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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 6

Turkish Mosque Education in the Netherlands: Aiding or Frustrating Integration?⁹

Introduction

Mosque education (i.e. the supplementary Islamic education provided in mosques) has been often portrayed as a threat to integration with a potential to radicalize Muslim youth, to further segregation and cause identity confusion (Sözeri et al., 2019; Cherti & Bradley, 2011). Some scholars have warned that mosque classes might be hindering social cohesion when students are being instructed to avoid spare time contact with their non-Muslim peers (Pels et al., 2016). In the Netherlands, many politicians have voiced their concerns about the influence of mosque education on Muslim children. For example, the mayor of Amsterdam and politician from the Green Party (GroenLinks) Femke Halsema expressed that she wants more control and inspection of the mosque classes in her city (Koops, 2019). Likewise, Lodewijk Asscher, leader of the Dutch Labor Party (PvdA) and minister of Social Affairs and Employment (2012-2017), commented in parliament that those who send their children to mosque classes have failed to integrate, even if they are economically active and participate in the Dutch society (Zandbergen, 2014).

Although there are no official estimates, Cherti and Bradley's (2011) research in Britain and Sözeri and Altinyelken's research in the Netherlands (2019) suggest that mosque education is attended by a higher number of students than the formal Islamic primary schools. Yet, for a variety of reasons among which difficulty of access to mosques and distrust towards researchers, mosque education is still largely understudied (Alkouatli, 2018). This study aims to contribute to filling the knowledge gap about the role of mosque education in the integration of Muslim children by offering evidence from the Turkish community in the Netherlands. The choice to focus on the Turkish-Dutch is not accidental: beside being the largest Muslim community in the Netherlands (CBS, 2018), previous research suggests that

⁹ Based on: Sözeri, S., Altinyelken, H. K., & Volman, M. (Submitted). Turkish mosque education in the Netherlands: Aiding or frustrating integration? *Ethnic and Racial Studies*.

the Turkish-Dutch are more isolationist than other migrant communities (Huijnk & Dagevos, 2012), show sustained levels of religiosity across generations (Maliepaard et al., 2010), and report stronger adherence to Islam when they have attended mosque classes in their childhood (Fleischmann & Phalet, 2012). Furthermore, higher Muslim religiosity among the youth has been found to be associated with lower host nation (i.e. Dutch) identification (Fleischmann & Phalet, 2018).

What is the role of mosque education in the integration of the Turkish-Dutch youth according to their parents, imams, mosque teachers and key stakeholders? This is the main overarching question this study seeks to answer. It poses the following sub-questions: (1) What is the understanding of integration of the different actors? (2) Does mosque education aid or frustrate integration according to the respondents? (3) What are the ways in which mosque education could be aiding integration? and (4) What are the ways in which mosque education could be frustrating integration? To address these questions, the study uses data from semi-structured interviews with Turkish imams, mosque teachers, parents and an ideologically diverse body of key stakeholders collected between March 2016 and December 2017.

The study is novel in two ways: first, it examines insiders' perspectives on the role of mosque education in Muslim children's integration which - despite the large body of research on the link between integration and Islamic religiosity of the youth - to our knowledge hasn't been studied before in the Netherlands, and internationally it has only been partially touched upon by a British think-tank (Cherti & Bradley, 2011). Secondly, it attempts to achieve a multifaceted understanding of the researched questions through qualitative data triangulation with persons (Denzin, 1989) (i.e. combining the perspectives of more than two categorically different groups of respondents, both insiders and outsiders: imams, mosque teachers, parents of mosque students, and other stakeholders). To our knowledge, in studying mosque education this approach has been adopted to varying extents only in two publications: namely, the research report by Cherti and Bradley on British madrassas (2011), and by Pels and colleagues' research on mosques' pedagogical practices commissioned by the Dutch municipality of Rotterdam (Pels et al., 2006; Pels et al., 2006a; Pels et al., 2006b).

Theoretical and empirical approaches

Immigrant integration and Islam

The question whether Islam plays a role in Muslim immigrants' integration in the host societies has been researched well by a large number of studies which report conflicting results about the first generation and their descendants. On the one hand, research establishes a negative link between the level of religiosity of first generation Muslim immigrants and a variety of integration outcomes among which social contact with natives (Maliepaard & Phalet, 2012), host language proficiency (Güveli & Platt, 2011), educational success (Van Tubergen & Sindradóttir, 2011), attitudes to egalitarian gender roles (Diehl et al., 2009), and identification with the host nation (Verkuyten & Yildiz, 2007). In contrast to these, some of the research on the role of religiosity in the integration of the so-called second generation (children of immigrants born in the host country), find positive associations between higher levels of religiosity (often measured as frequency of mosque attendance, prayer and degree of religious identification) and integration markers as educational attainment, employment, social participation, and interethnic contacts (Fleischmann & Phalet, 2012; Scheible & Fleischmann, 2013). In the light of such findings some scholars claim that religion does not matter anymore when the focus of analysis is on immigrants' descendants (Voas & Fleischmann, 2012, cited in Beek & Fleischmann, 2019). Yet, others point out that the religiosity of migrants' children is still negatively associated with egalitarian gender role attitudes (Kretschmer, 2018), values of sexual liberalism (Kogan & Weißmann, 2019), majority language skills and interethnic friendships (Beek & Fleischmann, 2019). The conflicting findings of the studies imply that there might be a need to re-conceptualize the definition of integration and to re-evaluate the different ways it has been measured so far.

