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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 7

General Conclusion and Discussion

This dissertation aimed at exploring the portrayal and practice of mosque education and its role in the integration of Turkish-Dutch children in the Netherlands. In this final chapter, I first summarize the main findings of each study. This is followed by a discussion where I connect the findings of the different studies to each other and reflect on the contribution of my research to the field with particular attention to new insights emerging from the findings. I end the chapter by addressing the limitations of the studies in this dissertation, offering directions for future research and presenting final remarks about the implications of the findings for policy and practice.

Portrayal in the Dutch press

In the light of the scarcity of existing research on mosque education, this thesis started with an investigation of the portrayal of mosque classes in five major Dutch newspapers. This had the purpose of situating the studied topic within the public and political debates about it. In chapter two, a content analysis of the discourses in the Dutch press between 2010 and 2016 showed that mosque education is portrayed overwhelmingly in negative light, with a frequent focus on problematic associations, and a rhetoric of perceived threat and alleged incompatibility of civic values and mosque education.

In the majority of the instances, the news was narrated by non-Muslim figures: the voices of the Muslim children, parents, and providers of mosque education were largely absent. References to the pedagogical practices of the mosques were dominated by the allegations of corporal punishment. In the same line, some press discourses depicted the pedagogies of the mosque classes as authoritarian and fear-based, relying on rote learning and indoctrination done by imams and mosque teachers who lack proper pedagogical training. Other key issues highlighted in the media portrayals were reinforcement of conservative gender norms and separation of sexes at the mosque classes, links with religious extremism, and undesirable effect on social cohesion. Mosque classes were said to increase ethnic

segregation by limiting Muslim children's exposure to non-Muslim peers, and hence to Dutch language and culture in their spare time.

There were very few references to a possible positive influence of mosque education. Some of those referred to possible benefits to students' attitudes to learning (e.g. by teaching them discipline which helped them perform better at school). Others highlighted the role of mosque education in offering positive recognition to the otherwise stigmatized Muslim identity of the children.

Practice: What are children being taught in the mosque?

Having identified the main themes in the discourses on mosque education in the printed media, the third chapter shifted the analytical focus from portrayal to actual practice. Namely, it sought to explore the organization of Turkish mosque education in the Netherlands with regard to its curriculum, learning objectives, content of teaching materials and language policies. The study was based on diverse body of data from the three largest Turkish Islamic organizations in the country (*Diyanet*, *Milli Görüş* and *Süleymanlıs*): semi-structured interviews with imams and mosque teachers (N = 9), with experts and stakeholders (N=38), nine classroom observations, and fieldwork notes from one expert meeting on mosque education and two roundtables. The findings of the study presented actual numbers about the size of the student population attending Turkish mosque classes and revealed a number of similarities and differences between the educational practices of the different communities.

Important similarities in the studied mosques included, for example, the existence of good physical conditions mimicking school classrooms, the shared objectives of providing mosque education, expressed primarily in instilling Islamic and Turkish identity in the children, similarity in content focused on teaching reading the Qur'an, the pillars of Islam, the basics of Islamic ethics and rules of conduct, the life of the prophet, and maintaining Turkish as the main language of instruction and an informal learning goal in itself. Even so, imams and mosque teachers experienced the low proficiency of the children in Turkish as a barrier in connecting with them. Differences between the communities were found to be related to the extent of standardization of the curriculum and the availability of own teaching materials and textbooks developed for use in the mosque classes outside of Turkey. In this regard, it was found that *Milli Görüş* had more systematically arranged curriculum and

textbooks than *Diyamet* and *Süleymanlıs*, the latter being most flexible with compiling teaching materials from different sources.

Nevertheless, the content of the textbooks was evaluated by some imams and mosque teachers (from each community) as insufficiently oriented towards the issues of living an Islamic life in a non-Muslim context. Moreover, the presence of curriculum content on Turkish citizenship (i.e. teaching the Turkish national anthem and textbook chapters identifying Turkey as a fatherland) was found to significantly distinguish the curriculum and teaching activities at the *Diyamet* mosques from the other two communities.

Pedagogies: How does teaching and learning happen in the Turkish mosque classes?

