

Islamic Primary Schools in the Netherlands

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Because of the constitutional Freedom of education in the Netherlands, everyone can establish a school and is entitled to full state funding. There now are 52 primary Islamic schools, with around 12,500 pupils mostly of Turkish and Moroccan descent. They focus on developing an Islamic religious identity, and high educational quality and pupil achievement. Because most pupils come from socioeconomic disadvantaged backgrounds, the schools receive nearly twice as much budget than schools with a predominantly non-disadvantaged population. The existence of Islamic schools has always been controversial. Their output in terms of academic achievement is relatively high, however. In an absolute sense they achieve below the “average” Dutch school, but when compared with schools with the same disadvantaged pupil population, they achieve better. Lately, there have been problems with secondary Islamic schools in the Netherlands. As a result, several politicians propose to abolish the Freedom of education act.

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1. Religion and religious education

One of the main features of the Dutch education system is the constitutional “Freedom of education”. This implies that everyone has the right to establish a school and then is entitled to full state funding. In the Netherlands there are public and private schools, but the only difference is the way they are governed; public schools are administered under the auspices of the community government, whereas private schools are administered by private legal institutions, usually a foundation or association. Public and private schools all receive the same amount of money from the Ministry of Education. Private schools are free to determine what is taught and how. However, the Ministry of Education does set quality standards which apply to both public and private education; it prescribes the subjects to be studied, the attainment targets, and the teacher qualifications.

Despite the high level of secularization in the Netherlands (more than half of the Dutch population nowadays indicates that they are not religious), most primary schools still are (at least in name) religious. In 2018, on a total of 6,288 primary schools, 32% was public, 30% Protestant, 30% Catholic, and the rest, 7%, were smaller denominations, such as Hindu, Jewish and Islamic. In 2019 there were 52 Islamic primary schools (with a total of some 12,500 pupils). In an absolute sense, this is a small number; in a relative sense the number is even smaller (less than 1% of the schools), as some 5% or 850,000 of the Dutch population of 17 million inhabitants adheres to the Islamic faith. Most of the Muslims are of Turkish and Moroccan descent; in addition, smaller groups are from Surinam, the Middle East and Africa.

An important feature of primary school funding is that, as part of the Educational Disadvantage Policy, additional resources are allocated to schools based on the socio-ethnic composition of its pupil population. The aim of this policy is to combat educational disadvantage resulting from factors in the child's home situation. Because Islamic schools are predominantly attended by pupils from disadvantaged immigrant backgrounds, these schools receive roughly twice as much funding as non-disadvantaged schools. Schools are free to use this extra subsidy for any number of purposes, for instance, for class size reduction or extra pupil support.

2. The establishment of Islamic schools

Since the arrival of the first waves of “guest-workers” in the 1960s, the number of especially Turkish and Moroccan pupils has grown considerably; by birth they almost all are Muslim. In 2018 there were 38,000 pupils of Turkish and 54,000 pupils of Moroccan descent in primary education, or 2.7 and 3.8% of the total number of 1,405,500 pupils. In the 1980s, some Muslim parents had become dissatisfied with the schools their children attended. There were two main reasons for this: (1) the absence of Islamic instruction and possibilities to fast and pray in the existing schools; clothing regulations; Darwinian evolution; boys and girls engaging in sports together; and exposure to homosexuality and sexuality in biology

classes; (2) the poor academic performance of their children relative to their native-Dutch peers. Two goals for Islamic schools derive from this: (1) to strengthen the pupils' sense of identity, i.e. cultural and religious personality development in the spirit of Islam, and (2) to improve the quality of education, i.e. the pupils' academic achievement.

The first initiatives to establish Islamic schools were taken in 1980, but it was not until 1988 that the first two Islamic primary schools were opened. That it took so long had to do with the inexperience of those who took the initiative to establish a new school, but probably more with the fact they generally did not receive much cooperation from the authorities. Much seemed to depend on the perspective from which the establishment was motivated. When the focus was on combating the educational disadvantage of Muslim children the authorities were more accommodating than when the focus was on the religious character of the school.

3. Turmoil: From quantity to quality

After the first schools had been established, there was a steady rise in the number of Islamic schools. This occurred despite the fact that at the time their existence (already) was rather controversial, not only among non-Muslims, but also among many Muslims. On the one hand, opponents feared: (1) that they would lead to isolation and separation ("self-segregation") instead of integration; (2) that Muslims visiting Islamic schools would not acculturate to the liberal Dutch democratic norms and values; (3) that Islamic schools with mostly Turkish pupils served Turkish nationalist purposes (more ideologically and politically motivated than based on religious grounds); (4) that especially conservative, orthodox and fundamentalist groups would make use of them; and (5) that they would result in an exodus from the existing schools. On the other hand, it was also argued that establishing Islamic schools was a sign of emancipation and that this form of temporarily self-segregation was a transitional station towards full integration into the Dutch society. For two reasons, the opposition became much stronger, however, round 2000. The 9/11 attacks in the US had a great impact on the political situation in the Netherlands (and elsewhere); the sentiment became much more anti-Islam and led to the establishment of anti-Muslim political parties. In addition, some negative reports on the governance of the Islamic schools and curriculum content of Islamic education were published. For instance, irregularities, such as fraud, surfaced in some three quarters of the Islamic school boards. Another investigation was conducted to determine whether Islamic education was potentially threatening to democratic norms, but also to see whether there was evidence of foreign infiltration. It found no evidence for the former, but it did some for the latter though. But whether the studies' findings were positive or negative, the fact that several investigations were conducted was enough to bring Islamic education into further discredit, and this again drew much negative media attention. As a consequence, the focus of the Islamic schools shifted away from increasing the number of schools onto improving the quality of the existing schools.

4. The output of Islamic schools

Islamic schools focus on socializing children into an Islamic religious identity and on high academic achievement. Regarding the first, hardly any empirical research is available. One study found that the number of hours spent on religious instruction was rather limited. Another study concluded that, contrary to the expectations, children at Islamic schools performed rather well on a citizenship test, even better than children at other schools. There were also differences as regards self-efficacy and task motivation in favor of Islamic schools. More is known about cognitive achievement, however, in particular reading/language and math. In a series of large-scale studies, a comparison was made between children at Islamic schools, at schools with a comparable (disadvantaged) pupil population, and at the "average" Dutch school. From these studies it was concluded that although Islamic schools in general achieve (far) below the average school, they on most indicators achieve better than the schools with a comparable pupil population. In other studies achievement of pupils at Islamic schools was compared with that of pupils at public, Protestant and Catholic schools. The results showed that although Islamic schools in an absolute sense achieve lowest on all cognitive measurements, once differences in the pupils' socio-economic background had been taken into account, they succeed in raising their pupils' achievement more than the other denominational schools.

5. Turmoil: Once again

For a number of years now, it has been relatively quiet and Islamic primary schools have drawn little attention. However, this is not the case as regards Islamic secondary schools. In the past decades there have been only a few Islamic secondary schools. But those were closed by the Dutch educational authorities due to their insufficient quality and administrative problems. And very recently there have been new scandals. In one school the final exams were stolen by the pupils and in another the school board was accused of having ties with terrorist Jihad organizations. The problem is

that these scandals in the secondary sector have severe consequences for all of the Islamic schools. Several politicians have proposed now to abolish the constitutional Freedom of education, which would mean that in future It will be very difficult to establish new Islamic (and other denominational) schools.

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