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The role of mosque education in the integration of Turkish–Dutch youth: perspectives of Muslim parents, imams, mosque teachers and key stakeholders

Semiha Sözeri [a], H. K. Altinyelken [b] and M. L. L. Volman [b]

aDepartment of Education and Pedagogy, Utrecht University, Utrecht, Netherlands;
bDepartment of Child Development and Education, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Netherlands

ABSTRACT
This study addresses the perceived role of mosque education in the integration of Turkish–Dutch Muslim children in the Netherlands. It is based on interviews with imams, mosque teachers, parents of mosque students, chairs of migrant organizations, policymakers and experts ($N = 75$). Most respondents ($N = 49$) view mosque education as potentially aiding the integration of the children, often depending on whether mosques adopt this as a policy and train imams and mosque teachers accordingly. Mosque education is perceived by many as contributing to integration by teaching the children values of respect and tolerance, offering positive identity affirmation to children's stigmatized Islamic identity and countering youth radicalization by providing messages of moderation. While sixteen participants see mosque education as irrelevant for integration, ten participants voice concerns about the potential of mosque education to cause value confusion, alienate students from the Dutch society and indoctrinate them with Turkish state propaganda. Implications are discussed.

Introduction

Mosque education (i.e. the supplementary Islamic education provided in mosques) has been often portrayed as a threat to integration with a potential to radicalize Muslim youth, further segregation and cause identity confusion (Sözeri, Kosar-Altinyelken and Volman 2019; Cherti and Bradley 2011). Some scholars have warned that mosque classes might be hindering social

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cohesion when students are being instructed to avoid spare time contact with their non-Muslim peers (Pels et al. 2016). In the Netherlands, many politicians have raised their concerns about the influence of mosque education on Muslim children. For example, the mayor of Amsterdam and politician from the Green Party (GroenLinks) Femke Halsema expressed that she wants more control and inspection of the mosque classes in her city (Koops 2019). Likewise, Lodewijk Asscher, leader of the Dutch Labour Party (PvdA) and minister of Social Affairs and Employment (2012–17), commented in parliament that those who send their children to mosque classes have failed to integrate, even if they are economically active and participate in the Dutch society (Zandbergen 2014).

Although there are no official estimates, Cherti and Bradley's (2011) research in Britain and Sözeri and Altinyelken's research in the Netherlands (2019) suggest that mosque education is attended by a higher number of students than the formal Islamic primary schools. Yet, for a variety of reasons among which difficulty of access to mosques and distrust towards researchers, mosque education is still largely understudied (Alkouatli 2018). The choice to focus on the Turkish–Dutch is not accidental: besides being the largest Muslim community in the Netherlands (CBS 2018), previous research suggests that the Turkish–Dutch shows sustained levels of religiosity across generations (Maliepaard, Lubbers, and Gijsberts 2010), and are more likely to resist acculturation into the mainstream society than their counterparts in other comparable European migration countries like Germany (Kortmann 2015). Furthermore, higher Muslim religiosity among the youth has been found to be associated with lower host nation (i.e. Dutch) identification (Fleischmann and Phalet 2018).

What is the role of mosque education in the integration of the Turkish–Dutch youth according to their parents, imams, mosque teachers and key stakeholders? This is the main overarching question this study seeks to answer. It poses the following sub-questions: (1) What is the understanding of integration of the different actors? (2) Does mosque education aid or frustrate integration according to the respondents? (3) What are the ways in which mosque education could be aiding integration? And (4) What are the ways in which mosque education could be frustrating integration? To address these questions, the study uses data from semi-structured interviews with Turkish imams, mosque teachers, parents and an ideologically diverse body of key stakeholders collected between March 2016 and December 2017.

The study is novel due to its focus on insiders' perspectives on the role of mosque education in Muslim children's integration which – despite the large body of research on the link between integration and Islamic religiosity of the youth – to our knowledge hasn't been studied before in the Netherlands, and internationally it has only been partially touched upon by a British think-tank (Cherti and Bradley 2011).

Theoretical and empirical approaches

Immigrant integration and Islam

The question whether Islam plays a role in Muslim immigrants' integration in the host societies has been researched well by a large number of studies which report conflicting results about the first generation and their descendants. On the one hand, research establishes a negative link between the level of religiosity of first-generation Muslim immigrants and a variety of integration outcomes among which social contact with natives (Maliepaard and Phalet 2012), host language proficiency (Güveli and Platt 2011), educational success (Van Tubergen and Sindradóttir 2011), attitudes to egalitarian gender roles (Diehl, Koenig, and Ruckdeschel 2009) and identification with the host nation (Verkuyten and Yildiz 2007). In contrast to these, some of the research on the role of religiosity in the integration of the so-called second generation (children of immigrants born in the host country), find positive associations between higher levels of religiosity (often measured as the frequency of mosque attendance, prayer and degree of religious identification) and integration markers as educational attainment, employment, social participation and interethnic contacts (Fleischmann and Phalet 2012; Scheible and Fleischmann 2013). In the light of such findings, some scholars claim that religion does not matter anymore when the focus of analysis is on immigrants' descendants (Voas and Fleischmann 2012, cited in Beek and Fleischmann 2020). Yet, others point out that the religiosity of migrants' children is still negatively associated with egalitarian gender role attitudes (Kretschmer 2018), values of sexual liberalism (Kogan and Weißmann 2020), majority language skills and interethnic friendships (Beek and Fleischmann 2020). The conflicting findings of the studies imply that there might be a need to re-conceptualize the definition of integration and to re-evaluate the different ways it has been measured so far.