Chapter four then used an ethno-case study approach to examine the different pedagogies practiced in the classrooms of one *Diyamet* and one *Milli Görüş* mosque in the Netherlands. The study was based on nine classroom observations in eight different classes attended by 90 students, and 10 semi-structured interviews with imams and mosque teachers at both communities. The findings suggest that the teaching practices in both mosques reflect the fundamental Islamic educational principles *tarbiyah*, *ta'lim*, *ta'dib*, and *tajweed*, according to which care for the spiritual development and moral growth of the child is seen as important as the memorization of prayers and the transfer of religious knowledge.

However, the study also identified that Islamic primary source pedagogies (Alkouatli, 2018) are implemented in varying degrees, and not prioritized equally. To specify, the findings showed that the principle of differentiated learning (an aspect of Relational Pedagogies), expressed in paying attention to the individual learning needs of the students, was an integral part of all observed Qur'an classes. That meant that each student was allocated one-to-one teaching time during which the mosque teacher or imam would correct students' pronunciation and check their progress. The principle of "doing together" (informed by the Pedagogies of Mutual Engagement) which stimulates the bonding of the community of learners, was also observed in both communities. Examples of implementation ranged from encouraging the mosque students to join the communal prayer *namaz* after their mosque lessons, to playing educational games in the classes, and organizing social outings such as swimming, football matches and theme park trips together with the mosque class. In contrast to these, the Pedagogies of Conscious Awareness accentuating critical questioning by the students were found to be less valued by the imams and mosque teachers and were used to a

much lesser degree in the observed classes. One *Milli Görüş* teacher even referred to critical questioning of the Islamic knowledge given in the lessons as a solved “problem” which does not happen anymore.

That being said, the study has also found evidence in both communities for pedagogical renewal based on borrowing motivation, discipline and class management strategies from mainstream education, accompanied by attempts to provide some form of pedagogical training to all teaching volunteers. Self-reports of imams and mosque teachers suggested that all forms of corporal punishment are extinct and condemned as an unacceptable disciplining method in the mosque classrooms. While all imams reported to have followed pedagogical formation as part of their Islamic Theology degree, the availability of pedagogical trainings and in-house support for the mosque teachers was found to be better arranged by *Milli Görüş*. Such provisions seemed to influence mosque teachers’ own perception of the quality of the mosque education they provide. Another finding which seemed to have implications for the perceived pedagogical quality of the mosque classes pertained to the difficulty of internal checks by the female educational coordinator in the classes of male mosque teachers and imams at the *Milli Görüş*. Last but not least, it was found that what differentiates the teaching practices of both communities most are the pedagogy of national identity building which was identified in a much more pronounced manner in the *Diyanet* classrooms. This is a major finding which merits further attention in the discussion section below.

Training of Dutch imams

Chapter five brought into the picture an important and relevant aspect of mosque education: the lack of imams who are trained in the Netherlands, and familiar with the Dutch socio-political context and the needs of Dutch Muslims. Based on interviews with 38 key stakeholders (among which academics teaching in the Dutch imam trainings, imams, mosque teachers, and chairs of Islamic organizations), the study investigated the reasons behind the failure of the state-funded Islamic theology programs and imam-trainings at the Dutch universities. The analyses were guided by historical accounts on de-pillarization of Dutch society and different understandings of Dutch secularism.

The findings challenge the official rhetoric on “separation of church and state” maintained both by Turkey and the Netherlands. Although both countries identify themselves

as institutionally secular, religious matters are found to have a significant impact on their governmental policymaking in the field of education and foreign policy, and in that sense bear the characteristics of “post-secular consciousness” (Habermas, 2008). In the case of Turkey, this is expressed in the unwillingness of *Diyanet* (the Turkish Presidency for Religious Affairs) to collaborate with the Netherlands for local imam-trainings out of concerns about losing control over the messages transmitted in its Dutch mosques. In the case of the Netherlands, on the other hand, funding Islamic theology programs is seemingly in line with the constitutional principle of equal treatment of religious groups. However, it actually conflicts with the ideology of minimal state interference in religious affairs as differently than Islamic primary and secondary schools, the Islamic higher education programs were not only not initiated by the Islamic communities themselves, but the communities were also not involved to a significant degree in their setup.

