

The significance and challenges of Islamic schools in the Netherlands:

Religious ethics and educational content as forums for learning and growth¹

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1. Tasks and methods

In the Netherlands, at present, about 950,000 Muslims, which is 5.8% of the whole population, live as members of the society.² The first generation consisted mainly of immigrants who came from the former Dutch colonies of Indonesia and Surinam, and also from Turkey and Morocco to support the rapid economic growth after World War II. Since the Dutch government's policy shift in the 1970's, active policies of multiculturalism have been implemented by promoting a strategy of improving the social and financial statuses of minorities.

However, the social situation of the Muslim residents in the Netherlands has greatly changed since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks in America in 2001. Just after the terror attacks, many incidents occurred of harassment against Muslim individuals, in addition to arson and rock throwing aimed at Islamic organizations. After that, with the rise of the former LPF (Lijst van Pim Fortuyn) leader P. Fortuyn, who called Islam a "backwards culture (achterlijke cultuur)" and insisted that Islamic values went against the "Western values" that had established freedom and equality for women and homosexuals,³ the ideas and values of Islam became sensitive issues. The cold gaze of society directed toward Muslims was also directed at education organizations. One particular target of criticism was the system of "Islamic schools" in the Netherlands. There were concerns that were widely reported by the media that these schools might be under the influence of "radical" or "extremist" Islam, or

that the educational content might be counter to democracy.⁴

An “Islamic school” is a school fully subsidized by the Dutch government and organized based on Islamic ideas in the framework of the Dutch school system. As of 2005, there are 39 Islamic primary schools and two Islamic secondary schools. In neighboring EU countries there are some publicly subsidized Islamic schools,⁵ but the Islamic schools in the Netherlands are the largest in scale and most organized. The first Islamic schools were founded in 1988. The schools were founded in response to problems that had been evident since the 1970s regarding the education of Muslim children and in response to the anxieties and concerns of Muslim parents. Some specific reasons include: many students had dropped out of conventional Dutch schools; Muslim students easily fell prey to bullying because of lack of respect for differences in religion and value systems; there were problems in communication and mutual understanding between schools and parents.⁶ In other words, the movement to establish Islamic schools was the result of the heightened desire to conduct educational activities by Muslims and for Muslims in order to relieve anxieties such as these.

There have already been many arguments regarding the merits and demerits of Islamic schools. The focus of these arguments has been whether Islamic schools are effective in helping Muslims adapt to Dutch society. The proponents of Islamic schools hold that by functioning according to the cultural and religious identities of the households of the Muslim children, positive self-awareness and emotional stability can be fostered. They insist that those positive elements enhance children’s motivation to learn and eventually raise the social status of Muslims, and this is thought to contribute to the unification of society.⁷ On the other hand, people who take a negative stance warn that the independent educational space isolates Muslim children from society and as a result, they point out, prevents them linguistically and culturally from adjusting to society.⁸

In response to these arguments, G. Driessen and F. Bezemer have conducted a comparison of Islamic schools with schools that students of similar social and ethnic backgrounds attend, and have quantitatively evaluated factors such as family makeup, attitudes toward school life, and academic achievement.⁹ As a result, they have produced data which show that while the level (expressed numerically) of academic achievement of

students who attend Islamic schools is lower than that of students of Dutch schools overall, there is little significant difference with the schools that were the object of comparison.¹⁰ In addition, the rate of students who are at risk for truancy or dropout is not only lower than the schools they were compared to, it is also lower than the average of Dutch schools overall, adding weight to evidence that students attending Islamic schools have positive and stable attitudes.

However, given recent world developments, Islam is often interpreted in negative contexts, and currently the range of analytical perspectives to respond to the severe questioning of such things as education values and ethical aspects within these schools is far from adequate. So far, there have been few studies (such as the one conducted by W.A.R. Shadid & P.S. van Koningsveld) that have centered on the education policies and religious characteristics of Islamic schools.¹¹ Analyses under the current circumstances, however, must be done from points of view that include the problems above that Islamic schools have been facing. To do this, it is necessary to correctly understand the character of the Dutch education structure from historical and social viewpoints, and then analyze with a multidimensional approach the uniqueness and compatibility of Islamic schools within that structure.

Seen from such viewpoints, the following points should become clear. That is, how do Islamic schools integrate Islamic ideas into the Dutch education system in order to develop the minds and bodies of children who live in Dutch society as Muslims? Moreover, how are concepts essential to modern education philosophy such as respect for human rights and non-discrimination dealt with in Islamic schools? And how is the parental participation system, a recent important point of debate, realized in these schools? Based on these inquiries, in the conclusion of this paper I would like to clarify the significance of Islamic schools and the challenges they face in the future in relation to Dutch society.

In order to examine the above points, in the following I shall conduct a qualitative analysis of educational content and policy in Islamic schools. For research purposes, this author visited the Netherlands several times during the period from August 2001 to July 2002, for a total of five months. During this term, I conducted a field survey targeting 12 Islamic primary schools¹². I employed two methods of survey: visits and interviews. At all

the schools I visited, I was able to see the campuses, and observe classes and other scholastic activities. At some of the schools, I also participated in extracurricular activities. A video camera was used only when permission was granted. This video footage, and field notes taken as needed, were used as materials for analysis. The interviewees were all associated with Islamic schools. Interviews were recorded with permission from the interviewees, and transcripts were made from the recordings. The “school guide (*School Gids*)”¹³ of the Islamic schools and textbooks for Islamic education were also considered valuable as materials for analysis.

2. Legal status of Islamic schools

(1) Summary of the education structure of schools in the Netherlands

Before analyzing Islamic schools, I would like to comment on the reasons why Islamic schools are established and managed with government funds. This is in order to clarify just how largely the historical background of Dutch education and the current system relate to the problems that Islamic schools are currently facing.

In the Netherlands, there was an active political battle over education in schools that continued for 60 years beginning in the middle of the 19th century. This battle, generally known as the “school struggle” (*schoolstrijd*), has roots in the education law or “school act” of 1857.