Defining integration in the Netherlands

The term "immigrant integration" is conceptually elusive. Givens (2007) who reviews the research on immigrant integration in Europe, describes it broadly as "the processes that take place after an immigrant has moved to a new country" and "a two-way process, requiring accommodation by both the native and the immigrant populations" (72). Similarly, Klarenbeek (2021) offers a conceptualization of integration as a two-way process in which integration is not only limited to socio-economic outcomes and the members of the receiving society have responsibility to lift boundaries to outsiders' integration such as discrimination, stereotypes and stigmatization. In his book "Imagined Societies: A Critique of Immigrant Integration in Western Europe", Schinkel who also scrutinizes the definitions of immigrant

integration in the literature, remarks that immigrant integration "is hardly ever defined" but rather "conceived in the contemporary social science of its measurement" (2017, 74). In other words, the dominant understanding of integration has mainly been based on quantitative measurements of migrants' socio-economic participation, language proficiency, attitudes toward liberal values and identification with the host nation. Since one of the goals of this study is to explore the definitions of integration of the interviewed community members, it is not theoretically guided by existing definitions in the literature.

Nevertheless, to put the actors' perspectives on integration in context, it is worth remarking that these have been shaped in the socio-political conditions of a sharp shift in integration policies from multiculturalism to assimilationism (Entzinger 2014). Namely, between the 1980s and 2000s, these were designed to facilitate immigrants' socio-economic participation in society through the maintenance of their own culture, language and traditions, while after the 2000s public figures and policymakers started to "blame" immigrants and their children for not identifying strongly enough with Dutch culture, and not adopting Dutch values and norms. After the shift to assimilationism, Islam has been depicted as one of the main sources of immigrants' integration problems in the Netherlands (Ghorashi 2017). Duyvendak (2011, 92) calls this phenomenon "the culturalization of citizenship": "a process in which emotions, feelings, norms and values, symbols and traditions (including religion) come to play a pivotal role in defining what can be expected of a Dutch citizen". That is to say, the prevalent understanding of integration in the Netherlands has changed from socio-economic emancipation to cultural assimilation: it is commonly understood as the degree of convergence of values and norms between natives and non-natives.

The role of mosque education

Mosque education is one of the most widely accessible ways for children's socialization in Islamic worldview and lifestyle as all mosques provide some form of Islamic education. According to some sources, attendance rates are higher than seventy-five per cent for Turkish-Muslim children in Amsterdam and Rotterdam (Phalet, Fleischmann, and Stojčić 2012). Instruction at the mosques is unregistered with Dutch educational authorities. Turkish mosque education in the Netherlands is scheduled in extracurricular time, and it is attended by children between the ages of six and sixteen from two hours up to twelve hours per week depending on the mosque's curriculum and facilities. Besides learning to read and recite the Qur'an, mosque students receive teachings in performance of Islamic rituals, life of the prophet, history of Islam, fundamentals of Islamic law and philosophy. Teaching the

Turkish language, history and traditions is also seen as one of the main learning objectives according to the providers (see Sözeri and Altinyelken (2019) for a detailed discussion). Considering the importance attributed to norms and values in the integration debates, the role of imams has been perceived as critical in the integration of young Muslims (Sözeri, Altinyelken, and Volman 2019). Foreign imams and mosque teachers have been often accused with inability to connect to the realities of diaspora youth (Kamp 2008). Cherti and Bradley (2011), who surveyed 179 British mosques, report that mosque classes might potentially benefit social cohesion if imams and mosque teachers from overseas receive training to get acquainted with the British context. Based on evidence from British cooperation projects between schools and mosques, they argue that mosques can be instrumental in Muslim children's citizenship education, and help them integrate better. Although research on the topic is scarce, in the Netherlands Ter Avest and Bakker (2018) draw attention to efforts by imams who pay increasingly more attention to topics of youth radicalization and alienation in their mosque classes, through emphasizing the importance of respect and tolerance towards non-Muslims.

Others advance the counterintuitive claim that ethnically segregated youth activities organized by mosques actually have a positive impact on children's social integration. For example, Bartels and de Jong (2007, 460) who studied the social activities and civic participation of four mosques in Amsterdam found that according to the mosque councils "activities aimed at strengthening their own identity contribute to social participation and integration; bonding is seen as a condition for bridging. Thus mosques focus more on bonding and see bonding as an activity of integration". Similarly, Walseth (2016), who conducted research with seven mosques belonging to different congregations in Oslo, suggests that the sport activities offered by the mosques had an important role in preventing youth marginalization and building children's self-confidence as Norwegian Muslims through the bonding social capital acquired in the mosque. Walseth argues that participating in competitions against other Norwegian sport clubs helped bridging across ethnic groups. In other words, the function of the mosque is seen not as alienating the children from the mainstream society, but as facilitating their participation in it by building their self-confidence as Muslims, or offering positive affirmation to the stigmatized religious identity of the children.

