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Article

Islamic Religious Education and Citizenship Education: Their Relationship According to Practitioners of Primary Islamic Religious Education in The Netherlands

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Abstract: This article discusses how practitioners of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) in Dutch primary schools look at the relationship between IRE and citizenship education (CE). To what extent do they believe it is possible and desirable for IRE to contribute to CE? What would an integration of IRE and CE look like, and where do they see potential tensions between IRE and CE? In two extensive focus group discussions, with identity coordinators and experienced IRE teachers, the relationships between IRE and four citizenship dimensions, namely, identity, legal status, participation, and rights, were discussed. Qualitative content analysis of these discussions reveals that the integration of IRE with CE is desirable and possible, but in varying degrees based on the level of different citizenship dimensions. The extent of integration of IRE and CE also depends on the interpretations of Islamic key concepts. IRE and CE were also found to face similar challenges in seeking to achieve integration: both struggle with exclusive interpretations of Islam and citizenship.

Keywords: Islamic religious education; citizenship education; focus group discussion

1. Introduction

Although in recent years Islamic schools in The Netherlands mostly score well when it comes to educational achievement (Inspectie van het Onderwijs 2013; Merry and Driessen 2016; Dronkers 2016; Driessen et al. 2017; Driessen 2021), Islamic education is regularly criticised. Islamic schools are accused of fostering segregation instead of contributing to emancipation and integration. In particular, Islamic Religious Education (IRE) has been criticised for indoctrination and lacking a modern pedagogy that stimulates democratic values and critical citizenship (Merry and Maussen 2018). This fear of social segregation and indoctrination is often accompanied by fear of Islamic radicalisation, and even terrorism (Franken and Gent 2021).

The concerns about IRE are fuelled by the growing number of Muslims in The Netherlands and the increasing number of Dutch Muslim parents who send their children to Islamic schools. While Muslims currently represent 5% to 7% of the Dutch population (approximately 17 million), this figure is expected to grow to 12.5% of the total population by 2050 (Pew Research Center 2017). The number of Islamic primary schools in The Netherlands, where IRE is taught, grew from 2 in 1988 to 60 in 2020 (Islamitische scholen en besturen ISBO 2020). The number of pupils in Islamic primary schools in The Netherlands also increased substantially from 9.324 to 16.005 in the period from 2008–2020 (DUO 2020). In addition, the number of Muslim students enrolled in IRE in state schools—where it is an elective subject based on parents' demand (Centrum voor Vormingsonderwijs 2022)—also increased in the last decade, from 2.150 to 2.819 students in the period from 2009–2019 (SPIOR 2009, 2019). These seemingly huge increases must, however, be put into perspective

since the number of Islamic schools amounts to only 0.9% of all primary schools in The Netherlands, and the vast majority of Muslim pupils in The Netherlands do not follow IRE in primary education. Only around 1% of all pupils in The Netherlands follow IRE (OCW in Cijfers 2022).

Despite these concerns, IRE is sometimes seen as a counterforce against radicalisation by others (Aslan and Rausch 2018). There is, however, also a worry from IRE practitioners about this view because instrumentalization of IRE by secular governments for political and security reasons could infringe on the intrinsic value of IRE and the expectations of Muslim communities (Franken and Gent 2021, pp. 5–6). As one study concludes, IRE has the potential to promote the religious and moral development of children and strengthen their sense of responsibility, which is a different approach from preventing radicalisation (Karagül 1994). Sahin (2018, 2021), emphasising a learner-centred approach, notes that the value of IRE for the children themselves—who want to be equipped to critically navigate their hybrid Western-Muslim identity—gets entangled between the interests of parents seeking to protect them from decadent Western values, and the secular state, which seeks to secularise or westernise them.

Coming back to the aforementioned critical concerns about IRE, these appear to be largely unfounded by previous empirical studies on the aims and outcomes of Islamic education in The Netherlands: Dutch Islamic schools generally foster social integration and participation with a growing emphasis on the societal context (Merry and Driessen 2016; Dronkers 2016; Beemsterboer 2018, 2019; Driessen 2021). Historical developments also show that Islamic school identities are not dogmatically fixed, but multiple, fluid, and evolving (Budak 2021).

Almost all previous studies in The Netherlands have mainly focused on Islamic schools as a whole (Beemsterboer 2018; Budak 2021; Driessen 2021), and not specifically on the subject of IRE. The only exception is a dated study which is more theoretical than empirical (Karagül 1994). Therefore, this study is the first to empirically explore IRE in The Netherlands and its possible contributions to CE from the perspectives of IRE practitioners in particular. These are mainly school identity coordinators, i.e., staff members who ensure and advise on the Islamic school identity, as well as experienced IRE teachers at primary schools in The Netherlands. By examining these practitioners' views, we hope to gain a nuanced picture of the different ways IRE and CE may relate to each other in primary schools in The Netherlands. Approaching IRE through the lens of citizenship also has the advantage of transcending the often culturalized integration approach of some previous studies of Dutch Muslims that permanently framed them as migrants, guests, or newcomers (Huijnk et al. 2015). Lastly, this study makes it possible to draw connections with other empirical studies about RE (of another religion) and CE (Willems et al. 2012).

In addition to the focus on IRE, the focus on citizenship in this article is also very timely, because the Dutch government has put CE explicitly on the agenda of Dutch schools since 2006 (Wet PO 2006). This is probably due to the aftermath of 9/11 and the assassinations of Pim Fortuyn (2002) and Theo van Gogh (2004), when concerns grew that certain tendencies in Islam, in particular Salafism, threaten the formation of democratic citizens.[1] In 2021, the 2006 CE law was specified by further stipulating and monitoring schools' commitment to citizenship (Wet PO 2021). However, in this article, we will not limit ourselves to the criteria of citizenship as formulated by the Dutch government but approach citizenship from a broad academic perspective by stressing four core dimensions of citizenship: identity, legal status, participation, and rights. This will be explained in the next section.

The aim of this article is to explore whether IRE and CE are compatible and can be integrated into Dutch primary education, according to IRE practitioners. The research questions of this article are formulated as follows:

1. To what extent do IRE practitioners believe it is possible and desirable for IRE to contribute to CE?
2. Which key concepts from the Islamic tradition and/or which educational goals do IRE practitioners formulate and argue for to integrate IRE with CE?