Defining integration in the Netherlands

The term "immigrant integration" is conceptually elusive. Givens (2007) who reviews the research on immigrant integration in Europe, describes it broadly as "the processes that take place after an immigrant has moved to a new country" and "a two-way process, requiring accommodation by both the native and the immigrant populations" (p.72). Similarly, Klarenbeek (2019) offers a conceptualization of integration as a two-way process in which integration is not only limited to socio-economic outcomes and the members of the receiving society have responsibility to lift boundaries to outsiders' integration such as discrimination,

stereotypes, and stigmatization. In his book “Imagined Societies: A Critique of Immigrant Integration in Western Europe”, Schinkel (2017) who also scrutinizes the definitions of immigrant integration in the literature, remarks that immigrant integration “is hardly ever defined” but rather “conceived in the contemporary social science of its measurement” (p.74). In other words, the dominant understanding of integration has mainly been based on quantitative measurements of migrants’ socio-economic participation, language proficiency, attitudes toward liberal values, and identification with the host nation. In this respect, the Dutch case is particularly remarkable as the Netherlands is the first European country to officially start measuring and monitoring immigrant integration on national level starting in the mid-1980’s (Bijl & Verweij, 2012, cited in Schinkel, 2017). Also, the Netherlands has experienced arguably the most extreme frame shift from multiculturalism to assimilationism with regard to immigrant integration (Vasta, 2007). Entzinger (2014) calls this “the paradox of Dutch integration policies” (p.699) which between 1980’s and 2000’s were designed to facilitate immigrants’ socio-economic participation in society through maintenance of their own culture, language and traditions, while after 2000’s public figures and policymakers started to “blame” immigrants and their children for not identifying strongly enough with Dutch culture, and not adopting Dutch values and norms. After the shift to assimilationism, “social-cultural distinctiveness has come to be considered an obstacle to socio-economic participation” (Duyvendak & Scholten, 2012, p.279). Islam has emerged as the most prominent marker of immigrants’ “incompatible cultural traits” and it is framed as one of the main sources of immigrants’ integration problems in the Netherlands (Ghorashi, 2017, p.2429). Duyvendak (2011) calls this phenomenon “the culturalization of citizenship”: “a process in which emotions, feelings, norms and values, symbols and traditions (including religion) come to play a pivotal role in defining what can be expected of a Dutch citizen” (p.92). That is to say, the dominant understanding of integration in the Netherlands has changed from socio-economic emancipation to cultural assimilation: it is commonly understood as the degree of convergence of values and norms between natives and non-natives.

The role of mosque education

Mosque education is one of the most widely accessible ways for children’s socialization in Islamic worldview and lifestyle as all mosques provide some form of Islamic education. According to some sources, attendance rates are higher than 75% for Turkish Muslim

children in Amsterdam and Rotterdam (Phalet et al., 2012). Instruction at the mosques is unregistered with Dutch educational authorities. Turkish mosque education in the Netherlands is scheduled in extracurricular time, and it is attended by children between the ages of six and 16 from two hours up to 12 hours per week depending on the mosque's curriculum and facilities. Beside learning to read and recite the Qur'an, mosque students receive teachings in performance of Islamic rituals, life of the prophet, history of Islam, fundamentals of Islamic law and philosophy. Teaching Turkish language, history and traditions is also seen as one of the main learning objectives according to the providers (see Sözeri & Altinyelken, 2019 for a detailed discussion). Considering the importance attributed to norms and values in the integration debates, it is perhaps not surprising that particularly the role of imams has been perceived as pivotal in the integration of young Muslims (Sözeri et al., 2019). Foreign imams and mosque teachers have been often accused with inability to connect to the realities of diaspora youth (Kamp, 2008). Cherti and Bradley (2011) who surveyed 179 British mosques, report that mosque classes might potentially benefit social cohesion if imams and mosque teachers from overseas receive training to get acquainted with the British context. Based on evidence from British cooperation projects between schools and mosques, they argue that mosques can be instrumental in Muslim children's citizenship education and help them integrate better. Although research on the topic is scarce, in the Netherlands ter Avest and Bakker (2017) draw attention to efforts by imams who pay increasingly more attention to topics of youth radicalization and alienation in their mosque classes, through emphasizing the importance of respect and tolerance towards non-Muslims.

Others advance the counterintuitive claim that ethnically segregated youth activities organized by mosques actually have a positive impact on children's social integration. For example, Bartels and de Jong (2007) who studied the social activities and civic participation of four mosques in Amsterdam found that according to the mosque councils "activities aimed at strengthening their own identity contribute to social participation and integration; bonding is seen as a condition for bridging. Thus mosques focus more on bonding and see bonding as an activity of integration" (p.460). Similarly, Walseth (2016) who conducted research with seven mosques belonging to different congregations in Oslo, suggest that the sport activities offered by the mosques had an important role in preventing youth marginalization and building children's self-confidence as Norwegian Muslims through the bonding social capital acquired in the mosque. Walseth argues that participating in competitions against other

Norwegian sport clubs helped bridging across ethnic groups. In other words, the function of the mosque is seen not as alienating the children from the mainstream society, but as facilitating their participation in it by building their self-confidence as Muslims or offering positive affirmation to the stigmatized religious identity of the children.

