

Article

Sex Education in Islamic Primary Schools in The Netherlands [†]

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Abstract: The Netherlands is known for its progressive attitude towards dealing with sexuality. Sex education has a permanent place in the educational system. Dutch legislation provides schools with the opportunity to teach the subject in their own way, in line with the school's ethos/identity. In this article I answer the question: What are the views and attitudes of RE teachers regarding sexuality in the teaching practice of Islamic primary schools? Qualitative research among six teachers of religious education (RE), a school principal, and a counsellor of religion at the Islamic school foundation SIMON, shows that respondents experience a gap between Islamic principles regarding sexuality and views common in Dutch society. Topics that lead to discussion include talking openly about sex, sexual diversity and the use of photos and images. The question emerges what role shame plays in Islamic sex education. One experiences a paradox as to the call to shame that emanates from religious sources, which seems to contradict the openness found in the same sources. Islamic sex education at SIMON schools seems to prefer open, informative, and modest communication about (almost) all subjects related to sexuality. Islamic views and an attitude of respect are encouraged with positive and loving terminology.

Keywords: education; Islam; The Netherlands; Islamic formal education; sex education



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1. Reasons for This Research

In a joint study of Islamic public education, the Dutch newspaper NRC (2019a) and news shown in the television program Nieuwsuur (2019) focused on the subject of sexual diversity and the teaching method 'Help! Ik word volwassen' ('Help!, I'm Growing Up') (Claassen 2013). This teaching method was developed by the Islamitische School Besturen Organisatie (Islamic School Boards Organization; ISBO) to comply with the legal obligation instituted in 2013 (Minister van Onderwijs 2012) to address sexual diversity in schools. As a member of ISBO, some SIMON schools also work with Claassen's teaching method. When *Help! Ik word volwassen* (Claassen 2013) was published in 2013, teachers of religious education within SIMON have critically studied this method. They concluded that some texts are 'harsh' and do not fit the current pedagogical climate and therefore do not fit well with the experience of the children. Additions and advice have been noted that serve as a guideline for Claassen's teaching method (Budak 2017). With these additional comments, the teaching method 'Help! Ik word volwassen' is used in almost all SIMON schools.

The SIMON foundation consists of ten Islamic primary schools (The Netherlands currently has a total of 43 Islamic primary schools).

On 11 September 2019, the NRC ran the headline 'Allah abhors sex between people of the same sex' (Kouwenhoven and Holdert 2019a). 'Help! I'm Growing Up' is controversial according to these authors. This caused quite a stir and was discussed by the House of Representatives. The Dutch Inspectorate of Education was commissioned to investigate what happens in Islamic schools. What is going on?

The method 'Help! I'm Growing Up' aims to prepare pupils for puberty by establishing a relationship between the development of their own Islamic identity and the value

orientation of the Dutch society. Claassen (2013)¹ indicates in her foreword that this method provides children with the knowledge and tools necessary to deal with sexual topics that society approaches in a different (non-Islamic) way.

Educators, Islamic teachers, and parents can use the method to educate pupils in upper primary and lower secondary schools about the physical developments and other changes that take place during puberty. The method describes various subjects related to sexual development, such as physical changes, hygiene, relationships and sexuality (“Kissing and having sex is only allowed when you are married”), responsible relations between boys and girls (“... and that we do not find one better than the other: a man and a woman complement each other. They need each other”), appropriate clothing, and homosexuality (“The prohibition in Islam on having intercourse with someone of the same sex is based on this story [of the Prophet Lute]. If you feel that your way of life is better than someone else’s, at least show it through your good behavior”).

The NRC article criticizes several topics from Claassen’s method. According to the authors, it advocates strict rules for conduct and clothing. Boys and girls must keep their distance and may not associate freely after puberty. Girls are not allowed to wear clothes worn by ‘infidels’ (Kouwenhoven and Holdert 2019b). The authors conclude that children learn that Islam forbids same-sex intercourse, that this behavior was abhorred by Allah and considered a great sin. According to the NRC, the teaching method prescribes how to live and how not to. Therefore, it would be at odds with ‘good citizenship’ and basic values in Dutch society, such as tolerance, promoting understanding for other people, and not inciting discrimination.

Some Islamic spiritual leaders in The Netherlands also criticize the teaching method and indicate that the terminology used is oppressive and that to the Dutch secular society, ‘advice’ about manners and clothing style appears oppressive and confirms gender-roles (Waszink 2019). Some politicians, such as former leader of the liberal political party ‘VVD’, Klaas Dijkhoff, want to restrict the freedom of education because they believe that the quality of education suffers from this freedom and that schools based on a specific religion or philosophy isolate their pupils (Van der Lingen 2019).

Micha de Winter, a professor of pedagogy at Utrecht University, also thinks that this does not match the Western lifestyle where people are free to choose how they want to live (Kouwenhoven and Holdert 2019a).

What does that mean for opinions that deviate from the dominant culture? What freedom does an Islamic school in The Netherlands have with regard to expressing its own views on sex education, and when does a school act contrary to the basic values of a democratic state?