This act was established in a revision to the Constitution of 1848 which had been drafted with the protection of liberalism that was growing at the time. It was based on freedom of education and the guarantee of primary education by the state, and promoted “neutrality in education” to the exclusion of religious education. In 1878, liberals revised this law, implementing state subsidies for public schools, and at the same time, they put harsher restrictions on the standards of construction and facilities of denominational schools. In response to this current of liberalism, both Catholics and Calvinists appealed to the government for a fairer system of subsidies for schools run by each of the religious sects as well. Religious factions gained a majority in parliament in the election of 1888, formed a coalition government, and eventually revised the Constitution in 1917, which provided for full government funding for

both neutral and denominational schools, and guaranteed the same standards of construction and facilities as other schools.¹⁴

As a result, the number of denominational schools increased dramatically, and with that various organizations to support religious education, by developing educational materials, etc., were established. The religious aspects of schools developed in a multi-leveled way.¹⁵ In addition, families tended to send their children to schools of the same religious base, and through this were able to preserve their religious cultural identities both at school and at home. Homogeneity in educational philosophy inside schools strengthened the relationships between families and schools, and these shared values facilitated stable school management. Consequently, rather than providing a place where people of different educational philosophies gathered in the same educational space, the education system in Dutch schools that grew out of this history after the middle of the 19th century created a structure that guaranteed the right to carry out the education of children within individually separate and independent domains.

It is said that with the progression of secularism after World War II, the religious character of denominational schools has largely faded. The school educational structure itself, however, has continued to the present day in its old form. Article 23 of the Dutch Constitution forms the backbone of that structure.

Article 23 of the Constitution

6. The requirements for primary education shall be such that the standards both of private schools fully financed from public funds and of public-authority schools are fully guaranteed. The relevant provisions shall respect in particular the freedom of private schools to choose their teaching aids and to appoint teachers as they see fit.
7. Private primary schools that satisfy the conditions laid down by Act of Parliament shall be financed from public funds according to the same standards as public-authority schools . . .¹⁶

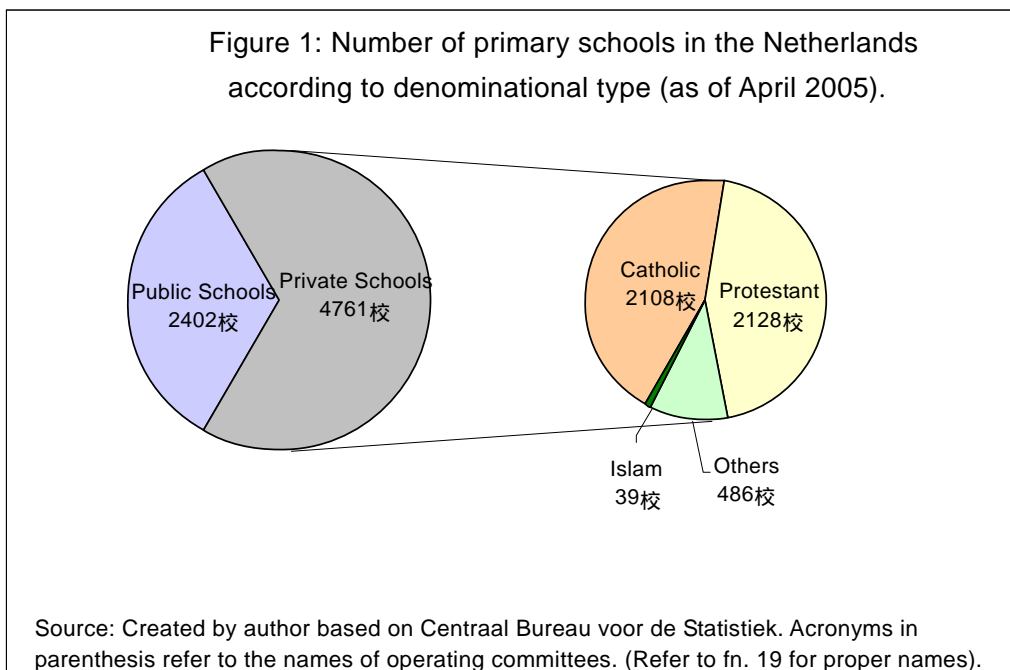
The Dutch original lays out rules for *bijzonder onderwijs*, or “particular education”, which as the English translation suggests refers to the so-called “private schools” (*bijzondere scholen*), the vast majority of which are Christian schools based on Holland’s historical religious traditions.

The Islamic schools dealt with in this paper fall into this category. Schools that are organized by local governments and that have no specific religious character, the “neutral schools”, are officially called “public(-authority) schools” (*openbare scholen*).¹⁷ It is possible to get a clearer picture of this school structure by looking at the “operating committees” (Commissie van beroep) that serve as “umbrella organizations” (*koepelorganisatie*). These committees’ main functions are to deal with industrial disputes or to establish comprehensive labor agreements for employee organizations.

At present, there are five separate committees for: Protestant schools, Catholic schools, Islamic schools, other special schools,¹⁸ and one for the local government association that manages public schools. Each school must have membership in one of these five.¹⁹ (Refer to Figure 1)

It is actually the parents whose rights to establish special schools are guaranteed. Specifically, if more than a certain numbers of parents wish for their children to receive primary education or secondary education based on specific beliefs or philosophies, and conditions meet the guidelines legislated by law, they can establish and manage schools fully financed by the government. The number of annual classes and academic achievement standards are prescribed by the government, and students in the final grade of primary schools are required to take a nationally-standardized test, called the “Cito Test” (Cito Toets).

However, each school has the freedom to decide by itself how it wishes to achieve those academic requirements, and the independent management of the schools based on value systems or philosophy is guaranteed. This freedom of management includes decisions such as what textbooks are to be used, educational methods, special events, etc.²⁰ Since the economic and social positions of both public and private schools are considered to be completely equal, parents can choose to have their children attend either type at no cost, hence with no difference in economic burden.²¹



(2) Legal position and organizational structure of Islamic schools

Next, I would like to illustrate the relationship between the Islamic school umbrella organization ISBO (Islamitisch Scholen Besturen Organisatie, or Organization of Islamic School Boards) and each school, in addition to discussing the organizational structure within Islamic schools.²² First, each Islamic school selects one representative as a member of the “governing council” (Raad van Bestuur: RvB) of the ISBO, which meets once every three months. Moreover, nine members of an “executive board” (Dagelijks Bestuur:DB) are chosen, and they discuss and confirm items of decision about once a month. Since the ISBO is the representative organization for negotiations concerning Islamic schools at the national level, the relationship between the school executives and the staff of the ISBO is extremely important.

