

Article

Conflicting Rights? Dutch-Turkish Muslim Parents Fostering a Religiously Coloured Agency

Rosanne M. S. Aantjes

Faculty of Education, Canterbury Christ Church University, Canterbury CT1 1QU, UK;
rosanne.aantjes@canterbury.ac.uk

Abstract: This article is an in-depth exploration of the roles of Dutch-Turkish Muslim parents in facilitating their children's freedom of thought, conscience and religion, and the rights of these parents to provide their children with religious direction. A limited number of four semi-structured, in-depth interviews was conducted, with a total of six Dutch-Turkish Muslim parents. The interview data were analysed by both inductive and deductive analysis, so-called abductive analysis. Instead of fostering child agency by promoting their children's individual choice, the parents seek to promote a religiously coloured agency. The findings indicate five ways the parents integrate a religious direction while fostering the child's agency.

Keywords: informal religious education; freedom of religion; children's rights; Dutch-Turkish Muslim parents; individual agency; religious direction



Citation: Aantjes, Rosanne M. S. 2022. Conflicting Rights? Dutch-Turkish Muslim Parents Fostering a Religiously Coloured Agency. *Religions* 13: 886. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13100886>

Academic Editors: Ina ter Avest and Bahaeddin Budak

Received: 15 June 2022

Accepted: 5 September 2022

Published: 22 September 2022

Publisher's Note: MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



Copyright: © 2022 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

The Dutch Education Council ([Dutch Education Council 2021](#)) recently highlighted the tension between a child's right to freedom of religion and parents' right to provide their children with religious direction. [Taylor \(2017\)](#) addresses this continued tension in light of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and notes that raising children in a particular religious direction is one of the most central aspects 'of the parents' own right to religious freedom' ([Taylor 2017](#), p. 357; see also [Schweitzer 2017](#)). However, others argue that, in religious schools, religious direction towards a child limits the child's freedom of religion ([Hand 2003](#)). In essence, they argue that a child should receive options to choose from ([Hemming 2018](#)). Furthermore, [Taylor \(2017\)](#) outlines some controversies in the interpretation of the CRC and notes how some countries made attempts to solve this. For example, in the Netherlands and Belgium, it was added that the child will be given the right to choose their own religion, 'once capable of doing so' (p. 358). Overall, according to the [Dutch Education Council \(2021\)](#), it is in this tense field that conflicts may arise in the educational context.

In this article, specific focus is on the role of Muslim parents in facilitating their children with freedom of thought, conscience and religion, and these parents' right to provide their children with religious direction. Recent research shows that Muslim parents in Western countries are faced with the task of 'navigating' different 'normative systems' in their children's educational contexts ([Haga 2019](#), pp. 124–25). In this regard, [Pels et al. \(2009\)](#) mention the 'handling of dissonance' (p. 8) in their conceptual framework on children being raised in migrant families. [Pels et al. \(2009\)](#) emphasize the 'multiple frames of reference' these parents have to deal with, with respect to the dominant cultural views in societies these families live in and 'different and sometimes opposing ideals' (p. 8).

In recent years, the agency of the child has become central in notions on the child's right to religious freedom ([Wyness 2013](#); [Hemming 2018](#); [Greene and Nixon 2020](#)). The concept of child agency has evolved considerably over the years ([Lollis and Kuczynski 1997](#); [Hemming and Madge 2012](#); [Greene and Nixon 2020](#)). [Lollis and Kuczynski \(1997\)](#)

discussed how descriptions of children's behaviour moved from 'non-agentic' notions to descriptions of children 'intentionally influencing and resisting parents, selecting parental ideas and constructing ideas of their own' (Lollis and Kuczynski 1997, p. 448). Hemming and Madge (2012) reflected a similar development, when describing how this concept originated from an emphasis in research on 'children as social actors in their own right' (p. 43). Most centrally, the position of children developed from being 'passive recipients of socialisation to be shaped by others' into a position of 'agents and social actors' (Greene and Nixon 2020). In the context of religion, Hemming (2018) describes this child agency as when children demonstrate 'that they are religious actors in their own right' (p. 157). In that sense, Hemming (2018) argues that viewing children as 'active agents' illuminates their ability to 'resist or negotiate' (p. 157) religious messages in, for example, schools. This concept of a child's religious agency has, thus, become central, both in notions on the child's right to freedom of religion and in research on children and young people.

