

## On the right track? Islamic schools in the Netherlands after an era of turmoil

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The Netherlands currently has 43 Islamic primary schools. Each is fully subsidised by the government. Yet since the first school was established in 1988 Islamic schools have been confronted with obstacles by the Ministry of Education, bad press and increasingly strict state supervision. Under pressure to improve their image, since 2008 Dutch Islamic primary schools have turned their attention away from expanding their numbers and instead focussed on improving school quality. In this article we describe the various developments and draw upon large scale empirical research to demonstrate the present state of affairs both in terms of cognitive and non-cognitive pupil achievements. We argue that the present results offer reasons to be cautiously optimistic.

**Keywords:** Islamic schools; the Netherlands; Muslims; primary education

### Introduction

Following the 9/11 attacks in New York in 2001, much has been written about the alleged ‘failure of multiculturalism’ and attending worries about an absence of social cohesion necessary for shared values, civic virtue and mutual trust. In Europe, it is particularly Muslims who have come under a new and intense form of scrutiny, especially where Islamic institutions have already been established (Kortman and Rosenow-Williams 2013). This has certainly been the case with respect to Islamic schools, which for at least 25 years have been viewed with suspicion on the belief that they contribute to segregation, inequality and social exclusion (Parker-Jenkins 2002; Shah 2012).

These same discussions and debates have occurred in the Netherlands where, in the wake of the murder of Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh in 2004 by a radicalised Muslim, Islamic schools came under fire (Merry and Driessen 2009). In that year, public officials called for their closure, believing that children were being indoctrinated into beliefs hostile to other

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religions, if not to Western culture as a whole. These developments played out against the background of suspicions toward Islam in general and European Muslims in particular (Modood 2013; Taras 2013). They also continue to occur against the backdrop of heated debates on immigration and integration, high levels unemployment across the continent, a low autochthonous birth rate, and a shrinking welfare state (Vasta 2007).

Today, much of the dust has settled. Repeated inspections in the early part of the twenty-first century have found most Islamic primary schools to be doing quite well relative to the populations they serve. Moreover, no solid evidence of extremism has been found. Nevertheless, a handful of schools were closed down that had long underperformed, failed in securing ample enrolments, or mismanaged their budgets. However, evidence has emerged showing significant academic improvements at a number of Islamic primary schools and by early 2013 two Islamic primary schools were awarded the title of 'Excellent School' by the Ministry of Education. This was a remarkable achievement considering that only 32 out of the 6800 primary schools in the Netherlands enjoy this distinction. What was not very long ago a rather precarious situation facing Islamic schools in the Netherlands now looks more promising.

To better understand these developments, in this article we examine both the background and current state of affairs of Islamic primary schools in the Dutch context. We begin with an overview of the relevant immigration patterns, followed by a description of the institutional context in general and the school system in particular. We then provide an overview of Islamic education from the beginning, underscoring the promise these schools symbolised as well as the negative reactions to them. In the subsequent section, we examine several factors related to the functioning of Islamic schools, in particular parental motivations, the qualifications of teachers, and the school boards.

We consider the evolving performance of Islamic schools through two sociological frames, viz. the disadvantage perspective and the denominational perspective. We present possible clarifications that have emerged from the literature and formulate some hypotheses, on the basis of which we will assess using available data. Using these hypotheses, we assess the performance of Islamic schools using data from 2011 and compare it with similar data from several years earlier. In the last section we make some tentative predictions about Islamic schools in the Netherlands in the years ahead.

## **Background**

### ***Immigrants***

The Netherlands presently has a population of 16.7 million inhabitants, of whom 1.6 million or 9.3% are Western immigrants and 1.9 million or 11.6% non-Western immigrants. More than one third of the Western immigrants come from the neighbouring countries Germany, Belgium and the UK. Three

categories of non-Western immigrants have come to the Netherlands since the 1960s: (1) immigrants from former Dutch colonies (Surinam and the Netherlands Antilles); (2) guest workers from Mediterranean countries (e.g., Turkey and Morocco) and subsequent waves of immigration from these countries for purposes of family reunification and family formation; and, more recently (3) asylum seekers from Eastern Europe, Africa and the Middle East. In 2012 the largest non-Western immigrant groups had the following origins and numbers: Turkey (393,000), Morocco (363,000), Surinam (347,000), and the Netherlands Antilles (144,000) (CBS 2013). One characteristic shared by most non-Western immigrants is their comparatively low levels of education. Another characteristic that sets most non-Western immigrants apart from both Western immigrants and native Dutch is religion, and specifically Islam.

### ***Religions***

Though the Dutch were once a very religious people, by 2009, 44% of the Dutch population over 18 had no formal church affiliation, while 28% still reported being Roman Catholic, 18% Protestant, and 10% belonged to some other denomination (CBS 2013). According to the latest estimates in 2008, 825,000 people or about 5% of the Dutch population was Muslim (Maliepaard and Gijsberts 2012). Some 296,000 of them are of Moroccan origin and 285,000 of Turkish origin. Taken together both groups constitute 68% of all Muslims in the Netherlands. Smaller groups originate from Surinam (34,000), Afghanistan (31,000), Iraq (27,000) and Somalia (20,000). In total, almost half of the non-Western immigrants adhere to Islam. In addition, there are some 40,000 Muslims from Western countries and 13,000 native Dutch Muslims. The absolute and relative number of Muslims is steadily growing due to: (1) the de-churching among the Christian denominations; (2) a high fertility rate relative to the native-Dutch population; and (3) the influx of asylum-seekers from Muslim countries and continuing family formation immigration.