3. Where do IRE practitioners see potential tensions between IRE and CE?

To answer these questions in the forthcoming sections we first conceptualise citizenship with the help of the four core dimensions mentioned above. Secondly, in the method section, we explain how data were collected through focus group discussions. Thirdly, we present the main results of the focus group discussions by answering the three research questions for each dimension of citizenship. Finally, in the discussion and conclusion sections, we summarise, interpret, and evaluate the possible integration of IRE and CE, as understood by the practitioners. We also highlight some challenges and potential points of conflict and propose some ideas for future research.

2. Citizenship Dimensions

The concept of citizenship has a long and complex history, resulting in a variety of disputed meanings linked to different political ideologies (Van der Heijden 2014; Isin and Turner 2002). However, as Stokke (2017) notes, despite different conceptualisations of citizenship, there is a certain degree of convergence about the core dimensions of citizenship. Referring to Delanty (2000); Faulks (2000), and Joppke (2008), Stokke identifies four dimensions of citizenship: membership, legal status, participation, and rights. With some minor adjustments, we will use Stokke's four dimensions to describe citizenship. We broaden the dimension of 'membership' to 'identity' and consider 'membership' as one aspect of identity, namely collective identity, in addition to personal or individual identity (Polletta and Jasper 2001). The four core dimensions of citizenship we distinguish are thus: identity, legal status, participation, and rights.

Identity can be understood as consisting of two subdimensions, namely individual and collective identity. Individual (or personal) identity refers to a sense of self (Carens 2000, p. 166) which has an existential aspect ('What is my life purpose?') that can be related to religion, spirituality, or worldview (Webster 2005). Collective identity refers to membership, identification, and belonging to a group or community (Polletta and Jasper 2001).

Legal status can be understood as the lawful position ascribed by (nation)states to those who belong to the national community of citizens. Here citizenship conflates with nationality, or it may refer to the status of foreign legal residents, asylum seekers, refugees, or undocumented ('illegal') migrants. Legal status encompasses a contractual relationship between a citizen and a state that includes certain civil, political, and social rights, as well as certain obligations and responsibilities. A core value of this dimension is loyalty: in the case of national citizenship, it is loyalty to the nation-state.

Participation refers to the legal duties and moral responsibilities citizens have towards the community. Duties are the legal obligations citizens have, for example, paying taxes or fulfilling compulsory military service. Responsibilities are the moral commitments expected by the community or the liabilities which are assumed, for example, voting when voting is not mandatory or doing voluntary work. Participation can take different forms on different levels, for example, at the level of self-governing communities, or the level of the whole society (Leydet 2017; Dagger 2002).

Finally, rights can be understood as the set of claims, privileges, and liberties associated with membership and the legal status of citizens. Citizenship rights in liberal democracies are based on certain values such as human dignity, liberty, equality, and solidarity. Marshall (1950) argues that historically acquired rights in liberal democracies can be categorised into civil, political, and social rights. Civil rights protect individual security and privacy and include freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and property ownership. Political rights are rights to participate in the public arena and politics, such as the right to vote and stand for office, to form a political organisation or party, and the right to opposition and protest. Social rights (including economic rights) relate to the welfare state and include the right to healthcare, pensions, and equal opportunity rights in education and the labour market, as well as redistributive and compensation rights, for example, in the case of low income or unemployment. To this list of rights, cultural, animal, and environmental rights could be added.

In this study, these four dimensions of citizenship were briefly presented to two focus groups of IRE practitioners who were then asked to relate these dimensions, if possible, to key concepts from the Islamic tradition and educational goals of IRE.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

Two semi-structured focus group discussions were organised with IRE practitioners of Dutch primary schools. We selected participants via purposive sampling (Campbell et al. 2020). Participants were selected because we expected them to give valid and useful information based on their current position in Islamic education. Participants were gathered in the period from November 2020 to April 2021, during the COVID-19 crisis. First, we tried contacting IRE teachers directly by email or phone on the schools' websites, but since many of them replied that they need permission from the principal or schoolboard, we decided to send invitation letters to all Dutch Islamic primary school principals and the director of SPIOR (Stichting Platform Islamitische Organisaties Rijnmond). SPIOR is an umbrella association for more than seventy Muslim organisations in The Netherlands that, among other things, organises optional IRE in non-confessional state schools. A few weeks later, these principals and the directors were contacted by phone and given additional information about the research project to persuade them to participate. An attempt was made to recruit representatives from all nineteen Islamic schoolboards for Islamic primary education in The Netherlands, and SPIOR. Eventually, nine school boards and SPIOR showed a willingness to participate in our study and most cases suggested an identity coordinator, an experienced IRE teacher, or a school principal to take part in the focus group discussions. Schoolboards that did not participate mostly gave the reason that they had other priorities, such as handling the COVID-19 crisis.

Our final sample consisted of fifteen participants, all with a Muslim background. The participants had different ethnic backgrounds and genders and represented a variety of Islamic schools labelled in previous research as having an 'open', 'pragmatic', or 'closed' school identity (Beemsterboer 2018). This gave us confidence that our sample was a good representation of the entire field of Islamic primary education in The Netherlands. Furthermore, we also managed to have two or three SPIOR representatives present at each focus group meeting to help balance out the IRE representatives that work in Islamic schools with those who teach IRE in non-confessional state schools. While association with certain types of schools was indicative, participants were not asked detailed questions about their religiosity or whether they consider themselves liberal, pragmatic, or conservative Muslims, as these labels are generalising and do not do justice to internal diversity and fluidity of views (Budak 2021). We did, however, identify liberal, pragmatic, and conservative voices on certain topics, as shall be seen later. The first focus group consisted of nine participants: five men and four women, shown in Table 1. The second focus group consisted of six participants: five women and one man, shown in Table 2.

3.2. Positionality and Reflexivity

In all social sciences and humanities, the positionality of the researcher, i.e., the researcher's personal position (views, beliefs, biases, and attitude) towards the social and political context within which the study is conducted, is likely to have an influence on different stages of the research (e.g., on the chosen theoretical frame and the formulation of research questions). This applies even more to qualitative research, which depends on a researcher's subjective observations and interpretations. Many scholars agree that the best way to deal with the researcher's positionality—the so-called reflexivity—is to acknowledge it exists and may have an effect on the results of the research (Berger 2015; Palaganas et al. 2017).

