogical practices of one Turkish and two Moroccan mosques in Rotterdam. The researchers conducted classroom observations and interviews with parents, mosque teachers and students, and concluded that compared to the initial stage of Muslim migrants’ settlement in the Netherlands in the 80’s, mosque education has undergone significant reforms. For instance, they found that nowadays there are child-friendlier teaching activities, milder discipline methods, and less focus on rote learning. However, in all three mosques the researchers observed pedagogies which favored one-directional exchange between the mosque teachers and the students (i.e. students were just expected to provide correct answers to teachers’ questions). The researchers identified

very little open interaction and discussion, and as such, pedagogies aiming to link the mosque education to the experiences of the Muslim children in a Western country were absent.

Later, in 2016 Pels and colleagues conducted another research (Pels et al., 2016), commissioned by municipality of Utrecht on the pedagogy of the Salafi mosque AlFitrah which had attracted negative media attention with news about youth radicalization. Their conclusions were similar to those of the previous research: the lessons were taught in a positive pedagogical climate and the mosque association was providing trainings in pedagogy, Islam and class management to the mosque teachers. However, again, little room for open dialogue and critical reflection was observed. While the mosque teachers paid attention to the importance of students' social participation through education and work, they advised the students to always adhere to Salafi norms and values even when those conflict with the mainstream values of the Dutch society. The researchers identified the pedagogy of mosque education in AlFitrah as authoritarian: it did not encourage interaction between the students, it prescribed strict behavioral expectations from them, and did not allow for discussion of the knowledge. Furthermore, the students were advised to avoid contacts outside of their own religious group in order to decrease undesirable impact on their lifestyle which was seen by the researchers as a risk factor for students' social participation.

Lastly, previous case-study by Altinyelken and Sözeri (2019) based on a *Diyanet* mosque suggested that mosque pedagogies imported from Muslim migrants' country of origin undergo significant adaptations in diaspora context. Using classroom observations, and interviews with key stakeholders, imams, mosque teachers, parents and students, the study analyzed the educational transfer of mosque pedagogy from Turkey to the *Diyanet* mosques in the Netherlands through imams appointed by the Turkish state and material developed for children in Turkey. The findings showed that while the content of the classes largely overlaps with the curriculum of Qur'an classes at *Diyanet* mosques in Turkey, there are many local factors which re-shape the imported pedagogy and contribute to its re-contextualization. The study found that some mosque teachers modify their pedagogical practices with the aim to mimic mainstream education as closely as possible. This was done because the students reacted best to practices they are already socialized into, and because the mosque teachers wanted the students to take mosque education equally seriously. Adaptation examples included copying the reward and punishment strategies of Dutch schools, use of Dutch as assisting language in the classes, use of more interactive and play-based educational

activities, offering extra-curricular activities and outings for group bonding, and making learning more inquisitive compared to education in mosques in Turkey. However, it was also found that in the diaspora context mosque pedagogy imported via *Diyanet* did not only aim at counteracting religious assimilation, but also had a function of socializing the students into being loyal Turkish citizens.

Here we build on our previous research by focusing more closely on the question of how does teaching and learning take place in the mosques. Moreover, to explore the differences in teaching between state-organized and grassroots mosques, we add a comparative perspective by also including data from a mosque affiliated with *Milli Görüş* which is arguably the second most prominent Turkish-Islamic association abroad after *Diyanet*.

Data and methods

The methodological approach adopted in this research can be best described as ethno-case study. The term has been developed by Parker-Jenkins (2018) who argues that a new qualitative research design has emerged combining the features of an ethnographic research and a case-study. While traditionally ethnography has been used to generate rich and detailed description of the lived experiences of a community based on the immersion of the researcher at the field over a prolonged period of time ranging from months to years, the observations collected through a case-study are more contained in time, possibly ranging from a few hours, to days or weeks. Acknowledging the limitations related to the time spent at the field means recognizing that the study is part of broader context, conclusions drawn from the observed situations are bound to change in time, and that shorter fieldworks might not be able to detect long-term patterns of change.