The above prompted my research in completion of my master’s degree at the Islamic Faculty Amsterdam². The main research question was: “What characterizes sex education in Islamic primary schools, and which issues stand out or need attention from the point of view of citizenship education?” (Kaya-Postema 2021). In this contribution, I focus on the question:

“What are the views and attitudes of RE teachers regarding sexuality in the teaching practice of Islamic primary schools?”

Below, I first describe Islamic principles regarding sexuality according to scholars from different schools of thought. I then continue to outline globally the Dutch perspective on sexuality and sex education. This is followed by a description of the research design and methodology. For this article, I focus specifically on eight semi-structured interviews that were conducted. Finally, I describe the conclusions resulting from the analysis of those interviews, and I make some recommendations for future sex education in Islamic schools in the Dutch plural society.

2. Islamic Perspective on Sex Education

Although Islamic sources recognize the presence of physical sexual desires, there is no unlimited freedom to satisfy those desires. The religious sources Quran and *Hadith* (Ahl

as-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah) provide regulatory guidelines which form a moral framework for sexual activity. Elements that form the Islamic moral (ethical) framework are chastity, modesty, shame, virginity, (faithfulness within) marriage, the prohibition of homosexual acts, respect, and love (Ashraah et al. 2013, p. 6; Islam and Rahman 2008, p. 17; Mabud 1998, pp. 70–71).

The challenge for religious Muslims is to satisfy their physical desires in permitted sexual acts. At the same time, they are expected to control themselves (Al Bouti 2019, p. 145; Mabud 1998, pp. 70–71).

Within Islamic sex education, Islamic scholars want to discourage, but not prohibit, behavior that falls outside the framework given in the Quran and Sunnah.

2.1. Conversation about Sexuality

From the early days of Islam, Arabic sources openly address sexuality. For example, in the erotic work ‘the fragrant garden’, the fifteenth-century writer Nefzaoui writes undisguised about a woman having intercourse with another man “... and rubbed its bead against the lips of her vulva ...” (Nefzaoui 2015, pp. h1, p19), and Ibn Hazm describes love in ‘the ring of the dove’. This openness in Arabic literature changes, according to Egyptian scientist, journalist and writer, El Feki, with the rise of colonialism in the 16th century (Feki 2013, p. 39).

Whereas sexuality in Europe changed to a public and widespread social appearance in the last century, sexuality has gradually been discussed in the Arab world since the beginning of the twentieth century (Hökelecli 1993).

During the early Islamic period the prophet Muhammed educated his community on all matters of sexuality. The texts below make this clear:

“They ask you ‘O Prophet’ about menstruation. Say, “Beware of its harm! So keep away, and do not have intercourse with your wives during their monthly cycles until they are purified.” (K.2-222) (Leemhuis 1996; The Noble Quran 2022)

Busrah bint Safwan reported that the Prophet said:

“Whoever touches his penis, he should not pray until he performs wudu (cleansing ritual)” (At-Thirmidhi 2020)

Without hesitation, Islamic law (*fiqh*) treats a range of sexual subjects such as: menstruation, pregnancy, sexual intercourse, and adultery (Hökelecli 1993, p. 22; Leezenberg 2017, pp. 35–36; Mohametov and But 2013, pp. 2, h1.4).

It follows from the above *hadith* that the Prophet spoke to his followers about physical matters in an informative, open, and detailed manner, as he called things by name. Conversely, there are also traditions that say that shame is part of believing.

The prophet Muhammed specifically said:

“Shame (*haya*) is part of faith” (Al-Bukhari 2012, p. 73)

This apparent paradox means that shame should not be a reason to avoid questions about sexuality, but sexuality can be discussed as a serious topic in an informative and not obscene way (Van Bommel 2003, p. 97).

Although there is no taboo regarding sexuality within Islam, Muslim adolescents talk less about sexuality with their parents compared to their non-Muslim peers (Graaf et al. 2017, p. 6). This is because some parents are reluctant or simply lack knowledge (Van Bommel 2003, p. 97; Islam and Rahman 2008, pp. 6–7; Vennix and Vanwesenbeeck 2005, p. 91). Different authors agree that it is precisely for this reason that sex education should be a part of any Islamic school’s curriculum (Ashraah et al. 2013; Islam and Rahman 2008; Mabud 1998; Vennix and Vanwesenbeeck 2005).

2.2. Goal of Sex Education

According to Islamic scholars in the field of education sex education emphasizes ritual, emotional, relational, moral, and biological aspects of sexuality.

Within this field of education, the aim is mainly to inform young people, for instance by educating them about physical developments, to protect them against abuse (Halstead and Reiss 2003, pp. 10, h.2), and to make them aware of risky behavior (Seksuele vorming.nl 2020) that can lead to sexually transmitted diseases or pregnancy (Ashraah et al. 2013, p. 11; Ashraf et al. 1991, p. 5; Mohametov and But 2013, pp. 3, h1.4). Furthermore, some authors cite abuse or violence as a risk against which pupils should be protected (Halstead and Reiss 2003, pp. 10, h2; Khan et al. 2020, p. 190; Vennix and Vanwesenbeeck 2005, p. 146).