Table 1. Characteristics of participants focus group 1 (N = 9).

Participants (Pseudonyms)	Gender (M/F)	Profession	Islamic School (I) or Non-Confessional State School (S)
Ilyas	M	Identity coordinator	I
Ali	M	School principal and director	I
Amira	F	Teacher IRE	I
Sami	M	Identity coordinator/IRE teacher	I
Omar	M	IRE Teacher	I
Yasine	M	IRE Teacher	I
Noor	F	IRE Teacher and coordinator	S
Nadia	F	IRE Teacher and coordinator	S
Shakira	F	IRE Teacher and coordinator	S

Table 2. Characteristics of participants focus group 2 (N = 6).

Participants (Pseudonyms)	Gender (M/F)	Profession	Islamic School (I) or Non-Confessional State-School (S)
Zahra	F	Identity coordinator	I
Maria	F	IRE Teacher and coordinator	S
Fatma	F	IRE Teacher and coordinator	S
Ahmed	M	School principal and director	I
Layla	F	IRE Teacher	I
Fayrouz	F	CE Teacher	I

As the focus group discussions were moderated by the first author, his Muslim background might have had an influence on the form of the discussion. He was also an acquaintance of some of the participants who knew him from previous employment relationships. Some questions he posed might, therefore, have come across as someone asking for things he already knew, leading to implicit answers. The moderator tried to tackle this by posing subsequent questions to help make the implicit more explicit. An indication that the participants were taking the researcher seriously and respected his role as a moderator, was that tables were not turned, i.e., the researcher was never questioned about his personal views and beliefs. The researcher's Muslim background may also have worked as an advantage since, in the polarised climate surrounding Islam in The Netherlands, it is plausible that a perceived insider is more likely to gain trust when discussing sensitive topics than a perceived outsider.

The researcher sometimes asked critical questions and brought up a number of hot topics about Muslims and citizenship in The Netherlands, e.g., questions about the relationship between Islam and politics or gender equality. Those questions contain some biases, but they were aimed at starting a constructive critical discussion in phases of the discussion that appeared to be too rosy and uncritical in the eyes of the moderator. The moderator was left with the impression that these interventions were accepted by most participants and were constructive as they brought more depth to the discussions.

The second and third authors did not play a role in the data collection but did participate in the design of the interview protocol and data analysis. The data analysis assumes a certain openness, as well as critical distance towards confessional education, and Islamic education in particular, which we are convinced are present in all three authors.

3.3. Focus Group Discussion Protocol

The focus group discussions had the form of semi-structured group discussions. We chose a semi-structured form because this would help initiate and structure the discussions that encompass two broad areas of study: IRE and CE. The participants were asked in advance to prepare for the discussion by reflecting on two main questions: "Are you aware of any concepts from Islamic theology or pedagogy you think fit with each dimension of citizenship?", and "Are you aware of any competences or educational goals in the form of knowledge, skills, attitudes or affections that you think correspond to each dimension of citizenship?" There were also two discussion questions shared with the participants: "Are there aspects or elements of IRE that, in your opinion, do not fit with CE?", and "Are there aspects or elements of CE that do not fit with IRE?" These are all closed questions that leave open the option of no relation between IRE and CE, while simultaneously paving the way for open follow-up questions.

The focus group meeting was planned to last for a maximum of 2 hours. To prepare for the focus group discussion, a very short explanation of the four citizenship dimensions (of one sentence each) was distributed, together with the aforementioned questions before the meeting took place. Additionally, a table with some suggestions for possibly connecting key concepts from Islamic theology or pedagogy and possible educational goals was enclosed. In the document and at the start of the focus group discussion, it was stressed that these were only suggestions to stimulate the discussion and that other answers could be more appropriate. Table 3 is displayed below.

Table 3. Suggestions for key concepts and educational goals to relate CE and IRE.

Citizenship Dimensions	1. Possible Key Concepts from Islamic Theology or Pedagogy	2. Suggested Competences/Educational Goals in Islamic Religious Education
I. Identity	*Khalifa* (steward) *Umma* (community)	Strengthen the development of an open religious identity for students Teaching students a positive attitude towards pluralistic, secular Dutch society
II. Legal position	*Shari'a* (Islamic law)	Teach students respect for Dutch law Teaching students a positive appreciation for Dutch citizenship
III. Participation	*Mu'amalat* (social interaction) *'Adl* (social justice) *Rahma* (compassion)	Contribute to the development of a sense of social justice (*'adl*) and compassion (*rahma*) towards other citizens and students
IV. Rights	*Huquq al-ibaad* ('human rights') *Karama* (human dignity)	Teach students respect for the dignity of all human beings (*karama*)

3.4. Data Generation

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the two focus group discussions took place online (Zoom). While this saved (travel) time and made participation possible without taking a day off, the dysfunctional cameras of some participants sometimes hindered the discussion due to a lack of non-verbal communication. Nevertheless, lively discussions ensued with plenty of interactions. Each focus group discussion was, with permission of the participants, digitally recorded and transcribed. The discussions took place in Dutch. The citations of the participants in this article are therefore translations.

3.5. Data Analysis

Transcripts were organised and analysed using a procedure known as qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2022) with the help of the software programme ATLAS.ti 22. We used a combination of conventional and directed content analysis. In the first approach, coding categories were derived directly from the textual data. The second approach starts with a theory or relevant research findings as guidance for initial codes (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). We drew our evidence from the two focus group discussion data, in large