The data for this ethno-case study is based on three months of fieldwork (between March and May 2017) at one of the largest *Diyanet* mosques, and two months of fieldwork (between October and December 2017) at one of the largest *Milli Görüş* mosques in the Netherlands. In both cases, the mosques have not been selected randomly by the researchers, but have been chosen by the management or key figures within the respective Islamic associations. This implies that they are likely to contain best practice examples which the communities are willing to promote. Nevertheless, both mosques qualify as typical examples of the way teaching and learning happens in *Diyanet* and *Milli Görüş* mosques as curriculum

content, learning goals and training of mosque teachers is centrally defined in both associations.

The fieldwork involved nine classroom observations in eight classes attended by 90 students in total, and 10 semi-structured interviews with an educational coordinator, imams and mosque teachers. The classes were usually taught by unsalaried volunteers with divergent degrees of expertise in Islamic education and pedagogy. We refer to them in this study as *hoca* [hodja]: this is the Turkish term used to denote a mosque teacher. All of the *hocas* and imams, except two young female *hocas* at the *Milli Görüş* mosque, were born in Turkey. Below, Table 10 presents the characteristics of the *hocas* and imam at the *Diyanet* mosque, and Table 11 describes the *hocas*, imam and educational coordinator at the *Milli Görüş* mosque.

Table 10. Demographic characteristics of the *hocas* and imam at the *Diyanet* mosque.

	Sex	Age	Nationalities	Education	Occupation	Years of experience in this mosque	Years of residence in the Netherlands
Hoca1	F	40	Turkish & Dutch	Vocational education degree for Educational Assistant	Educational assistant at Dutch primary schools	6	20
Hoca2	M	45	Turkish & Dutch	Bachelor's degree in Islamic Theology	Religious education teacher at Dutch primary schools	4	17
Hoca3	F	33	Turkish	Bachelor's degree in Islamic Theology	Female religious preacher (Turkish state employee)	2	2
Imam1	M	33	Turkish	PhD in Islamic Theology	Imam (Turkish state employee)	2	2

Table 11. Demographic characteristics of the *hocas*, imam and educational coordinator at the *Milli Görüş* mosque.

	Sex	Age	Nationalities	Education	Occupation	Years of experience in this mosque	Years of residence in the Netherlands
Hoca4	M	49	Turkish	Bachelor's degree in Islamic Theology	Lecturer at Islamic University	2	27
Hoca5	F	19	Turkish & Dutch	Vocational high school degree for doctor assistant	Unemployed	3	19
Hoca6	F	43	Turkish & Dutch	Islamic vocational high school	Housewife	6	17
Hoca7	F	27	Turkish & Dutch	Pedagogy degree from University of Applied Sciences	Call center agent	2	25
Imam2	M	49	Turkish & Dutch	Bachelor's degree in Islamic Theology	Imam	6	21
Educational coordinator	F	43	Turkish & Dutch	Islamic vocational high school & vocational degree as Education Assistant	Educational coordinator of the mosque	6	20

Four classrooms were observed in the *Diyanet* mosque; two were comprised of boys only, and two: girls only. This was also the case at the *Milli Görüş* mosque, where an additional fifth classroom was mixed. Below, Table 12 describes the composition of the observed classrooms at both mosques. Consent was obtained from the parents of the student participants in the study. Before the start of the fieldwork, the children themselves were also informed about the research, and they were given the opportunity to ask questions to the

researcher before and after the classroom observations. During the observations, the researcher was sitting at a separate desk at the back of the classroom and did not interfere in the classroom activities. While the main language of instruction was Turkish, each mosque had one classroom where the language of instruction was Dutch. The classroom observations paid attention to the material conditions of the classrooms, curriculum content, classroom interactions, *hoca* and student activities, language use, the nature of asked questions and responses, classroom climate, and power relations. The first author took detailed field notes of each observation.