At the same time, Islamic authors state that young people need self-confidence to withstand pressure from society, where other, Western sexual values and norms apply (Van Bommel 2003, p. 105; Mabud 1998, p. 70; Mohametov and But 2013, pp. 3, h1.4). Society's diversity regarding sexuality and gender should be addressed during sex education lessons so pupils understand the prevailing sexual attitudes and practices. Sex education can support young Muslims in their attitude towards deviant sexual values in society and teach them to deal with them with respect, understanding and tolerance (Ashraah et al. 2013, p. 9; Van Bommel 2003, p. 101; Mabud 1998, pp. 81–82).

2.3. Framework for Sexual Education

According to Mabud, Islamic sex education should take place in a safe, loving, and caring atmosphere in which pupils can grow and develop. To ensure this atmosphere, several authors recommend that sex education be taught in boys' and girls' groups separately, by a teacher of the same sex. This is expected to provide boys and girls with a safe environment to talk about sexual aspects and relationships with less embarrassment (Halstead 1997, pp. 326, 328; Mabud 1998, p. 87; Sanjakdar 2009; Sex Education Forum 2010, p. 21).

Trust and equality are paramount when sexuality is discussed and are linked continuously to the stages of moral development in children (Van Bommel 2003, p. 97; Khan et al. 2020, p. 117). By being aware of these developmental stages, teachers can relate to them and discuss appropriate topics and important guidelines in sex education lessons. Knowledge of sexual development of children provides information about which behaviors are considered 'normal' and appropriate for the age and developmental stage (Doef 2009). The openness in religious sources outlined above shows that there are no restrictions on openly discussing sexual issues within same sex groups.

2.4. Imagery

The ideas of Islamic scholars about the use of explicit sexual imagery and literature rather vary. According to Mohametov and But (2013, pp. 2, h1.4), this use can lead to immorality and adultery. Mabud also does not consider it to be in line with the Islamic norm (Mabud 1998, p. 87). Van Bommel, however, does see a role for visual content in warning people about the effects of sexual misconduct. Examples include videos about abortion and about the consequences of sexual abuse that encourage people to ponder these misdeeds (Van Bommel 2003, p. 107). When designing material, both visual and written, it is important to keep in mind Islamic principles like decency, modesty, chastity, and sexual responsibility (Sanjakdar 2009). For example, visual material should not show (pictures or videos of) a person's private parts because it is forbidden for a Muslim to see someone else's genitalia (K. 24: 30–31). Drawings can be used to inform pupils.

3. Dutch Perspective on Sex Education

My research provides insight into the different perspectives that play a role in sex education at primary schools of the Islamic school foundation SIMON. As part of Dutch society, Islamic aspects as well as those of Dutch society are important.

3.1. SIMON Schools' Perspective on Sexual Education

In addition to regular subjects, Muslim children at the ten SIMON primary schools also acquire knowledge of the Islamic faith tradition and this forms the basis for their participation in Dutch society. Aktaran (2008) writes in SIMON's identity document

‘Becoming Who You Are’ that SIMON wants to provide meaning to educational subjects from an Islamic perspective. Aktaran describes the duty of all SIMON schools as to teach pupils facts and opinions, to transfer knowledge of views and backgrounds of other people in society, and to learn to respect these different views (Aktaran 2008, pp. 52–53).

For SIMON schools, themes such as tolerance and self-determination, intimacy, shame, and sexual intercourse within marriage are important aspects of sex education. Furthermore, the SIMON schools adopt a positive approach to sexuality and its sex education lessons encourage contemplation. Sexual developments in society should be taught in SIMON schools from both an Islamic and a societal perspective (Budak n.d., p. 31).

3.2. History of Sex Education in The Netherlands

Until 2012 sex education was not a compulsory school subject in The Netherlands. In prior years, from the eighties onwards, sex education lessons were taught at school, with an emphasis at that time mainly on education, prevention of sexual risks and the promotion of safe sexual behavior (Rutgers 2013, p. 8; Bonjour and van der Vlugt 2018; Zimmerman 2015, pp. 115, 117).

In 2012, the Dutch Ministry of Education obliged all primary schools to pay attention to sexuality and sexual diversity by including this in the core objectives. Because of this legal obligation and, even more influentially, because children today receive a lot of information about sexuality through the media, today’s education has the task of providing reliable, complete and positive sexual information (Rutgers 2013, p. 8; Seksuele vorming.nl 2020).

3.3. Legal Framework

Article 23, article 1 and 2 of the Dutch Constitution states that

1. Education is an object of the government’s continuing concern.
2. The provision of education is free, subject to the supervision of the government and, with regard to education designated by law, the examination of the competence and morality of those who teach, to regulate this by law.

The law respects “... the freedom of confessional/denominational schools to choose their own teaching aids and to appoint teachers as they see fit, according to the freedom of education in The Netherlands (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties [Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations] 2022). This fundamental right gives every faith community the right to establish a school based on its religious convictions and to teach its beliefs (Beemsterboer 2018; Onderwijsraad [Education Council] 2020).