part coded according to a semi-predefined coding list. The coding list contained the four citizenship dimensions which are the synthesising concepts, and correspondingly, some connecting key concepts from Islamic theology, pedagogy, and educational goals that are listed in Table 3. Some key concepts were anticipated by the authors, such as *fitra* and *khalifa* based on IRE literature (Sahin 2015; Memon and Alhashmi 2018), while others were newly suggested by the participants during the discussions, for example, (Dutch, Islamic, or universal) 'values', 'Quranic stories', 'stories about the prophet Muhammed', and 'didactic-pedagogical tools'. The most mentioned Islamic key concepts that were connected in the discussions with citizenship and mentioned in Arabic (with frequency from most to least mentioned between brackets) are *khalifa* (steward; 10), *'abd(ullah)* (servant of God; 10), *shari'a* (Islamic law; 5), *ummah* (community; 5), *tawhid* (unity of God; 4), *fitrah* (Man's primordial nature; 2), *amana* (trust; 2), *allahu akbar* (God is greater; 1), *jihad* (struggle; 1), *maqasid shari'a* (objectives of shari'a; 1), *masuliya* (responsibility; 1), *mu'amalat* (social interaction; 1), *shura* (consultation; 1), and *Siraat al-mustaqeem* (the straight path; 1). Other key concepts mentioned only in Dutch were respect (*respect*; 32), freedom (*vrijheid*; 25), human dignity (*menselijke waardigheid*; 10), security (*veiligheid*; 7), solidarity (*solidariteit*; 6), equality (*gelijkwaardigheid*; 5), compassion (*barmhartigheid*; 4), justice (*rechtvaardigheid*; 4), sustainability (*duurzaamheid*; 2), environment (*milieu*; 1), and hospitality (*gastvrijheid*; 1).

The different key concepts and educational goals that could be connected to a specific citizenship dimension were grouped into a so-called "family". The connections between the codes and the dimensions of citizenship were mostly coded as "part of" or "related to". This led to a hierarchy on top of the four different citizenship dimensions followed by four families consisting of key concepts and below these the educational goals or other aspects or new "free codes". These free codes do not belong to one of the key concepts or educational goals, but were mentioned as important by the participants, such as the 'Dutch context'. There were some coded statements that could indirectly be linked to the four dimensions, such as teaching methods, or were felt to be new synthesising concepts: 'sensitive topics' and 'values'. Except for these exceptional codes it was generally possible to relate most codes to the four families or four dimensions of citizenship.

ATLAS.ti allows us to visualise and explore the links and relations of families and codes through the network view function, and to group quotations that belong to different families or citizenship dimensions. Scheme 1 shows the code tree with the code 'citizenship' on top, consisting of four citizenship dimensions, which were coded separately. These four dimensions are related to different key concepts and educational goals which were coded as underlying the dimensions to some anticipated codes from Table 3, as well as to new codes suggested by the participants. Values, for example, formed a separate new code since they were mentioned a lot, and could, due to their relatedness, easily be connected to the dimension of rights. Teaching methods are also coded separately, the most mentioned one being storytelling. Sensitive topics are also coded separately to cluster the points where IRE might conflict with CE. There were also other free codes such as quotes that emphasised the Dutch context. Lastly, criticism espoused on our whole theoretical framework was also coded separately. This code tree helped us to analyse the data and come to the results which will be discussed in the next section.
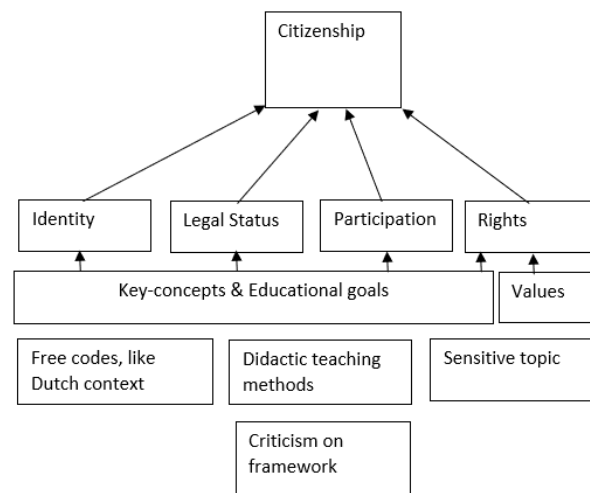
Scheme 1. Atlas.ti code tree.

4. Results

As mentioned, it was possible to link most codes to one of the four citizenship dimensions. A total of 129 quotes could be related to one of the citizenship dimensions: 40 quotes relate to the identity dimension of citizenship; 11 to legal status; 43 to participation; and 35 to rights. This is in line with the general observation that during the focus group discussion, most participants found it difficult to relate IRE to the citizenship dimensions of legal status and rights, and more often referred to the dimensions of identity and participation.

Some participants criticised the used theoretical framework. An important comment was that the distinction of the four dimensions of citizenship seems to ignore the interconnectedness and the overlap of dimensions, and also that the dimension of identity could be understood as encompassing all other dimensions. Another critique was that we seem to enter the discussion on IRE from the perspective of theories on citizenship instead of from the perspective of IRE and Islamic theology and pedagogy. These criticisms were raised at the beginning of each focus group discussion and did not prevent a fruitful discussion but led to results that answered the three research questions.

4.1. Identity

The first question on the desirability and possibility of connecting IRE and CE for the dimension of identity was answered affirmatively by the participants. It was mentioned many times that Islamic identity formation is one of the main goals of IRE and that Islamic Identity is linked with identity as a dimension of citizenship. There seemed to be a consensus that being a good Muslim is being a good citizen. The consequence was that a large part of the discussion among the participants focused on the dimension of identity, and it was difficult for the moderator to shift the discussion to the other dimensions of citizenship. One participant considered identity an overarching dimension of citizenship that includes the other dimensions:

> In my perspective, everything that makes the person who he or she is, is part of his or her identity, and then yes, that legal position, participation, rights, everything has to do with that [...]. (Ilyas)

Second, on the connection between citizenship and Islamic key concepts and educational goals, the participants referred to common values, storytelling, and key concepts. Some participants emphasised the common values of the Islamic tradition and Dutch society, which they called 'universal values', 'citizenship values', and 'core values of Dutch society'. Common values mentioned are freedom, equality, solidarity, respect, hospitality, love, compassion, and individual responsibility. Storytelling, especially inspiring stories from the Quran about the prophets and stories and sayings of the prophet Mohammed, was mentioned as a didactic-pedagogical tool or method to integrate IRE and CE. The

participants also identified different key concepts to integrate IRE with CE. A link was quickly made between Islamic identity and the concepts of *'abd* or *'abdullah* (servant of God) and *khalifa* (steward), referring to serving God (*Allah*) and serving His creation. So it was argued that awareness of an Islamic identity leads to servitude, which is both an Islamic and civic virtue, but it also showed, as one participant put it, the difference between an Islamic and a (secular-)humanist conception of citizenship:

> So what makes the Muslim different from a humanist is precisely that the injustice you do towards your fellow man, not only does not make you feel good as a human being, but also breaks your relationship with Allah, and you also get a bad feeling about it, where you feel responsible towards Allah not to act wrongly. (Ilyas)

The main dogma of Islam, *tawhid* (unity of God), was also mentioned by a participant as a key concept that could support a concept of citizenship identity, at least if interpreted as a concept that makes diversity a necessary part of creation (and society) that should be respected:

> He is unique in the fact that He is one, and this necessarily means that everything except Allah must be plural. (Yasine)

Another key concept that was mentioned by a participant in relation to identity is *ummah,* and especially, an inclusive interpretation of *ummah* that includes members of other faiths and moves beyond the traditional interpretation of an exclusively Islamic global community or worldwide Muslim society. A reference was made to the historical pact of Medina, a diverse political community somewhat similar (and as a pre-modern society, of course, also different) to our society:

> With me, of course, religious education is primarily about religious matters, but if you are talking about an ummah, formation of an ummah, especially in the Medina era, you cannot avoid looking at community formation here in The Netherlands. (Ali)

Another key concept, mentioned in relation to being one community, is the story of Adam and Eve (*Hawa*). It was interpreted with an emphasis on the common origin of humanity and universal fraternity or solidarity:

> The principle of origin of Adam and Hawa and love and mercy towards your fellow man. So those are actually the basic starting points from the Islamic identity that you can partly link very well to the core objectives of primary education when it comes to citizens. (Zahra)

The third question about possible conflicts between IRE and CE is answered quite differently by the participants. The disagreement concerns the starting point of IRE. Is it pedagogically better to start IRE lessons from Islamic sources, such as the objectives of *shari'a* (*maqasid shari'a*) and concepts such as *fitra* and *abdullah* (deductively), or from universal values such as freedom, equality, and solidarity (deductively), or—a third option—from the children's experience and context (inductively)? The second and third options were mainly expressed by teachers working in non-confessional state schools. Another disagreement related to potential differences between national and global citizenship. Should teachers emphasise Dutch citizenship and identify as a Muslim in The Netherlands, i.e., being a Dutch-Muslim, or should they link being Muslim with global citizenship and elaborate on what it means to be a good Muslim citizen in any country? As one participant formulated it:

> I can live here, but I can also live in Pakistan or in Suriname or Curacao, it doesn't matter that much. If you practice your faith according to the five pillars, you should not have a problem anywhere. (Fayrouz)

Another participant (Sami) noted that we cannot expect children to identify with a country where they are being discriminated against because of their religion, and we cannot force children to accept the Dutch identity. According to other participants (Nadia and Ilyas) however, not identifying as Dutch leads to rejecting co-ownership of society, which is

problematic because that leads to uncommitted, irresponsible, or passive citizens, which goes against the vision of Islam.

Still another discussion was about the nature of religious identity. For some participants, Islamic identity is something static that IRE should prevent you from losing in a hostile environment. For others, Islamic identity is layered and changeable in view of the cultural context. Dutch culture is, according to one participant (Omar), believed to contain religiously neutral elements that can be adopted by Dutch Muslims, such as the Dutch mentality of being sober. According to yet another vision that was shared by a participant (Yasine), Dutch society is built on the same values as Islam, especially freedom, equality, and solidarity, and religious education can contribute to strengthening these civic values. Finally, a discussion also arose around the concept of hybrid identity. Two participants (Fatma and Zahra) criticised Dutch textbooks on Islamic schools and state schools (seemingly both of their approaches to CE and IRE) for paying too little attention to hybrid identity and the migration history of the children.

4.2. Legal Position

At first, participants found it difficult to connect IRE to individuals' legal positions, but eventually, some did make connections. A few participants considered the legal position irrelevant for IRE citizenship identity development. It was said in different wordings that children are taught in IRE to behave well according to Islam and obey the law of the land they reside in, not only of The Netherlands but of any country, thus transcending the nation-state:

> And ... Islam was not developed for a country. Islam can be experienced all over the world. That means if you have your identity, you can live anywhere. Because from your identity, you should have respect for others. [...]. (Fayrouz)

Other participants considered legal position relevant, i.e., the rights and liberties of Muslims are better guaranteed in The Netherlands than in most Muslim countries:

> There are just as many Islamic countries that pretend to be a country of Islam, but that completely violate certain legal positions, so to what extent do you feel more connected to that? I think that as a Dutch person you should be quite proud that you can freely practice your faith here, that we are allowed to provide Islamic training here. What would that be like in an Islamic country? I think it is rather beneficial for our Islamic identity. That's how I see it personally. (Nadia)

The above disagreement seemed to reflect the tension between an ideal of global citizenship and national citizenship.

There was one specific key concept, namely *shari'a* (Islamic law), which was linked to an educational goal about the legal position:

> But when I look at this *shari'a* law and teach students respect for Dutch law, [...] I talked about standing at the traffic light last time, for example, you don't go cross the street with red light, why don't you do that. [...] You must respect the law that applies, you should do that as a Muslim. (Amira)

Where *shari'a* in the above definition gives primacy to respecting the law of a given country, another view of *shari'a* was formulated as a compass helping a person to navigate between different countries and laws, not automatically obeying them:

> Islamic law has taught me how to deal with Dutch law [...] how do you deal with all legislation, because a Muslim comes all over the world, not just in The Netherlands. (Sami)

However, some participants explicitly criticised the use of Islamic concepts in Islamic education, especially such a loaded and often misunderstood term such as *shari'a*:

> Those Islamic concepts really don't mean much to me, and certainly not [for] that single student in groups 7 and 8 [age 10–11]. When you talk about *shari'a* they

[would] think that it is a [divine] law, but we all know *shari'a* is just human work.
(Ali)