The interviews focused on questions about classroom management, motivation and discipline strategies, Islamic pedagogies, and approaches to discussions and critical thinking. All interviews were individual, conducted at a mosque classroom or imam's office, before or after the classes. The interviews lasted for 40 minutes on average. All were audio recorded and verbatim transcribed except with one *hoca* at the *Diyanet* mosque. In that case, the first author took detailed notes of the interview. The respondents were given the choice to conduct the interview in Dutch or Turkish, and most interviews were held in a combination of both. Quotations used in the study were translated into English by the first author. The thematic analysis and interpretation of the data was guided by the theoretical concepts of Islamic pedagogies and the scholarly criticisms to mosque education discussed in the literature. The researchers used a combination of deductive and inductive approach to data coding: all data was coded using the concepts and topics emerging from the literature, but the data was also (re-)read with the aim of identifying new patterns of meaning (themes) in relation to the explored research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

Table 12. Composition of the observed classrooms.

Islamic organization	Taught by	Age range	Sex	Number of present students	Lessons observed
<i>Diyanet</i>	Imam1	10-16	Boys	11	One Qur'an lesson & two religious knowledge lessons
	<i>Hoca1</i>	8-12	Girls	13	Two Qur'an lessons and one religious knowledge lesson
	<i>Hoca2</i>	8-14	Boys	13	Three Qur'an lessons
	<i>Hoca3</i>	8-14	Girls	15	One Qur'an lesson & two religious knowledge lessons
<i>Milli Görüş</i>	Imam2	11-14	Boys	9	<i>Hifz</i> class: one Qur'an lesson
	<i>Hoca4</i>	10-14	Boys	13	Three religious knowledge lessons
	<i>Hoca5</i>	6-8	Mixed	7	Preparatory class: One Qur'an lesson & two religious knowledge lessons
	<i>Hoca6</i>	7-10	Girls	9	One Qur'an lesson
	<i>Hoca7</i>	7-10	Girls	9	One religious knowledge lesson

Findings

Education at both mosques was divided into two general subjects: Qur'an lessons focusing on learning to read the Qur'an in Arabic and memorization of the prayers for *namaz* (a ritual prayer observed five times a day), and religious knowledge lessons focusing on the main tenants of the faith, the requirements of practicing the religion, the history of Islam and the life of the prophet. In addition to those, at the time of the fieldwork the *Milli Görüş* mosque also had a *hifz* class comprised of advanced students learning to recite the Qur'an by heart. Out of the 21 observed lessons, 11 were religious knowledge lessons, and ten were Qur'an lessons including the *hifz* class. It was observed that the *hocas* and imams employed different pedagogical approaches in the different lessons, depending on whether they were teaching Qur'an or religious knowledge. Before delving into the different teaching strategies in these two subjects, it is important to give a perspective on the physical conditions of the mosque classrooms and underline some commonalities. Differently than school classrooms, the

mosque classrooms were carpeted, and shoes were left at a special cabinet at the entrance of educational wing of the mosque. On the walls of the classrooms, there were frames with prayers in Arabic and Turkish, educational posters with religious knowledge (e.g. how to perform ablution, i.e. the ceremonial washing of body parts before prayer, and the sequence of movements for *namaz*). In some cases, the walls were decorated with religiously inspired crafts and drawings made by students (at the *Milli Görüş* mosque), and genealogy of the Ottoman sultans (at the *Diyanet* mosque). All of the observed mosque classrooms, except one, were equipped with white board, bookshelves, school desks and chairs. This equipment is in contrast to the typical mosque classroom setting where education takes place with both students and teachers seated on the ground with small wooden benches in front of them (Noh et al., 2014). Both mosques had at least one classroom with a projector, a computer and a printer. The only classroom which did not have a white board was actually a *sohbet* or religious discussion room which one class used temporarily until a regular classroom could be created for it. The management of both mosques complained about the lack of physical capacity to meet the demand for mosque classes, and both mosques had waiting lists for students. Some *hocas* commented on the importance of mimicking the school classrooms as closely as possible so that the students feel comfortable at the mosque and do not perceive it as an inferior learning environment. In all classrooms, *hocas* and imams were seen to copy motivation and discipline strategies used in mainstream education (e.g. time-outs or staying after class as a discipline measure, and compliments, stickers, and group outings as a motivation tool).