The Dutch Primary Education Act describes a framework for subjects or democratic values that should be taught in schools through so-called *kerndoelen* (attainment targets). The 4 four attainment targets for sex education, with target 38 at its core, are (Onderwijsinspectie [Education Inspectorate] 2016a; 2016b, p. 26):

- attainment target 34: “Pupils learn to take care of the physical and psychological health of themselves and others”;
- attainment target 37: “Pupils learn to behave respectfully towards generally accepted values and norms”;
- attainment target 38: “Pupils learn the fundamentals about spiritual beliefs that play an important role in the Dutch multicultural society, and they learn to deal respectfully with sexuality and societal diversity, including sexual diversity”;
- attainment target 41: “Pupils learn about the structure of plants, animals and humans and about the form and function of their parts”.

The freedom of education, guaranteed under *article 23* of the Dutch constitution, gives schools/school boards the opportunity to teach the governmental attainment targets in a way they see fit. Although the government, in consultation with teachers and experts, determines which subjects should be covered in education (Curriculum.nu 2022), schools themselves determine how these are taught. The freedom of education also facilitates the teaching of ideas that might contradict prevailing beliefs within education. On that basis,

Islamic schools are free to convey their own values in sex education classes as long as these do not compromise the basic values of the democratic state, such as autonomy, equivalence and tolerance. This means that schools may express a preference for (and a rejection of) a sexual orientation (such as homosexuality), if the curriculum reflects that people (are allowed to) make other choices in a democracy, that they are equal, and should be respected (Inspectie van het Onderwijs [Inspectorate of Education] 2020, pp. 11, 46).

3.4. Inspectorate of Education

According to the Inspectorate of Education in its report on Citizenship Education (in which it is proposed to include sex education, (2016), although the views of some Islamic (and also Orthodox Christian) schools deviate from the prevailing views in Dutch society, they may be in contrast, but still fit within the freedom of education referred to in Article 23 of the Dutch Constitution on education.

The Inspectorate of Education states that “there are generally more orthodox schools (which can be of various signatures, such as Christian, Jewish or Muslim), where elements of the curriculum repeatedly lead to social or political discussion”. In schools with an Islamic signature, this concerns religious principles that deviate from societal norms, including sexual diversity and the interaction between men and women” (Inspectie van het Onderwijs [Inspectorate of Education] 2020, p. 3.1.1).

With a few exceptions, in which schools did not offer in their teaching specific texts or phrases about sexual development or did not proactively address precarious statements by pupils, the Inspectorate found no conflict in Islamic schools with regard to basic democratic values (Inspectie van het Onderwijs [Inspectorate of Education] 2020, p. 3.2.7).

3.5. Public Opinion

In newspaper articles from the last several years gives many examples of the commotion about diversity and sexuality in education occur. This includes the ban on the burqa (Ysselt 2010) where the call to prohibit the wearing of face-covering clothing in certain sectors of society is loud, the shaking of hands (Centrale Raad van Beroep [Central board of appeal] 2009), where a school was vindicated when it fired a teacher who no longer wanted to shake hands with male colleagues, and whether the headscarf is allowed as part of the police uniform (Terpstra 2017), in which a police chief questions the code of conduct that instructs police officers to take to the streets neutrally.

Fear of and aversion to the unknown, but also concern for basic democratic values, play a role in the commotion about opinions that deviate from generally accepted points of view. This became clear, among other things, by the turmoil that arose in 2019 in response to the rejection of homosexuality in the Nashville statement (Trouw.nl 2020). Signatories of this ‘Joint Declaration on Biblical Sexuality’ draw values from the Bible regarding sexuality, gender identity, and the importance of marital fidelity. They oppose this to, among other things, same-sex marriage, adultery and sexual impurity. It is also illustrated by the commotion about the teaching method “Help! I’m Growing Up” in NRC and Nieuwsuur in 2019, as mentioned above.

Generally speaking, Dutch politics knows a progressive attitude towards sexuality and gender issues (Huijnk 2022). This progressive attitude is a Dutch self-image, according to Uitermark a.o. (Uitermark et al. 2014) where Dutch migrants—especially Muslims—form a tangible, visible “constitutive outside” of the Dutch majority. Muslims seem to be framed in terms of gender and sexual equality (Uitermark et al. 2014).

De Koning states that belonging to the Dutch moral community seems to be more and more based upon the idea of a ‘shared culture’ (in which sexual freedoms, emancipation of women and freedom of expression are believed to be the hallmarks) and cultural identity and sameness become the prerequisites to accessing citizenship rights. With this interpretation of citizenship, the need for migrants to accept ‘Dutch norms and values’ through education and assimilation become central (De Koning 2010).

Mepschen (2011) and Duyvendak (Singeling 2017) endorse this and both state that homorights are deployed to discipline and civilize (muslim) migrants. In order to finally become individual citizens of The Netherlands, Mepschen argues that it looks like migrants have to unlearn old habits. Homosexuality becomes the litmus test of their integration.

According to De Koning the representations of islam vis à vis Dutch society reproduce and nurture the image of The Netherlands as a homogenous secular country, based upon a Christian tradition, threatened by radicals (Muslims).