The bonding and bridging social capital referred in the studies above are two concepts developed by Putnam (2000). He suggests that a higher degree of contact with natives creates a bridging capital for people with migration background, and hence, they have access to more resources in the mainstream society creating more personal advantages for them. Bridging capital is assumed to be promoting social integration and a sense of belonging to the mainstream society. On the other hand, higher degree of contact with members of the same ethnic group is assumed to create a bonding capital providing for a social support network with co-ethnics who share the same background, but frustrating integration into the mainstream society. Based on this conceptualization, mosque education would be expected to generate more bonding capital for the mosque students and presumably, hinder their access to bridging capital by limiting their spare time contacts with native Dutch peers. However, the aforementioned studies by Walseth (2016), and Bartels and de Jong (2007) defy this expectation. Moreover, while access to interethnic friendships and ethnic segregation are still relevant issues for youth integration, as discussed above the current political and academic debates in the Netherlands are primarily informed not by social participation but by notions of cultural integration of the Muslim citizens. Hence, the operational definition of integration in this study 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.

Data and methods

The study is based on 68 individual and four group interviews conducted between March 2016 and December 2017 with a total of 75 respondents. Group interviews were conducted only when individual interviews were not an option for the participants. The sample included imams, mosque teachers, parents of mosque students, educators specialized in diversity in education, chairs and board members of the largest Turkish and Islamic organizations, experts teaching in the Dutch Islamic theology and imam-training programs, academics

studying the Dutch-Muslim communities, journalists with expertise on Dutch Muslims, advisors on integration from the Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, and municipality officials from Amsterdam and Utrecht working in the field of diversity management and radicalization in the Netherlands. We used heterogeneous purposive sampling technique which allowed us to deliberately choose participants with relevant but different perspectives, experience, expertise or insider knowledge (Etikan et al., 2016). Table 14 provides an overview of the demographic characteristics of the different groups of respondents.

Table 14. Demographic characteristics of the interviewees.

	Imams (N=10)	Mosque teachers (N=9)	Chairs &board members of Islamic organizatio ns (N=15)	Parents (N=28)	Academic experts (N=4)	Policymake rs & advisors (N=5)	Journalists (N=2)	Educators (N=2)
Age range	27-53	19 - 49	25-63	32-52	43-62	32-62	30-34	30-44
Gender	10 men	7 women, 2 men	4 women, 11 men	25 women, 3 men	1 woman, 3 men	1 woman, 4 men	2 men	2 women
Education level	10 university	4 university, 1 HBO, 2 MBO, 3 Imam-hatip	9 university, 1 HBO, 5 secondary school	2 university, 1 HBO, 5 MBO, 1 LBO, 3 Imam-hatip, 4 secondary school, 12 primary school	4 university	3 university, 2 HBO	2 university	2 university
Nationality	7 NL&TR, 3 TR	7 NL&TR, 3 TR	10 NL&TR, 1 NL&MR, 3 TR, 1 NL	17 NL&TR, 10 TR, 1 NL	4 NL	3 NL&TR, 1 NL&MR, 1 NL	2 NL	2 NL
Years of residence (range)	2-42	2-27	2-43	12-38	43-62	32-55	30-34	30-44

Abbreviations: NL: Dutch; TR: Turkish; MR: Moroccan; HBO: University of applied sciences; MBO: Vocational secondary school; LBO: Lower vocational education; Imam-hatip: Islamic professional secondary school.

Diyamet, *Milli Görüş*, *Süleymanlı*, and the *Gülen* community are four major Turkish Islamic communities in Europe with a significant presence in the Netherlands. While *Diyamet* is governed by the Turkish state's Presidency of Religious Affairs, *Milli Görüş* and *Süleymanlı* are Islamic organizations which are independent from the Turkish state, setup abroad by the first generations of Turkish guest-workers. The majority of the respondents in

the sample were associated with *Diyanet* and *Milli Görüş*. Namely, five imams, three mosque teachers, and twelve parents were affiliated with *Diyanet* (N=20). Likewise, five imams, six mosque teachers, sixteen parents were affiliated with *Milli Görüş* (N=27). Three respondents (two chairs of educational centers and one journalist) were associated with the *Gülen* community also known as *Hizmet* movement (followers of the Turkish imam in exile Fethullah Gülen), distinguished by the other communities by building education centers instead of mosques and focusing on interreligious dialogue. One imam was affiliated with the *Süleymanlı*, which have a long tradition of organizing Qur'an courses in Turkey. There were six respondents who were chairs or board members of secular Turkish migrant organizations (i.e. not affiliated with any Islamic community). The sampling aimed at ideological diversity, however, respondents with *Diyanet* and *Milli Görüş* affiliation were justifiably overrepresented, as they are the main providers of Turkish mosque education in the Netherlands and have the largest student population.