### ***The education system***

One of the key features of the Dutch education system is the constitutional freedom of education. This includes the freedom to establish schools, to organise the teaching and to determine the religious, ideological or educational principles on which this is based. As a result there are both publicly and privately governed schools in the Netherlands.<sup>1</sup> The freedom to organise teaching means that private schools are free to determine what is taught and how. However, the Dutch 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.

Over the years, these freedoms and the associated right to equal funding of all public and private schools have resulted in a wide array of denominations. Contrary to the situation in other countries, such as the UK and US, the difference between public and private schools in the Netherlands refers only to the way the schools are governed, and not to the way they are financed. All schools in the Netherlands, both public and private, are financed in the same way (Ministerie OCW 2007). With regard to primary education, in 2012 the largest denominations were the public, Protestant Christian and Roman Catholic with respectively 33, 30 and 30% of the total 6807 schools (CBS 2013). In addition, the Ministry has recognised some 15 other denominations, including schools based on Islamic, Hindu, Jewish, Steiner and Montessori precepts.

An important feature of primary school funding is that resources are allocated based on the socio-economic composition of the pupil population. In 1985 the Education Priority Policy was introduced. The aim of this policy is to prevent and combat educational disadvantage resulting from factors in the home situation of the child (Driessen 2012). Under this policy a child from very low-educated parents now receives an extra weighting factor of 1.20, a child from low-educated parents receives an extra weighting factor of 0.30, whereas a child from middle-class parents receives a weighting factor of 0. 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 may use this extra subsidy for any number of purposes, for instance, class size reduction or extra pupil support.

## **The establishment of Islamic schools**

### ***Motives and goals***

Since the arrival of the first immigrant waves in the 1960s the number of especially Turkish and Moroccan, and thus Muslim, pupils has grown considerably. In 2010 there were 40,000 Turkish and 43,000 Moroccan pupils in primary education, or 2.6 and 2.8% of the total number of pupils. Over time, some Muslim parents became dissatisfied with the schools their children attended. Basically there were two reasons for this: the absence of Islamic instruction in schools, and the poor academic performance of their children.

Taking the first item, some Muslim parents felt that there were not enough possibilities for their children to fast and pray in accordance with the principles of the Islamic faith. It is important to note that in the Netherlands hardly any Islamic religious instruction is provided in primary schools and, in many denominational schools, Muslim pupils are expected to receive Christian religious instruction.<sup>2</sup> This is one reason why many pupils of Turkish and Moroccan background attend privately funded and organised

Qur'anic classes after school and in the weekend.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, clothing regulations, Darwinian evolution, the idea of boys and girls engaging in sports together, and exposure to favourable views of homosexuality (or sexuality in general) in biology classes all are typical reasons why some conservative Muslim parents look for alternatives (Merry 2007).

Related to the second item, many Muslim parents were dissatisfied with the quality of existing schools because it had long been reported that immigrant children's achievements were far below that of their native-Dutch peers (Herweijer 2009). To improve their children's opportunities they naturally wanted a better education geared towards their children's specific needs. In addition, improving parental participation and enhancing the pupils' sense of cultural and religious identity were important motives for the establishment of Islamic schools.<sup>4</sup> Some Muslims also see the establishment of Islamic schools as a means of emancipation and clear proof of integration; they refer to the so-called 'school dispute' (*Schoolstrijd*) fought by the various social-political and religious groups in the nineteenth century, which ultimately led to the emancipation or equal treatment of both Protestants and Catholics in the Netherlands (Kennedy and Valenta 2006). This battle for equal treatment of public and private schools did not occur on its own but rather was part of a general social and political emancipatory process of 'pillarisation' (*Verzuiling*) that penetrated all aspects of society. 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, newspapers, and so forth. Since the 1960s the importance of the traditional pillars in Dutch society has decreased considerably, although in the education sector it has to a certain extent remained intact (De Rooy 1997).

Two goals for Islamic schools derive from these motives, namely to strengthen the pupils' sense of identity, i.e. cultural and religious personality development in the spirit of Islam, and to improve the quality of education, i.e. the pupils' academic achievement. For the majority of the parents the first goal is the most important one (Denessen, Driessen, and Slegers 2005).

### ***Opportunities and obstacles***

The constitutional freedom of education and the right to equal funding provided the opportunity for discontented Muslim parents to establish their own Islamic schools. As long as a number of conditions have been met, every school is entitled to full government funding. These requirements are: (1) the school has to be attended by a minimum number of pupils; (2) the language of instruction has to be Dutch; (3) the teachers have to be adequately certified; and (3) the curriculum has to comply with the stipulations laid down in the education acts (Ministerie OCW 2007). Although this legislation is fairly explicit, making it difficult for the local authorities to

object, the process of establishing an Islamic school was by no means an easy one. The first initiatives were taken in 1980, but it was not until 1988 that the doors of the first two Islamic schools were opened. That it took so long had a lot to do with the inexperience and limited Dutch language proficiency of those seeking to establish a new school. Equally relevant, however, was the fact that those who took the initiative generally did not receive a great deal of cooperation from the central and local authorities; sometimes they even felt the authorities had a policy of actively discouraging the establishment of Islamic schools. Much seemed to depend on the perspective from which the establishment of the new school was motivated. When the focus was on combating the educational disadvantage of Muslim children the authorities were rather more accommodating than when the focus was on the religious character of the school (Driessen and Merry 2006).

