The power of imagination, Dreams of founders and principals of the first Islamic schools for primary education in the Netherlands.

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Abstract

In this presentation we focus on the ‘imagination’ of founders and principals of Islamic primary schools in the Netherlands. Key persons of the first two Islamic schools and today’s board members and principals were interviewed about their ideals and dreams and present days’ school identity, respectively. The first founders and principals dreamed about a school teaching and learning into Islam like the Madrasa or the Imam Hatip schools: priority should be given to Islamic subjects like Qur’an recitation and the teaching of Hadith. This dream however could not be concretized. They developed a new type of Islamic school in the Netherlands. We present the process from ‘imagination’ to the 'reality' of a Dutch school based on the Islamic tradition, and the most important aspects in this development.

Keywords: Imagination, Identity development, Islamic school, historical context, plurality, the Netherlands

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1. Introduction

Images of ‘good’ education are central in the concretization of ‘good’ schools. In our presentation we focus on the images of the founders and principals of Islamic primary schools in the Netherlands 25 years ago, and the realization of these images in the years thereafter.

From the eighties of the last century onwards Islamic families of migrant workers and their descendants settled down in the Netherlands (Van de Werf, 1998). Nowadays approximately 850,000 Muslims live in the Netherlands in 2015, this is about five percent of the Dutch population. Islam for many Muslims is important in their life (Budak & El Bouyadi-van de Wetering, 2012). For many Muslims some of the activities of Dutch primary schools conflicted with their religious background. During the discussions about these problems Muslims discovered the possibilities of article 23. Article 23 of the Dutch Constitution allows the Muslim community, like any other religious group, to fund schools according to their religious life orientation (Avest, Bakker, Bertram-Troost, & Miedema, 2007; Bronneman-Helmers, 2011; Grondwet, 2012; Onderwijsraad, 2012). All schools are controlled according to basic educational standards (Bakker, 2011). The first two Islamic primary schools were founded in 1988 (Berglund, 2015; Ginjaar-Maas, 1989; Landman, 1992; Wagtendonk, 1991). Currently there are 46 primary schools and 1 secondary school (ISBO, 2015).

We focus in this article on the imaginative power of the founders and principals of the first Islamic primary schools in the Netherlands. They dreamed in different ways about what an Islamic school might be in the Netherlands. The question we wish to answer in our presentation is ‘What kind of images were central in the minds of founders and principals of the first two Islamic primary schools, and how can these images be traced in today’s school identity of Islamic primary schools, and what are the images of the future?’

2. 25 years Islamic education in the Netherlands: from imagination to reality

The Al-Ghazali School in Rotterdam and the Tariq Ibn Ziyad school in Eindhoven opened their doors in 1988. These two schools were the first schools founded in accordance with Article 23 of the Dutch Constitution. The founders aimed to provide education for children based on Qur’an and Sunna (Wagtendonk, 1991).

From an earlier study on the conviction, establishment and organization of the first two Islamic primary schools, we learn about the role of imagination, resulting in two different types of schools. The first type of school is based on Madrasa, a type of school where only Islam related courses are educated, such as Qur’an Recitation, Hadith, Sira, and Aqida. The second type of school, resulting form the imagination of the founders was a school like the Imam Hatip school in Turkey. The Imam Hatip school is a school preparing students to become imams and preachers in Turkey. In this type of school not only subjects related to Qur’an and Hadith are taught, but also other subjects such as math, linguistics and biology. (Budak, 2014)

The two types of school, as they were represented in the imagination of the initiators, however, could not be realised due to the funding preconditions. One of the funding preconditions is that the Dutch language is used in all communication in the school. Despite
these funding limitations, the initiators continued the process of establishing their school, and build and furnish their school, in Rotterdam as well as in Eindhoven (Budak, 2014). In the course of time, a third type of school has been developed. This third type of school we call 'The Dutch primary school with an Islamic foundation’ briefly ‘Dutch Islamic Primary School’ (DIPS). The DIPS were not similar to a Madrasa or an Imam Hatip school. The DIPS school has its own unique character, its own identity. The imagination regarding DIPS had their starting point in the Madrasa and the Imam Hatip school.

However, soon after the start of the first two schools the chairman’s and principals of these first two DIPS noticed that not everyone had the same images and expectations of what an Islamic school in the Dutch context could be. In the course of time board members, parents and staff discover that each of them has their own images and wishes of an Islamic school, and by consequence what has to be done in everyday practice to construct an identity of a DIPS the different groups can agree upon (Budak, 2013).

The initiators imagined and more or less expected that there would be no discussion about Islamic values and regulations and that all pupils would accordingly adhere to the Islamic rules in school. The initiators were of the opinion that the situation at home would match the situation at school, resulting in pupils’ good performance in school and by consequence pupils would have good learning results. Sometimes there were conflicts due to these different expectations. We noticed that the construction of the identity of an Islamic school is a dynamic process in which the imagination of the participants is recognizable in everyday practice. Earlier we noted that this is a matter of adaptation and recognition (Budak, 2014).