Hemming and Madge (2012) observe children's religious agency emerging in several studies, which they have summarized in four observations. It is interesting to note that these authors did not specify the age of the children, but only observed this concept emerging in the literature on 'children and young people' (p. 44). The following observations are, thus, applicable to a relatively wide age range. First, in these studies, they observe 'that children and young people may attach their own value and importance to particular concepts, ideas and practices in their religious and spiritual lives' (p. 44) and thereby, often diverge from their parents' choices. Second, they note that children and young people 'may reconfigure and renegotiate formal religious meanings and practices', which they observe as tenets of children's and young people's religious agency. Third, they observe that children and young people rely on different sources to 'make sense of *religious issues and concerns*', which, they argue, could support the notion that children and young people enact religious agency. Fourth, they state that children and young people are often actively involved in their own religious identity development, which indicates the involvement of child agency within this development. In this latter observation, Hemming and Madge, nevertheless, stress the influences of 'social spaces and contexts' on the child (p. 45), pointing to the importance of parental influence. Importantly, these four observations highlight the emergence of a child's religious agency, as they indicate that children and young people increasingly make their own choices, though parental influences also play a pivotal role.

To date, there has been relatively little research into this role of parents influencing their children's religious agency. In the field of adolescent religious identity development, de Bruin-Wassinkmaat et al. (2021) mentions the importance of the context influencing religious identity in youngsters. In this, 'influential' persons in the context of young people are viewed as able to 'honour and stimulate' their agency (de Bruin-Wassinkmaat et al. 2021, p. 99). Furthermore, with regards to religious parents influencing their children's agency, Barrow et al. (2021) found that parents from an extensive range of religious backgrounds seek to balance religious continuity while fostering the individual agency of their children. In line with previous studies, Barrow et al. (2021) described parents' perceptions of their children's agency as an acknowledgement of a free choice by the child to believe or not to believe. Similar to Hemming and Madge (2012), Barrow et al. (2021) did not specify the children's ages.

Presenting how parents achieve this balancing act, the authors put forward six processes (Barrow et al. 2021). Three processes focus on how parents support child agency and three focus on how parents support religious continuity. The processes supporting child agency are formulated as: (1) not forcing faith; (2) allowing exploration and mistakes; and (3) showing respect for children's views. The processes supporting religious continuity are formulated as: (1) teaching values; (2) providing expectations; and (3) setting an example. Barrow et al. (2021) conclude that parents preferred their children to believe but left the choice with their children. Nevertheless, the authors also found that religious parents differ in fostering agency and argued this resulted from cultural differences and different levels of religiosity amongst parents. Likewise, Hemming and Madge (2012) note the various

expectations in different religious or cultural groups ‘to exercise agency’, resulting in the concept being ‘not a straightforward issue’ (p. 44).

These parents’ influences, nonetheless, resonate with their right to provide their children with religious direction. In the educational context, Haga (2019) observes Somali-Muslim parents to be in conflict with teachers on the amount of freedom children receive to make their own choices. As previously noted, Haga (2019), thus, concludes that these parents need to ‘navigate’ between the ‘different normative systems’ of facilitating children with freedom of thought, conscience and religion, and parents’ right to raise children religiously. To date, there have been no in-depth studies exploring this balancing of religious direction and religious agency among Muslim parents in the Netherlands. This study aims to fill that gap by exploring this among a limited number of Dutch-Turkish Muslim parents who attend Diyanet (*Türkiye Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*, the Turkish Presidency of Religious Affairs) mosques. Dutch-Turkish Muslims make up the largest immigrant community in the Netherlands (total of 397,000, as taken from Altinyelken and Sözeri 2019) and the Diyanet mosques make up the largest group of mosques in the Netherlands (Altinyelken and Sözeri 2019). It is important to mention that the limited number of participants does not allow for a generalization of the findings, but rather gives insight into how Dutch-Turkish Muslim parents *may* balance religious direction and religious agency in Dutch society.

2. Method

This article aims to elucidate how the participating Dutch-Turkish Muslim parents influence both the religious agency and religious direction of their children in the Netherlands. Primarily, this article seeks to explore these processes in depth among parents in Dutch-Turkish Muslim families attending Diyanet mosques. This requires centralising a ‘detailed and focused approach’ (Parr 2015, p. 196) to explore the ‘subjective meanings and individual meaning making’ (Flick 2009, p. 57) of the religious parents. As a result, the data used for this article is collected among a low number of respondents (six parents spread over four families) and, therefore, allows for an in-depth exploration and illumination of these processes, rather than for a generalization of findings.