In the above comment, the participant probably points to the fact that in Islamic
sciences there is a science or body of law known as *fiqh* (jurisprudence) that hermeneutically
tries to determine what *shari'a* is. There were also some discussion points about where IRE
and CE could conflict. One discussion point concerned a question posed by the moderator:
does teaching that The Netherlands (and its constitution and rule of law) is non-Islamic
alienate Muslim pupils? One participant (Fatma) seemed to suggest that it is alright to label
The Netherlands as non-Islamic, as long as Muslims have a positive identification with this
country by recognising that at least some rights and freedoms of Dutch society are also
Islamic, it would not contradict with their Islamic identity. Another participant favoured to
call the Netherlands neither Islamic nor non-Islamic, but a mix of both, explaining it by a
metaphor:

This environment [The Netherlands] is Islamic and non-Islamic, it is a mix, it is
all kinds of things. And you are part of that. This area is a large garden with
many flowers, including roses. I am the rose and the rest is the rest. (Ilyas)

A third position that was voiced is calling The Netherlands very Islamic in terms of its
core values:

Whether you live in an Islamic society does […] not depend on whether Muslims
live there, but whether the Islamic core values are sufficiently reflected in it. […]
stewardship (*khalifa*), social justice, mercy, human rights, human dignity, … I
dare to argue that The Netherlands is a much more Islamic country than a country
like Morocco. […] The message should be in our schools: this is a very Islamic
country, because we can practice our Islamic faith very well. (Ahmed)

4.3. Participation

Participation was one of the dimensions easily connected with IRE by our participants,
perhaps because it easily interconnects with aspects that are widely emphasised in Islamic
praxis, such as moral behaviour, social justice, and compassion for the needy. Another
reason could be that IRE practitioners experience a sense of responsibility to set a good
example for their students by participating in society. As one respondent who is an IRE
teacher explained:

We have to assume that role, as role models for our students […] How do we talk
to each other?' If you start yelling yourself, you are setting the wrong example.
While by acting in the opposite way you unconsciously give the right [example].
(Fayrouz)

Some Islamic key concepts that were mentioned by the participants are *khalifa* (stew-
ardship) and *maqasid* (objectives) of *shari'a*. *Khalifa* refers here to serving and taking care of
other human beings and creatures. The dominant political meaning of *khalifa* was, how-
ever, not mentioned or explored in the discussion, i.e., succession, political and religious
leadership, hence its key theo-political component, related to the concept of *al-walaa wa-al-
baraa-* disassociating with unbelievers and loyalty to believers. While *maqasid shari'a* can
be understood as an Islamic foundation of human rights, with a participation dimension
when citizens respect, actively work for, or stand up for each other's rights. Another
key concept that was mentioned is *siraat al-mustaqim* (the straight path), a term from the
first chapter of the Quran, which was explained by a participant (Shakira) as walking the
golden middle way between different extremes in different aspects of your life. It was
stressed that participation is for the benefit of the whole society and is not limited to the
Muslim community. In this context, participants mentioned certain values, sometimes
called 'Islamic' and sometimes 'universal', they focus on in their program to connect IRE
with CE:

Well, if you look at our teaching material, it is written from eight values, which
come back every time. That includes individual responsibility, respect you name

it, it's all there. And from those eight values we give the lessons, and the goal is not to impose, but to learn something. (Maria)

One of the values, namely sustainability, was linked to the Islamic value of purity:

Not everyone knows about sustainability either, but that purity is not only [about] the body, purity is with the trees, also the environment. If you deal with this consciously, you will teach your children to do the same. (Fayrouz)

Possible points of conflict between IRE and CE that were discussed were friendships of Muslims with non-Muslims and the celebrations of non-Islamic festivals, such as birthdays and Christmas. As for friendship, one participant said there is nothing wrong with having friends from other faiths, as long as certain Islamic limits are respected:

As far as friendship is concerned, I think we learn from each other, as long as a child knows [...] as long as I'm not offered alcohol and so on. (Fayrouz)

Another participant said that the issue hardly exists in Islamic education:

I don't think there are Islamic schools that tell children not to have non-Muslim friends. (Ahmed)

As for participation in non-Islamic festivals, one participant (Ahmed) said that in most schools these are not celebrated, but the children are informed about the meaning of religious holidays, such as Christmas and Easter. Another participant (Layla) argued for more respect for differences of opinion: it is an individual choice of Muslims to participate in other festivals than the two Islamic festivals or not.

A last point of discussion in this dimension was whether schools should promote political participation. One participant (Amira) said that democratic participation is not an issue discussed in IRE. A second participant (Fayrouz) disagreed and said that it is explained to children that Muslims have the responsibility to vote for a party that is close to Islamic norms and values and that stands up for the rights and liberties of Muslims. The Quranic story of the prophet Yusuf (Joseph) was mentioned (by Yasine and Nadia) as an inspiring story, as Yusuf participated politically in a non-Islamic government as an administrator of Egypt. It was also mentioned that after the death of the prophet Muhammad some of the first caliphs were selected by a *shura* (consultation), which in modern days could be replaced by democratic elections because it has the same goal. A third participant (Ilyas) added that, according to him, the task of schools is only to create political awareness, to inform children about the democratic system and the rule of law, to create consciousness, not to politically mobilise children or call them to vote.

4.4. Rights

The participants gave great importance to this dimension in relation to freedom of religion and the preservation of their religious identity. Some Islamic key concepts—that can connect IRE and CE—that were mentioned by the participants are *karama* (human dignity), *'abdullah* (servant of God), *jihad-an nafs* (struggle against the ego), and *maqasid shari'a* (higher objectives of Islamic law). The aim of *shari'a* is specified in the protection of the five principles of human well-being: the protection of religion, life, intellect, lineage, and property. One of the participants said that all citizen rights can be deduced from these five principles. She explained that the principle of protection of religion should be understood not only as the freedom to be Muslim but as the freedom of all religions:

Securing the faith is not only about the Islamic faith, but also the freedom of belief, freedom of religion, life conviction. (Zahra)

This is in line with a modern approach to these higher objectives of *shari'a* as Islamic links to universal human rights (Auda 2008; Duderija 2014; Gleave 2021). To illustrate the importance of *karama* (human dignity), a verse from the Quran was cited that all mankind ('children of Adam') is dignified by God and should be respected. *Abdullah* was mentioned in the context of a *hadith* where serving God was connected with doing good deeds and

treating others with good manners. *Jihad an-nafs* was interpreted as fighting against your own prejudices and respecting the rights and liberties of others.