Most importantly, the study identified three main explanatory arguments for the failure of the Dutch initiatives for professional Islamic higher education: Islamic communities’ lack of trust in the intentions of the Dutch government, lack of confidence in the expertise of the non-Muslim academics teaching the programs, and the refusal of *Diyanet* to cooperate with the universities for the establishment of the programs. Informed by these reasons, I present our recommendations for future Islamic higher education programs in the last section.

Mosque education: Aiding or frustrating integration?

Finally, the study in chapter six dealt with one of the central and most controversial questions in this thesis: what is the role of mosque education in the integration of children with Turkish migrant background? In what ways could it be aiding or frustrating the integration of the mosque students? These questions were asked to all adult participants in this PhD research including imams, mosque teachers, experts, key stakeholders, and parents of the mosque students (N= 75). To be able to make better sense of the participants’ stances on the role of mosque education, the study started by exploring what the different actors understand from integration and how those understandings overlap with the mainstream idea of integration in the Dutch society. It was revealed that imams’, mosque teachers’, and parental perspectives are dominated by a socio-economic notion of integration. In other words, this group viewed integration as achievable through Dutch language proficiency, school success, participation in

the labor market and good interactions with the native Dutch. However, a review of the literature has shown that the current understanding of integration in the Dutch society has shifted from socio-economic participation to expectations for cultural adjustment and assimilation. This constitutes a main point of divergence as Muslim respondents in this study were vocal about the importance of being able to take part in society as practicing Muslims, without giving up their Islamic lifestyle and values.

The findings of the study are interesting: two thirds of all participants held the opinion that mosque education has the potential to assist the integration processes of the mosque students, 16 participants did not see any potential as they viewed mosque education as irrelevant for integration, and 10 participants expressed concerns about the potential of mosque education to have a negative impact on children's integration in the Dutch society. Many of the participants who were positive about the influence of mosque education often underlined that the beneficial effect would depend on mosques' conscious attempts in this sphere. In other words, an aiding role would depend on whether mosques strive to: (1) include a vision on citizenship and integration issues in its educational policy, and (2) employ imams and mosque teachers who are familiar not only with the Dutch language and culture, but also with the challenges faced by Muslim students growing up in a Western country.

Imams, mosque teachers, and many parents were convinced that mosque classes already assist children's integration by teaching them to be morally responsible citizens who tolerate cultural differences and respect the rules and regulations of the society they live in. Particularly imams also highlighted the contribution of mosque education to integration via its efforts to counter youth radicalization by promoting the teachings of moderate "Anatolian" Islam (as opposed to the orthodox teachings of some Salafi mosques, for example).

Contrary to imams and mosque teachers, almost half of the parents in the sample and four other stakeholders (academic experts, pedagogues and journalists) held the belief that mosque education cannot play a role in the integration of their children, either because they thought that the children do not have integration problems anymore or because they saw the content of the mosque classes as irrelevant.

Lastly, a group of ten respondents (including representatives of different Gülenist and leftist Turkish migrant organizations, and municipality advisors on integration and radicalization), were critical with regard to the influence of mosque education on youth

integration. The dominant concerns were related to fears about undesirable content of the mosque classes which might be alienating the students from the Dutch society by spreading messages of intolerance towards the Dutch, and Turkish state propaganda which might be incompatible with the goals of citizenship education at schools. Particularly *Diyanet* has been singled out in its attempts to keep the Turkish diaspora under control. It is noteworthy that some imams, mosque teachers and parents – who thought that mosque education might aid integration - nevertheless reported their observations about the challenges experienced by some mosque students in reconciling Islamic values with liberal gender attitudes and sexual norms, and raised their concerns about the potential of identity crisis and value confusion.