Various approaches play a role during the process of adapting and recognizing in the construction of the identity of the first two Islamic schools. We have articulated the following approaches:

- Approaches of conservation and further developing their own Islamic identity,
- Approaches taking their starting point in the Turkish education system,
- Approaches rooted in persons’ biographical narrative,
- Approaches based on the need to solve every day’s practical issues

- Approaches from a pedagogical perspective (Budak, 2014).

These approaches influenced the development in the processes from imagination to reality.

It has been over 25 years since the first two DIPS were founded. We describe in this paper the developments of the schools according to the experiences of the board members and principals and we focus on the images they had in mind for the positions of these schools in the Dutch plural society.
3. Method

For the description of the development from imagination to reality, in our qualitative research we did two rounds of interviews. In the first round the pioneers were interviewed: the first two chairs of the first boards of the schools (the founding fathers) and the principals of the two schools. In the second round we did 12 semi-structured retrospective interviews. (Baarda, Goede, & Teunissen, 2000, pp. 130-137)

From the first round of interviews we learned about the imaginations with regard to an Islamic school identity. These imaginations were presented in 4 qualitative interviews - two with the founders and two with the principals of the first two DIPS.

In a subsequent round of interviews we interviewed six principals and six board’s members, selected from schools that started at least twenty five years ago. The second criterion was to choose a principal and a board member whom worked at least ten years at an Islamic primary school. Ten of the interviews are recorded. All the recorded interviews are transcribed. Two of the respondents did not allow recording the interview. These interviews were written down at the time of interview. The average duration of the interviews was 75 minutes. However, the interviews with the two respondents who did not permit to record the interview took 120 minutes. Of each interview a verbatim was made.

The interviews are labelled according to statements relating to 'past', 'present' and 'future'. In a second reading similar labels are clustered. Labels as well as clusters are noted in terms and language as this is uttered by the respondents. If necessary, we choose a new term covering the content of the respective parts of the text. At the third stage, we analyse the interview on the basis of concepts ‘imagination’ and ‘development’, concepts that are central in our research question. Our method is based on 'close reading' as described by Rubin & Rubin (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; see also Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2013).

4. Results

In this section, we present the main results of our analysis of the interview texts and focus on the development as these are experienced by the board members and the principals regarding identity development of DIPS, concerning imagination and reality.

When they established the two first Islamic primary schools the ‘founding fathers’ had two type of schools in their mind: the Madrasa and the Imam Hatip school. They could not realize these types of schools due to the restrictions in the Dutch law. They established a school responding to the Dutch educational system. This resulted in a new, third type of school coined as ‘the Dutch Islamic Primary school’ (DIPS). This type of school included in the curriculum Islamic religious instruction including prayer during school hours, celebration of Muslim festivals, and separated sports and swimming activities for boys and girls. Subjects like music, biology and sexual education are adapted to the Islamic value orientation. The schools developed their own vision and policy documents in the past 25 years. In their interviews the board members and principals mentioned six important developments in the process from imagination to reality.

4.1. Housing related developments
At the beginning of the establishment the schools were housed in old buildings, with a lot of maintenance still to be done. We observe from the interviews that some new schools were build or are on the drawing board taking into account characteristics that reflect the Islamic identity of the school. We note a growing trend to leave old buildings and go for new buildings with a unique look reflecting the Islamic identity of the school. We also see that some Islamic schools are housed in one building with schools with a different identity (for example a Christian and/or a public identity).

4.2. Staff related developments

The first schools started with non-Muslim principals and non-Muslim teachers. We note a development from schools with almost 100% non-Muslim teachers towards schools with 100% Muslim teachers. There are also schools that deliberately and for integration-related reasons opt for a mix of Muslim and non-Muslim teachers. Board members however in these cases emphasize that the principal should be a Muslim in order to express and guarantee the Islamic identity of the school. Respondents are not always satisfied with the contribution of Muslim teachers regarding identity related subjects.

4.3. Religious Education (RE) related developments

Developments related to religious education we distinguish in
a) the religious beliefs of the teachers of RE and
b) the method for RE for the pupils

Teachers of RE

The first schools started with imams, as volunteers taking care of the RE classes. This was achieved with great difficulty. These imams were not proficient in the Dutch language. They did not follow the curriculum and often used physical punishments to keep pupils in the classroom under control. In recent years schools have employed professional teachers for RE. These teachers speak Dutch and have in some cases a Dutch teacher training background and are graduated from the teacher training course for Islamic religion in the Netherlands.

The method for RE

At the start of the schools, there were no methods for Islamic RE available. Teachers them selves had to develop all the material to be used. We see a development from cutting and pasting from a variety of RE methods from countries such as Turkey, Morocco or Egypt, to a development of various colourful RE methods, developed by teachers in close cooperation with experts in pedagogy and didactics.