The presented counter-narrative is amplified by Peucker and Ceylan (2017) who drawing on thirty in-depth interviews with members of Muslim community organizations in Australia and Germany, identify Islamic community activities as a "gateway to political participation" (2417) which facilitates intercommunity contact and engagement rather than furthering ethnic segregation. Often, the potential of mosques to

promote active civic engagement by Muslim youth is seen in encouraging Islamic volunteering initiatives (Peucker, Kayikci, and Reyhan 2020) that are guided by the faith-based motivation to serve the community and humanity at large (Peucker 2018).

Data and methods

The study is based on sixty-eight individual and four group interviews conducted between March 2016 and December 2017 with a total of seventy-five respondents. The sample included imams, mosque teachers, parents of mosque students, educators specialized in diversity in education, chairs and board members of the largest Turkish and Islamic organizations, experts teaching in the Dutch Islamic theology and imam-training programmes, academics studying the Dutch Muslim communities, journalists with expertise on Dutch Muslims, advisors on integration from the Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, and municipality officials from Amsterdam and Utrecht working in the field of diversity management and radicalization in the Netherlands. We used a heterogeneous purposive sampling technique which allowed us to deliberately choose participants with relevant but different perspectives, experience, expertise or insider knowledge (Etikan, Musa, and Alkassim 2016). Table 1 provides an overview of the demographic characteristics of the different groups of respondents.

Diyanet, *Milli Görüş*, *Süleymanlı* and the *Gülen* community are four major Turkish Islamic communities in Europe with a significant presence in the Netherlands. Currently, there are approximately 500 mosques in the Netherlands, and more than half of them are Turkish Islamic: about 150 mosques are affiliated with *Diyanet*, followed by eighty-four associations (of which forty-one mosques) affiliated with *Süleymanlı*, and about forty mosques affiliated with the two Dutch branches of *Milli Görüş*. While *Diyanet* is governed and financed by the Turkish state's Presidency of Religious Affairs, *Milli Görüş* and *Süleymanlı* are Islamic organizations that are independent from the Turkish state, setup abroad by the first generations of Turkish guest-workers (see Sözeri and Altinyelken (2019) for more detailed overview of the Turkish mosque organizations in the Netherlands). The majority of the respondents in the sample were associated with *Diyanet* and *Milli Görüş*. Namely, five imams, three mosque teachers and twelve parents were affiliated with *Diyanet* (N = 20). Likewise, five imams, six mosque teachers and sixteen parents were affiliated with *Milli Görüş* (N = 27). Three respondents (two chairs of educational centres and one journalist) were associated with the *Gülen* community also known as the *Hizmet* movement (followers of the Turkish imam in exile Fethullah Gülen), distinguished by the other communities by building education centres instead of mosques and focusing on interreligious dialogue. One imam was affiliated with the *Süleymanlı*, which

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the interviewees.

	Imams (N = 10)	Mosque teachers (N = 9)	Chairs &board members of Islamic organizations (N = 15)	Parents (N = 28)	Academic experts (N = 4)	Policymakers & advisors (N = 5)	Journalists (N = 2)	Educators (N = 2)
Age range	27–53	19–49	25–63	32–52	43–62	32–62	30–34	30–44
Gender	10 Men	7 Women, 2 men	4 Women, 11 men	25 Women, 3 men	1 Woman, 3 men	1 Woman, 4 men	2 Men	2 Women
Education level	10 University	4 University, 1 HBO, 2 MBO, 3 Imam-hatip	9 University, 1 HBO, 5 secondary school	2 University, 1 HBO, 5 MBO, 1 LBO, 3 Imam-hatip, 4 secondary school, 12 primary school	4 University	3 University, 2 HBO	2 University	2 University
Nationality	7 NL&TR, 3 TR	7 NL&TR, 3 TR	10 NL&TR, 1 NL&MOR, 3 TR, 1 NL	17 NL&TR, 10 TR, 1 NL	4 NL	3 NL&TR, 1 NL&MOR, 1 NL	2 NL	2 NL
Years of residence (range)	2–42	2–27	2–43	12–38	43–62	32–55	30–34	30–44

Abbreviations: NL: Dutch; TR: Turkish; MOR: Moroccan; HBO: University of Applied Sciences; MBO: Vocational secondary school; LBO: Lower vocational education; Imam-hatip: Islamic vocational secondary school.

has a long tradition of organizing Qur'an courses in Turkey. There were six respondents who were chairs or board members of secular Turkish migrant organizations (i.e. not affiliated with any Islamic community). Respondents with *Diyanet* and *Milli Görüş* affiliation were justifiably overrepresented in the sample, as they are the main providers of Turkish mosque education in the Netherlands and have the largest student population.