Since there are widespread stereotypes about the low qualifications of the imams and mosque teachers, it is worth mentioning that all imams except one *Milli Görüş* imam, were university graduates of Islamic Theology. Three of the mosque teachers were university graduates of Islamic Theology, three were graduates of Islamic vocational high-schools, two had a pedagogical degree from university or a vocational school, and one was studying as dental assistant. In the analyses, the study employs the term *hoca* [hodja] which is used to refer to mosque teachers in Turkish. This is done to remain true to the cultural connotations of the original term and to avoid implying false professionalization of the teaching volunteers in the mosques, who are often unpaid and untrained as teachers. The prevalence of female *hocas* and mothers in the sample might be explained with the female identity of the primary researcher.

The interview questions focused on respondents' own understanding of integration and on the perceived role of mosque education in the integration of the mosque students. All interviews were conducted at a location convenient for the respondent (e.g. their home, office, or the mosque). The respondents were offered the choice to talk in English, Turkish or Dutch. The interviews with stakeholders lasted on average one hour, the interviews with the imams and *hocas*: 45 minutes, and the interviews with the parents: 30 minutes. At a *Diyanet* mosque, one *hoca*, and three parents did not wish their voice to be recorded but allowed us to take notes of the interviews instead. The audio recordings were verbatim transcribed, and all

transcriptions including the notes from the non-audio interviews were coded by the first author for the relevant theoretical concepts using the software program Atlas.ti version 8.4.23.0. The study relied on a deductive approach to coding: that is, a coding scheme was formulated prior to coding based on the literature review and applied to the texts. Some examples of themes in the coding scheme are linguistic proficiency, social participation, integration, cultural assimilation, religious identity maintenance, cultural accommodation, interethnic attitudes, perceived (in)congruency in norms and values, youth radicalization. The second author also coded two-thirds of the interviews, and the coding was cross-checked by the first and second author for inter-coder consensus. In case of disagreement (which was rare), the authors tried to justify their standpoints and reach an agreement. Subsequently, the coded texts were thematically analyzed for emerging patterns of meaning (Friese et al., 2018). Whenever needed, quotations used in the article were translated into English by the first author who is a native Turkish speaker with advanced Dutch language proficiency.

Findings

In the following sections we present our findings in the order of the asked research questions. Before proceeding to those we need to address that the respondents were also asked whether according to them second and third generation mosque students still experience integration difficulties. Among all respondents, twelve parents thought the children do not have integration problems anymore and hence, mosque education is irrelevant for their integration. The rest of the sample agreed that, indeed, second and third generation Muslim students (i.e. born and educated in the Netherlands) still experience integration problems, often different than the problems experienced by their parents and grandparents. To put it in the words of Hoca2 (*Diyamet*) who was also employed at a primary school as Islamic studies teacher:

Yes, these children still have integration problems. As a matter of fact, second and third generation have more integration problems, the first generation was luckier in this respect. These children are stuck in between.

Most respondents linked this to the shift in the mainstream understanding of integration: while two decades ago integration was achievable with labor market participation and knowledge of Dutch, today this was not considered enough anymore as “integration has become a kind of short hand for cultural assimilation” (Academic1). Some, however, attributed the integration problems of the children to the isolationist attitudes within the

Turkish community in the Netherlands saying that “there is not an integration but segregation problem” (Chair2, secular migrant organization), “children grow up within their own group” (Chair10, *Gülen*), “still have language problems: watch only Turkish television and become friends only with Turks” (Journalist2, *Gülen*).

Different understandings of integration

How do different actors define integration? Understanding this was instrumental to interpreting their responses about the role of mosque education. Particularly academics, chairs of migrant organizations and journalists commented without being prompted that the mainstream definition of integration in the Netherlands has perceivably shifted from expectations for social participation and linguistic proficiency, to cultural assimilation demands for adoption of Dutch norms, values and lifestyle. As one chair of a migrant organization put it: “The more you distance yourself from Turkishness and Islam, the better integrated you seem”. Imams, *hocas* and many parents, on the other hand, expressed that they perceive a mismatch between their understanding of integration and the one imposed by the state and the society: they felt that what could reasonably be expected from youth with migrant background is linguistic proficiency, respect for the laws of the country and social and economic participation, while staying true to their cultural and religious values. The vision of imams and *hocas* was considered pivotal, as they are likely to convey their ideas while teaching in the mosque classrooms. Below are selected excerpts which illustrate the dominant view of integration among this group:

Integration: living here under the Dutch flag without forgetting our own Turkish flag, that's it. It is making friends with them when mingling in social occasions, sharing foods and drinks, but without drinking alcohol or eating pork, right? (...) I mean, we don't tell them to just do their business and separate their paths. We also talk about good neighborly relations in our classes. This also means integration to some extent. (...) But after all we have to be realistic: The Dutch state expects our people, our Ahmet, Mehmet, Ayşe to behave like Dutch. The education which we provide here is of course against that, isn't it? For example, while a typical Dutch family would sip their wine in the evening, we are telling them here that this is sinful. Of course, the children would not adopt their lifestyle and would not adjust to it. In other words, we need to accept that, yes, there are things like that. But according to us this is not a bad

thing. What we are telling them is that we can very well live together without sacrificing our own beliefs. (Imam1, *Diyanet*)