The qualitative data used in this article is collected within a PhD study on Dutch-Turkish Muslim and reformed-orthodox parents in contexts of their children’s education in the Netherlands. The findings as presented in this article are not presented in the PhD thesis.

2.1. Data Gathering, Selection of Participants, and Translation of Interviews

The data were gathered in autumn 2020 and spring 2021. A limited number of four semi-structured, in-depth interviews was conducted with a total of six Dutch-Turkish Muslim parents with children in the final years of primary school. In these interviews, ‘main questions’ (Rubin and Rubin 2012), informed by the research literature, served as starting points for a lengthy conversation. The interview recordings lasted between 71 and 86 min, with one exception lasting 212 min. The parents were recruited in the largest group of mosques in the Netherlands, Diyanet mosques, located in different places throughout the country (see Table 1). Diyanet mosques are aligned with the Turkish state and as such represent the ‘official Turkish Islam’ (Sözeri 2021, p. 32). In the mosques, gatekeepers were asked to select parents who were active, regular attendees (see for a similar approach, Barrow et al. 2021) and had children in the final years of primary school (8–12 year olds).

In three families, the parents were first-generation immigrants and in one family the parents were second-generation immigrants (see Table 1). The school attendance of the parents’ children ranged from Islamic ($n = 2$) to state ($n = 2$) and Protestant schools ($n = 2$). In two families, children attended different schools. Participants were between 30 and 42 years old and their backgrounds ranged from vocational to university education. One parent worked as a teacher at an Islamic school. In two interviews individual mothers participated, while in the other two interviews both parents participated. In the presentation

of the results, fictional names are used to anonymise participants' identities. As parents were recruited by snowball sampling, any characteristics which could reveal participants' identities were removed from this study.

Table 1. Characteristics of participants ¹.

Immigrant Generation	Demographics	Children, School Type
First generation	Middle part of the Netherlands, small town (65,000–70,000 inhabitants)	Five children, Protestant school, changed to Islamic school
First generation	Western part of the Netherlands, large village (20,000 inhabitants)	Three children, state school, changed to Protestant school
First generation	Western part of the Netherlands, small to medium-large town (115,000–200,000 inhabitants)	Three children, state school
Second generation	Western part of the Netherlands, small to medium-large town (115,000–200,000 inhabitants)	Three children, Islamic school

¹ To guarantee the participants' anonymity, participants' fictional names are not given in this table.

The interviews were conducted in Dutch. In translating the interview segments, first, the extracts were carefully read, interpreted, and thought through in the original language. A digital tool was used for an initial translation and these translations were then compared with the extracts in the original language. In this considerate comparison of the words, the sentences, their structure, and the extract as a whole, the author sometimes changed the translation to make it closer to the original meaning. In this, the context of the interview, participants' body language, tone of voice, and emotions (Bilic 2013; Choluj 2019) were taken into account. In this careful approach it was aimed to stay 'as close as it could be to the original meaning' (Bilic 2013) in the original language. Finally, a native English proof reader, having Dutch as second language, additionally checked the translations of the interview segments.

2.2. Data Analysis

The interview data were analysed by both inductive and deductive analysis, which is called abductive analysis (Timmermans and Tavory 2012). First, parts relevant to the research topic were selected from the data set. Then these parts were thematized, both inductively (themes coming up from the data, e.g., 'choice of state school to address child's responsibility') and deductively (themes derived from theoretical concepts, e.g., 'parent reinforcing child agency'). The in-depth variation in and between the data of the four families was further analysed under the formulated themes. In line with the abductive analysis of the interview data, the theoretical insights surrounding 'agency' and 'religious direction' were analysed. Consequently, the analysis moved back and forth between these theoretical concepts and the raw data. In particular, this led to a shift from old to new theoretical insights (Timmermans and Tavory 2012), as 'agency' and 'religious direction' were initially theorized as two distinct concepts but were found to be integrated by five formulated ways to 'colour religious agency'.