Tolerance for deviating opinions seems to decrease, which in several situations caused a stir and were labeled as undesirable (ANP 2006; Groot 2017; Ouariachi 2018). In recent political debates, members of parliament such as Kuiken, Wiersma and Asscher reacted strongly to schools where homosexuality is rejected and where gender inequality is experienced (Boer 2019) (Harmsen 2020). The debates raise the question of how far an opinion may deviate and to what point these opinions are compatible with the basic values of the democratic constitutional state (Baars 2020).

4. Research Design, Data Construction and Analysis

This article is based on my master thesis on sex education within Islamic primary education at the SIMON Foundation—a foundation that unites ten primary schools³ in The Netherlands. In 2020 I conducted a descriptive, empirical, qualitative research among teachers and their supervisors. I researched the issues, problems, and perspectives in the field of sex education⁴.

I interviewed six teachers of Religious Education (RE), a school principal, and a counsellor at the SIMON schools (from now on referred to as respondents) in a semi-structured manner, allowing them to share their opinions and experiences and to elaborate on questions and topics (Donk and Lanen 2013) (see Table 1). Due to the limitations of the corona pandemic, these interviews were conducted online. I asked the respondents what they think the purpose of sex education at their Islamic school is, which themes they find important in sex education lessons, which themes they find difficult to deal with in a group (tense issues), and whether they think that all subjects should be discussed openly and freely in sex education lessons. In conducting the interviews, I have been aware of my role as a researcher. I am a colleague for all respondents and I have used this as an advantage during the conversations. All respondents saw me as an insider (RE teacher), so they spoke freely. A downside of this role is that I had to be aware of working as a researcher constantly. Another disadvantage is that I asked less, because the respondents would find that strange and I am already aware of many things. As a female interviewer I have not experienced any uncomfortable situations in the conversations about sexuality with male respondents (Labaree 2002). The other, on the other hand, may have felt uncomfortable. However, explicit sexual words such as penis and masturbation were only used by a few female respondents.

Table 1. Background characteristics of respondents that were interviewed.

Teachers of Religion (6), School Principal (1), and a Counsellor of Religion (1)		
General Educational Experience (Average)	12 Years	
Sex ed Experience	5 Years	
Gender	Male	5
	Female	3
Religion	Muslim	8
Age	35–50 years	

In this article, I focus on the eight interviews, because the respondents are most responsible for sex education at the SIMON schools. Half of them use the method from Claassen, by selecting useful subjects from the method, such as puberty, purity and hygiene.

Moreover, these respondents can substantiate their views on sex education (with examples) because of their broad Islamic knowledge and experience.

On average, the respondents have been working as (religious; RE) teachers in Islamic schools for 12 years, with an average of five years teaching sex education classes. This group of respondents consisted of five women and three men, all of whom identified as Muslim. For a complete overview, see Table 1.

The interviews were analyzed by labeling the verbatim and relevant text describing aspects of sex education or sexuality without biased theoretical concepts. Each text fragment was provided with a label, which ultimately resulted in a labeling system. The decision to not use a predetermined theoretical framework was made to obtain new insights from the collected data. Such a systematic method of data analysis, inspired by the grounded theory approach, leads to new insights that yield useful practical knowledge (Baarda et al. 2009, p. 319).

The intersubjectivity (Baarda et al. 2009, p. 331) of my qualitative research was checked by a fellow researcher who rearranged and relabeled the text fragments from an interview using the (provisionally developed) labeling system. While relabeling, she could choose from randomly arranged labels. This led to an improved description of the labels and more insight in the label structure by using a tree structure.

This is shown below in Figure 1. The tree structure represents the aspects of sexual education that were most important to the respondents.