### *Numbers*

The pioneering work of the first schools and the establishment of the Islamic School Board Organisation ([ISBO] *Islamitische Schoolbesturen Organisatie*) paved the way for the establishment of later schools. By 1995 there were 29 Islamic primary schools with a total of 5400 pupils. By 2006, there were 46 Islamic primary schools, and two Islamic secondary schools. Today, in 2014, there is only one remaining Islamic secondary school,<sup>5</sup> while the number of Islamic primary schools has been reduced slightly to 43. It should be noted that these still are only small numbers; there are some 6800 primary and 650 secondary schools in the Netherlands (CBS 2013). The total primary school population in 2010 amounted to 1550,000 pupils, of whom 5% were of Turkish or Moroccan descent. Some 9300 pupils attended an Islamic primary school, of whom almost 55% were socio-economically disadvantaged; 40% of them were of Moroccan background, 30% were of Turkish background, and the rest constituted a heterogeneous population of mainly Surinamese and refugees from countries such as Somalia, Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq. In most schools pupils from one specific ethnic group are dominant, either Moroccan (54%) or Turkish (27%). These numbers indicate that no more than 0.6% of the total number of primary education pupils attends an Islamic school. For the total Moroccan primary education population the relevant percentage is 8.4 and for the Turkish population 6.3.

Until a few years ago there was a steady rise in the number of Islamic schools. Then, from a series of studies on school choice, Van Kessel (2004) concluded that 30 to 40% of the Turkish and Moroccan parents would send their children to an Islamic school if one was available. Based on this preference he estimated that in the Netherlands as a whole there was in addition to the then 41 existing Islamic primary schools a need for another 120 such

schools. Since this report appeared, however, little more has been heard about a demand for more Islamic schools. Partly in response to a politically volatile period following 9/11, but also to some negative reports on Islamic school performance, the focus, as we have seen, has shifted away from increasing the quantity of schools and rather onto improving the quality of schools (Altuntas 2008).

### ***Reservations and distrust***

For the first 15 to 20 years of their existence, the idea of Islamic schools or even a separate Islamic school sector ('pillar') was very controversial; not only did non-Muslims have their reservations, many Muslims did as well (Phalet and Ter Wal 2004). Those opposed to Islamic schools feared: (1) that they would lead to isolation and separation ('self-segregation') instead of integration; (2) that populations using Islamic schools would not acculturate to liberal democratic norms in general and Dutch norms and values more specifically; (3) that Islamic schools with mostly Turkish pupils served other nationalist purposes; and finally (4) that they would result in an exodus from the existing schools. Kabdan (1992) was of the opinion that founding Islamic schools was more of an ideological and political affair than a religious one. In particular, he felt that traditional fundamentalist groups would make use of them, which to a certain extent was confirmed by Shadid and Van Koningsveld (1992), who then qualified 17 of the 20 Islamic schools in 1992 as 'orthodox' or very conservative. A decade later, in 2002, the Dutch Secret Service reported that 30% of the Islamic schools were established by Turkish communities which mostly were moderately religious, and 45% of the schools were established by Moroccan communities which were more culturally and doctrinally conservative. In addition some of these schools had been supported by foreign countries or foundations and consequently were very conservative. The rest of the schools had a mixed ethnic population and mostly were only moderately religious (Binnenlandse Veiligheidsdienst 2002).

The growth of Islamic schools (but also mosques and community centres) led some to believe that an Islamic 'pillar' was taking shape. For example, Spiecker and Steutel (2001) argued that creating a separate Islamic pillar was both undesirable and unfeasible. The secularisation process at work in the society, they observed, did not bode favourably for a new religious pillar. Further, they argued that while the classical Dutch pillars facilitated attaining far-reaching political power because they covered relatively large and ideologically homogeneous groups, the Muslim community in the Netherlands was too small and too diverse in terms of ethnicity, country of origin, language spoken, political affiliation and interpretation of Islam.

### Islamic schools under scrutiny

On more than one occasion in its brief history, Islamic schools have been subjected to rather intensive examination by the Dutch government. This is itself highly unusual, for no other religious or pedagogically distinctive school has been the ‘target’ of such scrutiny.

As we have just seen, for example, in 2002 the Dutch Secret Service carried out an investigation of Islamic education to determine whether it was potentially threatening to democratic norms, but also to see whether there was evidence of foreign infiltration in the planning and ideas behind Dutch Islamic education (Binnenlandse Veiligheidsdienst 2002). From this investigation it appeared that roughly 20% of the schools received some financial support, or had regular contact with, foreign Islamic organisations such as al-Waqf al-Islami. While no evidence was forthcoming with respect to overt foreign influence, it was observed that a number of school board members were quite orthodox in their beliefs and even sympathetic to the violent aims of more radical groups, such as the Palestinian Hamas and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. Some of these school board members were believed to be a stumbling block for their respective schools, in large part owing to their dominant personalities and other means of influencing decision-making, for example through financial pressure.

Similarly, in 2002 the Dutch Education Inspectorate carried out its own research to determine whether Islamic schools were doing their part to help their pupils integrate into Dutch society (Inspectie van het Onderwijs 2002). The conclusion was that more than 90% of the schools were satisfactorily doing their part to assist in the integration process. For example, attitudes towards Dutch society were found to be generally favourable. Naturally there also were some weak points; for example there was no consistent method for administering religious education, which meant that most schools either improvised with the curriculum themselves, or else imported and translated very conservative and culturally irrelevant material from traditionally Islamic countries.

In a follow-up study (Inspectie van het Onderwijs 2003) the conclusions were quite similar, hence going some distance toward dispelling the idea that Islamic schools in the Netherlands were failing to prepare their pupils for living in a liberal democratic society, or, for that matter, that there was any reason to be alarmed about values being passed on to pupils that were fundamentally in opposition to democratic ones. More than that, the Inspectorate found that Islamic schools were doing acceptably well taking into consideration the demographic they served, where poverty and limited use of Dutch in the home was commonplace. Even so, the Inspectorate submitted a number of criticisms, in particular that the didactic quality of religious education left much to be desired, and also that quality controls could be better implemented.



