

# *Islamic Schools in the Netherlands: Expansion or Marginalization?*

GEERT DRIESSEN  
*Radboud University Nijmegen*

MICHAEL S. MERRY  
*Beloit College*

**ABSTRACT:** In the Netherlands, the constitutional freedom of education offers the opportunity for the growing number of Muslims to establish state-funded Islamic schools. At the moment there are 46 Islamic primary schools; a number of schools are in the process of being established and there is still a need for an additional 120 such schools. Right from the start Islamic education has been a highly controversial issue. Events such as 9/11 and the murder of Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh have fueled the discussion, which turned from open-minded and accommodating to critical and even demonstrably negative. This article focuses on Islamic schools in the Netherlands: how they have evolved, their objectives, their achievements, and the problems they have encountered – and continue to encounter. Specific attention is paid to a number of empirical studies that focus on the functioning of Islamic schools.

**KEYWORDS:** Islamic schools, Muslims, primary schools, the Netherlands, religion, denomination, ethnic minorities, integration.

## *Muslims in the Netherlands*

Since World War II, sizeable groups of immigrants have come to Western European countries: immigrants from former colonies, labour immigrants, and refugees and, or asylum seekers. Many of them are Muslims originating from Islamic countries in Asia and Africa. The total number of Muslims estimated to reside in Europe varies considerably. According to Shebaib (2004), between 15 and 25 million Muslims live in the European Union. This article focuses on the Netherlands, which has an estimated population of 920,000 Muslims or some 6% of the total Dutch population. In large cities like Amsterdam, Rotterdam, the Hague and Utrecht more than 10% of the inhabitants are Muslim. The majority

of Dutch Muslims are of Turkish or Moroccan origin, their numbers totalling 320,000 and 285,000 respectively (Phalet & ter Wal, 2004). The first Turks and Moroccans came to the Netherlands in the 1960s as so-called guest workers to perform low-skilled work. One characteristic they had in common was their low level of education, including, in many cases, illiteracy. Because of their relatively high fertility rate, family reunion, and family forming migration processes, the Muslim population is steadily growing. At present, however, the second and third generation Turks and Moroccans in the Netherlands still manage poorly in school and the labour market.

Muslims have set up several Islamic institutions in the receiving countries, such as mosques, religious instruction, cemeteries, and butchers (Shadid & van Koningsveld, 1991; Sunier, 1999). In this process of institutionalization, two interdependent factors play a role, namely political decision-making, which ultimately leads to specific legislation and rules, as well as ideological assumptions with regard to the position of Muslims in the new country (Rath, Groenendijk, & Penninx, 1991; Waardenburg, 2001).

In this article, we focus on one of these Islamic institutions, namely Islamic schools. We will concentrate on the Netherlands because the situation in this country is rather unique. Although legally speaking there are no obstacles in founding Islamic schools in other Western European countries, in practice there are still very few Islamic schools in these countries that are both recognised and completely funded by their governments (Balic, 1992; Dwyer & Meyer, 1996; Pedersen, 1996; Walford, 2001). We devote attention to the evolution of Islamic schools within the Dutch context of pillarization and freedom of education, to their motives and goals, their results in terms of achievement and integration, and the problems they have encountered and continue to encounter. Much of what has been said about Islamic schools is based on impressions and opinions. To counteract this tendency, in describing the Dutch situation of Islamic schools we will make use of all of the empirical evaluative studies available. The goal of this paper is to sketch a picture of the past, present, and future of Islamic schools in the Netherlands based on empirical data.

### *The Dutch Context of Pillarization and Freedom of Education*

Because of the school dispute that played out in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in the Netherlands, equal treatment of public and private schools was

constitutionally established in 1917 (Ritzen, van Dommelen, & de Vijlder, 1997). This implies, among other things, the freedom to establish a school, the freedom to teach according to a particular ideology or certain educational and instructional principles, and the freedom to choose a school. These freedoms and the associated right to equal funding by the government have led over the years to a colourful array of denominations (Driessen & van der Slik, 2001; Patrinos, 2002). With regard to primary schools, the largest ones are the public, Protestant Christian, and Roman Catholic. In 2005, the distribution of primary schools across these three categories was 33, 30, and 30%, respectively. In addition, the government recognised a number of smaller denominations, including Islamic, Hindu, Jena Plan, and Montessori schools, which together constituted some 7% of the schools (SBO, 2006).

Characteristic of the Dutch situation is the fact that the battle for equal treatment of public and private schools did not occur on its own but was, rather, part of a general social and political emancipatory process of pillarization that penetrated all aspects of society (de Rooy, 1997). The result of this was a society vertically segregated on the basis of religion with each pillar containing its own political parties, labour unions, schools, radio and TV networks, newspapers, sport clubs, hospitals, and so forth. This close interweaving of the religious and the secular lasted until the 1960s; after that time, a process of secularization and de-churching was initiated and the role of religion and the church within society changed drastically (Felling, Peters, & Schreuder, 1991; Lechner, 1996). While the waning influence of the church can be observed in most social institutions and organisations, the denominational educational system has remained remarkably intact (for reasons for this paradox, see Bax, 1988; Dronkers, 1996).

### *The Founding of Islamic Schools*

The constitutional freedom of education offered the opportunity for the growing number of Muslims to establish Islamic schools. Indeed, facilities provided for Christians cannot be denied to Muslims. As long as a number of conditions have been met, every school is entitled to full government funding. The statutory requirements are: the school has to be attended by a minimum number of students (at least 200, depending on the degree of urbanization), the language of instruction has to be Dutch, the teachers have to be adequately qualified, and the curriculum has to comply with the stipulations laid down in the Primary Education

Act (NMECS, 2005). Although this legislation is fairly specific and explicit, making it difficult for the local authorities to prevent the founding of these schools, the process of establishing an Islamic school is by no means a quick and easy one.