What I understand from integration is communities living together while respecting each other's differences. In this regard, it also means not exacerbating the differences, not polarizing them to such an extent that they become a reason for a conflict. For example, it means congratulating your Dutch neighbors when they have a holiday, and they congratulating you in return when you have a holiday. It is living together by respecting each other's lifestyle and beliefs. This is integration. (Imam5, *Milli Görüş*)

The quotations above contain a pattern which was repeated in the interviews with all imams, *hocas*, and chairs/board members of Islamic organizations. In their perspective integration was understood as peaceful cohabitation of the different communities in the Dutch society, defined by following the Dutch laws and regulations, contributing to the economy, respecting each other's differences without necessarily losing their own convictions even if they contradict some Dutch customs. References to national symbols such as the flags, and cultural codes like drinking wine and eating pork, highlighting where the belonging of the students lies by calling them "our" are examples of drawing the acceptable boundaries of integration.

Parental understandings of integration resonated with imams' and *hocas*' views. Many defined their "Dutchness" through citizenship ties only, and referred to participation in the labor market, paying taxes, and following the laws as main markers of integration. What is more, some parents like this mother expressed that they would not like their children to integrate if integration means adopting Dutch lifestyle and values:

I don't want them to integrate because I'd like them to stay true to their own culture. Let's face it: if they integrate, they will eat, drink, go out like the Dutch. They will treat their families and friends like the Dutch. This is what the Netherlands wants. Parents can't have a say in their children's life once they turn 18, and they think they can move out of the house or start dating. (...) But of course, we live in this country, in a way it is really our second homeland. So, I'd like them to integrate in the working and social life and abide by the state system here. (Parent26, *Milli Görüş*)

Many parents shared the view that the current generation does not have the integration problems of their parents as they are more proficient in Dutch, attend Dutch schools and have Dutch friends. However, parents were concerned that the children still face challenges of being accepted as Muslims, or with finding a balance between their different identities. Some parents (Parent7, Parent9 at *Diyamet*, Parent26, Parent27, Parent24 at *Milli Görüş*) referred to cases of discrimination and exclusion at school such as banning girls from wearing the headscarf, teachers insisting on more revealing clothing during gym classes, naked showers after swimming lessons, and Islam-related bullying by peers. They perceived those as significant obstacles to children's integration and belonging to the Dutch society.

Most stakeholders among which particularly chairs and board members of secular migrant organizations, policy-makers and municipality advisors voiced an understanding of integration which emphasized social participation, knowledge of Dutch culture and language, embracing Dutch norms, and claiming a Dutch or hyphenated Turkish-Dutch identity instead of prioritizing being Turkish or Muslim. Some, like the chair of an Islamic umbrella organization representing mosques from different sects and ethnicities, advocated the replacement of the term integration with "inter-creation". In her view, this term acknowledges the non-static nature of culture and provides a more equal basis for shaping culture and society by contributing to it together. Correspondingly, a pedagogue providing trainings to schools for inclusive education practices, voiced a similar understanding of integration as a "situation in which diverse people can contribute and give others the opportunity to contribute to the society they live in". It was observed that very often actors' definition of integration and perception of mosque education's role in it were shaped by whether or not they adhere to a secular worldview (i.e. their view on the space religion has in the public realm), rather than their religious or ethnic background.

Aiding or frustrating integration?

A global evaluation of our findings shows that two thirds of the respondents in our sample (or 49 out of 75) think that mosque education could have an assisting role in the integration of the mosque students. Sixteen respondents see mosque education as irrelevant for children's integration. This groups consists of the 12 parents who think their children do not have integration problems anymore, and four experts who justify their position with the allegedly irrelevant content, poor organization and implementation of mosque education. Ten

respondents are concerned that mosque education could have a frustrating role for integration. Table 15 further breaks down the responses for the different categories of respondents.

Table 15. What is the role of mosque education in the integration of the mosque students?

	Assisting role	Frustrating role	Irrelevant role
Imams (N=10)	10	0	0
Hocas (N=9)	9	0	0
Parents (N=28)	15	1	12
Chairs & board members of Turkish & Islamic migrant organizations (N=15)	9	6	0
Academics (N= 4)	2	0	2
Policymakers & advisors (N= 5)	3	2	0
Journalists (N=2)	0	1	1
Educators (N=2)	1	0	1
Total	49	10	16

Potential for aiding integration: teaching values of respect and tolerance, positive identity affirmation, countering radicalization

Two-thirds of all respondents saw a potential in mosque education to aid the integration of the mosque students. However, many did so conditionally. That is: the respondents - among which imams, *hocas* and chairs of Islamic organizations as well - used expressions such as “if it is done well”, “if the mosque administration adopts this as a goal and vision”, “if the imams and *hocas* are trained accordingly”, and “if there is cooperation between mosques and schools”. An academic expert commented the following:

If it is done well, it can have a positive effect because in Holland children have to defend themselves, especially youngsters. “Oh, you are a Muslim, oh, that means you are Bin Laden”: that means you have to become vocal and aware of what they can say to protect themselves. I think it can even protect them from radicalizing.