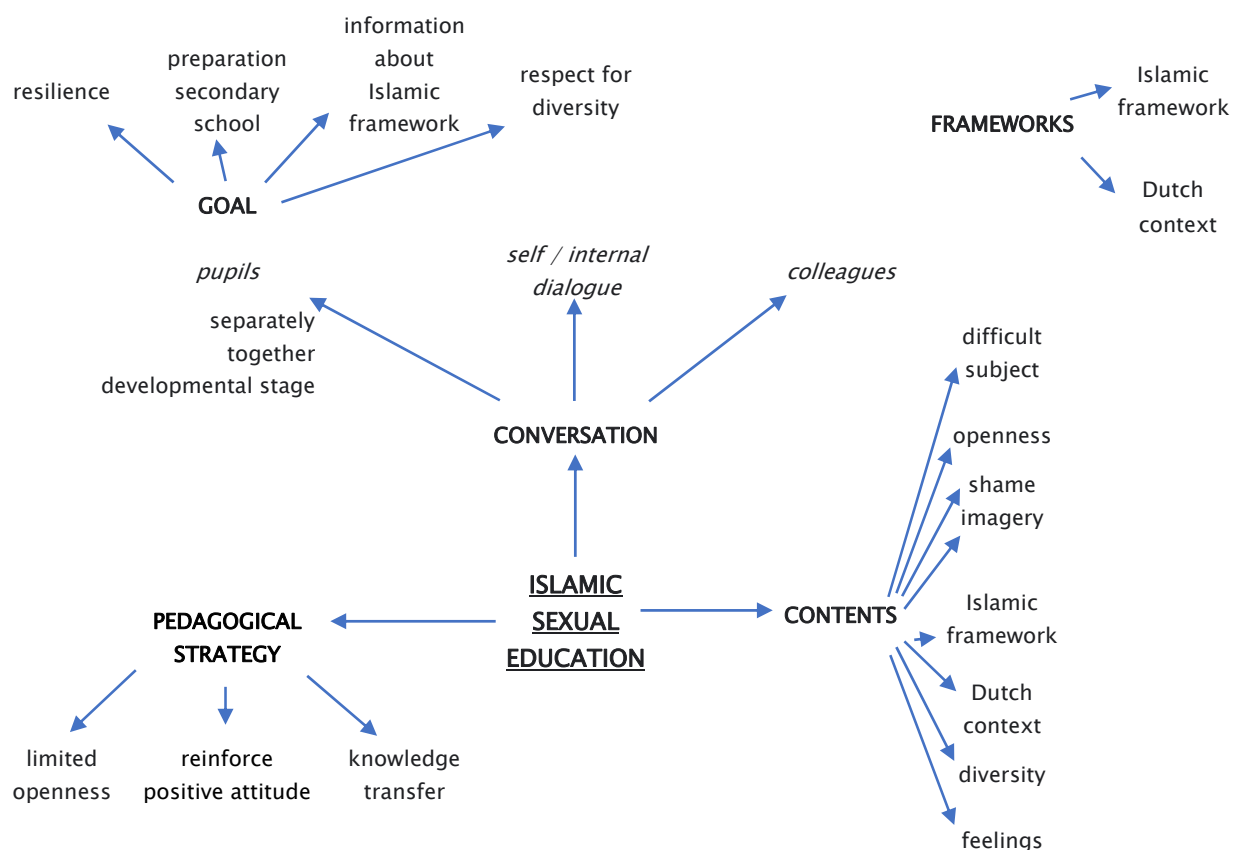


Figure 1. Tree structure with met key concepts of sexual education.

5. Results of the Study

To answer the question I asked myself in this article, “What are the views and attitudes of RE teachers regarding sexuality in the teaching practice of Islamic primary schools?”, I focused on excerpts from the verbatim interviews with eight respondents from my master’s research that are relevant to the present research question. The following emerges from those interviews:

5.1. Views and Attitudes of RE Teachers

For the respondents, Islamic sexual education in The Netherlands takes place within Islamic frameworks, while taking into account Dutch laws and context.

Respondents find the following aspects relevant to sex education: the Dutch context (with a diversity of opinions), sexual diversity and dealing with feelings. The socio-cultural framework, the Dutch progressive attitude, and the resilience (desired by the respondents) against societal pressure also seem to play a role. These topics show the need to connect the lessons with the Dutch context.

All but one of the respondents want to discuss all topics related to sexuality openly, in way appropriate to the age and developmental stage of the pupils. The respondents would like to see pupils get used to talking about sexuality to reduce the burden of the topic.

“There is no shame in the faith”
RE teacher, woman, Muslim
and
“I think we can ask and discuss anything”
RE teacher, man, Muslim

are frequently heard statements among the respondents. Yet, three of them feel inhibited to talk about certain aspects of sexuality, such as falling in love, masturbation, or liberal Islamic opinions about, for example, homosexuality or wearing a headscarf. They are afraid to arouse interest in the pupils or to cause doubt in them.

On the one hand, almost all respondents believe that everything should be open to discussion, while on the other hand, half of them avoid certain aspects of sexuality, as mentioned above. In instances where they prefer not to talk or talk superficially about sensitive sexual topics, a lack of knowledge or time on the part of the respondent play a role. For some respondents shame is also a factor; shame in the sense of shyness to talk about sexuality. And shame in the sense of taboo, whereas many Muslims consider (talking about) sexuality a taboo subject.

5.2. Dutch Context

For all respondents, legislation is important to sex education because Dutch law determines which subjects or values should be taught in the form of attainment targets. When offering Islamic sexual values and norms, all schools are bound to the basic values of the democratic constitutional state.

Because of the Dutch context, the respondents want to prepare pupils for secondary education. This is in fact a wish to prepare children for the approach to sex education that is most common in The Netherlands and differs from the Islamic view to sexuality. Moreover, the respondents do not want to use harsh and fraught words. Respondents find it important to teach and learn to respect non-Islamic opinions, backgrounds, and sexual perspectives.

5.3. Sexual Diversity

The interviews show that respondents do more than just naming other perspectives in their classrooms. All respondents want to explain and discuss different and sexually diverse ways of living and thinking in society. A large majority of the respondents, quoted below, mentioned (almost) immediately that other ways of thinking should be respected and that what is (not) allowed according to Islam should be stated:

“Eventually you say: ‘Look, there are also people with different opinions. We respect that, but this is what we believe in, and this is how it should be’”. RE teacher, man, Muslim

At the same time, half of the respondents want to spread the SIMON vision clearly. In its practical implementation, it is stated that tolerance, shame, and delaying sexual intercourse until marriage are important pillars (Budak n.d., p. 31).