The first initiatives were taken in 1980, but it was not until 1988 that the first Islamic schools were founded in the cities of Rotterdam and Eindhoven. That it took so long had mainly to do with the inexperience and limited language proficiency of those seeking to establish a new school often were inexperienced and did not speak the Dutch language well. Equally relevant was the fact that those who took the initiative generally did not receive a great deal of cooperation from the central or local authorities; sometimes they even felt the authorities had a policy of actively discouraging the founding of Islamic schools (Rath, Penninx, Groenendijk, & Meyer, 1997; Teunissen, 1990). Be that as it may, most Muslims have not been entirely unsuccessful in their efforts to establish new schools.

The pioneer work of the first schools and the establishment of the Islamic School Board Organisation (ISBO) paved the way for the founding of later schools. In 2006, there were 46 Islamic primary, two Islamic secondary schools, and two Islamic Universities. It should be noted that these still are only small numbers; there are some 7,000 primary and 700 secondary schools in the Netherlands. The total primary school population amounts to 1,550,000 students, of whom 100,000 or almost 7% are of Turkish or Moroccan descent. Some 10,000 students attend the Islamic primary schools of which 90% are socioeconomically disadvantaged; 40% of them are Moroccan, 37% are Turkish, and the rest constitutes a heterogeneous population of, for instance, Surinamese and refugees and, or asylum-seekers from such countries as Somalia, Afghanistan, Iran, and Iraq. Most schools attract students from one specific ethnic group, either Moroccan or Turkish. Although there is a steady rise in the number of Islamic schools, the current number does not even begin to meet the demand for more schools. According to a study by van Kessel (2000), in the city of Amsterdam, where approximately 56% of the primary school children are of foreign origin (and at the time there were only 6 Islamic schools), there was a need for an additional 20 schools. More recently, van Kessel (2004) concluded from a series of studies on school choice that 30 to 40% of the Turkish and Moroccan parents would send their children to an Islamic school if there were such a school in the neighbourhood. Based on this preference he estimated that in the Netherlands as a whole there is in addition to the then 41 existing Islamic primary schools a

need for another 120 such schools. A representative survey by Phalet and ter Wal (2004) confirms these estimates; they find that 25% of the Turkish and 35% of the Moroccan parents prefer Islamic schools.

### *Motives and Goals*

There are essentially two reasons for founding Islamic schools in the Netherlands. The first pertains to the Islamic faith and the second to the quality of education. On the one hand, Muslim parents feel that there are not enough possibilities for their children to fast and pray in accordance with the principles of the Islamic faith. In the Netherlands, barely any Islamic religious instruction is provided at the regular primary schools and many Muslim students receive Christian religious instruction. Almost half of the Turkish and Moroccan students attend privately funded and organized Qur'an classes after school, typically in local mosques. Furthermore, clothing regulations and the idea of boys and girls swimming and engaging in other sports together and learning about reproduction in biology classes are reasons for their parents to look for alternative schools.

On the other hand, Muslim parents are dissatisfied with the quality of existing schools because most immigrant children's achievements lie far below that of their native-Dutch peers. To improve their children's opportunities they want better education that is geared towards their specific needs. In addition, improving parental participation and contributing towards the students' sense of identity are important motives for founding Islamic schools. Muslims also see the founding of Islamic schools as a means of emancipation and clear proof of integration; regarding the latter they refer to the school dispute fought by the various social-political and religious groups in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which ultimately led to the emancipation or equal treatment of the Protestants and Catholics (e.g., Aarsen & Jansma, 1992; Karagül, 1994; Landman, 1992; Meyer, 1993; Spiecker & Steutel, 2001).

Two goals of Islamic schools derive from these motives (Driessen & Bezemer, 1999; Shadid & van Koningsveld, 1992), namely to strengthen the students' sense of identity, that is, cultural and religious personality development in the spirit of Islam, and to improve the quality of education, that is, the students' academic achievement.

Not everyone is convinced of the desirability of separate Islamic schools or even a separate Islamic pillar; not only do non-Muslims have their reservations, many Muslims do as well (Phalet & ter Wal, 2004; Teunissen, 1990). The opponents of Islamic schools fear that they will

lead to isolation and segregation instead of integration, that no real justice is done to the Dutch norms and values, that they are purely nationality schools, and that they will result in an exodus from the existing schools (Meyer, 1993). Kabdan (1992) is of the opinion that founding Islamic schools is more an ideological and political affair than a religious one. In particular, he feels that traditional fundamentalist groups will make use of them. Spiecker and Steutel (2001) add to this that a policy of re-pillarization, that is, creating an Islamic pillar, is both unfeasible and undesirable. They argue that the classical pillars could acquire far-reaching political power because they covered relatively large and ideologically homogeneous groups. However, the Islamic community in the Netherlands is in fact very diverse according to ethnicity, country of origin, language, political affiliation, and interpretation of Islam (van Heelsum, Fennema, & Tillie, 2004). Spiecker and Steutel (2001) also feel that developing an Islamic pillar would be difficult to combine with the aims of liberal civic education in a liberal democracy such as the Netherlands. Although they do not want to deny the possibility of a liberal version of the Islam, that is, a variant which is consistent with liberal-democratic values, they are of the opinion that the face of Islam in the Netherlands is predominantly illiberal. They extrapolate this from the fact that two basic liberal-democratic tenets are more or less explicitly rejected. These principles are: first, the idea of citizens as free persons (the principles of freedom of religion, tolerance, and the separation of church and state), and second, the idea of citizens as equal persons (the principle of nondiscrimination, e.g., as applied to sex and, or gender and sexual orientation). Spiecker and Steutel do not substantiate this by empirical research. However, a recent large-scale study by Phalet and ter Wal (2004) on Muslims in the Netherlands helps to illumine this point. According to these researchers, almost all Turkish and Moroccan Muslims still identify strongly with Islam; to them Islam is an integral part of their existence. However, this does not take away from the fact that a dominant trend towards secularization in terms of less practical religious participation also can be observed. Three factors correlate to this tendency, namely educational level and length of residence (positively) and age (negatively). The support for religious exclusionism (i.e., fundamentalism) was found to be very small, only a tiny percent of Muslims in the Netherlands are sympathetic to this trend.