In each school under the ISBO, there are several “administrators” (het Bestuur). The administrators of a particular school may be Muslims that played a leading role in the movement to establish that school or Muslims who became actively involved in the school when or after their children attended. These administrators are the people that make specific policy decisions in accordance with administrative guidelines and regulations that the ISBO issues as reference material. The administrators are ultimately responsible for school buildings, financial and school staff management, in addition to carrying out duties regarding the hiring of teachers and general staff. However, when deciding matters of policy or regulations, administrators

cannot make decisions by themselves. They are subject to the supervision of the “participation council” (de Medezeggenschapsraad: MR). The membership of the MR is made up of several school staff members and parents of students, who are chosen in elections held once a year or once every two years. Before deciding important items such as education matters within the schools or regulations for staff members, the administrators have to gain the advice and consent of the MR. In addition, there is another organization called the “parents’ committee” (de Oudercommissie).²³ The parents’ committee assists with various school events and plays a leading role in expressing opinions about children’s education in school to administrators.

In Japan as well, parental participation has recently become a more important issue, and effective methods are being explored by following examples such as the “school board”, “council” or “regents” systems of Western countries. By making adequate use of the systems common to all Dutch schools, such as the MR and parents’ committee, parental participation is made possible at multiple levels. Muslim parents, who might otherwise find it difficult to participate in school activities due to cultural and linguistic differences, or whose opinions might not be heard even if they do participate, can become actively involved in organizations in Islamic schools. Not only do they not have to feel hesitant in expressing their opinions based on their own cultural conventions and value systems, they can actually find meaning and pleasure in active participation in the schools as parents, because those are precisely the opinions that are valued within that mechanism.

3. Educational policies and content in Islamic schools

In the previous section I provided a general summary of the organizational structure of Islamic schools and their position as institutions within the Dutch educational system. In the following I would like to continue to examine the importance and significance of these schools as well as the challenges that they face by looking at education policies and the subject matter that is taught.

(1) Curriculum design and the basic policies

First, I would like to outline the general framework of the administration of Islamic schools using the content of school curriculum and the basic policies set forth in school guides.

The curriculum is designed around developing reading and writing skills in Dutch, arithmetic, and other basic subjects (Table 1). All classes are taught in Dutch. The total number of class hours per year and the academic achievement goals at graduation time is identical to other Dutch schools. As in other schools, in the final year, parents, teachers, other school staff, and children plan together how to prepare for the national standardized tests, or discuss their plans for the future. Unless children achieve certain scores on these tests, in their secondary education they cannot gain entrance to the academic advancement courses such as VWO or HAVO. For that reason, at Islamic schools as well, educational activities are centered on the goal of reaching a high level of quantifiable academic achievement. In Islamic schools, where the native language of the students is often not Dutch, mastery of the Dutch language is considered of the highest priority. All of the principals of Islamic schools that I talked with stressed the importance of curriculum design aimed at early acquisition of the Dutch language.

Table 1: Weekly curriculum in an Islamic school in 2002

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
8:30-9:30	Arithmetic	Arithmetic	Arithmetic	Computation	Dutch (reading comprehension)
9:30-10:30	Dutch	OALT	Dutch	Dutch	OALT
10:45-11:30	History	Dutch	Religion	Pair reading	Expression (until 11:45)
11:30-12:15	Dutch (grammar)	Biology	Religion	Geography	
12:45-13:30	English	Computation	Physical Education (Girls)	Traffic manners	
13:30-13:50	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	
13:50-14:30	Educational TV	Dutch (grammar)	Writing (until 14:45)	Arithmetic	
14:30-15:15	Computer	Presentation	Physical Education (boys) (14:45-15:15)	Art	

Source: Made by the author based on a curriculum guide received from teaching staff at El-Wahda School.

In the curriculum of Islamic schools, there are a few distinctive features, such as education in Islam for one or two hours a week and prayer times from Monday to Thursday. Not just for Islamic schools, but in all schools with a religious or denominational base, including Catholic and Protestant schools, the state allows for up to three hours a week for religious education. At most Islamic schools, this time is used for education in the classroom by specialists in Islam or for prayer.

Holidays are also designed to fit Muslim customs. Friday is a special day for Muslims, and they are required to gather in one place to pray. In accordance with this custom, Friday afternoon is a holiday in Islamic schools. Usually, Dutch primary schools have holidays in the afternoon on Wednesday as well as Saturday and Sunday, but in Islamic schools there are classes on Wednesday afternoon to make up for those that would otherwise be conducted on Friday. Concerning long holidays, during the religious festival of Eid ul-Fitr (marking the end of Ramadan)²⁴ and the sacrificial festival Eid ul-Adha (held on the last day of the pilgrimage to Mecca),²⁵ Muslim children have time off from school to spend time with immediate family or relatives.

Basic administration policies in Islamic schools can be ascertained by reading the following school guidelines:

School administration shall be carried out with the Qur'an²⁶ and Sunnah²⁷ at its foundation...What is important for identity is that children grow up in a place where there is a relationship with Allah and the people around them. In other words, while paying respect to the society in which we live, it is necessary to form an environment in which to live in accordance with the values, norms, and rules of Islam. Particularly important are the following points: sincerity, fairness, respect, trust, purity in faith, daily prayer, following the custom of Ramadan, and careful reading of the Qur'an.²⁸

While characterizing themselves as positioned in "the society in which we live", i.e. the multicultural society of the Netherlands, this general policy aims to create a school environment based on the "values, norms, and rules of Islam". The fact that the living environment based on Islamic values and norms refers also to moral standards important for the growth of the children, such as sincerity, fairness, mutual respect and trust among people, is worthy of attention, and I

shall focus on that point below in Section 4.

(2) Characteristics and regulations within the schools

In the hallways and classrooms of Islamic schools are displayed photographs and posters of the Ka'bah in Makkah ("Mecca"), the most sacred of places in Islam (Figure 2). In addition to these, windows are decorated in stained-glass fashion with pictures of mosques, and posters can also be seen marking Islamic festivals and holidays. By displaying such images of mosques and shrines important in Islam, it is expected that children will feel closer to them. Also within the school, greetings of "Assalaam 'alaykum" ("may peace be upon you") can be heard exchanged, and before children eat lunch or snacks they say "Bismillah".²⁹

Figure 2: Tapestry of a mosque displayed in front of the entrance of a classroom



Taken by Author on 4 September, 2001

When organizing class members, separation of gender for students at the early ages of puberty is also given a certain degree of consideration. At all of the schools that this author visited, teachers carefully considered such things and determined seating arrangements according to particular circumstances. To give a specific example at one school, both boys and girls sat and studied around the same table until the fourth year, but beyond that it was arranged so that children of the same gender would sit around tables. In many schools, physical education and swimming classes were separated by gender for older children as well.

Concerning clothing, as is the case with other Dutch schools, there are no uniforms, and each student comes to school in his or her ordinary clothes. However, regarding the wearing of

scarves and veils, while some schools do not require it and leave it up to the will of the individual, other schools incorporate it as a school regulation for girls above a certain age.³⁰ Though there are differences in this regard, the important thing is that the meaning of veils and scarves is shared and respected, and whether or not they are part of school regulations is merely a secondary result of this school culture.