Discussion

In this section, I will highlight connections between the findings of the different studies in this PhD thesis and the insights brought about by them. First, I would like to draw attention to some unique contributions of this research to the existing knowledge about mosque education in the Netherlands. The findings of the study on organization of Turkish mosque education provided quantified information about the size of the student population attending Turkish mosque classes in two of the largest Turkish Islamic communities in the Netherlands, *Diyanet* and *Milli Görüş*: 15,000 and 5,000 students respectively (figures from November 2016). The third community *Sülyemanlıs* which is comparable in size to *Milli Görüş*, reported that their student body comprises of ‘thousands of students’, which would suggest that the total size would easily approximate 25,000 mosque students from Turkish background only. When compared to the figures of the total number of students of all ethnic backgrounds attending Islamic primary schools in the Netherlands: 15,078 (DUO, 2018), this finding tells us what was previously only inferred by the results of other studies (Driessen & Merry, 2006; Cherti & Bradley, 2011; Phalet et al., 2012): that, indeed, the number of Muslim children attending mosque classes is much greater than the children enrolled in regular Islamic schools. What is more, supporting observations by Cherti and Bradley (2011) and van de Wetering and Karagül (2013) about the struggle of mosque associations to accommodate the high parental demand for classes, this research also presented evidence that the demand for mosque education is higher than the supply capacity as both case-study mosques had waiting lists for enrolment of students. These findings reconfirm the social and scientific need to know more about the educational practices of the mosques which offer tens of thousands of Dutch students values education beyond mainstream schooling.

Secondly, it is good to underline what this research revealed about the contrast between portrayal and actual practice of mosque education in the Netherlands. The study on the organization of mosque education in the three Turkish Islamic communities, showed that the physical conditions of the mosque classrooms are in reality much better than the dark portrayals in the press. Classrooms not only in the two case-study mosques (which might have been exemplary as best practices), but also in the other Turkish mosques visited for interviews during the fieldwork were equipped just as regular school classrooms. The findings about practice revealed that providers of mosque education attached importance to offering a learning environment which would be as similar as possible to the school environment which the children are familiar with. The mosques did not simulate only the physical conditions of the schools, but also to varying degrees the pedagogical approaches with regard to motivation, discipline and classroom management. The observed mosque classes provided evidence for reformed pedagogical practices which incorporated child-friendly, play-based and interactive teaching techniques. This is in sharp contrast to the dominant portrayal of the pedagogies of mosque education as almost exclusively relying on fear-based, authoritarian teaching strategies, and corporal punishment as a disciplining method. Good physical conditions and reformed pedagogical practices come forth as significant aspects of improvements in the quality of the offered education.

In this regard, this PhD research reinforces the previous findings of the studies conducted by Pels and colleagues on the pedagogies of mosque education in the Netherlands (Pels et al., 2006; Pels et al., 2006a; Pels et al., 2006b), in which the researchers point out the positive changes in the teaching practices in mosque classrooms. In contrast to the British context described by Cherti and Bradley (2011), corporal punishment is not acceptable in any learning environment in the Netherlands and can be reported to public health authorities (GGD). It is remarkable that the simulation practices of mainstream education happen in the absence of collaboration between schools and mosques, but the results of the study on pedagogies in chapter four hint that teaching experience in Dutch schools (beside level of education, generation and general exposure to the Dutch education system) appears to have an effect in this respect. This echoes previous findings by the British study of Noh and colleagues (2014) who pointed out that mosque teachers often transfer pedagogical skills obtained in mainstream schools to their Qur'an classes. In other words, albeit scarce, the existing literature on pedagogies of mosque education in non-Muslim contexts, already

indicated ongoing pedagogical reforms and borrowing from mainstream education (see also Altinyelken & Sözeri, 2018). In addition to these, the study of the pedagogies in this thesis exposed the difficulty of internal checks due to gender-related power imbalances: the female educational coordinator reported the challenge of giving corrective feedback in the classes of male mosque teachers and imams. In the lack of external inspections, this might have serious implications for ensuring (or improving) the quality of the provided education.