### *Empirical Studies Into Islamic Schools: A Concise History*

Although there have been Islamic primary schools in the Netherlands for 18 years now, very little empirical research has focused on them (Driessen, 2003). Therefore, much of what has been brought up in the many discussions on Islamic schools is not based on facts. In the following paragraphs, we will present the results of the available empirical studies.<sup>1</sup>

#### *The Fundamentalist Character*

Shortly after several Islamic schools had been established, the Dutch Inspectorate of Education investigated the fundamentalist character of the then 6 Islamic schools (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 1989, 1990). This study focussed on any differences between Islamic schools and other schools. The method included discussions with teachers and school principals, classroom observations, and an analysis of documents. The Inspectorate concluded: in some cases the school work plan, outlining the content and organisation of teaching, did not completely meet the legal requirements (which was, nevertheless, understandable in light of the fact that the schools had only recently been established); all teachers had had an adequate teacher training, with the exception of the Minority Language and Culture (MLC) teachers and the religious instruction (RI) teachers; the language generally spoken was Dutch, but not by all of the MLC and RI teachers; and finally, the curriculum generally did not deviate from that of the average primary school and was aimed at functioning in Dutch education and society.

#### *Liberal Versus Orthodox*

Shadid and van Koningsveld (1992) studied the policy and statute documents of the 20 Islamic schools and focussed on the character or orientation of the schools that were in existence in 1991. They found that there were three types of schools. The first type included 3 schools that could be characterized as liberal; they had been founded by Turks and kept to the interpretation of Islam as is adhered to in modern secularized Turkey.<sup>2</sup> In practise, these schools seldom lived up to various basic Islamic rules and therefore differed only slightly from non-Islamic schools. The second type, consisting of 7 schools, had been founded by local Turkish groups, some of which were associated with Millî Görüş, a religious-political organisation. These schools were orthodox-Sunni and were oriented towards Dutch society. The third

type, consisting of 10 schools, had been founded by local Moroccan groups and were orthodox-Sunni. The difference with their Turkish counterparts was that they focussed on Islamic society. Shadid and van Koningsveld characterised both latter types as conservative, which they concluded from, among other things, the contents of the RI and the observation of the Islamic rules of behaviour by staff and students at these schools.

### *Political Islam*

In 1998, the National Security Service (NSS; Binnenlandse Veiligheidsdienst, 1998) published a report on political Islam in the Netherlands. One of the domains the NSS studied was the education at Islamic schools. Specifically, it had concerns with the interference of foreign powers (e.g., Iran, Libya, and Saudi-Arabia) and political-Islamic organisations with the contents of education. The results of the NSS' study showed that its suspicion was not completely unfounded. Some schools received substantial donations from the Al-Waqf al-Islami organisation, which was used for the financing of student transport and teaching materials. This organisation propagates a very orthodox politico-religious worldview and is intolerant towards liberal Muslims, Jews, and Christians. The NSS concluded that the number of radical Muslims in the Netherlands was very small, and that there was no need to fear a growing power and influence of extremism in the short run. For the longer term, however, the NSS expected these organisations to gain power as a consequence of the socioeconomic malaise, marginalization, and exclusion of Muslim immigrants. The results, it hypothesized, might be polarization and disruption of the process of integration.

### *Schools, Parents, and Students*

The first extensive study was carried out by Driessen and Bezemer (1999). They used data from the national cohort study PRIMA that included half or 16 of the Islamic schools. They compared these schools with a group of 16 non-Islamic schools with the same socio-ethnic student population (comparable schools), and with a national representative group of 432 schools (reference schools). In all, some 40,000 students were involved in this study. Driessen and Bezemer not only performed quantitative analyses on data collected from principals, teachers, students and their parents, they also conducted in-depth interviews with the principals of the Islamic schools and studied these schools' statutes and work plans. The data pertained to the family



situation, teacher and school characteristics, and cognitive and non-cognitive student competencies.

Regarding family characteristics, the most striking aspect of the Islamic schools did seem to be that the students' parents more frequently viewed themselves as being Muslims. Accordingly, they attached greater importance to the role of religion in bringing up children than the parents of students at comparable schools. These parents less frequently viewed themselves and their children as belonging to the Dutch cultural community and were less focussed on the use of the Dutch language. As to the educational features, the students at Islamic schools more frequently received Dutch as a Second Language and MLC instruction. In the higher grades of some schools, boys and girls were separated. Some topics, for example reproduction and evolution, had been deleted from the curriculum. Other subjects like history were reinterpreted according to an Islamic view. Concerning the cognitive and non-cognitive characteristics, the students at the Islamic and comparable schools did not differ in their nonverbal intelligence, their well-being at school and their self-confidence, nor did they differ in their cognitive capacities, home learning climate, attitude towards work, and social behaviour. The mathematics achievement levels were, however, somewhat higher at the Islamic schools. Analysis of the language achievement levels indicated that there were no differences. The scores on the primary school final examination showed that, once again, the Islamic schools scored slightly higher. What was more, the students there cut classes less frequently and according to their teachers, were less likely to become dropouts later in their school career. Notwithstanding these relatively positive findings, Driessen and Bezemer (1999) stressed the fact that neither at the Islamic nor at the comparable schools did the students do nearly as well as at the reference category of schools on their language and mathematics achievement levels, intelligence scores, final primary school examination results, recommendations for their further school career, or risks of having to repeat a class. With respect to most of these characteristics both the Islamic and comparable schools lagged far behind.