In the analyses, the study employs the term *hoca* [hodja]which is used to refer to mosque teachers in Turkish. This is done to remain true to the cultural connotations of the original term and to avoid implying false professionalization of the teaching volunteers in the mosques, who are often unpaid and untrained as teachers. The prevalence of female *hocas* and mothers in the sample might be explained with the female identity of the primary researcher.

The interview questions focused on respondents' own understanding of integration and on the perceived role of mosque education in the integration of mosque students. All interviews were conducted at a location convenient for the respondent (e.g. their home, office or the mosque). The respondents were offered the choice to talk in English, Turkish or Dutch. The interviews with stakeholders lasted on average one hour, the interviews with the imams and *hocas*: forty-five minutes, and the interviews with the parents: thirty minutes. At a *Diyanet* mosque, one *hoca* and three parents did not wish their voice to be recorded, but allowed us to take notes of the interviews instead. The audio recordings were verbatim transcribed, and all transcriptions including the notes from the non-audio interviews were coded by the first author for the relevant theoretical concepts using the software programme Atlas.ti version 8.4.23.0. The study relied on a deductive approach to coding. Some examples of themes in the coding scheme are linguistic proficiency, social participation, integration, cultural assimilation, religious identity maintenance, interethnic attitudes, perceived (in)congruency in norms and values, and youth radicalization. The second author also coded two-thirds of the interviews, and the coding was cross-checked by the first and second author for inter-coder consensus. In case of disagreement (which was rare), the authors tried to justify their standpoints and reach an agreement. Subsequently, the coded texts were thematically analysed for emerging patterns of meaning (Friese, Soratto, and Pires 2018). Whenever needed, quotations used in the article were translated into English by the first author who is a native Turkish speaker with advanced Dutch language proficiency.

Findings

Different understandings of integration

How do different actors define integration? Understanding this was instrumental to interpreting their responses about the role of mosque education.

Particularly academics, chairs of migrant organizations and journalists commented without being prompted that the mainstream definition of integration in the Netherlands has perceivably shifted from expectations for social participation and linguistic proficiency, to cultural assimilation demands for adoption of Dutch norms, values and lifestyle. As one chair put it: "The more you distance yourself from Turkishness and Islam, the better integrated you seem". Imams, *hocas* and many parents, on the other hand, expressed that they perceive a mismatch between their understanding of integration and the one imposed by the state and the society: they felt that what could reasonably be expected from youth with migrant background is linguistic proficiency, respect for the laws of the country and socio-economic participation, while staying true to their cultural and religious values. The vision of imams and *hocas* was considered pivotal by policymakers, as they were likely to convey their ideas while teaching in the mosque classrooms. Below are selected excerpts which illustrate the dominant view of integration among this group:

> Integration: living here under the Dutch flag without forgetting our own Turkish flag, that's it. It is making friends with them when mingling in social occasions, sharing foods and drinks, but without drinking alcohol or eating pork, right? (…) I mean, we don't tell them to just do their business and separate their paths. We also talk about good neighbourly relations in our classes. This also means integration to some extent.(…) But after all we have to be realistic: The Dutch state expects our people, our Ahmet, Mehmet, Ayşe to behave like Dutch. The education which we provide here is of course against that, isn't it? For example, while a typical Dutch family would sip their wine in the evening, we are telling them here that this is sinful. Of course the children would not adopt their lifestyle and would not adjust to it. In other words, we need to accept that, yes, there are things like that. But according to us this is not a bad thing. What we are telling them is that we can very well live together without sacrificing our own beliefs. (Imam1, *Diyanet*)

> What I understand from integration is communities living together while respecting each other's differences. In this regard, it also means not exacerbating the differences, not polarising them to such an extent that they become a reason for a conflict. For example, it means congratulating your Dutch neighbours when they have a holiday, and they congratulating you in return when you have a holiday. It is living together by respecting each other's lifestyle and beliefs. This is integration. (Imam5, *Milli Görüş*)

The quotations above contain a pattern which was repeated in the interviews with all imams, *hocas* and chairs/board members of Islamic organizations. In their perspective integration was understood as peaceful cohabitation of the different communities in the Dutch society, defined by following the Dutch laws and regulations, contributing to the economy, respecting each other's differences without necessarily losing their own convictions even if they

contradict some Dutch customs. References to national symbols such as the flags, and cultural codes like drinking wine and eating pork, highlighting where the belonging of the students lies by calling them "our" are examples of drawing the acceptable boundaries of integration.

Parental understandings of integration resonated with imams' and *hocas*' views. Many defined their "Dutchness" through citizenship ties only, and referred to participation in the labour market, paying taxes and following the laws as main markers of integration. What is more, some parents like this mother expressed that they would not like their children to integrate if integration means adopting Dutch lifestyle and values:

> I don't want them to integrate because I'd like them to stay true to their own culture. Let's face it: if they integrate they will eat, drink, go out like the Dutch. They will treat their families and friends like the Dutch. This is what the Netherlands wants. Parents can't have a say in their children's life once they turn 18, and they think they can move out of the house, or start dating. (…) But of course, we live in this country, in a way it is really our second home-land. So, I'd like them to integrate in the working and social life, and abide by the state system here. (Parent26, *Milli Görüş*)