A senior policy advisor on integration from the Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs agreed: he expressed that mosque classes can help the children to respond to exclusionary discourse used by far-right politicians and their followers:

Youth growing up here is constantly reminded of their difference as Muslims. If they do not know exactly what Islam is, they feel lost and express their anger in different ways. Hence, I am sure that mosque education can contribute to integration if organized and implemented well.

The same conditional potential was highlighted by a young second generation Turkish-Dutch social entrepreneur whose company provided trainings and workshops to schools and mosques about social inequalities and institutional racism. He observed that at least one quarter of the Turkish-Dutch youth does not identify themselves with the Netherlands and even higher numbers are raised in ethnically segregated neighborhoods without any interaction with native Dutch peers until they reach adulthood. He claimed that mosque education has an untapped potential to aid the integration of these children, but only if it is reformed. In his view, mosques have to evaluate whether religious education is only about learning the basic principles of Islam, or whether they would do something about the experiences of children with segregation, racism and discrimination: “They have to also give them guidance how to deal with the challenges Muslim students face in their daily lives here”. Another young second generation board member of an Islamic umbrella organization also saw that potential: mosque education, he argued, was beneficial for affirming positively the Islamic identity of the students, so that they would not feel insecure about themselves in their interactions with non-Muslims. But it could achieve more if mosques recognized that they have “responsibility to not only provide Qur’anic education but also citizenship education just as provided at school” on topics about being a Muslim in a non-Muslim society, attitudes towards homosexuality and general sexuality education.

The Turkish director of a *Gülen*-affiliated education center also expressed that mosque education could contribute to the integration of the children, depending on how it is organized and who is giving the classes. He explained:

For example, it is impossible for imams coming from Turkey to affect the lives of children born here positively. But if imams who come to the mosques have certain level of Dutch language and culture, and if they are open to cooperation with all

ethnic and religious groups here, then mosque education can play a positive role for the children. But for this, mosques need to develop projects for cooperation with all communities, they need to become more open for everyone.

On the other hand, there was a consensus between the imams and *hocas* that the mosque classes already have a positive impact on children's integration. Similar to some of the arguments above, Imam2 (*Milli Görüş*) underlined the importance of having good knowledge of Islam, Turkish history and traditions for the self-confidence of the children when interacting with the native Dutch. Many referred to the positive influence of the universal values of respect, tolerance, kindness and good morals taught in the mosque classes. Yet others gave examples about the role their teachings play in advancing moderate Islam and in countering extremist tendencies and youth radicalization. In doing so, they also distinguished themselves from other Islamic communities in the Netherlands, who were portrayed as the sources of threat:

When you look at our Arab brothers, their understanding of Islam is very different than ours. The Netherlands has mostly problem with the Arab interpretation of Islam, because there are many from that community who join terrorist organizations. However, the possibility of someone educated in our mosques to join ISIS or another terrorist group is out of the question. It's never heard of. In our mosques, we spread the Anatolian understanding of Islam. (Imam4, *Diyanet*)

With regard to the role of the mosque education in children's identity development, the imams and *hocas* acknowledged that strengthening children's Islamic and Turkish identity is, indeed, one of the goals of the mosque classes. In their view, children were already learning Dutch language and culture at school. Some respondents (Imam1 at *Diyanet*, and Hoca5, Hoca7 at *Milli Görüş*) claimed that based on their observations, the students were successful in combining their Turkish, Dutch and Muslim identity without any issues. They supported their claims with examples about children's preference for talking in Dutch with each other in the mosque (while the medium of instruction is Turkish), and children's excitement about celebrating non-Muslim holidays such as Halloween beside the traditional Muslim holidays.

Parents who believed that mosque classes can aid integration processes, provided different arguments for their reasoning. Similar to Hoca2 (*Diyanet*) and other stakeholders,

Parent4, Parent8, Parent11 and Parent12 (*Diyanet*) suggested that mosque classes can have a positive role if there were more cooperation projects between the schools and the mosques that could help building bridges between the two communities. Currently, there was no collaboration they knew of. Many (Parent17, Parent18, Parent23, Parent25 at *Milli Görüş*, Parent7 at *Diyanet*) pointed out that mosque classes can assist integration because they teach the children to respect, accept and form better relationships with the Dutch by the virtue of being a “spiritual education teaching the children to distinguish right from wrong” (Parent2, *Diyanet*) aiming “to raise good people” (Parent16, *Milli Görüş*). Others, such as Parent19 and Parent22 (*Milli Görüş*) said that “fear from Allah” which the children learn at the mosque teaches them to be useful for the society they live in.