From the in-depth interviews with the principals the following was observed. To a considerable degree, the transmission of an Islamic identity to the students seemed to be a question of outward appearances, such as the learning of and conformity to behavioural rules and codes, and the learning and reciting of Qur'anic verses. Related to this is the fact that there have been a number of problems

with the availability of RI teachers who speak Dutch and have had an adequate teacher training. Several principals noted that because many of the RI teachers spoke only Arabic or Turkish they did not know what was being taught during these lessons. Some principals felt RI is solely the responsibility of the parents and the school's board. If students received RI, this usually took an average of one hour per week. Another aspect that is probably related to the rather formal transmission of Islamic identity is the fact that most of the regular teachers (some 70%) were non-Muslims.<sup>3</sup> This poses a considerable problem, because these teachers cannot be expected to profess and propagate a faith which is not their own. What is required of them, then, is to adhere to the rules that are determined by their school's board. There is considerable variation between the schools as to the strictness, that is, orthodoxy, of these rules. Especially non-Muslim teachers who simply want a job and who have not been specifically chosen for Islamic education can have a difficult time at the more orthodox-leaning schools. Principals seemed to act as intermediaries between the more or less orthodox board and liberal non-Muslim teachers. This proved to be a rather daunting task as there were quite a few teaching vacancies and the principals' job satisfaction was typically very low.

Improving parent participation and involvement was considered an important goal at Islamic schools. Although the schools invested a lot of energy in this aspect, some schools complained that there had not been much improvement. They felt that a strict division between responsibilities is an integral part of these parents' culture: the family is the parents' responsibility, the school is the teachers', and the street is the jurisdiction of the police. Of course, it does not help much that many parents have had only minimal education, have little command of Dutch, and are not acquainted with the Dutch educational system. In these respects, Islamic schools did not differ from comparable, all-immigrant schools. However, many Islamic schools differed from comparable schools because most of their students come from a wide geographical area and parents typically would have to travel considerable distances to participate in school activities.

The school board of governors plays a decisive role in the Islamic schools. From the interviews, it became evident that on several boards one or two governors acted as agents and, or spokespersons. They were the persons who, often in contrast with the other members, had a relatively good education and spoke Dutch well. Still, the administrative experiences of a number of them were rather limited, at least when compared to non-Islamic boards. At half of the schools that were

interviewed, one of the members of the board had a job at the school (e.g., as a policy staff member), which is a highly unusual phenomenon in the Netherlands.

### *School Quality and Achievement*

In 1999, the Inspectorate of Education (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 1999) wrote another report on Islamic schools. For their study they used two sources: the information on achievement levels as reported by Driessen and Bezemer (1999), and data from the Inspectorate's evaluation system of individual schools pertaining to 14 of the 28 Islamic schools that were in existence at that time. The findings of both studies showed considerable overlap.

The Inspectorate concluded that from the beginning Islamic education had been a highly controversial topic. In this, the media played an important role. The general attitude has shifted from being open-minded and accommodating to critical and even patently negative. Typical of the public discussion and coverage in the media is that they are mostly based on isolated incidents and seldom on systematically collected data.

The Inspectorate's analyses showed that because of differences between Islamic and Western values there were many tensions between the boards, principals and teachers. What was especially lacking was a shared vision on education and development, cooperation, and educational leadership. In their evaluation system the Inspectorate applied 15 quality standards of good education; these standards are mainly derived from educational legislation. On 11 standards, the Islamic schools outperformed schools with a comparable student population, and on 4 standards they scored better than the average Dutch school. Islamic schools scored below the average school with regard to the pedagogical climate and quality of teaching, especially with respect to stimulating and challenging students; they scored better in areas such as the educational content, the planning and use of instruction time, and the efficiency of classroom organisation. The differences among Islamic schools were far greater than between Islamic schools and non-Islamic schools.

### *Foreign Interference and Anti-Integrative Tendencies*

In 2002, the NSS published a second report on Islamic schools, which again focussed on foreign interference and anti-integrative tendencies (Binnenlandse Veiligheidsdienst, 2002). At that time, there were 32

Islamic schools. For their study, the NSS interviewed various experts, parents, teachers, and principals of Islamic schools, civil servants of the Ministry of Education, the Inspectorate of Education and the Department of Education of municipalities. The NSS concluded that there were hardly any problems with legal compliance in the majority of the schools. This does not take away from the fact that various foreign organisations had gained some influence, but this influence on the content of the lessons was rather limited, with the exception of RI. Twenty percent of the schools had received financial aid from Al-Waqf al-Islami and, or had school board members who were affiliated with radical Islamic organisations. In a number of cases, persons who are opposed to the integration of Muslims in Dutch society gave the RI and MLC lessons. This does not necessarily mean that in these schools children are being indoctrinated with anti-democratic, anti-integrative, intolerant, and discriminatory ideas. The NSS criticized the school board organisation ISBO because there was no internal discussion and it did little to deal with the abuses that often were reported in the media.<sup>4</sup>

### *Social Cohesion*

Yet another report was written by the Inspectorate of Education in 2002 (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2002). This time, the Inspectorate's focus was on social cohesion defined as the student's willingness to actively participate in and identify with Dutch society. For their report the Inspectorate studied the relevant documents of all of the 37 Islamic schools and interviewed members of the schools' boards, the principals, and some teachers, and students.

The Inspectorate concluded that almost all Islamic schools had an open attitude towards Dutch society and played a positive role in creating conditions for social cohesion. In the opinion of the Inspectorate, attending Islamic schools certainly did not hinder integration. One school, however, was noted for maintaining an educational climate that kept the students too aloof from Dutch society. In addition, it was reported that certain risks prevailed at some of the schools because the principals were not familiar with the RI and MLC lessons and because there was not enough of a distance between the school's board and principal.

In general, however, the conclusion was a positive one: the schools' instructional approach was geared to their students' specific backgrounds, Dutch language instruction assumed a central position,

the schools had good contacts with other schools and local educational and welfare institutions, and parental participation was an important goal.