Qur'an lessons

Compared to religious knowledge lessons, Qur'an lessons in both mosques involved more self-study time balanced with one-to-one attention by the *hoca* to the proper pronunciation and the reading skills of the individual student. *Ta'lim*, or classical teacher instruction, repetition of reading passages, memorization and attention to *tajweed* were present in all observed Qur'an lessons. Qur'an lessons would start with a prayer said communally, followed by students taking turns in reading passages from the Qur'an in Arabic and the *hoca* correcting their pronunciation. This was alternated with self-study time during which the *hoca* would work with each student individually while the rest of the class continued reading for themselves. Some Qur'an lessons, such as the Qur'an lesson of Imam1 at the *Diyanet* mosque and the *hifz* class of Imam2 at the *Milli Görüş* mosque would start differently.

Imam2, for instance, started by demonstrating to the students the proper way to recite the passage on which they would be working at the lesson. Imam1, on the other hand, followed a different strategy:

For the last two years when I come in the morning, I do something which never changes. I always start the lessons with *Asma-ul-Husna*. [...] *Asma-ul-Husna* are the 99 names of Allah. After we finish them, since those are children living abroad, I ask them to read the Turkish national anthem so that they can appreciate their fatherland and its flag. We read all ten verses. We stopped with this exercise after each student learnt the anthem by heart. (Imam1, *Diyanet* mosque)

Likewise, another Qur'an lesson at the same mosque began with a memorial prayer for the Turkish national war heroes who died at the Battle of Gallipoli during the First World War (classroom of *Hoca2*, *Diyanet* mosque). The war heroes were referred to as "martyrs" implying they sacrificed their lives in the name of Islam. These practices show the importance attributed to instilling attachment to the Turkish Republic and maintaining the Turkish national consciousness of the diaspora youth to the extent that Islamic and Turkish identities are synthesized together and expressed in a pedagogy of national identity building.

The observed Qur'an lessons did not contain teaching strategies directed at encouraging debate or critical thinking; the nature of the subject material (i.e. learning to read and recite the Qur'an properly) seems to be uncondusive for such exercises. As such, the pedagogies of the observed Qur'an lessons overlapped to a great extent with the traditional portrayal of mosque education. The importance of understanding the meaning of the read Qur'anic passages was underlined only in three of the Qur'an lessons. For example, *Hoca3* and Imam1 in the *Diyanet* mosque translated the meaning of the studied text from Arabic to Turkish and wrote the main terms on the white board. Whenever some students did not understand the Turkish words, the *hoca* and the imam asked the students who understood to translate in Dutch for the rest. Similarly, *Hoca6* at the *Milli Görüş* mosque said that she asks the students to write down the meaning of the chapter they read in their notebooks because this way the students concentrate better. It is likely that *Hoca3* and Imam1 were able to provide Turkish translations and comment on the meaning since they were more highly educated in Islamic theology and Arabic compared to the rest. *Hoca6*, on the other hand, was relying on the translations available in the Islamic education textbooks.