Potential for frustrating integration: challenges in reconciling Islamic values and liberal norms, alienation from Dutch society, and indoctrination with Turkish state propaganda

Although most respondents perceived mosque education as (possibly) beneficial to children’s integration, there was a group of ten respondents who was concerned about its impact. Many parents voiced that their children became more religious after starting mosque classes. This was expressed in children’s desire to start wearing a headscarf (Parent7, *Diyanet*), or being offended after seeing negative news about Muslims on television (Parent27, *Milli Görüş*). Parents mostly interpreted the increased religiosity of their children positively, even when they reckoned that mosque classes might be distancing the children from feeling Dutch (Parent24, *Milli Görüş*). Parent3 (*Diyanet*), however, was an exception. She valued autonomy and was worried that her daughter would sacrifice too much of her liberties for the sake of Islam. Nevertheless, according to her, parental role modeling was very important in counteracting any undesirable influences from the mosque classes:

For example, even now when I wear make-up my daughter warns me that this is not allowed in Islam and I shouldn’t do it. I answer that I am an adult and I can choose for myself. She tells me that she will put on a headscarf when she becomes 12 years old. I try to be careful on this subject. I tell her that it is up to her whether she will wear a headscarf or not. But I make it clear that if she decides to wear headscarf some of her freedoms will be limited.

It was not only parents like her who were worried about the impact of a possible value clash on the students. Some imams and *hocas*, for example, although holding the belief that

mosque classes benefit integration, nevertheless expressed worries about children experiencing identity crisis or value confusion. To illustrate, Hoca3 (*Diyanet*) argued that mosque students manage to become neither fully Dutch, nor fully Turkish and Muslim. According to her, they speak broken Turkish, study Islam but normalize homosexuality, and try to follow Dutch lifestyle (e.g. dating and holding hands) within the limitations imposed by their family and religion. Hoca1 (*Diyanet*) agreed with this view by pointing to the role of the school in “assimilating” the mosque students into the Dutch values and culture to the extent that they are at least “50% Dutch and 50% Turkish”: she said that even her own children are as different than her as “black from white”. Likewise, Hoca8 (*Milli Görüş*), observed that their students “feel more Dutch than Turkish”: even if they would wear a headscarf, their lifestyle choices, tastes and behavior would reflect Dutch rather than Turkish culture. This, she claimed, gave rise to another issue: the Dutch-Turkish youth feeling alienated both in Turkey and in the Netherlands. Hoca4 (*Milli Görüş*) remarked that although the majority of the mosque students are coping well with growing up in two cultures, there are some extreme cases in which adolescent students experience psychological problems which trigger drug or alcohol addiction, or even suicide thoughts. He shared the stories of a few of his students who sought either his or imam’s help in such situations: “What pushes the youth into this path is either reaction to their identity, or to their family, to their environment. When they can’t find an escape there, their search for help leads them back to the imam”.

Concerns about the potential of mosque education to alienate children from the Dutch society were voiced by other actors as well. A chair of a leftist Turkish migrant organization, for instance, argued that while he defends the rights of the religious Turks to practice Islam in the mosques, he nevertheless thinks that mosques should not have the right to provide education because of lack of transparency on the side of the Turkish Islamic organizations about the content of their education. He argued that it could be enforcing isolationist attitudes:

I will give you a concrete example: if an imam says to children with Turkish background in the Netherlands “Do not go to swimming pools together with the Dutch children, they are like pigs”, then it is an obstacle to integration.

For him, it did not matter whether this was a widespread phenomenon: it was a cause for concern even if only few imams spread messages of intolerance and hostility towards the Dutch.

A chair of a Gülenist education center also claimed that Islamic education provided particularly by *Diyamet* mosques which are governed by the Turkish state, have the potential to alienate the children from the Dutch society: “They impose them an identity and orientation towards Turkey, and these unavoidably affect their attitude toward the Dutch society negatively. I even sometimes think they cause hostile feelings in the children”. Two board members and a chair of another secular Turkish migrant organization shared his view: they were worried that adolescents who were born and raised in the Netherlands could be easily galvanized by mosques to protest on the Dutch streets for Turkey while they are barely familiar with Turkish politics (referring to the Rotterdam protests during a diplomatic crisis between the Netherlands and Turkey¹⁰).

In a similar line, two municipality advisors on diversity and integration observed that mosque education might contain elements of Muslim countries’ citizenship education which might not be compatible with the goals of Dutch citizenship education at schools. They were critical and distrustful of the activities which some mosques profiled as benefitting integration:

They have an approach saying “look, how much we are doing about integration” and point to the homework assistance they provide to support children at Dutch schools. But this is not about support, it is about identity. Only that they have a very different and traditional understanding of what is identity: it still means orthodox Islam plus the regime. It does not matter whether it is the regime of Turkey or Morocco. (Advisor1)

These arguments are intrinsically linked to accusations of indoctrination with foreign state propaganda which are widespread in public debates. A chair of a Moroccan migrant organization argued that mosque education contributes to “ghetto-forming”, and that the classes are not based on a “theology of emancipation” but a political theology which serves migrants’ state of origin. Likewise, a Turkish journalist affiliated with a Gülenist media

¹⁰ See “Netherlands expels Turkish Minister as Diplomatic Row Escalates”:

<https://www.dw.com/en/netherlands-expels-turkish-minister-as-diplomatic-row-escalates/a-37908208>

outlet claimed that some of the Turkish-Dutch children grow up in closed communities with cultural and social orientation only towards Turkish state. He claimed that *Diyanet* mosques had a very big role in that: “There is the long arm of Ankara, *Diyanet* (...). They constantly want to keep the diaspora here under control. This is why the Turks here cannot integrate.” This resonates with recent studies suggesting that *Diyanet* has been instrumentalized by the Turkish state as a foreign policy tool to exercise continuous influence over Turkish-Muslim migrants abroad (Öztürk & Sözeri, 2018).