The Inspectorate's report on social cohesion led to intense discussions in Parliament. Some members thought the study to be less than thorough and therefore too positive in its conclusions. For this reason the Secretary of Education requested another study, which was published in 2003 (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2003). This study consisted of two parts. First, the study offered an in-depth examination of 20 Islamic schools carried out by the Inspectorate that included interviews, class observations, analysis of teaching material, textbooks, student work, and computer programs. The focus was on points for improvement as reported in the earlier studies, RI, MLC, fundamental values, and conditions for integration. Second, the study contained a review of the empirical literature with regard to the social and cognitive competencies of students at Islamic schools and the quality of instruction in these schools. The latter part was carried out by Driessen (2003), who compiled and analysed the relevant reports (see above).

The results of this new study did not deviate from the findings of earlier studies. The most important conclusion was that the Inspectorate did not find anything that should lead to suspicion or alarm. Two points need special attention, however: both the instructional quality of the RI lessons and the administrative vulnerability of the Islamic schools indicate that much improvement is still needed.

### *A Methodological Remark*

The studies summarized in this section have very different origins and were conducted from different perspectives and with different intentions. The studies by Shadid and van Koningsveld and Driessen and Bezemer were conducted by independent university researchers. The studies by the Inspectorate mostly rely on data collected, described and analysed by Driessen and Bezemer and its own standardized school evaluation reports. The National Security Service used a diversity of sources and instruments that were not made public and thus cannot be checked. Consequently, it could be argued that the results of these studies are biased in one way or another. The Inspectorate's studies, for instance, were criticised because it was felt that the inspectors did not have access to the most extreme situations and thus paint an unduly positive picture of Islamic schools. On the other hand, it could

be argued that the Security Service is prejudiced and not objective in its search for possible threats to the Dutch democratic order and thus is too negative in its judgment. Even so, if both were true the result would be more or less balanced, and it should be noted that researching a topic like Islamic schools is indeed a very sensitive endeavor (cf. Walford, 2003).

### *Recent Developments*

After 9/11, the political climate changed dramatically in the Netherlands. Until then, a Labour party dominated government had been in power for many years. The elections in 2002, however, were completely dominated by populist right-wing politician Pim Fortuyn, whose main theme was immigration and integration. He attracted many followers, especially among youngsters and native-Dutch citizens living in the inner cities that were increasingly being populated by low-SES immigrants from a diversity of countries and cultures. Anti-Muslim Fortuyn accused the Labour politicians of having been much too lenient towards immigrants. Among his claims he posited that many Muslims do not speak Dutch, even after having been in the Netherlands for decades; many are unemployed<sup>5</sup>; finally, many do not adhere to Western and liberal norms and values such as the emancipation of women and the separation of church and state. A few days before the elections took place Fortuyn was assassinated, but his party enjoyed tremendous success, pushing the old Labour establishment out of power.

It is not only the ideological West versus Islam clash that matters here, however; there are also economic aspects that play a role. The Netherlands has always been a comparatively healthy social welfare state. Because of the economic recession and the continuing growth of the aging population, it has become clear that the current level of state provisions is untenable. As a large number of immigrants make use of these provisions, there is a growing resentment towards these groups (cf. Gowricharn, 2002). Consequently, there continues to be an urgent call for a policy of assimilation instead of a policy of integration with maintenance of the own culture (Vermeulen & Penninx, 2000). In addition, there is a shift in policy away from categorical provisions for specific groups and towards general provisions.

Since 2003, the Netherlands is being governed by a coalition of Christian-Democrats, Liberals, and Center-Democrats. These parties have adopted many of Fortuyn's right-wing ideas with regard to immigrants.<sup>6</sup> These include, among other things, the abolition of:

Minority Language and Culture Teaching (or bilingual education for, for example, Turkish and Moroccan students); subsidies for immigrant organisations that are not aimed at integration; and subsidies for Dutch as a second language courses for newly arrived immigrants. Concerning the latter, as of 2006 those who wish to emigrate to the Netherlands will have to organise these courses in their native country and they will have to pay for them themselves; moreover, they have to take an examination in their native country and if they fail they will not be allowed to emigrate to the Netherlands. The government also wants to put a stop to the so-called import marriages (or marriage migration). At present, 75% of the Turkish and Moroccan youth fetch their future partners straight from Turkey and Morocco (Hooghiemstra, 2003). As these brides and bridegrooms do not speak Dutch and have little knowledge of Dutch society, the Dutch government is of the opinion that in this way integration has to start from scratch again and again (cf. Kabinet-CDA/VVD/D66, 2003). According to the leader of the Christian-Democrats, marriage migration is one of the reasons integration into Dutch society has failed (Kruijt, 2004).

Yet another important topic is the future of the Islamic schools. The Liberal Party (which despite its name is located on the political far right) wants to put a halt to the expansion of these schools<sup>7</sup>. Their main argument is that Islamic schools are almost exclusively populated by low-SES immigrant children who, because of the so-called school composition effect, lag considerably behind their peers at other schools. In addition, most schools have a mono-ethnic student population making it virtually impossible to encounter other immigrant groups or native-Dutch children. Still, probably the most important reason why the Liberals are against Islamic schools is because they fear that the Muslim children will be indoctrinated with anti-Western, anti-democratic, and anti-integrative ideas. To prevent this, the Liberals are calling for ethnically mixed schools; in their opinion, such schools offer the best opportunities for integration. The Christian-Democrat Minister of Education has now put forward a bill that any new school must have a school board comprised entirely of members with Dutch nationality. Furthermore, they must adopt an integration plan and explain how they plan to adhere to Dutch norms and values. The most far-reaching element of this bill, however, is that no more than 80% of the student body can be from a disadvantaged background.