There were also some possible tensions between IRE and CE mentioned. For example, gender-neutral education and LGBTQI rights were mentioned to be sensitive topics. At one of the two focus group discussions there was a consensus that although there was not any case known of an Islamic school with a homosexual pupil, in general, Islamic schools are not ready to deal with the issue maturely. The general message of the practitioners was that Muslim children should be taught to respect all human beings, regardless of their sexuality, and, at the same time, that being openly homosexual (with same-sex sexual behaviour) is condemned as a sin in Islam. There was, however, a participant who pointed to a more liberal view of Islam, referring to Islamic history:

> I mean about the time of Andalusia, we had a liberal view on homosexuality there. The only thing is those are voices in the minority, but they are there. (Ali)

Some participants pointed to a double standard in The Netherlands when it comes to tolerance: Muslim women are, for example, sometimes not allowed to wear the headscarf at work, but at the same time they feel pressured to not only tolerate homosexual persons but even to accept homosexuality as a normal practice. One participant, therefore, felt the freedom of religion is now under pressure:

> The government wants to change this, this is done through the use of role models [...] So the government is forcing me to accept this. [...] So my right to reject this is being taken away from me. [...] That you may say: 'no, this is from my faith ... this is not possible, I do not want to accept this. (Omar)

5. Discussion

This paper addresses three research questions to explore whether IRE and CE are compatible and can be integrated, according to IRE practitioners, in The Netherlands:

1. To what extent do IRE practitioners believe it is possible and desirable for IRE to contribute to CE?
2. Which key concepts from the Islamic tradition and/or which educational goals do IRE practitioners formulate and argue for to integrate IRE with CE?
3. Where do IRE practitioners see potential tensions between IRE and CE?

To answer these questions, we focused on the different dimensions of citizenship: identity, legal status, participation, and rights.

The findings on the first question can be summarised as follows. In general, the IRE practitioners found it possible and desirable for IRE to contribute to CE and integrate the two. Overall, there was no tendency towards segregation among the participants, but rather an emphasis on participation. It was striking that radicalisation was never mentioned in the discussion, and that IRE and CE were not regarded (primarily) as instruments for preventing radicalisation. Another remarkable point was that some participants called Dutch society more Islamic than many Muslim societies. The identity dimension of citizenship was seen as the most desirable and fitting contribution from IRE, probably because Islamic identity development is understood to be a central aspect of IRE: there was a consensus that a good Muslim is a good citizen. The participation dimension of citizenship was also seen as having a strong connection with IRE, probably because participation in society (doing good) is seen as an essential aspect of the Islamic faith. It was stressed that participation is for the benefit of the whole society and is not limited to the Muslim community. The legal dimension of citizenship was found by some to be irrelevant for IRE, as they implicitly endorsed global citizenship that transcends nation-states, which makes being a good Muslim independent of a specific society. Other participants, however, emphasised and praised the privilege of being Dutch citizens and living under the Dutch constitution and legal system, calling them more Islamic than in most Muslim countries. Finally, the rights dimension—especially religious freedom and rights of Muslims—was by most participants

seen as particularly relevant in the context of the preservation of the Islamic identity as a minority in The Netherlands.

Despite these findings, we can still question why IRE should contribute to CE at all? Does this not lead to the instrumentalization of IRE? The participants agreed that IRE can and should contribute to society, but the question is whether this can and should be translated one-to-one into citizenship education. Would a discussion about the societal contributions of IRE, from the perspective of the Islamic tradition—as one participant suggested—without the baggage of citizenship theory, have led to similar or other results? An alternative approach from Sahin (2015, 2018, 2021), that has not been explored in this study is pedagogical in nature: would a discussion on key concepts from Islamic pedagogy, such as *tarbiya* (pedagogy), bring views to light where (Islamic) education transcends the religious-secular, and the IRE-CE divide?

Regarding the second question, participants often agreed with the suggestions of Islamic key concepts and educational goals that were handed out beforehand or suggested by the moderator. Occasionally, participants added new Islamic key concepts or surprising interpretations. For example, *abdullah* (servant of God) and *tawhid* (unity of God) may resemble, at first glance, purely theological concepts that strictly deal with the relationship between an individual and God, but these concepts were interpreted in a way that made them relevant for citizenship. However, it should be noted that there are also interpretations of these terms that go against an inclusive and democratic form of citizenship. For example, *abdullah* can be interpreted as blind obedience to God, and *tawhid* as the belief in the absolute sovereignty of God in every sphere of life and the rejection of man-made political systems such as democracy (Wagemakers 2016). Still, these alternative and not uncommon interpretations of *abdullah* and *tawhid* were not discussed in the focus group meetings. However, the participants did show awareness that other key concepts can be interpreted in radically different ways, which makes them either irrelevant, opposite, or conducive to citizenship. This goes especially for some loaded terms such as *shari'a* and *jihad*. Some participants objected to the use of key concepts in Islamic education altogether or suggested at least not to start with them in class since they do not mean much for primary school pupils. Educationally, it was believed by some participants to be better to start with the context and experiences of the students or universal values they could easily recognise. One could, however, object to this, that, in our society, it is educationally necessary that pupils become acquainted with these Arabic terms and also with their 'negative' interpretations in order to make them more resilient in public debates on Islam and contact with fundamentalist groups. The participants also pointed to the possibilities to integrate IRE and CE with the help of certain pedagogical-didactical tools, especially storytelling, e.g., stories of the prophets.

The lack of consensus on the key concepts and their potential importance is related to the question of authority and interpretation in the Islamic tradition. In contrast to Catholicism, for example, Islam has no central authority, but many authorities that are often poorly institutionalised and not hierarchically organised. Who speaks for Islam? What is the correct interpretation? These are questions that many Muslims struggle with, especially in modern times, with the crumbling of traditional authority structures and the democratisation of knowledge (Robinson 2009). The lack of consensus can, depending on the context, be a weakness or a strength. The discussions show that, especially, educational institutions that take their pedagogical project seriously, can create conditions in which there is room for a plurality of interpretations and reasonable discussions. However, it is essential to experience the freedom and safety to have such discussions. The question is: does Islamic education in The Netherlands experience sufficient space and can it withstand the pressure from society, politics, and (mosque) clergy to conform to certain interpretations of Islam and citizenship?