In order to follow up with these concerns, another inspection was called for in 2008 (Inspectie van het Onderwijs 2008). From this inspection irregularities surfaced in some three quarters of the school boards. An astounding 86% of Islamic schools showed evidence of fraud, whereas the national figure is closer to 2%. Quality controls with respect to the education on offer and the achievement levels of pupils also were found to be either weak or very weak. Compared to other schools serving a similar demographic Islamic schools were doing somewhat better, but they lagged far behind the average Dutch school.

In the wake of so much negative attention, a great deal of which reached the press, the umbrella organisation of ISBO indicated late in 2008 that they were not seeking to establish any more schools (Altuntas 2008). Instead of focusing on *quantity*, i.e. expanding the number of Islamic schools, the focus now was to be on *quality*, i.e. improving the management, education and achievement of the existing schools. Keywords such as professionalism and stability came to the fore. To improve quality controls, the ISBO indicated that they would recruit younger, and even more non-Muslim, talent. They also would develop an official method for offering religious instruction. An evaluation showed that promising steps had been taken and that overall quality had indeed been raised, but also that there still is plenty of work to be done (Velzen and De Vijlder 2012). That same year, the Inspectorate of Education also indicated that the percentage of Islamic schools that had been described as weak or very weak – some 50% – had fallen considerably to only 12%.

## **Islamic school performance: a quantitative analysis**

### ***Goals, explanations and hypotheses***

As we indicated earlier one of the main goals of Islamic schools is to improve their overall performance, not only in terms of cognitive factors such as literacy and numeracy, but also in terms of non-cognitive factors, namely attitudes and behavioural characteristics. The goals of Islamic schools are not dissimilar to those of other schools, particularly those with a comparable pupil composition. Each of these schools aims to educate their pupils well. That said, the expectation some have is that in this endeavour Islamic schools are doing better than other schools. Various explanations are given for this.

In order to make sense of Islamic school performance, we can begin with two well established sociological perspectives, namely the disadvantage perspective and the denominational perspective (Dijkstra, Jungbluth, and Ruiter 2001). Owing to the specific composition of their pupil population, Islamic schools are by definition disadvantaged schools. Indeed, nearly all pupils come from poor immigrant families and accordingly occupy the lowest socio-economic standing. However, at the same time Islamic schools

form a (new) denomination in the pillarised Dutch education system. Through the years both perspectives have led to very different explanations. While we are not able to exhaustively test each of these theses in this article, some of the main features of each can be summarised.

Islamic education represents one type of private education. Compared with public education, the performance of schools in this sector is generally higher, principally because the administrative scale is smaller. In particular, the shorter and more informal lines of communication between the school board and school quality is well documented (Hofman 1997). In recent years, due to recent increases in scale operations, there are some indications that the benefits of private education are starting to disappear. However, for Islamic schools this is not the case because most Islamic school boards have only one or two schools under their authority.

That education in denominational schools is more effective in terms of academic challenge and achievement than that offered in public schools is possible not only because religious socialisation plays a comparatively minor role, but also because the centrality of non-cognitive goals figures more prominently in the school aims. Strong leadership, shared values endorsed by the teachers, and a more cohesive school mission also mean that virtues such as respect, cooperation and self-discipline are not as difficult to attain as they may be in schools where these favourable conditions are in shorter supply. Each of these conduces to a more favourable school climate, and this translates into better behaved pupils, a higher morale within the school, and higher job satisfaction among the staff. Taken together, these non-cognitive factors also contribute to positive cognitive outcomes as well (Dronkers and Robert 2004).

To the foregoing organisational features of denominational schools we can add the role of the parents. Many parents self-consciously choose their 'own' private school. This form of self-selection importantly contributes to a school community with shared values, strong social ties and extensive networks. In light of these combined benefits it is unsurprising that many pupils at these schools can and do profit from these school features, and this often translates into better academic performance (Dijkstra, Dronkers, and Karsten 2004).

The explanations for why Islamic schools generally produce poor outcomes often derive from resource theory (Van der Slik, Driessen, and De Bot 2006). Particularly relevant is the cultural, social and linguistic capital which parents and their children have at their disposal. Immigrant children from lower socio-economic backgrounds generally have fewer (relevant) resources at their disposal than native children from higher socio-economic backgrounds. Another type of explanation for the low performance of Islamic schools focuses on the influence of the peer group (Caldas and Bankston 1997). Classmates create their own social context, apart from the individual background, and this context strongly influences the performance

level of the students. Relevant factors are shared interests, habits, aspirations and peer pressure (not) to excel. The peer group can and often does affect the performance of individual students not only directly but also indirectly through the (stereotyped) teacher's perception of the peer group. Negative perceptions can lead to low expectations and through a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy these often combine to produce underachievement.

Based on the preceding observations, certain expectations and hypotheses can be formulated. In what follows we reiterate and examine our four hypotheses. With the first two the emphasis rests on the denominational perspective, while with the last two the emphasis rests on the disadvantage perspective.

*Hypothesis 1: Cultural-religious congruence.* With respect to attitudinal and behavioural characteristics, pupils at Islamic schools are able to perform much better than pupils in schools with comparable backgrounds, but also better than pupils in the average primary school.

Islamic schools aim to meet the needs of their pupils but also (within reason) to satisfy the wishes and demands of the parents. They hope to accomplish this by creating an environment in which the cultural and religious norms of the schools align with those of the home. The idea here is that the children will feel more at home, have stronger relationships with the staff and fellow pupils, and also develop more self-confidence and consequently enjoy better academic achievement. As a result, the motivation and vested interest of the individual parents, together with the strong 'community' Muslim parents produce, and finally the ethos of the school itself combine to foster rather favourable conditions for both the cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes of the pupils.