(3) Religious background of school staff and students

The total number of the students in Islamic schools was 7,008 in 2001,³¹ and most of them are third-generation immigrants of Turkish and Moroccan heritage.³² There are other students that are children of refugees from Somalia, Bosnia, Palestine, and Afghanistan or other countries in which conflicts have occurred, and some children (though few) born of Muslim and Dutch parents. Non-Muslim students are not forbidden from enrolling, but at present there are no such students attending Islamic schools.

Let us now look at the religious and cultural backgrounds of school officials such as teachers and principals. In the Netherlands, each school has discretion concerning educational content and methods, and the hiring of teachers is for the most part done solely by school administrators. The human resources whom Islamic school administrators look for as teachers are Muslims that have completed a course at a “primary schoolteacher training institution” (Pedagogische Academie voor het Basisonderwijs: PABO) affiliated with HBO (professional higher education) or WO (research oriented education) institutions. However, according to a report by the “Education Inspection Committee” (Inspectie van het Onderwijs), as of 1999 only one-fourth of principals and school officials at all Islamic schools were Muslim, and of the teachers in charge of classes, Muslims accounted for only 20%. To put it another way, among staff and officials at Islamic schools, the ratio of non-Muslims is more than three-quarters of the total. One can infer from these figures the partial reality that the total number of Muslims who have teaching qualifications in Dutch schools is overwhelmingly insufficient.

As one problem stemming from this situation, G. Driessen and P. Valkenberg point out that there is more than a little friction between school administrators and non-Muslim staff, who do not share the same religious values that the Islamic schools are based upon.³³ It is true that even when I visited for field research, I found that there was some discord concerning cultural

and religious differences between non-Muslim school staff and school administrators at some schools. Since ultimate authority lies with the administrators and not teachers, the stance demanded of teachers is one of respect for the educational policies of school administrators and parents. Though non-Muslim school staff members are hired after agreeing to these points, some people become apprehensive when faced with actual school educational policies. Their concerns vary from doubts about school policies on gender separation to dissatisfaction towards requirements that women staff must wear scarves at schools. Sometimes confrontations and differences are brought to light by the media, but in many of those cases it is reported in such a way that adds the nuances of Islamic schools adhering to their classical but tolerant rules.

It must be added, however, that the relationship between the two in the actual educational setting is not only one of confrontation, and that cultural diversity is not interpreted only in a negative light. For example, one male non-Muslim teacher described constructing good relationships with Muslim students in the following way:

I am not a Muslim. That's why it is very difficult for me to adjust to this environment. But that is only in the beginning. After working for some years as teachers here, teachers themselves learn a lot from students. In other words, students teach their cultures to teachers. Then teachers absorb these things. I (as a teacher) try to look carefully at whatever students do. This is because I am in their environment, and I try to get closer to it. Then by understanding how they communicate, I try to incorporate that into my self.³⁴

As just described, many non-Muslim teaching staff enjoy the opportunity to encounter different value systems in the course of their daily work. Moreover, in recent years, even school administrators have tried to reconsider the existence of non-Muslim staff in a positive way, because they serve as liaisons of sort with Dutch society at large, and changing attitudes, for example efforts to overcome misunderstanding or mutual doubt on both sides through daily communication with non-Muslim teachers, are starting to become apparent.

In addition, it is important to mention the existence of Muslim staff who serve as classroom

assistants. Classroom assistants mainly provide help to the teachers in charge of classes of younger children, and nearly all of them work on a part time basis. Muslims occupy the high ratio of 85% of classroom assistant jobs, and since most of them are women, they sometimes become important supporters of school education for mothers.

(4) Respect for and practice of Islam in education

In Islamic schools as well, the basic daily education routine consists of study with the use of textbooks and other educational materials. Textbooks for arithmetic, science, and other such general subjects are chosen by each school from among those of more than ten publishers in the Netherlands. The most important condition when choosing textbooks is naturally their quality; however, for example, when choosing a history book, factors such as whether the histories of both Islam and the West are emphasized also become important decision criteria. Muslim students learn from both points of view that history has been dynamically formed from deep mutual influence through cultural exchange among magnificent civilizations.

When the first Islamic schools were built in 1988, there were no independent organizations that made special educational materials, and though curriculum development had lagged behind for a period, since the establishment of the “Islam Education Center” (Islamitisch Pedagogisch Centrum: IPC), the curriculum has developed rapidly. The IPC hires Muslims who have specialized in education or Islamic theology as researchers, and they have the leading roles in developing Islamic educational material. Material developed by the IPC is widely used in religious education at Islamic schools.

Of the works published by the IPC, I would like to take up a textbook aimed at younger students called *“My behavior: educational rules in Islamic schools”* (*Mijn Aglaaq: Pedagogische op de Islamitische Basisschool*). In this textbook, there is a section describing 29 general rules of behavior. For example, one can see such formulas as “I will happily help” or “I will not discriminate against anyone.”³⁵ These codes of conduct are based on the Qur’an or Sunna of the Prophet Mohammed, which is likewise explained simply in the book. For example, the basis for the maxim “I will happily help” is the third verse of the fifth chapter of the Qur’an, a chapter called the “Table”. The textbook quotes it as, “Help each other willingly in doing right deeds and in deepening faith. Do not help each other in committing sin or wrongdoing. Fear Allah...”³⁶ In

this sense, by placing Islamic values at the starting point when learning basic lifestyle habits, that philosophy is thought to form an important core in the healthy human development.

The IPC also puts out three volumes dealing with fundamental knowledge of Islam.³⁷ Of those, there is a book about the five “pillars”³⁸ of Islam where the meaning and significance of each pillar is clearly explained with the plentiful use of illustrations and photographs. Children’s entrance into primary school coincides with the time when they learn methods of prayer and begin their practice, so proper methods and places concerning prayer are explained in particularly fine detail. Through questions such as “What do you think it means to pray?” or “What does it mean to follow the Islamic rules of dress?” children are encouraged to think by themselves about the importance of the five pillars, and furthermore what it means to live as a Muslim.