For most respondents, other Islamic opinions such as accepting homosexuality cannot yet be part of the current curriculum. This is apparent from the following quote, among other things, because

“The Islamic world is not ready for that yet” RE teacher, woman, Muslim

Although two of the respondents embrace ‘the other’, the majority does not seem to teach this liberal Islamic view:

“But I think that [teaching liberal Islamic view on homosexuality] is a step further. We can give them the knowledge, this is what we know from the faith, this is what Allah says about it, this is the prophet story that goes with it, but we hold everyone in their value. Everybody . . . ” religion teacher, woman, Muslim

5.4. Sensitive Subjects

All respondents want to name and discuss sensitive topics such as homosexuality:

“For now, I think we came a long way if we just talk openly about it [homosexuality]” RE teacher, woman, Muslim

When mentioning homosexuality in the classroom, six of the eight respondents indicate to pupils that the practice of homosexuality is unacceptable from a mainstream Islamic perspective. Nevertheless, three respondents mentioned that the homosexual person should be respected or left alone and should not be judged.

“However annoying it [prohibition of homosexuality] is and how harsh it may sound to others. Because those are Allah’s words, as it is written in the Qur’an. And of course; keep a dialogue going. “We do not judge, Allah judges.” RE teacher, woman, Muslim

Two out of eight respondents adopt an open mindset and make a plea for inclusivity and room for people with different views:

“If you really look at it that way, especially about sexual diversity. How do you describe that? And a little more inclusive. I really think so . . . I think we should indicate a bit: we have something traditional and what is mainstream and the most common. But if you are not mainstream, you do count as a person.” Sex education teacher, male, Muslim

5.5. Purpose of Sex Education

The respondents mainly want to prepare their pupils for secondary education, where sexuality is discussed

“in great detail” and with “boys and girls mixed” RE teacher, woman, Muslim

The use of drawings and co-education lessons are part of this preparation, as the quote below shows:

“Next year, they will see those pictures [explicit sexual images] and maybe even a video. So, I think it’s good that the worst, if at all for some kids, scare happens in their safe little group. Before they are in a class with total strangers and boys and girls mixed” RE teacher, woman, Muslim

5.6. Pedagogical Strategy in Sex Education

Sex education lessons are taught in separate groups for boys and girls, by a teacher of the same sex as the pupils, so sexuality can be discussed in a safe atmosphere and without shame.

For most respondents, choice of words plays a formative and substantive role in sex education. The importance of appropriate framing is reflected in the criticism of the teaching method “Help! I’m Growing Up”. Some terminology such as punishment, sin, and ‘accursed’ are perceived as fraught and harsh. Half of the RE and sex education teachers find it desirable that positive and loving words are used in Islamic sex education. The good should be mentioned and recommended, and unwanted or negative ideas omitted.

5.7. Imagery

Where a difference of opinion on imagery occurs in the literature, the respondents agree when it comes to the use of drawings, such as those found in biology textbooks. When these drawings are functional and not stimulating, as some respondents call it, pupils will be informed and warned about the effects of inappropriate sexual behavior.

The interviews with respondents teach us that at the very least the topics summed up below should be included in the Islamic sex education curriculum:

- sexual diversity, a variety of sexual perspectives, respect for (the opinions) of others, and environmental influences;
- how to deal with feelings;
- warnings about unethical behavior, the dangers of sexuality and social media, and environmental influences;
- growth and development, reproduction, and dealing with appearance.

6. Conclusions, Discussion, Recommendations

Based on the analysis of the interviews, the respondents' description of their classroom routines is in agreement with the view of (Islamic) scholars and educators about sex education in Islamic schools. Pupils should be informed about sexual matters in a well-balanced curriculum, openly, and modestly, and fitting the pupils' moral developmental stage. In groups separated by gender, a Muslim teacher of the same sex as the pupils teaches and explains the Islamic way of thinking, according to the SIMON vision, and the different and sexually diverse ways of living and thinking in society.

It appears that for these eight respondents from the SIMON schools, both the Islamic framework and the Dutch context play a role in sex education. This becomes clear in the points mentioned below.

When it comes to informing, protecting, warning, empowering, reducing fear and teaching values such as tolerance and respect, the teaching practices largely match the Islamic perspective described above. However, the respondents would like to see education at the SIMON schools go a step further and prepare pupils for the Dutch approach to sexuality in secondary education. Although mixing boys and girls when talking about certain subjects of sexuality does not fit within the Islamic moral and ethical framework, it is still important to align the content and form of sex education lessons with the Dutch context.

The recommendations to teach several sex education lessons to boys and girls together, and to use drawings that are functional and non-stimulating, will teach pupils to talk about sexuality in an ordinary way. Consequently, they do not find this scary, bad or weird, but instead, it will prepare them for the way sexuality is taught in secondary education.

It is important that pupils learn to deal with contrasting sexual norms and specific Islamic norms, including covering the body and delaying sexual intercourse until marriage, and that they have the courage to comply with those norms.