*Hypothesis 2: Pedagogical and didactic alignment.* In the core subjects, pupils at Islamic schools will perform better academically; moreover, advice offered by teachers for education beyond primary education is much higher than that offered to pupils in schools with a similar student population and even higher than students in the average primary school.

Islamic schools are able to adapt their teaching and instruction to their specific pupil population. Often this means a strong emphasis on basic skills (literacy, numeracy). Combined with improved communication with parents, particularly if they are made to feel more comfortable speaking their native language, these benefits yield better overall outcomes for pupils and bode well for their self-esteem and academic performance at the secondary and tertiary levels. In short, compared to non-Islamic schools serving comparable populations, Islamic schools are able to supply important benefits to their pupils, even if the concentration of immigrant children from low socioeconomic backgrounds has a dampening effect on their overall outcome.

In addition to the two main hypotheses formulated from the denomination perspective, two additional hypotheses can be formulated from the disadvantage perspective.

*Hypothesis 3: Resources deficits.* Pupils at Islamic schools perform much better than pupils at schools with a comparable population, but much lower than the average Dutch primary school. Compared to pupils from mainstream Dutch schools, children who attend Islamic schools as a whole have fewer (relevant) cultural, social and linguistic resources at their disposal. Their deficits are not unlike those of pupils attending comparable non-Islamic schools, but they stand in stark contrast to most pupils attending the average Dutch primary school.

*Hypothesis 4: Positive peer pressure.* Pupils at Islamic schools perform well in terms of their behaviour and attitudes, and therefore their disposition towards achievement generally is much better than pupils in schools with comparable populations, and at least as well as pupils in the average school. In contrast, in the typical school hosting a large concentration of immigrants there commonly is peer pressure of another sort, which often has both a negative impact on many of the pupils as well as on the staff. Owing to an absence of parental support, a sense of community, as well as value alignment often found in Islamic and other denominational schools, staff turnover rates are generally much higher in these schools. These factors aggravate the problem of negative peer pressure.

### ***Empirical analyses***

In several studies conducted since the 1990s the language and math test scores and attitudes and behaviour of pupils at Islamic schools were evaluated. Based on the notion that a school's output to a large degree is determined by its pupil population in terms of parental educational level and ethnic background (Sirin 2005), three categories of schools were delineated: Islamic schools, 'comparable' schools, and the 'average' school. 'Comparable' schools are schools with a virtually identical socio-ethnic pupil population as found in Islamic schools, i.e. the parents of pupils at both categories of schools have roughly the same ethnic background and educational attainment level. The 'average' school is simply the average Dutch primary school in terms of its pupil composition, notably the ethnic background and educational attainment level of the parents. In the analyses, two comparisons were made: the achievement of pupils at Islamic schools with: (1) those attending comparable schools; and (2) those attending the average Dutch primary school. The most recent detailed analyses reflect the situation in 2005 (Driessen 2008). In that study it was concluded that only minor differences existed between Islamic schools, comparable schools and the average school with respect to behaviour and attitudes. With respect to academic achievement, however, Islamic schools performed somewhat better than comparable schools, but much lower than the average school. These findings from 2005 were similar to those from 1995, 1997 and 1999. In other words, not much had changed in the subsequent years.

In 2011 new data were collected, making it possible to see whether the ISBOs new approach were showing signs of improvement and if there had been any positive developments in the intervening years. The data are from the 2011 measurement round of the national COOL<sup>5-18</sup> cohort study (Driessen, Mulder, and Roeleveld 2012). More than 550 primary schools participated in this study with a total of nearly 38,000 pupils in grades 2, 5 and 8 (6, 9 and 12-year-olds). Among the participating schools there were 17 Islamic schools. In the Dutch context, the budget of schools to a large extent is determined by the social backgrounds of the pupils. As explained earlier, under the Educational Priority Policy extra funding is awarded on the basis of the number of children who have parents with low, or very low, levels of education. The total disadvantage of a school is expressed in the so-called 'school score', which ranges from 100 to 220.

The upper panel of Table 1 presents some background information of all Dutch Islamic schools and the total population of Dutch primary schools. In 2010 there were 41 Islamic schools (with a total of 9318 pupils). Almost 55% of these pupils' parents were very low or low educated; of these nearly 30% were of Turkish origin and 40% of Moroccan origin. In contrast, at the average Dutch school less than 14% of the pupils' parents were very low or low educated and only 5% were of Turkish or Moroccan descent. In the lower part of Table 1 are the relevant data from the COOL study (from 2011). Following the earlier evaluations of Islamic schools, the same distinctions were made between Islamic schools, comparable schools, and the average school. Although there is some difference regarding the percentage of Turkish pupils at the 17 Islamic schools (with 1323 pupils in grades 2, 5 and 8), the school score in the COOL study is almost identical to that of the 41 Islamic schools in the total population, suggesting that in terms of socioeconomic disadvantage the Islamic schools in the COOL study are representative for all Dutch Islamic schools. We constructed a sample of schools which in terms of disadvantage is comparable to the sample of Islamic schools. Accordingly we selected the 69 schools with the highest school score (i.e. the most disadvantaged schools). There were 4250 pupils in grades 2, 5 and 8 of these schools. Although there are differences with regard to the percentages of low educated and Moroccan parents, the school score is identical. The school score of the average school in the COOL study is nearly the same as that found in the total population of Dutch schools.

In the COOL study several instruments were used. First, in all grades standardised Language or Reading and Math tests were administered developed by CITO, the National Institute for Educational Measurement to gauge the pupils' cognitive skills ([www.cito.nl](http://www.cito.nl)). Second, in grades 5 and 8 two standardised scales were used to establish the pupils' motivation, namely Self-efficacy and Task motivation (Midgley et al. 2000; Seegers, Van Putten, and De Brabander 2002). Finally, in grade 8 the citizenship competences

Table 1. Population and COOL<sup>5-18</sup> study schools background data (in 2010).