Prayer, which is an important aspect of the practice of faith, is considered to be an important part of religious education, and at almost all Islamic schools, for around 15 to 20 minutes between one and three o’clock in the afternoon, under the guidance and direction of the Muslim teacher in charge of religious education, prayer is held. The age at which prayer begins within the curriculum differs, but at most schools it starts around the age of nine. Some schools prepare a special room, the “prayer room (*gebedruimte*)”, where children pray in gender-separated groups, while in other schools the grounds of the campus are used, and the particular group of students gather and pray together (Figure 3). Moreover, near restrooms, washing spaces for purification, or *wu’du*, are set up, (Figure 4), and children are expected to systematically learn the meaning of prayer.

Figure 3: Children praying in an open space



Taken by Author on 4 September, 2001

Figure 4 Washing space for *wu'du*



Taken by Author on 29 August, 2001

(5) Emphasis on bonds with parents

As I mentioned at the beginning, the driving force behind the movements to found the Islamic schools were the parents who wanted to be relieved of the anxieties of existing Dutch schools. Since their establishment, Islamic schools have tried to stay aware of parents' feelings and thoughts on their children's education. They have also considered it an important duty to strengthen bonds with parents so that the values or norms that form the basis of educational content at school are as close as possible to the values in the household. The bond that binds the two is none other than Islam.

As described above, in addition to parental participation functioning in the sphere of school administration, parents are also extremely active participants in school events at Islamic schools. The most celebrated events in the year at Islamic schools are events around the holidays of the two major Eid festivals mentioned above. Many parents bring homemade food and sweets and participate in the events together with their children. Also, during the month of Ramadan, in some schools, plans are made where all the parents and students get together and have Iftar (meals after confirmation of sunset during fasting).³⁹

Furthermore, Islamic schools stress the importance of placing Islam at the foundation of discipline and education both at school and at home, which is the center of children's lives, and thereby adopt a positive stance that seeks the contribution of the parents in the education of their children.

In Dutch society, it is difficult to keep one's original identity as a Muslim. That is

why it is very important for children to understand Islam, not just gain knowledge (about Islam). Teaching the verses of the Qur'an is the first duty as parents. Parents have the responsibility to raise their children to be good Muslims. Moreover, going to mosques (together) is also an important duty (for parents). Parents are in charge of the foundations of education. Islamic schools have classes based on Ibadat, Aqidah, and Akhlaq,⁴⁰ and by getting the children to understand as much as possible, their education is deepened.⁴¹

The current Islamic schools have started to play a leading role in raising the next generation of Muslims in the Netherlands in addition to their role as alternatives to conventional schools. But in terms of the relationship with parents, the role of Islamic schools does not stop there. That is, they are responding to a subtle change that has occurred in the relationship between parent and child, i.e. between generations. At present, most Muslim children of mandatory education age are third-generation who were born in the Netherlands. For the parents, who grew up in a societal environment different from their children, it is difficult to raise their children based only on their own experiences. In particular, how the various elements of individualistic liberalism seen in Dutch society, which is extremely diverse in familial and gender relationships, will affect the growth of their children is a major source of anxiety for the parents' generation.⁴² It seems that children as well have naturally faced a dilemma regarding their parents and how to adapt to Dutch society. As described above, there are systems in which parents can participate in schools at multiple levels, and the will and hopes of the parents have had an enormous influence on the administration of the schools. However, to respond to the gap between generations and the changing relationships of parents and children, frameworks that strengthen these systems are necessary. Regarding the issue of the change between generations, one Muslim staff member at the ISBO had this to say about the position of Islamic schools:

Islamic schools themselves have a subtle dilemma about the generation change. Many of the parents' generation don't want any change, but children's generation unconsciously tries to change. Islamic schools respond to these delicate issues by

thinking together. It is important for Muslims to think about the direction in which they are changing themselves, and put it into practice.⁴³

In other words, Islamic schools are aware of the necessity to explore the processes of raising children or growth by sharing the apprehension and anxiety toward change that both parents and children have. By being actively involved in these delicate family issues which immigrants must confront, Islamic schools are trying to solve, together with parents and children, the weighty problem of how to live as Muslims in the Netherlands. In the future, it is expected that Islamic schools will be central in creating the frameworks with which to incorporate the will of the parents and the voices of the students in order to calmly resolve the generation gap.

4. The significance and challenges of Islamic schools

In this section, based on administrative policies and educational content analyzed in the previous sections, the significance and the future tasks of Islamic schools shall be discussed.

(1) The significance of Islamic schools

Islamic schools are the result of a combination of the desire of Muslim parents for a comfortable education space and the characteristic school education structure in the Netherlands. The schools have been founded and run under democratic systems. The characteristic to which I refer here of the Dutch education structure is that the establishment and administration of schools with a religious or denominational base is firmly guaranteed. That historical process is the starting point of Dutch society, in which a “consociational democracy” has been developed with the principle that the rights to live in accordance with individual beliefs or ideas must be acknowledged.

Located within this particular structure, what kind of significance do Islamic schools have with regard to their function within Dutch society? We can come to three conclusions based on a qualitative analysis of their administrative foundations, education policies, and educational content shown above.

First, Islamic schools play a role in protecting Muslim children, who might otherwise be teased or bullied because they are social and cultural minorities. Before the establishment of the schools, there were many cases of bullying, in particular concerning the scarves that Muslim girls of a certain age wear. In Islamic schools, the meaning of the scarf is widely and commonly recognized from the basic Islamic position that sexual morality should be protected, and in these schools children do not need to feel a sense of alienation because of the customs of their own culture, nor do they need to lose their cultural identity.

Furthermore, by creating a school space, developing curriculum and school events with Islamic overtones, Islamic schools try to make Islamic cultural elements sources of emotional support for children. In the choice or development of textbooks as well, by having Islamic values at the starting point, it is expected that Islam will form the foundation for identity-formation. By devising mechanisms such as these, Islamic schools aim to raise Muslims who can in the future interpret their own cultural and religious background in Dutch society, and actively talk about their culture and religion.

The second point is that schools put a great deal of emphasis on sharing a sense of values with parents. Parental participation in schools varies in form, from systematic aspects such as the MR or the parents' committee to volunteer aspects such as participation into school events. In addition to the existence of a school base with Muslims at the center, the organized frameworks with which parents cooperate and participate in school administration allow parents' wishes and opinions to be influential in the schooling of their children. In fact, Muslim parents say that sending their children to Islamic schools based on these systems leads to their own education and comfort, and parents of children who have transferred from other schools particularly stress this point.⁴⁴

However, the role that Islamic schools are considered to play in relation to the household does not stop at that. That is, they also make the school a forum in which to share and explore solutions to challenges or differences between generations arising from having the social backgrounds of immigrants or refugees. Between the generation of Muslim parents, and that of their children who were born and raised in the Netherlands, gradual changes can be seen taking place in the ideal norms of gender and family relationships. Islamic schools try to respect parents' feelings and opinions as well as to reflect children's voices; furthermore, they take a

stance that tries to respond to the important issues of conduct codes that are essential elements in the maturation process. They take this point of view concerning delicate matters precisely because administrators of school regulations and organizations share the same sense of concern, which can be thought of as one original point of significance in Islamic schools.

