

Islamic schools in the Netherlands - integrating by separating

By: Marina Ferhatovic

Two 12-year old girls with white veils peek curiously through the big open windows of the teacher's room of Bilal Islamic Primary School during the morning briefing. Sofia Roodenburg, one of the teachers, turns to them smiling, and blows them a kiss.

“Our pupils are different. They are being shaped by the way the society reacts to them. That is why I want to give them as much love as I can”, she says.

Being one of the first Islamic schools in the Netherlands, Bilal school in Amersfoort opened its doors for the first time 16 years ago as a result of a joint initiative by the Turkish and Moroccan communities in the area. The idea was to preserve the Islamic religion and culture by providing the children with a solid religious identity in the context of the secular Dutch state. Today the school has around 350 pupils, most of them with origins in countries like Turkey, Morocco, Iraq or Somalia. The only unifying element in this mixture of cultures is the religion of Islam and a shared sense of alienation that comes with it.

Half past eight sharp, the school bell rings and the classroom of Vera Driessen is filled with smiling faces of the group 9A. Today the pupils are learning how to form diminutives of words like bikini, baby and house. The room looks like any other primary school classroom except for some small details, such as drawings of mosques that cover one of the walls and a pink Barbie backpack hanging of one of the chairs - instead of the familiar blond doll on the front there is a black-eyed Fulla doll with a veil.

The day starts with a morning prayer and a “hadith of the week”. Even though she is not Muslim, Vera prays with the children following the school policy of showing respect for the religious belief of the pupils. Other religious elements in their education are: a weekly one hour lesson on Islam, a weekly prayer when the whole school gathers in the gymnasium to perform “salat”, and the celebration of religious holidays, like Ramadan. When the lesson starts one might notice an element not necessarily related to the religion of Islam that differentiates this classroom from a typical primary school – the order.

“Our children are really calm. We have smaller groups than a school with predominantly Dutch pupils, which creates better learning environment and allows us to focus more on the specific needs of our pupils”, Vera explains.

The smaller groups in Bilal school are a direct effect of the Dutch Education Policy, which provides extra funding for ethnic minority pupils. The idea behind it is to bridge the gap regarding the knowledge of the Dutch language between immigrant and Dutch students in order to create more equal opportunities for them in their future studies. According to Jeske Sannen, the teacher of 7A in Bilal school, the policy has not had the desired effect.

“Our children are still far behind the Dutch children when it comes to the vocabulary. Most of them are born in the Netherlands so they don't have an accent but the

classroom is the only place where they practise the language. Even when they go out to play in the school yard they switch to their mother tongue”, she says.

Despite of that, she feels that her pupils are better off in an Islamic school than in a public school with high density of immigrants. Before coming to Bilal school, Jeske has worked in a so called “black school” in Amsterdam and recalls the atmosphere in the classroom as chaotic and destructive.

“Going to a religious school may not be good for the integration of immigrant children into the Dutch society, but it is better for their education”, she says.

The reports from the Education Inspectorate support her opinion. At the end of the primary school most pupils in the Netherlands take a so called CITO test, which is meant to determine their level of achievement. The last comparative study of the different levels between the schools was made in 2003 and the results then showed that pupils from Islamic schools, in many cases, were above the average in the category of schools with high number of immigrant children. But the scores were below the level of schools with predominantly Dutch students. Twan Gommans, the director of the Bilal school, sees the results as promising.

“It is good but we are not content yet. I believe in our children and our teachers and I know that we can do better”, he says.

As proof of his faith stands the fact that his own son attended the last year of primary school in Bilal school, becoming its first non Muslim pupil. Twan does not believe that the level of education is the problem for the pupils of his school, but their lack of contact with the Dutch society. As an attempt to combat this, the Bilal school is participating in projects in which the children can meet with classes from predominantly Dutch schools. The school also focuses on the vision of keeping the staff of the school mixed, which is believed to create a good role model of integration for the children.

“If we can work together here with mutual respect for our differences, the children will learn that it can be done in the society as well”, he says.

However, not everybody shares this positive view of Islamic schools’ effect on integration. Recently the schools have become something of a disturbance for, on one hand, the extreme right parties with their anti-immigrant views, and on the other hand, the liberals arguing that religious schooling is a threat to integration. As the number of Muslims in the Netherlands is about to reach a million the need of finding a common approach is more urgent than ever.

Today’s model of Islamic schools has its roots in a world much less preoccupied with the idea of assimilation of immigrants. The Netherlands has a history of division of society in pillars on the basis of religion or philosophy of life, each group having its own political parties, hospitals and schools. Therefore, the establishment of the first Islamic schools in the late 80’s was accepted without much controversy. This climate of openness has changed in the light of events like 9/11 and the murder of Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh by a Muslim fundamentalist. Muslims organizing in groups

was suddenly perceived as a threat which gave new fuel to the idea of abolishing religious schooling as the next logical step in the process of depillarisation.

Frits Bolkestein, former leader of a Dutch liberal party People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), is very much in favour of this idea. In his opinion the Dutch are not really going to come to final terms with the segregation in the country until there is a constitutional amendment ending religious schooling.

"Divided schooling leads to a divided country," he was quoted as saying in the International Herald Tribune.

In the shadow of growing discontent with the segregation of immigrants in the Netherlands, during the past few years many studies of Muslim schools and their effect on integration were conducted. According to Marcel Maussen, researcher at Institute for Migration and Ethnic Studies (IMES) at the University of Amsterdam, these reports have concluded that on the whole, Islamic schools are not obstructive to integration of Muslim children.

"The fact that children are brought up and educated with a strong sense of religious identity need not be a problem, but they should be able to participate in a variety of activities and spheres in Dutch society, such as sports, work and neighbourhood. The reports suggest that this happens. Students are well equipped to participate in Dutch society after completing this type of education", he says.

Twan Gommans, believes that the children of his school will integrate well precisely because they were introduced into the Dutch society more gradually. Even sheltered behind the school walls, the pupils of Bilal school are very aware of the negative views of their religion, which exist in the society. One of the pupils of 7A, Osama, 11 years old, when expecting a visit from American journalists to the school, became anxious and said to his teacher: "Oh no, they are not going to like my name." Twan believes that this negative self-image, which Muslim children are in danger of developing, is the main reason for keeping the Islamic schools in the Netherlands.

"I hope that religious primary schools can be abolished one day. That is the perfect scenario. But we, as a society are not tolerant enough yet and I think these children deserve a chance to embrace who they are before they have to face the prejudice about them", he says.

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