Nevertheless, some of the *hocas* have incorporated innovative teaching practices in their Qur'an lessons. For example, *Hoca2* has introduced an unorthodox approach to make reciting the Qur'an more entertaining for his students. He has allowed them to improvise rap music on the passages instead of reciting them in the traditionally accepted melody. The rapping occurred at the end of the classroom observation, after which we talked with the student who had performed it. He explained that he used the music of the song *Baba*, belonging to the Turkish-Dutch rapper Rambo. While *Hoca2* still teaches them reading and reciting the Qur'an following *tajweed*, he reserves the last quarter to half an hour of his classes to let them express themselves in a more creative way:

I try to teach without boring the child, avoiding classical instruction, but with stories and theater. [...] I think one of our main drawbacks right now is that we cannot afford to spend enough time on memorization. If we do more memorization, then morals and *adab*, national and spiritual values education will lag behind. The children can memorize themselves, too. Conversation is more important. [...] Children view the mosque as an environment full of bans, they get bored and don't have fun. Therefore, we need more social activities to facilitate attachment to and love for the mosque. For example, I started a bike club. Also, the mosque offers Turkish language and music lessons. (*Hoca2, Diyanet mosque*)

In another classroom, *Imam2* instructing a *hifz* class at the *Milli Görüş* mosque has incorporated technology in an innovative way when teaching Qur'anic recitation. The class has a WhatsApp group, and before studying a certain passage together, he sends them an audio or video recording of himself or someone else reciting the passage melodically. Proper intonation, rhythm and melody are central to learning to recite the Qur'an, so he expects them to have listened to the recording before the class. When asked whether he observes motivation or discipline issues at his classroom, he replies that he usually does not, however, he has developed a strategy to teach unruly students separately from their group until they correct their behavior:

I haven't experienced serious issues but when the children were younger there were some who had such disruptive behavior. I was giving them separate lessons during weekdays. [...] I was teaching them one-to-one. We applied this teaching strategy to three children. And we told them that we are doing this as a punishment because they

have disrupted the classroom order and the learning motivation of their classmates.
[...] This lasted for a month, and after that we re-integrated them in the group again.

(Imam2, *Milli Görüş* mosque)

Religious knowledge lessons

The way teaching and learning occurred in the religious knowledge lessons differed substantially from the pedagogies of the Qur'an lessons. Before elaborating on the differences in teaching, it is important to note two major differences between the mosques. The first one has to do with the teaching materials used in the lessons. The *Milli Görüş* mosque had its own religious knowledge textbooks including special homework notebooks, grade sheets, teacher books with curriculum and certificates for completion for each level (beginners, intermediate and advanced), printed by *Milli Görüş* headquarters in Germany and distributed to all *Milli Görüş* mosques around Europe. The *hocas* at the *Diyanet* mosque, on the other hand, were relying on Islamic education textbooks usually used in the Islamic secondary schools in Turkey and printouts of information which they would find online and bring to the class⁶. The second difference has to do with the availability of pedagogical trainings and support to the *hocas* teaching in the mosques. As reported by the *hocas*, educational coordinators and the management figures at *Milli Görüş*, all *hocas* teaching at *Milli Görüş* mosques receive an annual pedagogical training which may last for a weekend or a week, and is taught by professional experts on child development and pedagogy. In addition to that, the case-study mosque had an in-house educational coordinator and pedagogue. The lack of similar arrangements for the *hocas* teaching at *Diyanet* has been reported as a

⁶ At the time of the fieldwork, the management of *Diyanet* commented that they are working on publishing bilingual religious education textbooks (in Turkish and the host country language, e.g. Dutch or German) for use in their mosque classrooms in Europe. However, these were still not in use during the classroom observations. In 2018, the association has reported on its website about the first published mosque education textbook "*Camiye gidiyorum I*" ("I am going to the mosque 1") and the accompanying assisting activity books: <https://diyanet.nl/hizmetlerimiz/dini-egitim-ve-din-hizmetleri/>

drawback by some of the *hocas* that we talked to, as they evaluated the chances for training offered by *Diyanet* as insufficient⁷.

That being said, compared to the Qur'an lessons the format of the religious knowledge lessons in both mosques was more conducive to discussion-based classes and featured more child-centered teaching strategies. Play-based instruction (e.g. using word games and puzzles to teach main Islamic concepts), storytelling (e.g. narrating stories from the life of the prophets), and using crafts (e.g. cutting and pasting paper with the names of the prophets or the angels on them) were the most commonly observed and reported teaching approaches. Religious knowledge lessons would begin with the *hoca* announcing the topic, followed by asking questions to the students to assess what they remember from the last lesson and whether they have studied at home. In that sense, religious knowledge lessons also were based on classical teacher instruction or *ta'lim*. The *hoca* would write the main concepts on the white board which was used much more actively during the religious knowledge lessons compared to the Qur'an lessons.