As a third significant role of Islamic schools, the efforts toward early acquisition of the Dutch language and improvement in levels of academic achievement can be pointed out. At all Islamic schools where surveys were conducted, in addition to creating an educational environment founded on Islam, the indispensability was stressed of students acquiring the academic ability that would allow them more opportunities and choices necessary for living in Dutch society. In addition, for each school the average scores on the national tests and students' academic placement are overseen by the "Education Inspection Committee" (Inspectie van het Onderwijs), and these records are considered to be an important barometer for measuring the quality of each primary school's education. In order to show the potential of Islamic schools in Dutch society, academic ability is given the highest priority.

The discussions of the significance of Islamic schools, as we have seen, can also be linked to the quantitative approach described above. For example, Driessen's analytical results tell us that the potential rate of drop-outs from Islamic schools is low, and from that result, it can be interpreted that the efforts from the approaches of the three aspects outlined above have been effective.

(2) Challenges for the future

There are, on the other hand, some challenges that Islamic schools will have to face in the future. As previously noted, Muslim students experience encounters with the largely non-Muslim educational staff on a daily basis, yet they have few opportunities for direct multicultural contact with non-Muslim children, as has been pointed out in previous studies. However, if we understand the particular rights, i.e. the freedom to create an independent educational space based on beliefs or philosophies in Dutch school education, which was created in special historical circumstances, it becomes clear that the phenomenon of Islamic schools is not due to any motive of Muslims to isolate themselves from society. This is also

clear from the fact that Islamic schools consider their own existence as part of the “foundation of the multicultural society” that is the Netherlands. In other words, this phenomenon rather arises from the pillarized Dutch educational structure, which has not actively sought to create forums for people of different religions or creeds to meet.

However, as mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the terrorist attacks in America in 2001 have led to the limits of this aspect of Dutch society being exposed. The major reasons for this are that Muslim residents in Dutch society became the objects of attention of in connection with, directly or indirectly, the fundamental causes of the Sept. 11 attacks, and that there was a lack of forums for direct interaction in society to correct misunderstandings. One Muslim principal in an Islamic school described the attitudes in Dutch society which he experienced after Sept. 11 terrorist attacks as follows:

Even I had to say, “I had nothing to do with it” regarding the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks in America. That kind of state of tension is not good. I am a Dutch Muslim and I have lived in the Netherlands for 27 years. It has been a long time since I came to the Netherlands from Turkey, and I have rather strong feelings that I am Dutch. However, since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, whenever I hear things being said around me or have contact with other people, I don’t go away with a very good feeling. Just because I am a Muslim... Before that, I used to think of the Netherlands as a most tolerant society. Homosexuals can get married and death with dignity (euthanasia) is accepted. We thought that the Netherlands was a country where it was possible to respect the will of individuals and that was accepted. But the tolerance shown to us (Muslims) is very little.⁴⁵

Criticism directed towards Islamic schools has mounted, and the legitimacy of the educational philosophy and content within the schools is being questioned with skepticism. Since that has happened, in Islamic schools, the need has been felt to show a stance that seeks to built more points of contact with Dutch society. Independent schools are originally spaces where peaceful and stable educational development internally should be assured. However, when discrimination toward the beliefs and philosophy that the schools are based on

heightens, these schools become the focus of this discriminatory gaze precisely because they are independent. The biggest task that members of Islamic schools face with regard to the limits that have become apparent in Dutch society lies in how persuasively they can advocate the dynamism within Islamic schools. That is, simply put, showing that Islamic schools follow the ideals of Dutch democracy and continuing the efforts to create a school environment that is founded on the sincerity, fairness, mutual respect, and trust that are at the base of Islamic values and norms. Furthermore, it is possible to assert that there is an inseparable relationship between education based on Islam and the ideas of human rights and non-discrimination that Western society has come to advocate.

It should be pointed out that without opportunities for mutual interaction and without attitudes that mutually respect the existence of the parties involved, the process of constructing forums for dialog is impossible. The school principal mentioned above had this to say concerning that point:

So far, Dutch society has talked *about* us (Muslims), not *with* us. They talk about me when I am not present. That is the problem. I have repeatedly said, 'Do not talk about me without me. Let us talk together. Although we Muslims are here in the Netherlands, the decisions (regarding the problem of Muslims) are made without us. I think that this is a very big problem.'⁴⁶

In creating forums for dialog in the future, whether or not Dutch society is willing to find common elements in the characteristics and educational philosophy of Muslim schools must be seriously examined. In other words, the fundamental challenges that Islamic schools face are not internal problems, but rather problems of their position in Dutch society.

(3) Toward the construction of forums for dialog

What kinds of solutions exist for resolving the problem of lack of dialog concerning schooling? First, I would like to point out the importance of establishing mutual relationships with other religions or religion-based schools in the Netherlands, such Protestant and Catholic, and even (though they are few) Jewish or Hindu-based schools.⁴⁷ Since freedom of school

administration based on religion is firmly guaranteed by the system born of Dutch history mentioned above, even at present the aspect of education as a means to transmit religious values remains strong. Many of these schools even now hold on to their various religions or creeds as the “official” identities of their schools, and school administration is said to be greatly influenced by these.⁴⁸ On the other hand, as society becomes increasingly secular, and the significance of schools as places to practice beliefs or religions rapidly changes, all groups that are involved with religious education are at a turning point where they must rethink the significance of religious education and the forms that it should take. In the secular aspects of Dutch society there are codes of conduct with which Muslims feel uncomfortable, and to confront these issues is an unavoidable task if Islamic schools are to survive in the Netherlands.

Stress on the importance of sharing awareness of problems among religious groups can be seen in the positions of one of the majority political parties, the CDA (Christian Democratic Appeal). While the other major parties such as the VVD (People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy) and PvdA (Labor party) pay little attention to religion, religious-based schools or their structures in the secularized modern society, the CDA, which aims for a society that places importance on religious values, continues to this day to call for systematic guarantees that private schools will be protected. From these political points of view, the CDA has been the party that has recognized the high value of the significance and potential of Islamic school the most.