Thirdly, building upon existing research on academic programs for imams in the Netherlands by Ghaly (2008), Johansen (2006), and Meuleman (2012), this research contributed to a new and better understanding of the reasons behind the failure of the Dutch university initiatives for imam training and Islamic theology. This is important as the findings of the studies on the organization of Turkish mosque education, its pedagogies, and its role in the integration of the mosque students indicate the need for imams (and mosque teachers) who are familiar with the language, culture and societal issues shaping the life-worlds of the mosque students. This is not a surprising finding: while previous studies in the Netherlands suggest that deficiencies in the quality of mosque education are linked to the lack of proper professional trainings for the imams and mosque teachers (Sieckelinck et al., 2012), studies in Germany (Kamp, 2008) and Britain (Lewis, 2002; Cherti & Bradley, 2011) also point out that imams educated abroad lack skills and knowledge required to address the multiple identities and local social conditions of the children they teach in the mosques. The particular contribution of this thesis lies in uncovering the reasons behind the failure of the attempts for Islamic higher education in the Netherlands as reported by key stakeholders from the Islamic communities, and in the revelation that many first generation imams and mosque teachers who have been educated in a Muslim-majority country (Turkey) show self-awareness in their deficiencies in establishing emotional and linguistic connections with the children, and acknowledge the need for context-sensitive mosque education. The insights from the study on Dutch imam trainings might provide useful in future attempts in setting up academic programs in Islamic theology in the Netherlands and in other Western countries.

Then, it is important to note that this is the first research which investigates the education in the *Diyanet* mosques outside of Turkey. Differently than *Milli Görüş* and *Süleymanlıs*, *Diyanet* is under the governance of the Turkish Presidency of Religious Affairs, and in that sense, its mosques directly represent the political and ideological vision of the Turkish state. And while supporting previous research this thesis shows that mosque

education in all three Turkish Islamic communities has a function of ethnic and religious identity maintenance, the findings on mosque education provided by *Diyanet* require special attention. All studies in this dissertation, except the media analyses, highlight the significant role assumed by *Diyanet* in the lives of Turkish-Dutch children in particular and Turkish migrants overall. The study on the organization of mosque education uncovered that the presence of curriculum content teaching allegiance to the Turkish state. The study on pedagogical practices at *Milli Görüş* and *Diyanet* mosques identified that a pedagogy of national identity building is a distinct feature of *Diyanet* classrooms. These findings point out that beside providing Islamic education, mosque classes at *Diyanet* offer a *sui generis* education in Turkish citizenship to children from Turkish migrant background. Considering the contentions around the strong autocratic profile of the consecutive Justice and Development Party governments in Turkey, and the allegations against Turkey for using *Diyanet* mosques for exerting political surveillance over Turkish migrants (Öztürk & Sözeri, 2018), this is a result which requires further attention by researchers, policy-makers, and educators, not only in the Netherlands but also in numerous other Western countries in which *Diyanet* offers mosque education.

The search for context-relevant curriculum, textbooks and pedagogies, and the demand for imams and mosque teachers who are familiar with and responsive to the needs of the Dutch conditions, bring us to the question about the role of mosque education in the integration of the mosque students. In line with findings by Pels and colleagues, and by Cherti and Bradley (2011), this thesis also confirms that, indeed, the teaching material and classroom discussions seem to make few links with the issues encountered by the Muslim students in their daily lives in a European society. This thesis reveals that there is a search for bi-lingual and context-appropriate teaching materials, with attempts for new textbooks at both *Diyanet* and *Milli Görüş*. However, in the light of the concerns about the existence of a competing citizenship education agenda at the *Diyanet* mosques, evaluating whether the Turkish Islamic communities succeed in their challenging endeavors to create more context-relevant curriculum and teaching practices would be speculative.

Last but not least, this dissertation also identified that mosque education could potentially have a positive role in the integration of Dutch-Turkish children. This seems to be possible only if Islamic associations create more space for dialogue and discussion of controversial subjects in their mosque classrooms, and adequately train their teaching

personnel. Resonating with the results reported by previous Norwegian research by Östberg (2000) and Walseth (2016), and Dutch research by Bartels and de Jong (2007), and Pels and colleagues, the results in this dissertation also suggest that mosque education could contribute to positive identity affirmation and increased self-confidence when interacting with non-Muslims and replying their questions about Islam. Perceived discrimination, feelings of stigmatization and alienation are known to negatively affect social participation and democratic engagement, particularly so in the case of descendants of migrants (Sanders et al., 2014). Hence, mosque education's role in offering safe space in which Muslim children build resilience against stigmatization should not be underestimated.