The pedagogies employed in these lessons were noticeably guided by attention for *tarbiyah* and *ta'dib*. *Hoca6* at *Milli Görüş*, for example, pointed out that what differentiates Islamic pedagogy and its approach to child development from the Dutch educational system, is the importance it pays to teaching the children to have respect for their parents, the elderly and the family values. Similarly, *Hoca3* at *Diyanet*, expressed that Islamic pedagogy was more concerned with the moral education of the children than the pedagogies she has observed in mainstream Dutch schools. Students who had received good *tarbiyah* and *ta'dib* would know what is acceptable behavior for Muslim girls and boys:

Excuse me, but there [at Dutch schools] a girl and a boy can sit next to each other, hold hands and kiss each other in the breaks. In other words, this is very normal there, but you can't do that in the spiritual atmosphere of the mosque. Because if the *hocas*

⁷ Nevertheless, there are some indications observed after the end of the fieldwork that *Diyanet* has also started to provide more trainings to their teaching volunteers. For example, the association mentions on its website a three-year long training programme for mosque *hocas* which has been introduced as a pilot in some mosques:

<https://diyanet.nl/hizmetlerimiz/dini-egitim-ve-din-hizmetleri/>

are spending time to teach you knowledge, you have to respect them. (*Hoca3, Diyanet mosque*)

Another aspect of *ta'dib* was seen in discussions of practicing Islamic dress code. Covering yourself and having special attire for the mosque was seen as a necessary etiquette which the children should embrace as part of their education. This was also in line with the Islamic concept of embodiment: the expectation that the students would be practicing the Islamic knowledge which they have acquired (*Hoca1, Diyanet mosque*). Likewise, the pedagogy of practicing together was observed in the classrooms of a number of *Diyanet hocas* who stressed the importance of encouraging the students to participate in *namaz* together with the congregation (*Imam1 and Hoca1, Diyanet mosque*).

Among all classroom observations, two contrasting approaches to teaching Islam stood out as examples illustrating the extent of diversity of pedagogies within the context of a single mosque. These were the religious knowledge lessons of *Hoca4* and *Hoca5* at *Milli Görüş*. To begin with, both *hocas* had very different profiles. *Hoca4* was a 49 years old man, a primary school graduate who migrated from Turkey when he was 22 years old and completed a private Islamic Theology program in the Netherlands. *Hoca5*, on the other hand, was a 19 years old woman, born and raised in the Netherlands, student in vocational training for medical assistance. *Hoca4* was teaching advanced level boys whose age ranged between 10 and 14, and *Hoca5* was teaching a preparatory class of boys and girls between the ages of six and eight. It was not only the mixed-gender composition that set the classroom of *Hoca5* apart. Differently than *Hoca4* who used archaic Turkish mixed with Arabic words, she would use Dutch as the main medium of instruction complemented by Turkish. But what is more remarkable was her way of making the lessons more child-friendly and interactive.

Beside storytelling, crafts and educative games observed in other classrooms, she would also use body language, role-play and props to facilitate the learning of the students. During our observation, for example, she started the lesson by holding an envelope and asking the students what they can use it for. They answered, “to send a message”. She used the envelope as a prop to explain the concept of Allah sending messages to the people via the angels, such as in the case of angel Gabriel who was the subject of that lesson. Another time, she would designate two students one of which would demonstrate the ritual of ablution, while the other one would play the role of a *hoca* controlling whether the steps are performed

correctly. Her teaching approaches were age-appropriate and conducive to enhancing student autonomy. This created a classroom climate in which the students felt at ease to ask her challenging questions as in the dialogue below:

Hoca5: The paradise is a place which is much more beautiful than this earth.