### *Conclusion*

In the last 18 years, more than 48 Islamic schools have been established in the Netherlands and at the moment a number of schools are in the process of being founded. In addition, according to a recent study there is a need for another 120 Islamic schools. Islamic schools have two aims, namely to improve the school performance of their students and to bring them up in the spirit of Islam. Owing to the constitutional freedom of education there are no legal obstacles to Islamic schools, yet there is growing criticism and resistance. Based on current legislative proposals, one senses that the Liberal Party would prefer to see the abolition of all Islamic schools. For this stance, the Liberals mention two arguments, namely that such schools underachieve and that they are anti-integrative.

From our review of empirical studies, we can draw the conclusion that students at Islamic schools do not do more poorly than students at schools with a comparable socio-ethnic disadvantage. The concern about the students' performance being lower at Islamic schools has not been confirmed. However, compared with the students at the average Dutch school, students at Islamic schools lag far behind. This means that Islamic schools have yet to attain one of their central aims, which is to improve the school performance of their students. Time will tell whether they succeed in doing so in the future.

Our review also shows that the transmission of the Islamic identity seems largely to be a matter of formalities, that is, rules and codes imposed upon the teaching staff and students by the school's board (cf. Walford, 2002). One of the likely reasons for this rather formal approach is that the larger part of the teaching staff are non-Muslims, and consequently do not identify with the Islamic faith. This makes it difficult for the teachers to convey Islamic norms and values and rather improbable that they will propagate anti-integrative ideas as opponents of Islamic schools fear. Another likely reason is that while according to Dutch law the schools are free to determine what is taught and how it is taught, this freedom is limited by the quality standards set by the Ministry of Education. These standards, among other things, prescribe the subjects to be studied, the attainment targets or examinations syllabi and content of national examinations, the number of teaching periods per year, the qualifications which teachers are required to have, giving parents and students a say in school matters, and planning and reporting obligations (NMECS, 2005). Concerning the religious instruction lessons, our review shows that there have been problems in



the sphere of adequate teaching staff and teaching materials. As to the content and persuasion of these lessons, no clear picture has emerged.

As a number of studies have shown, there are many differences, not only between the Islamic schools, but also between the various parties concerned within the schools. A small number of schools seem to be very strict and orthodox in their allegiance to the Islamic faith and rules. According to one of the principals, eventually this trend will inevitably result in conflicts and a struggle between the school board and teaching staff, and even the parents. Other schools hardly differ from regular Dutch schools; paramount at these schools is the aim of improving the students' achievement levels and securing their life chances in Dutch society. In general, it is probably true to say that the boards of governors and parents are more oriented towards the religious aspects and the teaching staff more towards improving student achievement. What is crucial here is that the schools succeed in finding a balance between student identity and academic quality. In this, the principals could play an important role as intermediaries between the various parties involved. Many would argue that the founding of separate Islamic schools leads to segregation instead of full and active participation in Dutch society. Conversely, many findings suggest that only a few schools persist in shielding Muslim youth from the bad influences of a secular non-Muslim society. The boards of governors have a special role to play here, as they must realize that Islamic schools are no islands and that their students will come to function in a wider context.

Whether a new, Islamic pillar will flourish in the Dutch denominational landscape will ultimately be a political decision (Benayed & Bal, 2004; Valk, 2003). Islamic schools, though at one time very promising in the Netherlands, now face insurmountable challenges from the Minister of Education. Especially the requirement that new schools have no more than 80% of its students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds will prove to be impossible to meet. At present, some 90% of the students who attend an Islamic school can be characterized as disadvantaged and less than 2% of the parents were born in the Netherlands. This means that once this new ruling has been adopted in Parliament, it will most certainly lead to an abrupt halt in the founding of new, and the further marginalization of existing, Islamic schools. The question is if this measure will have the intended effect of promoting integration. Restricting the establishment of new Islamic schools will probably mean that Muslim students whose parents would like them to attend an Islamic school will be constrained to attend

another, already existing school with a high concentration of immigrant students from disadvantaged milieus. There is no reason to expect that this will improve these students' achievements. In addition, this measure may result in Muslim parents sending their children to extra-curricular instruction in mosques to compensate for the lack of attention to cultural and religious personality development in the spirit of Islam in regular schools. Religious instruction in mosques is not subject to any state control and there is growing evidence that some imams preach anti-integration (Botje & Lazrak, 2001; van de Ven, 2005).

### NOTES

1. A few case studies, which were carried out by university students, will not be considered here (cf. Driessen, 2003).
2. The Turkish state that adheres to a strict division between state and religion is of the opinion that Islamic schools are undesirable. Its representative for religious matters, the Diyanet, fears that these schools will cause a shift in the children's identity from Turkish to Muslim.
3. There simply are not enough qualified teachers with a Muslim background; in addition, not all teachers with a Muslim background want to teach in Islamic schools.
4. As a result of the NSS publication the complete ISBO board resigned. Although the board did not agree with the report's conclusions it felt that it had obviously failed to win the confidence of the Dutch society
5. In 2003 4.2% of the native-Dutch were without work; for the non-Western immigrants the figure was 14.4%. Of the people receiving a social service benefit 40% are non-Western immigrants, though non-Western immigrants constitute only 8% of the total Dutch population.
6. After the elections of 2002 a coalition government with Fortuyn's party (LPF: List Pim Fortuyn) took over. This coalition was short-lived, however, due to the complete inexperience of many newly appointed LPF politicians and internal power struggles.
7. The Liberal Party Minister of Integration (and many other prominent politicians) even want to abolish the freedom of education altogether (*Katholiek Nederland*, 2004).