Limitations of the research

There are a number of possible limitations of this research which need to be addressed. To begin with, it should be acknowledged that design of this thesis and the number of included Islamic associations does not permit generalizations, neither to all Turkish mosques in the Netherlands, nor to other Islamic communities in the country or elsewhere. As seen in the study on pedagogies, teaching practices can be widely heterogenous even within a single mosque, depending on the profile of the mosque teacher. This dissertation employed mainly exploratory and interpretative methodologies which relied on self-reports of the participants and classroom observations by the researcher. To deal with possible bias which might emerge from the interviews, I attempted to purposefully include a diverse sample of participants with divergent but relevant professional positions and ideological stances. When it comes to the classroom observations, avoiding possible bias caused by the mere presence of the researcher in the field presents an even more challenging task. To minimize the effect of my presence in the classrooms, I tried to spend time before the classroom observations in order to establish rapport and familiarity with the children and the mosque teachers, so that my presence would feel more natural. In addition to that, whenever possible I sat in an unobtrusive manner at the back of the classrooms as a complete observer, without joining the classroom activities. Finally, it should be acknowledged that the studies in this dissertation do not include the perspectives of the students on their own integration and identity issues. Further investigating those might provide essential knowledge about children's own experience and agency in navigating the different educational realms of the mosque and the school.

Recommendations for policy, practice, and future research

I conclude this chapter by presenting recommendations for policy, practice and future research. First and foremost, the findings of each study in this dissertation point to the necessity to investigate the areas for possible cooperation between mosques and schools sharing a student population. Miedema, Ruyter and de Koning (2008) drew attention to the untapped potential of the mosque as a partner in education initiatives longer than a decade ago. Likewise, Pels, Lahri and El Madkouri (2006) have reported the willingness of mosques to collaborate with primary schools for pedagogical exchange programs which would form a steppingstone for an inclusive “pedagogy of the neighborhood”. However, there are no known cooperation attempts at present. Possible areas for establishing local partnerships lie in the field of pedagogical exchange, civics education, psychological support for the youth, homework assistance programs and initiatives for parental involvement at schools.

Next, the findings of this thesis highlight the need for locally trained imams. Setting up attractive imam training and Islamic theology programs in the Dutch universities can be achieved by establishing better links with the Islamic communities themselves, and exploring the demand and the possibility to start a vocational imam training at the secondary vocational level. The findings in this dissertation indicate that there is a need to re-establish trust with the Islamic communities with regard to the academic programs in Islamic theology in the Netherlands. Exchange programs with known theological departments from Muslim countries might contribute to the credibility of future initiatives while opening up space for creating a theology of Islam with a distinct Dutch vision.

Furthermore, the findings point out to the need to develop standardized context-appropriate mosque education curriculum and teaching materials. Considering the ethnic and sectarian diversity among the Islamic communities in the Netherlands, this task could be best monitored and encouraged by official Islamic umbrella organizations such as the Contact Organ for Muslims and the Government (CMO). There seems to be institutional willingness on part of CMO to facilitate reforms in this direction as one of the main conclusions of the expert meeting on mosque education organized by it in September 2016 was the recognition of the need for developing a coherent inter-communal vision on mosque education with regard to the content of the curricula, professionalization of imams and mosque teachers,

parental involvement, improvement of the physical conditions of the mosque classrooms, and exchange of knowledge with practitioners from mainstream schools.

Seeing that the Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment has a function in policy making in the field of integration, it could be advisable to increase its role in encouraging the representative umbrella organizations for cooperation towards this objective. The success of this and other recommendations could be more significant if CMO and SPIOR (*Stichting Platform Islamitische Organisaties Rijnmond*, an important regional Islamic umbrella organization) manage to involve the Dutch branch of *Diyanet*, Islamic Association Netherlands in their endeavors with regard to mosque education in the Netherlands.

Given the heterogeneity of the Islamic communities, future research which examines mosque education provided by other ethnic and sectarian Islamic groups would contribute to obtaining a more complete picture of the spectrum of the different types of mosque classes followed by students in the Netherlands. Also, replicating the research in this thesis in other non-Muslim countries could bring about important knowledge on the role of contextual characteristics which might be influencing the educational practices in the different Islamic communities in unexpected ways. Finally, future research studying the education provided to children by Islamic, Jewish and Christian communities in the Netherlands in comparative perspective can provide insights on the commonalities and differences in pedagogical approaches, curriculum, learning goals, norms and values taught to the children in non-formal religious classes.