The construction of forums for religious dialog through the process of examining the relationship between secular values and religious values in the Netherlands could lead to a mutual reaffirmation by representatives that the philosophy and purposes of Islamic schools are not isolated in society, but rather are in positions parallel to those of other religious groups. The creation of such dialog could also become an important starting point from which educational philosophies based on religious values of peace and love could be developed together.

There are various potential forms, for example the diverse umbrella organizational system, which actual forums for dialog could take, but the most important thing is that administrators themselves have the opportunity to discuss religious values and the significance of their practice in education, and further deepen such dialog. Moreover, regarding the development of

religious education materials, we are already seeing the beginning of exchange with Christian developers of material. It is also necessary to explore new methods in which the fruits of the dialogs between administrators and curriculum developers could be extended to exchanges between children and parents from the differing schools. With the recent tensions concerning coexistence, some areas and schools have begun to carry out exchange programs and collaborative events on an irregular basis, but it is necessary to look into measures that would to a certain degree systematize such exchange.

Second, the promotion of Islamic higher education deserves mention. This has already been begun by the “Foundation for Islamic Higher Education” (Stichting Islamitische Hoger Onderwijs: SIHO) in cooperation with the ISBO.⁴⁹ Specifically, plans have been put forth to set up courses for the study of Islam in Dutch national universities where students with this focus can earn bachelor or master’s degrees. At present, though there are two Islamic universities in the Netherlands, they are neither accredited nor funded by the Dutch government. In the future, if the plan by SIHO is realized, Islamic higher education within the Dutch education system is expected to develop dramatically. Intellectual modalities such as communication and logical thinking skills will allow Muslims who have received higher educations to be able to persuasively convey the philosophy of Islam using concepts and modes of thought common to non-Muslims. Muslims who have gained such abilities can become the leaders necessary to more effectively promote cross-cultural dialog and mutual understanding.

However, it goes without saying that opportunities and forums for communication should not be restricted to Muslims who have received higher educations. As a third approach, it is important to mention the efforts to construct productive forms of learning based on the diverse educational spaces of Muslims. At mosques, for example, in addition to classes on the Qur’an for school-aged children held on the weekends, cultural activities and seminars aimed at the parents’ generation are frequently held. In this sense, mosques function as an important place for the lifelong learning for Muslims. If Muslims who have received higher educations become leaders involved in such forums, opportunities will be made for positive self-expression for Muslims in Dutch society.

While focusing on the direction of the three types of communication forum creation mentioned above, in order to examine this problem from a more diverse approach, it is

necessary in the future to conduct comparative studies with societies that are dealing with similar challenges but that have different education systems. In the future, by comparing various forms of contact among different religions, I would also like to conduct a more detailed examination of the significance and challenges of such forums of communication.

Notes

¹ This article is the translation from the original version (in Japanese) published in *International Education*, Japan International Education Society, No.10, pp46-70, October 2004.

² Statistics from 1 January, 2004, from the Central Bureau of Statistics (Central Bureau voor de Statistiek). By country, Turkish Muslims are the majority, with about 330,000 people. Next is Morocco, with 295,000. <http://www.cbs.nl/>

³ Fortuyn, W.S.P., 2001, *De Islamisering van Onze Cultuur: Nederlandse Identiteit als Fundament*, Karakter Uitgevers B. V., & Speakers Academy Uitgeverij B. V.

⁴ 2001-9-27, "Onderzoek naar 'Talibanschool,'" *Trouw*, Paul-Kleis Jager & Henriette Lakmaker, 2001-10-12, "Antiwesters ensemitiesch / Haatdragende Teksten Imam-schoolleider," *Trouw*. 2002-02-21, "Radicalen Actief op Moslimscholen," *Trouw*.

⁵ Denmark, Sweden, Belgium, and other countries. Marechal, B., 2001, "Teaching Islam at Publicly Financed Schools in Europe." in W. A. R. Shadid & P. S. Van Koningsveld (eds.), *Intercultural Relations and Religious Authorities: Muslims in the European Union, Leuven, Paris, and Sterling*: Peeters, 138-148.

⁶ Regarding the history of the Islamic school establishment movement, see "Problems concerning the Intercultural Dialogue at Schools in the Netherlands: Focusing on the Discussion about the Establishment of Islamic Schools", by Mihara, Reiko, 2003, in *Nichiran Gakkai kaishi*, Vol. 28 No. 1, 117-127.

⁷ Landman, N., 1992, *Van Mat tot Minaret: De Institutionaliseren van de Islam in Nederland*, VU Uitgeverij. Meyer, A., 1993. *Islam en Onderwijs in Utrecht: de Oprichting van Islamitische scholen en Islamitisch Godsdienstonderwijs op Openbare Scholen*. Katholieke Universiteit Nijmegen. Kuit, J., oktober 1993, "De Islamitische Basisschool als Hefboom voor Emanchiptatie," *Bestuursforum* 17 jaargang nr. 10, 252-254.

⁸ Teunissen, J., 1990, "Basisscholen op islamitische en Hindoeïstische gronslag," *Migrantenstudies*, 6, 45-57.

⁹ Driessen, G. & Bezemer, F., 1999, "Achievement Levels of Islamic Schools," *Race Ethnicity and Education*, Vol. 2, Number 2, 235-256.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* Cf. also Driessen, G. 1996, "Prestaties, Gedrag en Houding van Leerlingen op Islamitische Basisscholen: Een Vergelijking van Islamitische Scholen en Scholen met een Overeenkomstige Sociaal-Etnische Leerlingenpopulatie," *Migrantenstudies*, Nr. 3. 136-151.

¹¹ Shadid, W. A. R. & van Koningsveld, P. S., 1992, "Islamic Primary Schools," in W. A. R. Shadid & P.S. van Koningsveld (eds.), *Islam in Dutch Society: Current Developments And Future Prospects*, Kampen: Kok Pharos Publishing House, 107-122.

¹² Before I visited all the Islamic schools, I sent the letters requesting permission to visit and in the end I visited the 12 schools which replied and granted permission by phone or email. The names of the schools I visited are as follows (parentheses indicate school locations): Tariq Ibnoe School (Eindhoven), Abibakr School (Nijmegen), El Wahda School (Heerlen), Okba Ibnoe Nafi School (Breda), Yunus Emre School (Den Haag), Al Ghazali School (Rotterdam), Er-Riséleh School (Leiden), Aboe Da' oedschool (Utrecht), El Feth School (Bergen op Zoom), Salah Eddin El Ayyoubi School (Helmond), El Inkade School (Ede), Bilal School (Amersfoort).

¹³ This is material every school is required to prepare for parents with children soon to enter school in order to enjoy the "freedom of school choice", and which describes educational policies, characteristics, and events schedules based on school culture. This is indispensable material for parents to understand the cultural and religious aspects of a certain school.