As for the third question, possible tensions between IRE and CE brought lively discussions between the participants. There was a discussion about which aim is preferable in IRE: identification with the national sphere (being a Dutch Muslim) or the global sphere

(being Muslim anywhere). This raises the question: can a person simultaneously identify with the local, national, and global sphere? Moreover, is global citizenship achievable? It obviously is an attractive ideal for many, but it has also been criticised, since, legally speaking, citizens are more under the regime of national laws than the regime of global or international laws. It is therefore argued to better speak of different regimes of citizenship (Isin 2002; Guillaume 2013). We can also identify conservative voices and liberal ones in the discussions held, but most voices were balanced in between, looking for pragmatic solutions. There was, for example, some disagreement about what kind of Islamic identity one should aim for in IRE. Most participants seemed, implicitly and broadly speaking, to support the ideal of an open, dynamic, and multi-layered Muslim identity, but at some moments in the discussion, especially around sensitive topics, some participants seemed to fold back to a more foreclosed identity, an Islamic identity that must be preserved in a minority context, and us-versus-them thinking. This brings an important pedagogical question to light about what the pedagogical goal of IRE is? Is the goal, for example, socialisation into a religious community with a fixed, static, or foreclosed religious identity? Or is the goal subjectification, a free and grown-up, open, critical, and explorative identity (Sahin 2015; Biesta 2021)? The pressure was felt by Dutch political and societal debates to conform Islamic (religious) education to (modern Dutch) values and norms that sometimes conflict with Islamic orthodoxy. The latter was felt especially on issues of sexuality, gender, and LGBTQI rights. Muslims are not only expected to tolerate but also to accept homosexuality, which was for some participants too big a step to take, while others supported the idea that Islamic (religious) education needs to take some steps forward in thinking about and dealing with these issues, without elaborating what this could specifically mean. A possible alternative and more liberal approach to homosexuality was quickly mentioned: *Al-Andalous* (medieval Islamic Spain). Probably referring to a culture of relative acceptance of homosexuality that has historically flourished under Islamic rule (Murray and Roscoe 1997; El-Rouayheb 2005). Some participants, however, pointed to the double standard they experience in this debate: Muslim citizens are regularly lectured about tolerance, while at the same time they feel discriminated against and not really accepted as equal citizens. Here, a distinction between formal and substantive citizenship might clarify this discussion (Holston 1999). Some participants pointed to a gap between formal citizenship: the formal status (with rights and duties) that citizens have; and substantive citizenship: the ability that citizens, in reality, have to claim this status as citizens.

The discussions on sensitive topics show that Islamic (religious) education often struggles with the same issues that orthodox Christian education also struggles with (Exalto and Bertram-Troost 2019). It often revolves around the same (sexual) morals or issues. However, as one participant noted, there is a difference in that with Islamic (Religious) Education the conflicts are often framed in an integration discourse: the Dutchness of Islamic schools and teachers is more likely to be questioned than that of orthodox Christian schools and teachers in The Netherlands. This illustrates how the concept of citizenship, similar to Islam or any religion, can have an exclusive narrow interpretation that, in this case, can be used to exclude or alienate Muslims. It also points to the question of authority and interpretation that also exists in citizenship studies: who decides what citizenship is?

6. Conclusions

In general, IRE practitioners find the integration of IRE with CE desirable. Our study shows how this integration is possible in different degrees, with the help of certain Islamic key concepts, which can be interpreted in ways that connect them with citizenship dimensions. In addition, our study shows that Islamic concepts such as *Abdullah* and *Tawhid*, while they may at first glance appear to be exclusive, are conducive to citizenship if interpreted openly or inclusively. Connecting IRE with CE is also possible with the help of common values or by certain pedagogical-didactical tools such as storytelling. Furthermore, our study shows how certain didactical approaches may foster citizenship. IRE may foster citizenship deductively, by starting from theological concepts or universal values, as well

as inductively, by starting from the experiences and context of the pupils. At the same time, there are also points of tension, comparable to those of orthodox Christian education.

The first limitation of our study concerns the sample. Though we tried to make the sample as representative as possible and organised two focus group discussions instead of one, a sample of only 15 IRE practitioners is, of course, limited. A second limitation is that the analysis of the focus group discussions gives us only a glimpse of what is happening on the ground. Further research is needed to conclude whether or how the integration of IRE and CE is being done in Islamic and non-confessional schools. A third limitation concerns the semi-structured form of the focus group discussion. Explicitly asking the respondents to reflect on the four citizenship dimensions we distinguished may have been too directive, although this strategy did help to initiate and structure the discussion. A fourth limitation is that our study did not delve deeply into the pedagogical dimension and did not explore deeply how the participants understand education and IRE and how they understand central Islamic pedagogical concepts, such as *tarbiya*, that can be understood as encompassing both secular sciences as well as moral and religious education which can help to see how IRE and CE can be integrated (Sahin 2015, 2018, 2021). The study also does not explore how the discourses in the focus groups related to discussions on *muwatana* (citizenship) in Islamic discourses (Routledge (Firm) 2021).

A strength of this study is that it helped to reveal, in an accessible way, the two challenges of connecting IRE to CE. The first challenge arises if certain Islamic concepts and ideals are interpreted in an exclusive way. This can clash with an inclusivist ideal of citizenship where acceptance of differences sometimes goes beyond (orthodox) religious limits, for example, holding beliefs or conducting one's life in ways that are religiously condemned. The second challenge arises when exclusive or narrow views of citizenship are endorsed that exclude or alienate Dutch Muslims. These challenges show that IRE and CE may face similar challenges; both struggle with exclusivist interpretations and a gap between ideals and the lived reality, as well as with the problem of interpretation and authority, i.e., who decides which interpretation of Islam or citizenship is right? While this article has clarified the views of IRE practitioners on the relationship between IRE and CE, as well as the Islamic key concepts that may contribute to it, further empirical research is needed to clarify how IRE contributes to CE or not, in, for example, textbooks and daily classroom practices.

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Note

1   https://www.onderwijsinspectie.nl/actueel/nieuws/2019/09/11/feiten-over-het-toezicht-op-burgerschapsonderwijs-en-bijbehorende-lesmethoden (accessed on 29 July 2022).

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