4.4. Board members related developments

The first board members did not master the Dutch language and had no experience with regard to managing a school. We note a development from inexperienced board members to a clear shift to young college or university trained board members. In the first years the board members were volunteers and run only one school. Most foundations now have several schools with a professional chairman as well as an executive board of professionals. Additionally to the member of the board we see that members of the supervisory board are college or university trained as well.
4.5. Media related developments

The establishment of Islamic schools started with a lot of media attention. The respondents experienced the media attention in the first years in a negative way. Board members these days have changed their attitude concerning the attention of and communication with the media. Board members who used to take away from the media nowadays take the initiative themselves to inform the media about innovative developments, or interesting festivals or competitions that take place in their school.

4.6. Quality related developments

The quality of education is frequently mentioned by respondents as an important aspect of development. Some of the board members give the quality of the school priority to the identity of the school. According to the respondents a school with poor learning results can not be a good Islamic school. There were schools with poor results. According to several recent studies most Islamic schools in general are of good quality and in some subjects they even do better than ordinary Dutch schools with a similar pupil population. There are two schools nominated as an excellent school by the inspection of ministry of education. These two schools are seen as excellent schools and are ‘examples of good practice’ of Islamic education in the Netherlands.

5. Conclusion and discussion

After 25 years of Islamic education, we conclude that board members and principals point to six major developments. This development we summarize as follows;

- a development from old buildings to newly build accommodation with a unique look reflecting the Islamic identity of the school
- a development from almost no Muslim staff to some schools with 100% Muslim staff,
- a development from no method for RE to a variety of methods
- a development from voluntary teachers, imams who hardly spoke Dutch and were not trained in pedagogical competencies for RE, to teachers who have completed a Dutch teacher training program
- a development from voluntary board members who hardly spoke any Dutch and who had no experience in school management, to a professional management with a Dutch college or university background
- a development toward a positive attitude to the media instead of avoiding the media
- a positive development regarding the quality of teaching and learning in Islamic schools

Board members and principals continue to imagine the future of their school. Images of the future of Islamic schools centre around the following aspects:

Housing

Respondents indicate that in the future they will build more new schools. An estimate is made of 100 Islamic primary schools in the near future. The board members also indicated to start more secondary schools. Some of the older school buildings are replaced by new buildings. Architects have to prepare themselves to think about schools with a characteristic Islamic
image. The schools in the Netherlands can profile themselves internationally with this new born architectural design.

**Staff**

In the past 25 years there are many more Muslim teachers employed compared with 25 years ago. However, the schools should take care regarding the way these teachers are committed to the Islamic identity of the school. The teachers have completed the teacher training program but many of them do not necessarily have good/enough knowledge of Islam. School boards in the future have to invest in the necessary knowledge and how to stimulate a positive engagement of the staff to the Islamic identity of the school. In the future training programs will be developed to include the staff in the concretization of the identity of the school in everyday life, like that is the case for other denominations in the Netherlands. As an example the Christian schools used to ask the teachers beside their diploma of teacher training program the qualification for the Religious Training Program DCBO (Diploma Christelijk Basis Onderwijs). Islamic schools will have to develop their own qualification requirements. The InHolland University for Applied Sciences has developed the DIO (Diploma Islamitisch Onderwijs).

**Religious Education**

The requirements for teachers for RE are not determined by law. Board members face the fact that they sometimes employ teachers whose pedagogical and didactical competences do not have the required level. We see a shift from voluntary ‘employed’ imams to professional teachers with the required competences. Despite this development, some of the boards are not satisfied with the pedagogical and didactic qualities of some of their teachers. This problem is still subject of discussion by board members and principals of Islamic schools. In the future we expect that the board of Islamic schools and also the inspection of education will become more strict as the application of these requirements. The teacher training program of the InHolland University currently educates teachers for Islamic RE.

**Board**

The shift from voluntary board members who did not master the Dutch language, to university educated young board members creates better opportunities for constructive communication with the context (municipality, neighborhood, and media).

Instead of a list about what is forbidden and what is permissible, as this was made by the first board members, today’s board members develop a policy in which they show how to give way to teachers to construct the Islamic identity in school’s everyday practice.

**Media**

According to the board members attention of the media in the early years was only negative. Islamic schools were subject of discussion in relation to integration and poor teaching and learning results. The Islamic schools today seem to be accepted as one of the possible types of schools in the Netherlands, like schools with an other religion of life orientation related identity. Board members are looking for the media to show and share what they do.

**Quality**
The inspectorate monitors the quality of Islamic schools like they do for all other schools. From the beginning there have been several studies on the quality of these schools compared with other schools with a similar pupil population. The studies indicate that Islamic schools don’t score worse and in some cases even better than other schools. School boards are focused to perform even better than the do now. This may result in even more excellent Islamic schools in the future.

From this research we conclude that the power of imagination resulted in several developments and has added to the Dutch pillarized educational system a new and these days highly respected pillar.

**Bibliography**