	N schools	% Very low educated	% Low educated	% Medium or high educated	% Turkish	% Moroccan	School score
<b>Population</b>							
Islamic schools	41	45.3	8.8	45.8	29.4	40.2	157
Average school	6882	5.7	8.4	86.0	2.4	2.6	109
<b>COOL study</b>							
Islamic schools	17	44.4	7.2	48.5	19.0	43.9	155
Comparable schools	69	41.7	17.8	40.6	19.2	20.2	155
Average school	406	6.1	9.5	84.4	3.0	3.5	110

questionnaire was used, which consisted of four subscales, namely Knowledge, Reflection, Skills, and Attitudes (Ten Dam, Geijsel, and Reumerman 2011). Also in grade 8 the Primary school leavers' test developed by CITO was administered, and the secondary school recommendation was given by the head teacher.

In our analyses two distinctions are important: first, the distinction between the Islamic schools and the comparable schools, and, second, between Islamic schools and the average school. To gain insights into the magnitude of the differences, a so-called effect size (ES) was calculated for each difference (Coe 2002). An important advantage of ESs is that they are standardised and therefore make it possible to also compare output across different achievement indicators. In its most simple form, an ES is the difference between the means (e.g., test scores) for two groups divided by the pooled standard deviation; this ES is referred to as the Cohen's *d*. With regard to the interpretation of an ES, the rule of thumb provided by Cohen (1988) is usually followed, namely that a coefficient with a value of 0.20 is considered 'small', one with a coefficient of 0.50 'medium', and one with a coefficient of 0.80 'large'. An ES with a positive sign (+) here indicates that Islamic schools score better than comparable schools and/or the average school; an ES with a negative sign (-) means that the other schools score better.

In the upper part of Table 2 the mean scores on the language/reading and math tests in grades 2, 5 and 8 are presented. They show the achievement differences between Islamic schools, comparable schools, and the average school. In the lower part of Table 2 the differences are summarised in terms of ESs, with a comparison of Islamic schools versus comparable schools, and a comparison of Islamic schools versus the average school. To give some examples: in grade 2 Islamic schools perform slightly worse

than comparable schools with regard to language achievement, but much worse than the average school. In grade 8 Islamic schools perform moderately better with regard to math achievement than comparable schools, and slightly worse than the average school. The ESs show that from grade 2 to grade 8 Islamic schools are gradually performing better than comparable schools. Especially in grade 8, the final grade of Dutch primary education, Islamic schools are achieving much better in the subject of math than comparable schools are. The same positive development can be detected from the comparison with the average school. In grade 8 the difference virtually disappears in math, though there still is a considerable difference in the subject of reading.

An important aspect of education is the children's motivation to learn, achieve and continue to make progress. Table 3 provides an overview of the pupils' self-efficacy and task-motivation, both in the form of means scores and ESs. In grade 5 pupils at Islamic schools do not differ from those at comparable schools, but in grade 8 there is some difference in favour of the Islamic schools. The comparison with the pupils at the average school is striking. Not only in grade 5 but even more in grade 8 pupils at Islamic schools score much higher regarding self-efficacy and task-motivation than their fellow pupils at the average Dutch school.

Those opposed to separate Islamic schools sometimes argue that the pupils there grow up in total isolation and therefore will never be integrated into Dutch society and learn to be engaged citizens. Comments like these are widely shared and routinely appear in Dutch newspapers. Remember that the citizenship instrument used in the COOL study uses the four components Knowledge, Reflection, Skills and Attitudes and focuses on four central societal tasks: acting democratically, acting in a socially responsible manner, dealing with conflicts, and dealing with differences. Table 4 provides insight into the pupils' citizenship competences. With regard to

Table 2. Comparison language/reading and math test scores in 2011: mean scores and effect sizes.

	Grade 2		Grade 5		Grade 8	
	Language	Math	Reading	Math	Reading	Math
<b>Mean scores</b>						
Islamic schools	56.25	56.09	18.84	66.08	45.57	109.67
Comparable schools	56.73	54.90	18.52	64.01	42.51	104.35
Average school	64.21	59.39	25.81	71.08	54.21	109.97
<b>Effect sizes</b>						
Islamic vs comparable schools	-0.05	0.09	0.03	0.13	0.17	0.39
Islamic vs average schools	-0.74	-0.24	-0.49	-0.32	-0.45	-0.02

three dimensions, Reflection, Skills and Attitudes, pupils at Islamic schools score considerably higher than pupils at comparable schools, and still higher than pupils at the average school. With respect to one dimension, Knowledge (knowing, understanding, having insight), pupils at Islamic schools score nearly the same as pupils at comparable schools, but significantly lower than pupils at the average school.

These findings directly challenge the widely circulated assumption that pupils attending voluntarily separate schools are less likely to cultivate the relevant civic virtues needed to engage with each other, those in their communities, and by extension, those outside of their communities. To be sure, some schools manage to cultivate the civic competences better than others, but this also describes the situation in many other types of schools.

In grade 8, the final grade of Dutch primary school, pupils completed the Primary school leavers' test, which covers the basic skills in language and math, as well as study skills. In addition to three subtest scores a total test score was computed. In grade 8 pupils receive a recommendation as to the most appropriate type of secondary education. Secondary education in the Netherlands is a tracked system with basically three tracks: pre-vocational secondary education which prepares for middle-level vocational education; senior general secondary education which prepares for higher vocational education; and pre-university education which prepares for university. We computed the percentage of pupils with a recommendation for senior general secondary education or pre-university education. Table 5 gives an overview of the results for the Primary school leavers' test and the recommendation.