Most stakeholders among which particularly chairs and board members of secular migrant organizations, policymakers and municipality advisors voiced an understanding of integration which emphasized social partici-pation, knowledge of Dutch culture and language, embracing Dutch norms and claiming a Dutch or hyphenated Turkish–Dutch identity instead of prior-itizing being Turkish or Muslim. Some, like the chair of an Islamic umbrella organization representing mosques from different sects and ethnicities, advo-cated the replacement of the term integration with "inter-creation". In her view, this term acknowledges the non-static nature of culture and provides a more equal basis for shaping culture and society by contributing to it together. Correspondingly, a pedagogue providing trainings to schools for inclusive education practices, voiced a similar understanding of integration as a "situation in which diverse people can contribute and give others the opportunity to contribute to the society they live in". It was observed that very often actors' definition of integration and perception of mosque edu-cation's role in it were shaped by whether or not they adhere to a secular worldview (i.e. their view on the space religion has in the public realm), rather than their religious or ethnic background.

Aiding or frustrating integration?

A global evaluation of our findings shows that two-thirds of the respondents in our sample (or forty-nine out of seventy-five) think that mosque education could have an assisting role in the integration of the students. This is perhaps not surprising considering the high number of Islamic community members

in the sample. Sixteen respondents see mosque education as irrelevant for children's integration. These groups consist of twelve parents who think their children do not have integration problems anymore, and four experts who justify their position with the allegedly irrelevant content, poor organization and implementation of mosque education. Ten respondents are concerned that mosque education could have a frustrating role in integration.

Potential for aiding integration

Although the majority of the respondents saw a potential in mosque education to aid the integration of the mosque students, many did so conditionally. That is, the respondents – among which imams, *hocas* and chairs of Islamic organizations as well – used expressions such as "if it is done well", "if the mosque administration adopts this as a goal and vision", "if the imams and *hocas* are trained accordingly" and "if there is cooperation between mosques and schools". An academic expert commented the following:

> If it is done well, it can have a positive effect because in Holland children have to defend themselves, especially youngsters. "Oh, you are a Muslim, oh, that means you are Bin Laden": that means you have to become vocal and aware of what they can say to protect themselves. I think it can even protect them from radicalising.

A senior policy advisor on integration from the Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs agreed: he expressed that mosque classes can help the children to respond to exclusionary discourse used by far-right politicians and their followers:

> Youth growing up here is constantly reminded of their difference as Muslims. If they do not know exactly what Islam is, they feel lost and express their anger in different ways. Hence, I am sure that mosque education can contribute to integration if organised and implemented well.

The same conditional potential was highlighted by a young second-generation Turkish–Dutch social entrepreneur whose company provided trainings and workshops to schools and mosques about social inequalities and institutional racism. He observed that at least one quarter of the Turkish–Dutch youth does not identify themselves with the Netherlands and even higher numbers are raised in ethnically segregated neighbourhoods without any interaction with native Dutch peers until they reach adulthood (observations that are, indeed, supported by research, see Slootman and Duyvendak (2015) on identification, and Musterd and Ostendorf (2009) on residential segregation). He claimed that mosque education has an untapped potential to aid the integration of these children, but only if it is reformed. In his view, mosques have to evaluate whether religious education is only about learning the basic principles of Islam, or whether they would do something about the

experiences of children with segregation, racism and discrimination: "They have to also give them guidance how to deal with the challenges Muslim students face in their daily lives here". Another young second-generation board member of an Islamic umbrella organization also saw that potential mosque education, he argued, was beneficial for affirming positively the Islamic identity of the students, so that they would not feel insecure about themselves in their interactions with non-Muslims. But it could achieve more if mosques recognized that they have "responsibility to not only provide Qur'anic education but also citizenship education just as provided at school" on topics about being a Muslim in a non-Muslim society, attitudes towards homosexuality and general sexuality education.

The Turkish director of a *Gülen*-affiliated education centre also expressed that mosque education could contribute to the integration of the children, depending on how it is organized and who is giving the classes. He explained:

> For example, it is impossible for imams coming from Turkey to affect the lives of children born here positively. But if imams who come to the mosques have certain level of Dutch language and culture, and if they are open to cooperation with all ethnic and religious groups here, then mosque education can play a positive role for the children. But for this, mosques need to develop projects for cooperation with all communities, they need to become more open for everyone.

On the other hand, there was a consensus between the imams and *hocas* that the mosque classes already have a positive impact on children's integration. Similar to some of the arguments above, Imam2 (*Milli Görüş*) underlined the importance of having good knowledge of Islam, Turkish history and traditions for the self-confidence of the children when interacting with the native Dutch. Many referred to the positive influence of the universal values of respect, tolerance, kindness and good morals taught in the mosque classes. Yet others gave examples about the role their teachings play in advancing moderate Islam and in countering extremist tendencies and youth radicalization. In doing so, they also distinguished themselves from other Islamic communities in the Netherlands, who were portrayed as the sources of threat:

> When you look at our Arab brothers, their understanding of Islam is very different than ours. The Netherlands has mostly problem with the Arab interpretation of Islam, because there are many from that community who join terrorist organisations. However, the probability of someone educated in our mosques to join ISIS or another terrorist group is nihil. It's never heard of. In our mosques, we spread the Anatolian understanding of Islam. (Imam4, *Diyanet*)

When we further unpack the above quote, we observe that the imam engages in defensive rhetoric against the mainstream securitization of mosques' influence on youth, intertwined with a construction of a discourse

on the superiority of Turkish Islam. This occurs within a context of competition between the different Islamic communities in the Netherlands for legitimacy in the eyes of the Dutch state and public (Sunier, van der Linden, and van de Bovenkamp 2016).