Student: How do you know? Have you ever been to?

Hoca5: This is what is written in the Qur'an.

Student: But I love play-stations. What if there are no play-stations in paradise?

Hoca5: They will give you everything you want in paradise.

Student: But what if what is written in the [holy] book is not true?

Hoca5: But this is not the topic of our lesson today. We are discussing the angels.

In contrast to this, the classroom of *Hoca4* was defined by an authoritarian teaching style and hierarchical power relations expecting discipline and obedience from the students. Most of the talk was done by the *hoca*, who used rhetorical philosophical deliberation and storytelling to convey the messages of the lesson focusing on fate and the role of human will in the pre-determined path dictated by Allah. Before starting to tell the story of the day, the *hoca* went to one of the students who was talking with his neighbor, grabbed his arm and pushed him lightly. The student and the rest of the group became visibly uncomfortable. After this, the *hoca* asked the students what could happen to someone just by touching him. For example, could someone be killed just by a touch? Upon that, he told them a story about the dream of a butcher who kills a customer just by touching him. The moral of the story was that the butcher would be legally accountable for his deed, but the death would have happened because of Allah's will. The storytelling appeared to aim at an aspect of *tarbiyah* or personality development of the students according to Islamic ethic. However, the story seemed to silence the students by creating an environment of fear. Following the classroom observation, in an interview with *Hoca4* we asked him whether the students in his class are asking critical or challenging questions, to which he replied:

Last year there were questions such as "why do I have to learn this", or "why this is like that". But they got used to my style [...]. Right now, I don't have that problem anymore. (*Hoca4*, *Milli Görüş* mosque)

The examples above illustrate that despite teaching the same subject in the same mosque, two *hocas* can have very different approaches to teaching. During the fieldwork, the (female) educational coordinator of the *Milli Görüş* mosque commented that although they keep an eye on what is happening in all classrooms, have regular meetings and provide annual training to all *hocas*, they find it challenging to inspect the classes of elderly male *hocas*, and even more challenging to give them corrective feedback. Such internal power imbalances and the lack of external inspection might potentially have serious implications for the quality of the mosque education and its impact on the lives of students.

Discussion and conclusion

This study aimed at revealing how teaching and learning happens in the mosque classrooms of *Diyanet* and *Milli Görüş* in the Netherlands. The analysis shows that application of the Islamic concepts of education of *tarbiyah*, *ta'lim*, *ta'dib* and *tajweed* are integral to the teaching practices of *hocas* from each mosque. In other words, irrespective of the Islamic association they belong to, the *hocas* do not aim only for transfer of religious knowledge and instruction in teaching to read and recite the Qur'an, but also for teaching children Islamic morals and behavioral codes which will guide the students in their daily lives.

The primary-source pedagogies identified by Alkoutli (2018) have been observed in many classrooms. For instance, all Qur'an lessons had an element of differentiated learning (an aspect of Relational Pedagogies) expressed in one-to-one teaching of correct pronunciation. Likewise, the Pedagogies of Mutual Engagement expressed in “doing together” were observed in encouraging the children to take part in the communal *namaz*, integrating educational games into the lessons, and organizing social activities like swimming, football and theme park trips together with the mosque class. The application of Pedagogies of Conscious Awareness through critical reflexivity was less pronounced as there were only few cases in which the imam and *hocas* made space for critical questioning by the students. Some like *Hoca4* even defined it as a “problem” which did not occur anymore in his classes. In that sense, the findings imply that despite attempts at mimicking mainstream education, mosque education might value certain aspects of the school pedagogies more than others: while student autonomy is encouraged through self-study time and tasks in the classroom, challenging the tenants of the religion or the authority of the *hocas* might be seen as disrespectful and undesirable. This is in line with the findings of Pels and colleagues about

the limited space for open dialogue in the mosque classes (Pels et al., 2006; Pels et al., 2006a; Pels et al., 2006b; Pels et al., 2016). It also reinforces some of the concerns raised by Halstead (2018) about the potentially unfavorable impact of mosque pedagogies on the critical thinking skills of the students.