Pupils at Islamic schools achieve better than pupils at comparable schools for math and study skills and the test as a whole, but achieve lower than pupils at the average school for language, study skills, and the test as a whole. This result is in line with the results for the reading and math tests discussed earlier. Pupils at Islamic schools also receive a higher secondary

Table 3. Comparison self-efficacy and task-motivation in 2011: mean scores and effect sizes.

	Grade 5		Grade 8	
	self-efficacy	task-motivation	self-efficacy	task-motivation
<b>Mean scores</b>				
Islamic schools	4.03	4.35	3.95	4.31
Comparable schools	3.98	4.35	3.82	4.15
Average school	3.82	4.16	3.69	3.93
<b>Effect sizes</b>				
Islamic vs comparable schools	0.07	0.00	0.21	0.25
Islamic vs average schools	0.32	0.30	0.43	0.62



Table 4. Comparison citizenship knowledge, reflection, skills and attitudes in 2011: mean scores and effect sizes.

	Grade 8			
	knowledge	reflection	skills	attitudes
<b>Mean scores</b>				
Islamic schools	0.70	2.57	3.25	3.20
Comparable schools	0.71	2.38	3.10	3.05
Average school	0.78	2.25	3.01	2.95
<b>Effect sizes</b>				
Islamic vs comparable schools	-0.04	0.33	0.36	0.34
Islamic vs average schools	-0.50	0.57	0.61	0.60

education recommendation than pupils at comparable schools, but a lower recommendation than pupils at the average school. In summary, while the results of Islamic school pupils continue to be mixed, they certainly are favourable with respect to non-cognitive factors such as motivation and citizenship competences.

### The future of Dutch Islamic schools

Dutch Islamic schools were established to address specific concerns within the Muslim community, most especially worries about their children not doing well in school. And since the first Islamic schools were established toward the end of the 1980s, in many ways they have continued to serve disadvantaged ethnic minority children. Educational disadvantages experienced by children of various ethnic groups, all too frequently in Europe those of Muslim background, have been the focus of many concerns about inequality (Stevens and Dworkin 2013).

Dutch Islamic schools continue to face many challenges. Here are two. First, Islamic schools struggle to retain their school principals and teachers. But this is a difficulty that many schools serving disadvantaged populations face, and there are reasonable grounds for believing that as the reputation of Islamic schools improves, more teachers not only will want to work in Islamic schools but also will want to stay there. Second, religious schools that are fully funded and supervised by the state will always struggle to find a balance between satisfying the inspectors and creating and sustaining a school climate and ethos that promotes what the schools purport to be about. Again, this is a challenge that other schools with a special religious or educational vision face – *inter alia*, Hindu, Jewish, Catholic, but also Montessori and Steiner – and so long as the funding and supervision of these schools falls under the ambit of the state, these challenges will likely remain.

Table 5. Comparison Primary School Leavers' test, language, math and study skills, total, and secondary education recommendation in 2011: mean scores and effect sizes.

	Grade 8				
	Language	Math	Study skills	Total	Recommendation
<b>Mean scores</b>					
Islamic schools	67.65	41.79	27.14	531.74	33.74
Comparable schools	68.17	37.88	26.14	529.63	23.02
Average school	74.60	42.44	29.47	535.29	45.05
<b>Effect sizes</b>					
Islamic vs comparable schools	-0.04	0.34	0.15	0.21	0.25
Islamic vs average schools	-0.55	-0.06	-0.37	-0.38	-0.23

Though Islamic schools continue to experience growing pains, there is mounting evidence that, over time, they may be able to accomplish what other schools serving other – formerly stigmatised and disadvantaged – ethnic minorities have. Indeed, Hindu schools in the Netherlands faced a similar set of challenges when they first were established, yet over time their continued efforts have borne much fruit. It is true that the Hindu community in the Netherlands is much smaller, more cohesive, and its schools are overwhelmingly staffed by members of the (Surinamese) Hindu community. Moreover, the Dutch language is more fluently spoken by Dutch Hindus and with greater frequency in the home. Taken together, the Hindu community has become considerably less disadvantaged and stigmatised over time. Indeed, there may even be evidence to suggest that Dutch Hindus have become ‘model minorities’ in the Netherlands (Merry and Driessen 2012).

By way of contrast, as we have seen the very idea of Islamic education has from the very beginning faced ongoing difficulties in the Netherlands. Without question, the media has played an important role in shaping public opinion. Within a few short years, the general attitude among the public had shifted from being open-minded and tolerant to being vociferously critical and even hostile. The 9/11 attacks, the murder of Theo van Gogh, as well as incidents of Islamist terrorism abroad have all been decisive factors in shaping public opinion (Buijs 2009).

Yet while criticism directed at Islamic schools has died down considerably in recent years, they continue to face several demands. By far the most significant is that Islamic schools must educate their pupils to become ‘well-integrated citizens’ within Dutch liberal-democratic society. To help promote this aim, the subject of ‘citizenship’ was made compulsory in all Dutch schools in 2006. Partly to ward off further criticism, Islamic schools

have been keen to show that they are actively promoting good citizenship in their schools and promoting ‘integration’.

At the same time, however, both concepts – integration and citizenship – suffer from vagueness and the underlying assumption by mainstream academics and politicians alike is that it is minorities – routinely referred to as ‘allochthonous’ (literally, from somewhere else) by native Dutch – who alone must demonstrate this, regardless of whether they are born and raised in the Netherlands or speak Dutch as their mother tongue (Leeman and Pels 2006). Yet while demands to ‘integrate’ will invariably be controversial and slanted in favour of the majority population, prerequisites for integration appear to include both the ‘correct’ political-religious attitudes and educational qualifications.