Regarding the role of the mosque education in children's identity development, the imams and *hocas* acknowledged that strengthening children's Islamic and Turkish identity is, indeed, one of the goals of the mosque classes. In their view, children were already learning Dutch language and culture at school. Some respondents (Imam1 at *Diyanet*, and Hoca5, Hoca7 at *Milli Görüş*) claimed that based on their observations, the students were successful in combining their Turkish, Dutch and Muslim identity without any issues. They supported their claims with examples about children's preference for talking in Dutch with each other in the mosque (while the medium of instruction is Turkish), and children's excitement about celebrating non-Muslim holidays such as Halloween beside the traditional Muslim holidays.

Parents who believed that mosque classes can aid integration processes, provided different arguments for their reasoning. Similar to Hoca2 (*Diyanet*) and other stakeholders, Parent4, Parent8, Parent11 and Parent12 (*Diyanet*) suggested that mosque classes can have a positive role if there were more cooperation projects between the schools and the mosques that could help building bridges between the communities. Currently, there was no collaboration they knew of. Many pointed out that mosque classes can assist integration because they teach the children to respect, accept and form better relationships with the Dutch by the virtue of being a "spiritual education teaching the children to distinguish right from wrong" (Parent2, *Diyanet*) aiming "to raise good people" (Parent16, *Milli Görüş*). Others, such as Parent19 and Parent22 (*Milli Görüş*) said that "fear from Allah" which the children learn at the mosque teaches them to be useful for the society they live in.

Potential for frustrating integration

Although most respondents perceived mosque education as (possibly) beneficial to children's integration, there were ten respondents who were concerned about its impact. Some parents voiced that their children became more religious after starting mosque classes. This was expressed in children's desire to start wearing a headscarf (Parent7, *Diyanet*), or being offended after seeing negative news about Muslims on television (Parent27, *Milli Görüş*). Parents mostly interpreted the increased religiosity of their children positively, even when they reckoned that mosque classes might be distancing the children from feeling Dutch (Parent24, *Milli Görüş*). Parent3 (*Diyanet*), however, was an exception. She valued autonomy and was worried that

her daughter would sacrifice too much of her liberties for the sake of Islam. Nevertheless, according to her, parental role modelling was very important in counteracting any undesirable influences from the mosque classes:

> For example, even now when I wear make-up my daughter warns me that this is not allowed in Islam and I shouldn't do it. I answer that I am an adult and I can choose for myself. She tells me that she will put on a headscarf when she becomes 12 years old. I try to be careful on this subject. I tell her that it is up to her whether she will wear a headscarf or not. But I make it clear that if she decides to wear headscarf some of her freedoms will be limited.

It was not only less religious parents like her who were concerned about the support needed by the students in navigating the different behavioural norms taught at the mosque. Some imams and *hocas*, for example, although convinced that mosque classes benefit integration, nevertheless expressed worries about children experiencing identity crisis. To illustrate, Hoca3 (*Diyanet*) argued that mosque students manage to become neither fully Dutch, nor fully Turkish and Muslim. According to her, they speak broken Turkish, study Islam but normalize homosexuality, and try to follow Dutch lifestyle (e.g. pre-marital dating and holding hands) within the limitations imposed by their family and religion. Hoca1 (*Diyanet*) agreed with this view by pointing to the role of the school in "assimilating" the mosque students into the Dutch values and culture to the extent that they are at least "50% Dutch and 50% Turkish": she said that even her own children are as different as her as "black from white". Likewise, Hoca8 (*Milli Görüş*), observed that their students "feel more Dutch than Turkish": even if they would wear a headscarf, their lifestyle choices, tastes and behaviour would reflect Dutch rather than Turkish culture. This, she claimed, gave rise to another issue: the Dutch–Turkish youth feeling alienated both in Turkey and in the Netherlands. Hoca4 (*Milli Görüş*) remarked that although the majority of the mosque students are coping well with growing up in two cultures, there are some extreme cases in which adolescent students experience psychological problems which trigger drug or alcohol addiction, or even suicide thoughts. He shared the stories of a few of his students who sought either his or imam's help in such situations: "What pushes the youth into this path is either reaction to their identity, or to their family, to their environment. When they can't find an escape there, their search for help leads them back to the imam".