#### *Authors Addresses:*

Geert Driessen

ITS - Institute for Applied Social Sciences

Radboud University of Nijmegen

P.O. Box 9048

6500 KJ Nijmegen

THE NETHERLANDS

EMAIL: [g.driessen@its.ru.nl](mailto:g.driessen@its.ru.nl)

[www.geertdriessen.nl](http://www.geertdriessen.nl)

Michael S. Merry  
 Department of Education and Youth Studies  
 Beloit College  
 700 College Street  
 Beloit, Wisconsin 53511  
 U.S.A.  
 EMAIL: merrym@beloit.edu

## REFERENCES

- Aarsen, L., & Jansma, P. (1992). *Een islamitische basisschool. Onderzoek naar verwachtingen van moslimouders en leerkrachten aangaande de islamitische basisschool* [An Islamic primary school. A study into the expectations of Muslim parents and teachers with regard to the Islamic primary school]. Nijmegen: KUN.
- Balic, S. (1992). Religious education for Muslims within state schools: The example of Austria. *British Journal of Religious Education*, 15, 44-49.
- Bax, E. (1988). *Modernization and cleavage in Dutch society. A study of long term economic and social change*. Groningen: Universiteit van Groningen.
- Benayad, S., & Bal, R. (2004). De minister discrimineert [The minister discriminates]. *Het onderwijsblad*, 9(14), 38-39.
- Binnenlandse Veiligheidsdienst. (1998). *De politieke Islam in Nederland* [The political Islam in the Netherlands]. Den Haag: Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken.
- Binnenlandse Veiligheidsdienst. (2002). *De democratische rechtsorde en islamitisch onderwijs. Buitenlandse inmenging en anti-integratieve tendensen* [The democratic legal order and Islamic education. Foreign interference and anti-integrative tendencies]. Den Haag: Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties.
- Botje, H., & Lazrak, A. (2004). *Nieuw Staphorst. Het gitzwarte verleden van Khalil el Moumni* [The ink-black past of imam Khalil el Moumni]. *Vrij Nederland*, 26 May 2004.
- de Rooy, P. (1997). Farewell to pillarization. *The Netherlands' Journal of Social Sciences*, 33, 27-41.
- Driessen, G. (2003). *De onderwijskundige kwaliteit van islamitische basisscholen. Een review van de empirische literatuur ten behoeve van de Inspectie van het Onderwijs* [The educational quality of Islamic primary schools. A review of the empirical literature for the Inspectorate of Education]. Nijmegen: ITS.
- Driessen, G., & Bezemer, J. (1999). *Islamitisch basisonderwijs. Schipperen tussen identiteit en kwaliteit?* [Islamic primary schools. Compromising between identity and quality?]. Nijmegen: ITS.

- Driessen, G., & van der Slik, F. (2001). Religion, denomination, and education in the Netherlands: Cognitive and noncognitive outcomes after an era of secularization. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 40, 561-572.
- Dronkers, J. (1996). Dutch public and religious schools between state and market. A balance between parental choice and national policy? In D. Benner, A. Kell, & D. Lenzen (Eds.), *Bildung zwischen staat und markt* (pp. 51-66). Weinheim and Basel: Beltz Verlag.
- Dwyer, C. & Meyer, A. (1996). The establishment of Islamic schools. A controversial phenomenon in three European countries. In W. Shadid, & P. van Koningsveld (Eds.), *Muslims in the margin. Political responses to the presence of Islam in Western Europe* (pp. 218-242). Kampen: Kok Pharos.
- Felling, A., Peters, J., & Schreuder, O. (1991). *Dutch religion. The religious consciousness of the Netherlands after the cultural revolution*. Nijmegen: ITS.
- Gowricharn, R. (2002). Integration and social cohesion: The case of the Netherlands. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 28, 259-273.
- Hooghiemstra, E. (2003). *Trouwen over de grens. Achtergronden van partnerkeuze van Turken en Marokkanen in Nederland* [Marriage migration. Backgrounds of partner choice of Turks and Moroccans in the Netherlands]. Den Haag: SCP.
- Inspectie van het Onderwijs. (1989). *Nader onderzoek naar het functioneren van de Islamitische scholen* [A closer examination into how Islamic schools work]. Zoetermeer: Ministerie van Onderwijs en Wetenschappen.
- Inspectie van het Onderwijs. (1990). *Onderzoek naar het fundamentalistische karakter van vier per 1 augustus 1989 opgerichte Islamitische scholen* [A study into the fundamentalistic character of four Islamic schools that were established 1 August 1989]. Zoetermeer: Ministerie van Onderwijs en Wetenschappen.
- Inspectie van het Onderwijs. (1999). *Islamitische basisscholen in Nederland* [Islamic primary schools in the Netherlands]. Utrecht: Inspectie van het Onderwijs.
- Inspectie van het Onderwijs. (2002). *Islamitische scholen en sociale cohesie* [Islamic schools and social cohesion]. Utrecht: Inspectie van het Onderwijs.
- Inspectie van het Onderwijs. (2003). *Islamitische scholen nader onderzocht* [A further investigation of Islamic schools]. Utrecht: Inspectie van het Onderwijs.
- Kabdan, R. (1992). Op weg naar maatschappelijke spanningen op religieuze gronden. Islamitische scholen in Nederland zijn onwenselijk [On the road to societal tensions on religious grounds. Islamic schools in the Netherlands are not desirable]. *Vernieuwing*, 51, 4-8.