3. Results

The findings in this study indicate five ways in which Dutch-Turkish Muslim parents enact an entanglement of children's agency with raising their children religiously (see Figure 1). Rather than purely balancing religious direction and religious agency, as Barrow et al. (2021) found, the findings indicate parents integrate a religious direction in their fostering of their children's religious agency in five ways. Below, these five ways are further explored.

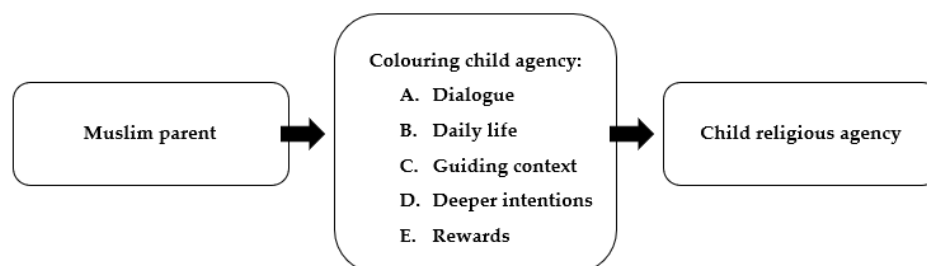


Figure 1. A Muslim parent ‘colouring’ a child’s religious agency.

3.1. Dialogue

In dialogues with their children, the Muslim parents seem to intertwine both religious direction and religious agency. They discuss the religious and ideological issues their children are confronted with. One couple of Muslim parents, Derya and Ramazan, posit the dialogue as an alternative to practices in their own childhood years. They describe these years as ‘a different era’, in which sensitive issues were discussed less and direction was more central:

Derya: Yeah, we live in a time when you can’t, err, forbid children, you know. Look, we lived in a different era than our kids. You can’t say ‘oh no, we’re not going to talk about that now’. You just can’t say that now. And you also can’t say: ‘no, you can’t do that’. No, you can’t say that either.

Interviewer: No, no.

Derya: You know, you have to—as he [husband] says—talk about that in a nice way, lovingly, and in an open, honest way.

In the extract above, Derya explains the difference she observes between her own childhood and now, when she is raising her children. She mentions not ‘forbidding children’ and not avoiding the discussion of sensitive topics. Instead, she observes the importance of openly discussing with her children, ‘lovingly, and in an open, honest way’. In this context, Derya explains how her children take the initiative to discuss sensitive issues arising from the educational context at home. In other words, Derya’s children express an agency to open up about sensitive issues. Derya stresses that she is open to listening in these situations:

Derya: I’m going to talk anyway . . . It’s not like I’d say: ‘no, we don’t do that.’ I love to listen. And usually they [the children] start talking about it in the evening, before they go to sleep. They come up with such a story, then the youngest falls asleep and then we talk about it—how to deal with it and that.

Derya mentions how she avoids explicitly directing her children, noting that she prefers ‘to listen’. She continues by outlining that she discusses issues together with her children and helps her children with ‘how to deal with’ these issues. Here, an entanglement of religious direction and a fostering of the child’s religious agency emerges. Derya does not describe how exactly she ‘deals’ with these issues, but finally she describes her children taking the initiative to ‘continue’ the discussion amongst themselves:

Derya: (. . .) Then they [the children] continue to discuss it with each other. I really like that.

Ramazan: Yeah, we’re not going to cut it off; we’re willing to talk about it. And, yeah, to support and coach them around it. Yeah.

Thus, arising from the dialogue with these parents, their children express an agency in continuing the dialogue amongst each other. As a result, these parents mention not ‘cutting off’ their children’s ideas, but rather ‘supporting and coaching’ them, as Ramazan maintains.

Likewise, another Muslim parent, Meryem, repeatedly indicates that she initiates moments with her children, in which she both listens and expresses particular directions she prefers them to take. In that sense, she also seems to combine facets of religious

direction and religious agency. This is particularly evident when Meryem responds to negative portrayals of the Islamic faith in the media and then describes how her 9 year old is astonished by these. Meryem responds by saying it is her child's responsibility to show an opposite image of the Islamic faith:

Meryem: And then T. [name of son] says, 'Huh, heavily Islamic again? But what rules are those?' I answer, 'Yes, what are those rules? Because they do not know our faith, we must [tell them]; you [to son] now really get [it] heaped on your shoulders'. I say to him: 'you must tell your friends, those around you, whoever it is, what Islam actually is. This is what our Prophet did, and we have to do it as well.'