Concerns about the potential of mosque education to alienate children from the Dutch society were voiced by other actors as well. It is remarkable yet not unexpected that especially *Gülen*-affiliated actors and respondents profiled as leftist/secular were more critical towards the role of mosques in Turkish–Dutch youth's lives, and particularly the role played by *Diyanet* mosques governed by the Turkish state. This could be explained by the

strained dynamic between those groups and the consecutive pro-Islamic AKP governments in Turkey, political tensions peaking in the aftermath of the failed coup attempt in 2016 (Öztürk and Sözeri 2018). A chair of a *Gülenist* education centre, for instance, claimed that *Diyanet*'s mosque lessons estrange the children from the Dutch society: "They impose them an identity and orientation towards Turkey, and these unavoidably affect their attitude toward the Dutch society negatively. I even sometimes think they cause hostile feelings in the children". Two board members and a chair of a secular Turkish migrant organization shared his view: they were worried that adolescents who were born and raised in the Netherlands could be galvanized by mosques to protest on the Dutch streets for Turkey while they are barely familiar with Turkish politics (referring to the Rotterdam protests during a diplomatic crisis between the Netherlands and Turkey).

Yet another chair of a leftist Turkish migrant organization, for instance, argued that while he defends the rights of the religious Turks to practice Islam in the mosques, he nevertheless thinks that mosques should not have the right to provide education because of lack of transparency on the side of the Turkish Islamic organizations about the content of their education. He argued that it could be enforcing isolationist attitudes:

> I will give you a concrete example: if an imam says to children with Turkish background in the Netherlands "Do not go to swimming pools together with the Dutch children, they are like pigs", then it is an obstacle to integration.

For him, it did not matter whether this was a wide-spread phenomenon: it was a cause for concern even if only few imams spread messages of intolerance and hostility towards the Dutch.

In a similar line, two municipality advisors on diversity and integration observed that mosque education might contain elements of Muslim countries' citizenship education which might not be compatible with the goals of Dutch citizenship education at schools. They were critical and distrustful of the activities which some mosques profiled as benefitting integration:

> They have an approach saying "look, how much we are doing about integration" and point to the homework assistance they provide to support children at Dutch schools. But this is not about support, it is about identity. Only that they have a very different and traditional understanding of what is identity: it still means orthodox Islam plus the regime. It does not matter whether it is the regime of Turkey or Morocco. (Advisor1)

These arguments are intrinsically linked to accusations of indoctrination with foreign state propaganda which are wide-spread in public debates. A chair of a Moroccan migrant organization argued that mosque education contributes to "ghetto-forming", and that the classes are not based on a "theology of emancipation" but a political theology which serves migrants' state of origin. These arguments resonate with recent studies suggesting that

Diyanet has been instrumentalized by the Turkish state as a foreign policy tool to exercise continuous influence over Turkish-Muslim migrants abroad (Öztürk and Sözeri 2018).

Discussion and conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceived role of mosque education in the integration of Muslim children with Turkish background in the Netherlands according to imams, *hocas*, parents of mosque students and key societal stakeholders. Looking back at the theoretical conceptualizations of integration in the literature, it becomes apparent that there is a large overlap between the imam's, *hocas'* and parents' perspectives on integration and a socio-economic understanding of integration. There is an agreement among imams, *hocas,* parents and chairs of Islamic organizations about the importance of Dutch language proficiency, educational achievement, participation in the labour market and positive relations with the native Dutch. The divergence in understanding between mainstream notion of integration and those of the Muslim respondents in this study seems to arise when it comes to the adoption of liberal values, "Dutch" lifestyle and identification with the host nation. This is exemplified by the references of the imams and *hocas* to the importance of adhering to Islamic code of conduct and values while taking part in Dutch society, and parental fears about the cultural assimilation of their children. These findings contribute further insights to the conclusions of a previous study by Kortmann (2015) which compares the definitions of integration of fifteen representatives of Muslim migrant organizations in the Netherlands and Germany. Based on 2008 data, Kortmann (2015) argues that Islamic migrant organizations in the Netherlands often have more defensive attitude towards their own identities and make less space for assimilation than their German counterparts. He explains that the multiculturalist integration policies of the Netherlands accommodated the demands for religious and cultural maintenance of the migrant communities more than the German integration policies. Our findings imply that the policy shift towards assimilationism in the Netherlands might have further reinforced the already existing resistance against cultural assimilation within the Dutch Muslim organizations.

Furthermore, our study reveals that the majority of the (Muslim) participants are convinced that mosque education could potentially benefit the integration of the children. Many argue that this potential can be realized if mosques employ imams and *hocas* who are familiar with the Dutch language and culture, who address integration challenges, and make space for topics around sexuality and citizenship education in the mosque classrooms. According to imams and *hocas*, mosque classes assist children's integration by teaching them good morals, and universal values of respect and tolerance

to culturally different communities. Imams and *hocas*, just like many parents, saw the role of mosque education in disciplining good citizens for the Netherlands who would abide by the laws and participate in society by studying and working. Also, echoing the observations by Ter Avest and Bakker (2018), mosque education's contribution to integration was seen in its potential to avert youth radicalization: some imams underlined how their classes teach about moderate "Anatolian" version of Islam. However, in doing so they engaged in boundary-drawing and othering Arabic-speaking Islamic communities in the Netherlands, by distinguishing Turkish mosques from them and portraying Arabic mosques as a threat which needs to be monitored. Nevertheless, contrary to providers of mosque education, almost half of the parents in this study did not agree that mosque education can play a role in children's integration, either because they thought this generation does not have integration problems anymore or because they attached more importance to the role of school and parents.