Meanwhile, a number of politicians (especially populist Member of Parliament Geert Wilders) continue to publicly pronounce that the Islamic faith is incompatible with liberal democratic values. Of course, the fact that some Islamic schools have a conservative orientation and that some school board members have ties with Islamist political-religious organisations does not necessarily mean that this orientation is also imposed upon the pupils (Binnenlandse Veiligheidsdienst 2002). In any case, the possibility that pupils are being indoctrinated at school would be unlikely, as most regular class teachers are native-Dutch non-Muslims, and on average no more than one hour of Islamic instruction is permitted. The more interesting question is what some Muslim children learn *outside* of school, where many are likely to hear dogmatic instruction during Qur’anic classes in some of the mosques.

## Conclusions

In this article we have examined the evolving performance of Islamic schools using two sociological frames, the denominational perspective and the disadvantage perspective. Through these frames we have tested four different hypotheses – cultural-religious congruence, pedagogical alignment, resource deficits and positive peer pressure – using data from the national COOL<sup>5-18</sup> cohort study. Yet of these hypotheses, religious congruence, pedagogical alignment and positive peer pressure appear to have little explanatory efficacy. In contrast, the resource deficit hypothesis continues to have considerable explanatory efficacy where the majority of Islamic schools is concerned.

As we have seen, one of the main reasons for the founding of Islamic schools was to improve the educational environment and quality and thus the learning outcomes of children of Muslim background. We have shown how over time and with varying degrees of success, Islamic schools have begun to tackle educational disadvantage, in part by attending to the cultural and religious background of their pupils, thereby improving their motivation

to learn. Moreover, owing partly to the shared values, stronger discipline and parental support, but also complete financial support from the government, Islamic schools – some more than others – have made modest gains in improving the academic performance of their pupils. We also have shown that their improved performance is noteworthy when examined alongside comparable schools, i.e., schools serving pupils with an almost identical ethnic and socioeconomic background.

Some of this improvement likely follows from the fact that many Islamic schools deal with less diversity than schools serving other Muslim children. Owing to the ethnic homogeneity one often can find, together with efforts to align the values of the school with those of the home, pupils are more likely to develop strong relationships with staff and feel at home in an Islamic school; as a result many Muslim children experience greater self-confidence, and this – at least in theory – can contribute to improved academic performance. Still, it remains the case that most Islamic schools continue to perform only slightly better than schools serving a comparable population and worse than the average primary school. This is disconcerting, to say the least, considering that Islamic schools for years have received almost twice as much funding as non-disadvantaged schools owing to the relatively disadvantaged population they serve. Yet while the data suggest only modest gains, given the arduous struggle to improve Dutch Islamic education over the past 25 years, even modest gains should be interpreted as something positive. Indeed, as we indicated in the introduction, two Islamic primary schools are now recognised as being among the very best primary schools in the country. This positive news will likely inspire others to emulate their success.

With respect to lingering worries about homogenous schools, contrary to the expectation of those who frown upon all forms of segregation a growing research suggests that a positive correlation often exists between a homogenous class composition and the motivation to learn. That is to say, a majority composition of minority pupils may in fact provide opportunities to succeed that are not available in more mixed school settings (Dronkers and Van der Velden 2013). Indeed, a culturally or religiously segregated pupil population in itself tells us nothing about whether a school is able to meet the needs of its pupils. Similarly, it is not a foregone conclusion that pupils from a relatively disadvantaged background concentrated in one school will inevitably produce poor academic or non-academic outcomes. To the contrary, with sufficient support and the right kinds of resources present in the school, disadvantaged children may be better off in an environment where their backgrounds are not seen as a liability but rather as an asset.

With respect to the claim that homogeneous learning environments limit what pupils are able to learn about different points of view, two things can be said. First, it is difficult to avoid the implication that most homogenous Dutch schools also will fail in this endeavour for the simple reason that

most of these will be majority *white* schools. Second, it turns out that teachers in Islamic schools report that older Muslim children are in fact well aware of the significance of cultural and religious differences, as well as how they are viewed by others and what they must do to succeed. In any case, minority status almost always means that minorities usually know more about the majority culture than others know about them.

At the present time, the sense of crisis facing Islamic schools in the Netherlands seems to have abated. To be sure, Islamic schools continue to be confronted with many challenges: school board reforms, achievement improvement, and an ongoing battle for ‘the soul of Islam’ across Europe and elsewhere in the Islamic world, as events on the global stage and conflicting visions of Islamic circulated on the Internet continue to inform and colour how Muslims practice their faith, but also how their faith is represented and understood. Meanwhile, most Islamic school principals and teachers are struggling simply to get on with the business of developing a clear set of learning goals, a challenging curricula, a safe and accepting school climate, and all the while trying to infuse an Islamic ethos into the school.

## Notes

1. Public schools are administered under the auspices of the community government, whereas private schools (which are almost all denominational schools) are administered by private legal institutions (usually a foundation).
2. In 2009, only some 50 schools offered Islamic religious instruction (Bouma 2009).
3. In 2011, 71% of the Turkish and 76% of the Moroccan 15- to 24-year-olds indicated that they had attended Qur’anic classes when they were children (Maliapaard and Gijsberts 2012).
4. On the other hand, staff in Dutch schools also criticised Muslim parents. They reproached them for not showing enough interest in their children’s education, for living in a closed community, and for taking little interest in mainstream Dutch society. In short, there was mutual incomprehension and distrust.
5. Recently this secondary school again made the headlines, the occasion being the theft of final exams. This scandal, combined with a consistently low level of student performance, too many uncertified teachers, and financial irregularities have led the authorities to the decision to completely re-structure the school in November 2013. Immediately thereafter its teaching staff for the most part was replaced and operated under the authority of the Christian school governing body *Melanchthon*. Since the beginning of the 2014/15 school year the school began operating independently again under a new name, Avicenna College.

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