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Author: Beemsterboer, Marietje

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10 Summary

Thirty years ago, in 1988, the first Islamic primary schools were established in the Netherlands. Islamic primary education has since been the topic of many public and political debates. In these debates the same arguments have repeatedly been used. However the development that Islamic education has gone through gives rise to new insights. This study examines how Islamic primary schools shape their identity and how they weigh the Islamic identity and various public debates. The unique perspective of this study is both the focus on identity formation and the choice to let teachers and board members speak. In this way differences in values, standards and habits are explained from within.

Question

The central research question is:

What is the relationship between the religious identity of Islamic primary schools and the societal context within which they operate?

Theoretical framework

For this research, a theoretical framework was developed in which school identity is regarded as a product that is shaped in relation to the school's context and which is subject to continual change. Within the context of an Islamic school the 'diverse religious identity' and 'Dutch societal context' play a huge role. Diversity within Islam also plays a role because the schools aim to attune to widely divergent home environments of the pupils who differ in ethnic-cultural backgrounds, religious doctrine and meaning that Islam has in their lives. Dutch societal context is important because the schools want to prepare the children for a future in the Netherlands. Examples of trade-offs between the home environments and the societal context are obligatory wearing of the headscarf for female staff or not, gender-separated or mixed gym classes and the actual curriculum for art,

music and sex education. The theoretical framework in this study therefore offers space for both diversity within Islam and the influence of Dutch societal context. In addition the theoretical framework offers scope to describe both the character of Islamic primary schools and the development that the schools have gone through over the last thirty years.

Research design

To answer the main question qualitative research based on interviews was conducted. Interviews give respondents the opportunity to express the reality in their own words and to choose their own illustrative and representative examples. This approach is in line with the intention of this research to better understand the way in which Islamic primary schools shape their identity and how they weigh Islamic identity and social debates.

In the context of this research, 75 members of school management, group teachers and religious teachers were interviewed who worked at 17 different Islamic primary schools. In the selection of the respondents and schools the aim was to cover the variety in the field. Interviews were conducted until saturation was reached. This means that research ended when new interviews no longer seemed to add new information to this study.

Data analysis

All interviews were recorded and transcribed in full. They then were imported into the qualitative analysis software 'Kwalitan' for analysis. In Kwalitan the interviews were segmented and coded. The codes were ordered thematically leading to the creation of a thematic card index. By studying the quotations thematically patterns became apparent which formed the basis for the conclusions.

Conclusions

The main conclusions are: that

- a) there are major differences between Islamic primary schools especially from the widely divergent Muslim population that collects in the schools;
- b) there is a tendency whereby the importance of the societal context in Islamic primary schools increases;

c) Islamic primary schools provide a sense of security from which they contribute to the integration of Muslims in the Netherlands. These three conclusions are briefly explained below.

Although Islamic primary schools share the same foundation it turned out that there is a great diversity among Islamic schools. The schools bring together a great variety of ethnic/cultural backgrounds amongst the parents and staff in Islamic primary schools, who may follow different doctrines and may show variation in the meaning of Islam in their daily lives. This variety poses a challenge for school management of Islamic schools because all people involved share the expectation that the Islamic primary school will align more closely with their own specific Islamic home environment. The fact that all concerned refer to 'Islam' but that there are nonetheless a number of concurrent manifestations gathered under this common denominator encourages an internal dialogue in Islamic primary schools where the divergent points of view are combined into a joint and well thought-through '*desired identity*'. The outcome of that process varies greatly from school to school. A concrete example of this process is the mutual decision about which 'Muslim celebrations' will or will not be held in school. Celebrating the Prophet Muhammad's birthday, for example, is celebrated by a number of groups of Muslims and firmly rejected by others.

A trend in all schools involved in this study appears to develop whereby the influence of the Dutch societal context on decisions taken in Islamic primary schools is increasing. This trend was explained from the changing school population since the establishment of the first schools. Successive generations of migrant parents tend to develop educational ideals in the direction of the educational aims of Dutch parents without a migrant background. The first Islamic schools paid attention to Islamic expressions. Nowadays the emphasis on many schools has shifted more towards the internalization of Islamic values. The first Islamic schools required all female teachers to wear a headscarf (regardless of religious background). However nowadays the number of schools is increasing where even Muslim teachers are free to choose for themselves.

The final conclusion is that Islamic primary schools contribute to the integration of Muslims in society from the sense of safety they provide. Several respondents gave examples of discussing sensitive topics where

the influence of education was greater simply because parents and pupils felt safer and better understood within Islamic schools. One of the examples given was a discussion about homosexuality, where Muslim children in a non-Islamic primary school would probably drop out of the discussion mentally from the assumption that the content of the message would not fit with a Muslim way of life. However when this topic is discussed within the safe context of the Islamic school the pupils at least appear to be open to the message for longer. In contrast to the idea that prevails in many national media Islamic primary schools can in this way actually contribute to the integration of Muslims in the Netherlands.







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