¹⁴ Kurihara, Fukuya, 1997 (1982), *Benerukusu Gendaishi [Benelux Contemporary History]*,

Yamakawa Shuppan.

¹⁵ In the past, organizations such as labor unions, TV stations, and political parties as well as schools were also classified according to belief or philosophy. These groups are classified into four main pillars (zuil): Catholics, Calvinists, socialists, and liberalists. According to Kubo, people could live, in every aspect of life, in a community their whole lives relying only on the organization to which they belonged. Kubo, Yukie, 2002, *Oranda Koukyou-housou-taisei ni okeru Imin no Sannyuu: Muslim Housoukyoku ha ika ni shite Setsuritsu sareta no ka*, ["Immigrant's participation in the Dutch public broadcast system: how Muslim stations were established"] *Nichiran Gakkai Kaishi*, Vol. 26, No. 2, 49-64.

¹⁶ Grondwet voor het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden, Artikel 23.

¹⁷ "Openbaar" is generally translated as "public". However, as described in this paper, there is no financial difference between schools managed by local authorities and the other special schools, and both are wholly subsidized by the government. In this respect, because even in special schools they do not charge tuition, they are similar to what would be called "public schools" in other countries. To avoid misunderstanding as to the meaning of "public", and to make clear that the large difference the presence or absence of a religious background makes, I have used the designation "neutral" as necessary.

¹⁸ This is an organization encompassing private schools other than Protestant and Catholic schools; schools which practice Montessori or Steiner education, and a few Hindu and Jewish schools belong to this organization.

¹⁹ The official names are as follows: BPCO (Besturenraad Protestants Christelijk Onderwijs: "Protestant Christian education association"), VBKO (Vereniging Besturenorganisaties Katholiek Onderwijs: Association of Governing Boards of Catholic education), VBS (Vereniging Verenigde Bijzondere Scholen voor onderwijs op algemene grondslag: "general basic education special school association"), ISBO (Islamitische Scholen Besturen Organisatie: Organization of Islamic School Boards), VNG (Vereniging van Nederlandse Gemeenten: Association of Netherlands Municipalities).

²⁰ Ohta identifies three freedoms in Dutch education: "freedom of school establishment", "freedom of school choice", and "freedom of educational content and methods". Ohta, Kazuyuki, 2001, "Gakkou-sentaku wo Kangaeru" ["Thinking about school choice"], *Gendai no Espri*, No. 406, 36-46.

²¹ However, every school has a donation system for parents, and the amount of money collected varies with schools. Legally, donation by parents is not required, but they collect donations to cover the cost of school activities, and paying is normal.

²² Cf. ISBO, 1997, *Islamitische Scholen In Nederland*, Nieuwegein.

²³ At some schools they are also called "parents' councils (de Ouderraad)".

²⁴ During the month of Ramadan, which is the ninth month of the Muslim Hejira Calendar, Muslims must fast for one month. Eid ul-Fitr marks the end of Ramadan and the first day of the tenth month.

²⁵ This is the twelfth month of the Hejira calendar.

²⁶ The sacred book of Islam. It is the revelation of God to the prophet Mohammed, and made up of 114 chapters. It is often spelled "Koran".

²⁷ "Sunnah" means "practice" or "custom", and refers to the daily customs of Mohammed and the things he decided. It serves as an interpretation or an exegesis of the Qur'an.

²⁸ Islamitische Basisschool "El Inkade", 2000, *School Gids*, Ede.

²⁹ This phrase, "in the name of Allah", appears many times in the Qur'an. "In the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful" is a fuller rendering. Before religious rites or ordinary daily customs, it is common for Muslims to say "Bismillah".

³⁰ Even in schools where scarves are not required, it is a customary to wear scarves for prayer.

³¹ From an email received from an ISBO employee dated 28 October, 2002. Statistics as of 1 October, 2001.

³² According to statistics of 1997, the breakdown of students going to Islamic schools is as follows: Morocco, 43.2%; Turkey 35.3%; Surinamese 1.7%; Tunisian 0.6%; and Dutch 0.1%. Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 1999, *Islamitische Basisscholen in Nederland. Inspectierapport*. Nr. 1999 - 2.

³³ Driessen, G. & Valkenberg, P., 2000. "Islamic Schools in the Netherlands: Compromising between Identity and Quality?" *British Journal of Religious Education*, Vol. 23/1, 15-26.

³⁴ From an interview held 4 September, 2001.

³⁵ *Mijn Aglaaq: Pedagogische Regels op de Islamitische Basisschool*. Nieuwegein: IPC.

³⁶ The author referenced the Japanese translation of the Qur'an. Izutsu, Toshihiko (tr.), Iwanami Bunko, 1980.

³⁷ *De Offerweek*. Nieuwegein: IPC. *Godsdienstlessen*. Nieuwegein: IPC. *Ramadaan Boekje*. Nieuwegein: IPC.

³⁸ These refer to the five religious duties common to the Muslim faith. They are the confession of faith, prayer, Zakat (alms), fasting during Ramadan, and pilgrimage.

³⁹ However, the practices are intended for healthy adults, and fasting itself is not practiced in Islamic schools. The purpose of Iftar, which the schools plan, is to make children understand the meaning of fasting (in addition to being a practice honoring God, its intent is to know the meaning of hunger, and share the pain of the impoverished) and feel a sense of belonging as a Muslim by eating meals together with others.

⁴⁰ "Religious practice," "doctrine," and "ethics," respectively.

⁴¹ Al-Ghazali School, 1999-2000, *Islamitische Basisonderwijs School Gids*, Rotterdam.

⁴² For a related work, see Naito, Masanori, 1996, *Allah no Europe: Imin to Islam no Fukkou* [*Allah's Europe: immigrants and the revival of Islam*] University of Tokyo Press.

⁴³ From interviews held on 28 May, 2002.

⁴⁴ From an interview with several groups of parents who came to a school event at an Islamic school on 21 December, 2001.

⁴⁵ From an interview of 5 June, 2002.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Concerning Hindu schools, see for example, Matsuura, Mari, 2000, "Holland ni okeru Shuukyuristu-gakkou no Sonzai-igi ni kansuru Ichi-kousatsu," *Journal of Kyoto Seika University*, No. 18, 149-60.

⁴⁸ Bakker, C. & Griffioen K, (eds.), 2001, *Religious Dimension intercultural Education*, Dutch University Press.

⁴⁹ From an interview with an ISBO employee of 28 May, 2002.