Discussion and conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceived role of mosque education in the integration of Muslim children with Turkish background in the Netherlands according to imams, *hocas*, parents of mosque students, and key societal stakeholders. Looking back at the theoretical conceptualizations of integration in the literature, it becomes apparent that there is a large overlap between the imam’s, *hocas*’ and parents’ perspectives on integration and a socio-economic understanding of integration. There is an agreement among imams, *hocas*, parents, and chairs of Islamic organizations about the importance of Dutch language proficiency, educational achievement, participation in the labor market and positive relations with the native Dutch. The divergence in understanding between mainstream notion of integration and those of the Muslim respondents in this study seems to arise when it comes to the adoption of liberal values, “Dutch” lifestyle and identification with the host nation. This is exemplified by the references of the imams and *hocas* to the importance of adhering to Islamic code of conduct and values while taking part in Dutch society, and parental fears about the cultural assimilation of their children.

The study reveals that two thirds of the participants are convinced that mosque education could potentially benefit the integration of the children. Many argue that this potential can be realized if mosques employ imams and *hocas* who are familiar with Dutch language and culture, who address integration challenges, and make space for topics around sexuality and citizenship education in the mosque classrooms. According to imams and *hocas*, mosque classes assist children’s integration by teaching them good morals, and universal values of respect and tolerance to culturally different communities. Imams and *hocas*, just like many parents, saw the role of mosque education in disciplining good citizens for the Netherlands who would abide by the laws and participate in the society by studying

and working. Also, echoing the observations by ter Avest and Bakker (2017), mosque education's contribution to integration was seen in its potential to avert youth radicalization: some imams underlined how their classes teach about moderate "Anatolian" version of Islam. However, in doing so they engaged in boundary-drawing and othering Arabic-speaking Islamic communities in the Netherlands, by distinguishing Turkish mosques from them and portraying Arabic mosques as a threat which needs to be monitored. Nevertheless, contrary to providers of mosque education, almost half of the parents in this study did not agree that mosque education can play a role in children's integration, either because they thought this generation does not have integration problems anymore or because they attached more importance to the role of school and parents.

In line with findings by Bartels and de Jong (2007) and Walseth (2016), many respondents from almost each group in the sample seemed to appreciate the role of mosque classes in building children's confidence in their Muslim and Turkish identity. According to them, thanks to mosque education the children are equipped to reply questions with regard to who they are without hesitation, and hence, more confident when interacting with non-Muslims. Nevertheless, differently than what is suggested by Bartels and de Jong (2007) and Walseth (2016), this study found no support for the claim that mosque education can also assist the children in creating bridging social capital. On the contrary, some respondents voiced concerns about the potential of mosque classes in aggravating ethnic segregation unless mosques develop a conscious policy to tackle the issue. This is a concern which needs attention because neighborhood and school segregation are already at very high levels in the Netherlands, and school-aged children seem to be affected at much higher degree than adults (Boterman, 2019).

In Givens' (2007) and Klarenbeek's (2019) terms, integration is supposed to be a two-way process of mutual accommodation, and while some imams and stakeholders shared this view, parental accounts show that students are often not accommodated as Muslims at school and face exclusion. Likewise, accounts by municipality advisors imply that mosque classes are not seen as a form of education which needs to be accommodated: on the contrary, their influence is perceived as undesirable and harmful. Our findings indicate that fears of alienation of the children from the Dutch society and concerns about indoctrination with Turkish state propaganda play an important role in different actors' distrust in the potential of mosques to become a partner in creating a more cohesive society. On the other hand, just like

in the British example (Cherti & Bradley, 2011), the findings suggest that a cooperation between mosques, schools and youth care institutions could be instrumental in assisting the integration challenges which mosque students face. The warning concerns about the psychological wellbeing of Muslim youth who might experience identity crisis and mental problems should be addressed as an important aspect of the problem. Our findings imply that imams, mosque and schoolteachers need to be aware of the risks of value confusion and make safe space in their classrooms to reflect on possible tensions between the norms and values taught at the two learning environments. Local policy-makers might benefit communities by investigating the possibilities for cooperation between mosques and schools, and developing concrete strategies for assistance of the mosque communities including workshops and trainings to imams and other mosque educators on topics which are socially relevant for the Muslim youth's lives in the Netherlands.

Lastly, it should be acknowledged that the study is based on self-reports of a limited number of respondents about Turkish mosque education in the Netherlands, and hence, does not allow for generalizations to all Turkish mosques in the Netherlands, or to other Islamic communities neither in the Netherlands, nor elsewhere. Moreover, it does not include perspectives of mosque students on their own integration. Future research focusing on mosque students' experiences and reflections on their own identities and sense of belonging might provide valuable insights and evaluate better the role of mosque education in children's lives.