The socio-cultural framework, which outlines the diversity of views and opinions concerning sexuality in The Netherlands, and which seems to determine the integration of Muslims on the basis of a 'shared culture' (in which sexual freedom is believed to be a hallmark), seems to weigh more heavily for the respondents than the framework that the law sets for sex education. The respondents' focus on the Dutch context and sexual diversity is not about a desire to belong, but seems to be based on an intrinsically motivated interest in (others with) different opinions. For Islamic sex education, this means that respondents believe that subjects should be taught in the light of the Dutch context, taking the SIMON vision into account. I recommend that teachers are particularly aware of the diversity (of opinions) present in society and that they reflect this diversity in their lessons.

Subjects such as sexual diversity, different sexual perspectives, respect and tolerance for this, shared sexual values and the influence of the environment should be included in the curriculum, according to the respondents. The influence of the Dutch context is reflected in the terminology, the use of images and the open discussion of sexual topics.

In literature Islamic scholars do not prohibit but rather discourage behavior that falls outside the Islamic framework. Whereas respondents want to reinforce desired behaviors by using positive and loving terminology. The words used should come across clearly, but not fraught and harsh, so that the choice of words suits the Dutch context.

In the cited literature, the specific choice of words in sex education is not discussed. Newspaper articles by [Kouwenhoven and Holdert \(2019a, 2019b\)](#) show that certain terminology, such as sin and cursed, is used in the teaching method “Help! I’m Growing Up” and does not seem to match Dutch circumstances. This aspect deserves attention in further developing the curriculum and teaching materials for sex education in Islamic schools.

In day-to-day teaching practices, people are unanimous about the use of non-stimulating drawings. But when it comes to the use of explicit images about sexuality, opinions are somewhat divided in the literature. According to [Mohametov and But \(2013, pp. 2, h1.4\)](#), it can lead to immorality and adultery, and Mabud does not consider it to be in line with the Islamic norm either ([Mabud 1998, p. 87](#)). Van Bommel, however, does see a role for visual content in warning people about the effects of sexual misconduct, like videos about abortion and about the consequences of sexual abuse that encourage people to ponder these misconducts ([Van Bommel 2003, p. 107](#)).

In the interest of Islamic identity development among pupils, all respondents prefer appropriate openness to restraint.

In religious sources, a paradox emerges between openness and shame. Some scholars disagree when it comes to discussing sexuality. Khan a.o. ([Khan et al. 2020](#)) and [Mabud \(1998, p. 88\)](#) want to discuss religious issues openly but modestly, and within the moral religious framework. [Van Bommel \(2003, p. 7\)](#), on the other hand, argues for restraint in discussions about sexuality because this would maintain sexual tension.

The teaching practice underlines this to some extent; respondents believe that everything should be discussed openly in same sex groups, but half of them avoid certain aspects of sexuality. Khan a.o. state that even some Muslim scholars consider sexuality a taboo subject. During the last century, one hardly finds books dealing with this subject and therefore the Muslim community is in need of literature describing sexuality within Islamic teachings.

The contemporary openness in Dutch society requires sex education lessons to include openness, honesty, and realistic experiences, as [Van Bommel \(2003\)](#) states, rather than restraint. This also means that in gender-segregated lessons, it is recommended to provide information on the perspective of the opposite sex. This will increase understanding and respect, which will benefit pupils in future relations.

To avoid reluctance on the part of teachers courses on Islamic pedagogy and didactics on sex education are recommended. A comprehensive manual with additional background information on sensitive topics and different Islamic opinions will be of great help for the teachers.

The limited literature available on sexuality in Islam often describes this subject from an Islamic perspective. In addition, the influence of the West is only mentioned (in a negative sense), but there is no explanation of how to deal with this (in a positive way). Day-to-day practice shows that a number of respondents are claiming space to relate to the Dutch context. They are familiar with the Islamic frameworks and are looking for ways to include diversity in Dutch society in their sex education lessons. Claassen’s teaching method (2013) was a first attempt to represent sexuality in Dutch society within Islamic frameworks. To support teachers (even) better, I recommend developing a teaching method for sex education in which the Islamic framework and the Dutch context are not contrasted but integrated.

A didactic recommendation is to organize physical encounters with others—teachers and pupils from non-Muslim schools. In a mutual dialogue, all pupils (from an Islamic school and the non-Islamic school) can develop connection, understanding and ultimately respect for people with a different way of life.

The conclusions of this qualitative research, can of course not be generalized to all Islamic primary schools in The Netherlands. I recommend exploring the perspective on sexuality in Islamic (primary and secondary) schools in The Netherlands by conducting a broader study. An interesting research question would be: How do school administrators in education policies, and teachers in their everyday teaching practice, interactively position the Dutch context and Islamic frameworks in their education?

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Notes

- ¹ For a description and discussion of “Help!, I’m Growing Up”: [Ter Avest \(2021\)](#).
- ² For more information about the Islamic Faculty Amsterdam: <https://www.i-ua.nl/> (accessed on 8 July 2022).
- ³ <https://www.simonscholen.nl/Onze-scholen> (accessed on 8 July 2022).
- ⁴ Although parents play an important role in the field of sex education, this group was not questioned in this study.

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