In line with findings by Bartels and de Jong (2007) and Walseth (2016), many respondents from almost each group in the sample seemed to appreciate the role of mosque classes in building children's confidence in their Muslim and Turkish identity. According to them, thanks to mosque education the children are equipped to reply questions with regard to who they are without hesitation, and hence, more confident when interacting with non-Muslims. Nevertheless, differently than what is suggested by Bartels and de Jong (2007), Walseth (2016) and Peucker and Ceylan (2017) for that matter, this study found no support for the claim that mosque education can also assist the children in creating bridging social capital or promoting intercommunal engagement. On the contrary, some respondents voiced concerns about the potential of mosque classes in aggravating ethnic segregation unless mosques develop a conscious policy to tackle the issue. This is a concern which needs attention because neighbourhood and school segregation are already at very high levels in the Netherlands, and school-aged children seem to be affected at much higher degree than adults (Boterman 2019). That being said, this study does not rule out the possible positive effects of values of intercommunal respect taught at the mosques in defining long-term interactions between the mosque students and their ethnically Dutch peers. However, making any statements in this regard would warrant a different research design.

In Givens' (2007) and Klarenbeek's (2021) terms, integration is supposed to be a two-way process of mutual accommodation, and while some imams and stakeholders shared this view, parental accounts show that students are often not accommodated as Muslims at school and face exclusion. Likewise, accounts by municipality advisors imply that mosque classes are not seen as a form of education which needs to be accommodated: on the contrary, their influence is perceived as undesirable and harmful. Our findings indicate

that fears of alienation of the children from the Dutch society and concerns about indoctrination with Turkish state propaganda play an important role in different actors' distrust in the potential of mosques to become a partner in creating a more cohesive society. On the other hand, just like in the British example (Cherti and Bradley 2011), the findings suggest that a cooperation between mosques, schools and youth care institutions could be instrumental in assisting the integration challenges which mosque students face. The warning concerns about the psychological well-being of Muslim youth who might experience identity crisis and mental problems should be addressed as an important aspect of the problem. Our findings imply that imams, mosque and school teachers need to be aware of the risks of value confusion and make safe space in their classrooms to reflect on possible tensions between the norms and values taught at the two learning environments. Local policymakers might benefit communities by investigating the possibilities for cooperation between mosques and schools, and developing concrete strategies for assistance of the mosque communities including workshops and trainings to imams and other mosque educators on topics which are socially relevant for the Muslim youth's lives in the Netherlands.

The question remains whether and how the perceived role of mosque education in the integration of mosque students might differ according to the profile of the Islamic organization offering the classes. The design of our study and the limited number of participants per organization do not allow us to make claims in that regard. In their essay on the role of Islamic-Turkish organizations in promoting or hindering integration in Germany, Yükleyen and Yurdakul (2011), for example, argue that "integration practices vary according to the specific Turkish Islamic organization, its understanding of German society and culture, its religious beliefs and practices and its historical formation in Germany and Turkey"(65). It is very likely that this is the case in the Netherlands, too, as our findings imply that an aiding role in integration is conditional on mosques' vision on citizenship and integration issues.

Also, it should be noted that the relations between the different Islamic organizations are dynamic and change according to political developments in Turkey. These must be taken into account when reading Muslim actors' accounts about the perceived influence of mosque education on integration. For instance, as shown in the findings, *Gülen*-affiliated respondents were particularly critical towards the role of *Diyanet* in the integration of Muslim youth. At the same time, no criticism towards each other or competition for influence has been noticed in the accounts of representatives of *Diyanet*, *Milli Görüş* and *Süleymanlı*. This might be interpreted as being reflective of the criminalization of the *Gülen* community by the Turkish government after the coup attempt in 2016, and the following rapprochement between

Diyanet and other Turkish Islamic communities (Christofis 2020). Moreover, even before the transformation of *Diyanet* into a Turkish foreign policy tool (Öztürk and Sözeri 2018), as pointed by Çıtak (2018, 387), its activities in Europe have always been characterized by strategic opposition to the creation of "various European Islams" and promotion of "Turkish Islam" instead. This legitimately raises concerns about the possible influence of *Diyanet* on the integration and acculturation processes of Turkish–Dutch youth attending its mosques.

Lastly, it should be acknowledged that the study is based on self-reports of a limited number of respondents about Turkish mosque education in the Netherlands, and hence, does not allow for generalizations to all Turkish mosques in the Netherlands and to other Islamic communities in the Netherlands or elsewhere. Moreover, it does not include perspectives of mosque students on their own integration. Future research focusing on mosque students' experiences and reflections on their own identities and sense of belonging might provide valuable insights and evaluate better the role of mosque education in children's lives.

ORCID

Semiha Sözeri   http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3365-4831
H. K. Altinyelken   http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2178-0862
M. L. L. Volman   http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9217-1402

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