- Kabinet-CDA/VVD/D66. (2003). *Meedoen, meer werk, minder regels. Hoofdlijnenakkoord voor het kabinet CDA, VVD, D66. 16 mei 2003* [Participating, more work, less rules. Agreement CDA, VVD, D66 Government]. S.l.: S.n.
- Karagül, A. (1994). *Islamitisch godsdienstonderwijs op de basisschool in Nederland. Theorie en praktijk in vergelijking met enkele Europese en Moslimse landen* [Islamic religious instruction in primary schools in the Netherlands. Theory and practice in comparison with some European and Muslim countries]. Amsterdam: UvA.
- Katholiek Nederland*. (2004). Verdonk wil af van Artikel 23 voor onderwijs [Minister Verdonk wants to abolish the Freedom of Education article]. *Katholiek Nederland*, 21 December 2004.
- Kruijt, M. (2004). Grote instroom fnuikt integratie [Large influx cripples integration]. *De Volkskrant*, 15 January 2004.
- Landman, N. (1992). *Van mat tot minaret. De institutionalisering van de islam in Nederland* [From prayer rug to minaret. The institutionalization of Islam in the Netherlands]. Amsterdam: VU Uitgeverij.
- Lechner, F. (1996). Secularization in the Netherlands? *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 35, 252-264.
- Meyer, A. (1993). *Islam en onderwijs in Utrecht. De oprichting van islamitische scholen en islamitisch godsdienstonderwijs op openbare scholen* [Islam and education in Utrecht. The founding of Islamic schools and Islamic religious instruction at public schools]. Nijmegen: KUN.
- NMECS. (2005). The education system in the Netherlands 2005. The Hague: Netherlands Ministry of Education, Culture and Sciences. Retrieved September 21, 2006 from [www.minocw.nl/documenten/eurydice\\_en.pdf](http://www.minocw.nl/documenten/eurydice_en.pdf)
- Patrinos, H. (2002). *Private education provision and public finance. The Netherlands as a possible model*. New York: Columbia University, NCSPE.
- Pedersen, L. (1996). Islam in the discourse of public authorities and institutions in Denmark. In W. Shadid, & P. van Koningsveld (Eds.), *Muslims in the margin. Political responses to the presence of Islam in Western Europe* (pp. 202-217). Kampen: Kok Pharos.
- Phalet, K. & ter Wal, J. (Eds.). (2004). *Moslim in Nederland. Een onderzoek naar de religieuze betrokkenheid van Turken en Marokkanen* [Muslim in the Netherlands. A study into the religious involvement of Turks and Moroccans]. Den Haag: SCP.
- Rath, J., Groenendijk, K., & Penninx, R. (1991). The recognition and institutionalisation of Islam in Belgium, Great Britain and the Netherlands. *New Community*, 18, 101-114.

- Rath, J., Penninx, R., Groenendijk, K., & Meyer, A. (1996). *Nederland en zijn Islam. Een ontzuilende samenleving reageert op het ontstaan van een geloofsgemeenschap* [The Netherlands and its Islam. A depillarized society reacts to the genesis of a faith community]. Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis.
- Rath, J., Penninx, R., Groenendijk, K., & Meyer, A. (1997). De Nederlandse samenleving en haar islam. Reacties op de opbouw van islamitische instituties [Dutch society and its Islam. Reactions to the establishment of Islamic institutions]. *Migrantenstudies*, 13, 69-79.
- Ritzen, J., van Dommelen, J., & de Vijlder, F. (1997). School finance and school choice in the Netherlands. *Economics of Education Review*, 16, 329-335.
- SBO. (2005). *Jaarboek 2005. Onderwijsarbeidsmarkt in Beeld* [Year book 2005. Education Labour Market]. Den Haag: Sectorbestuur Onderwijsarbeidsmarkt.
- Shadid, W., & van Koningsveld, P. (1991). Institutionalization and integration of Islam in the Netherlands. In W. Shadid, & P. van Koningsveld (Eds.), *The integration of Islam and Hinduism in Western Europe* (pp. 87-121). Kampen: Kok Pharos.
- Shadid, W., & van Koningsveld, P. (1992). Islamic primary schools. In W. Shadid, & P. van Koningsveld (Eds.), *Islam in Dutch society: Current developments and future prospects* (pp. 107-122). Kampen: Kok Pharos.
- Shebaib, N. (2004). *Muslims in Greater Europe*. Retrieved January 7, 2004 from [www.islamonline.net](http://www.islamonline.net)
- Spiecker, B., & Steutel, J. (2001). Multiculturalism, pillarization and liberal civic education in the Netherlands. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 35, 293-304.
- Sunier, T. (1999). Muslim migrants, Muslim citizens. Islam and Dutch society. *Netherlands' Journal of Social Sciences*, 35, 69-82.
- Teunissen, J. (1990). Basisscholen op islamitische en hindoeïstische grondslag [Primary schools on Islamic and Hindu foundations]. *Migrantenstudies*, 6, 45-57.
- Valk, G. (2003). *Plan zwarte scholen 'verkapte discriminatie'* [Plan with regard to black schools 'veiled discrimination']. *NRC*, 1 May 2003.
- van de ven, T. (2005). Turkse godsdienstleraar opgepakt [Turkish religious instruction teacher in prison]. *NU.nl*, 24 February 2005.
- van Heelsum, A., Fennema, M., & Tillie, J. (2004). *Moslim in Nederland. Islamitische organisaties in Nederland* [Muslim in the Netherlands. Islamic organisations in the Netherlands]. Den Haag: SCP.
- van Kessel, N. (2000). *Verlangd onderwijs in de gemeente Amsterdam* [School choice in the city of Amsterdam]. Nijmegen: ITS.
- van Kessel, N. (2004). Zorg om 120 extra moslimscholen [Concerns regarding 120 extra Islamic schools]. *Algemeen Dagblad*, March, 6, 2004.

- Vermeulen, H., & Penninx, R. (Eds.). (2000). *Immigrant integration: The Dutch case*. Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis.
- Waardenburg, J. (2001). *Institutionale vormgevingen van de islam in Nederland gezien in Europees perspectief* [The institutionalization of Islam in the Netherlands from an European perspective]. Den Haag: WRR.
- Walford, G. (2001). Funding for religious schools in England and the Netherlands. Can the piper call the tune? *Research Papers in Education*, 16, 359-380.
- Walford, G. (2002). Classification and framing of the curriculum in Evangelical Christian and Muslim schools in England and the Netherlands. *Educational Studies*, 28, 403-419.
- Walford, G. (2003). Separate schools for religious minorities in England and the Netherlands: Using a framework for the comparison and evaluation of policy. *Research Papers in Education*, 18, 281-299.