On the other hand, the concerns raised by Coles (2014) and Sieckelinck et al. (2012) with regard to the lack of pedagogical training of the *hocas* and the use of harsh discipline-oriented methods have been only partially observed in our study. There is evidence of pedagogical reform and adaptations at both mosques. As reported by Altinyelken and Sözeri (2019), the use of corporal punishment is said to be extinct in the mosques, and *hocas* not only at *Diyanet*, but also at *Milli Görüş* borrow motivation, discipline and class management strategies from the Dutch schools. The availability of regular trainings, and pedagogical support offered to *hocas* by their Islamic association, appeared to be better arranged at the *Milli Görüş* mosque than at the *Diyanet* mosque. These seem to matter for the *hocas* and their perception about the quality of education they are providing. Although the main language of instruction in both mosques was Turkish, what sets the pedagogies of both mosques apart is primarily the pedagogy of national identity building observed in the *Diyanet* classrooms. These are the teaching practices of the imam and the *hocas* (e.g. teaching the Turkish national anthem, and the memorial prayer for the Battle of Gallipoli) directed at creating a nationalistic attachment to the Turkish state among the diaspora youth. In other words, our findings indicate that mosque education at *Diyanet* has a political aspect which was not observed to the same extent at the *Milli Görüş* mosque. This resonates with recent studies on the activities of *Diyanet* in Europe which conclude that the Turkish state instrumentalizes *Diyanet* mosques as one of its tools for influence over the Turkish diaspora abroad (Maritato, 2018; Öztürk & Sözeri, 2018).

That said, although the literature suggests Islamic pedagogies diverge along ethnic and sectarian lines, it has been remarkable to observe that there is a diversity of teaching approaches not only between different mosques within a single ethnic community, but also within mosques belonging to the same Turkish-Islamic association. As demonstrated by the comparison of the contrasting pedagogies in the classrooms of *Hoca4* and *Hoca5* at the *Milli Görüş* mosque, more standardized teaching material and availability of pedagogical trainings was not associated with harmonized teaching practices. Teaching experience in Dutch schools (as in the case of *Hoca2* at *Diyanet*) seemed to be linked with more openness to

innovation in the mosque classes. This reinforces previous findings of Altinyelken and Sözeri (2019) and Noh et al. (2014) who report that mosque teachers with experience in mainstream education system adopt pedagogical practices from it and apply these in their mosque classes. However, the sample size and format of our study would not allow us to deduce underlying factors associated with the different pedagogies. It is likely that factors such as age, gender, country of birth, generation, exposure to the Dutch education system and level of education might have an influence on the extent to which the *hocas* and imams are open to deviate from traditional and more authoritarian Islamic pedagogies and make space for more child-friendly teaching practices. Research into the recruitment and training of the *hocas* and imams might shed further light on this subject.

Last but not least, the implications of the difficulty of internal checks (e.g. due to power imbalances between female educational coordinators and male *hocas*), and the lack of external inspections, might have far-reaching consequences for the quality of the mosque education and its impact on the students. Research shows that there is a demand for pedagogical innovation in mosque education, particularly by Muslim parents who were themselves born and raised in migration context (Pels et al., 2016), but also by *hocas* and imams who realize that the mosque pedagogies imported from their countries of origin need to be adapted to the diaspora experiences of the children (Altinyelken & Sözeri, 2019). Cooperation with primary schools might help achieve that: mosques have expressed desire for establishing pedagogical exchange programs to collaborate with schools for a shared pedagogical climate and creating a “pedagogy of the neighborhood” (Pels et al., 2006a, p.73). In this respect, our findings imply a need for further attention to the possibilities and challenges for mutually beneficial pedagogical exchange and collaborations between mosques and schools sharing a student population.