Here, Meryem addresses the individual responsibility of her child and, with that, her child's agency. By addressing this responsibility, it appears she supports and encourages her child to 'reconfigure and renegotiate formal religious meanings and practices' (Hemming and Madge 2012, p. 44), thus, religiously colouring the child's agency. However, in doing so, Meryem also includes a clear religious direction towards her child. Overall, while Derya, Ramazan, and Meryem mention the importance of listening and having open conversations with their children, in these dialogues, these parents integrate a more or less clear 'religious direction'. As such, these findings indicate that in the dialogue, these Muslim parents integrate a religious direction, religiously colouring their children's agency.

3.2. Daily Life

Although Barrow et al. (2021) formulated 'Setting an example' as a strategy to foster religious continuity and direction, the Muslim parents studied here foster their children's agency by setting themselves as an example in daily life. Nevertheless, these findings indicate that the parents also integrate a religious direction into the fostering of their children's agency. In other words, the fostering of children's agency seems religiously coloured by the parents. For instance, Meryem sets out how she enacts a diversity of activities in daily life, while she observes her children showing agency by choosing similar activities:

Meryem: (. . .) Every night before I go to bed, we do du'a [prayer]. That's every night. And then pray. (. . .) I also pray in front of them. I read the Qur'an, too, and then they say: mum, please read the Qur'an with me, because it will help me to sleep. I do that as well. If they really can't sleep, they say: 'Mum, can you turn on the Qur'an prayer?' Then I put it on in the hallway they hear that and fall asleep like that. Or my daughter, if she gets restless, I pick her up and start reading prayers. (. . .) And very often I also try to remind them during the day that yes, we're going to pray again.

Then, Meryem describes how her daughter shows an initiative to pray:

Meryem: Yesterday, too. My daughter, who is one and a half years old, always takes the cloth [prayer rug] herself, then she takes her headscarf, then she also takes one for me, and then we put them on together. And then she says, for example: 'Allahu akbar, amen'. And that's so nice to see. [laughs] Then I think: yes, look, children imitate the [behaviour of the] parents.

Thus, Meryem explicitly describes the individual choices her children make after observing her as an example in daily life. Similarly, Semra describes the importance of living her faith in daily life, whilst she additionally describes how this stimulates her children to ask questions. Semra responds by explaining the deeper intentions behind her religious practices.

Semra: I go to pray, and then my children come, from the smallest one; I always take them [with me] when I go to the mosque, I take [them] with me. (. . .) then my kids ask, 'why do you pray so many times a day, mum? Why do you do that?' So I explain to them: 'because Allah wants me to, because I believe in it.'

Interestingly, whilst both Semra and Meryem seem to more actively enact being an example in daily life, one Muslim father, Ramazan, lives his religious life more passively:

Ramazan: . . . I try to give the example of just acting normally, and not standing out. [Imagining speaking to his children:] 'Look, this is your culture, this is your faith. And yes. We are this and if you want to follow us, this is the path.'

Ramazan appears to set an example in daily life, however, in order to foster his children's agency to 'follow us'. In contrast, Meryem seems to more strongly intertwine a religious direction with the fostering of religious agency, whilst Semra aims to explain the deeper intentions of religious practices to her children. Overall, whether explicitly or implicitly, by setting themselves as an example in daily life, the Muslim parents appear to foster their children's individual agency alongside expressing a religious direction. Most importantly, the encouragement of children's individual agency seems religiously coloured, as the religious direction and religious agency seem to be intertwined.

3.3. Influencing the Contextual Factors

In several cases, the Muslim parents state that they influenced factors in their children's context. The findings suggest that, in doing so, the parents, again, integrate a religious direction into a fostering of their children's agency. For instance, during the interviews, parents explain their choices for non-religious or religious schools. Selim and Emine discuss their choice for an Islamic school: they seek to foster religious continuity through this choice, as Selim considers the religious school as 'an extension' of the home. Selim then continues that he favours the Islamic school, as there, 'Christian celebrations' are avoided:

Selim: It's an extension of what they get at home. So it . . . what we give them here, they see that there as well.

Emine: And it's just a Dutch school, they just get everything that an average Dutch school offers, only they get

Selim: . . . they don't take part in Christian celebrations, for example . . . I don't want my children to participate in Christmas. That's important to me.

More practically, Emine describes how one television programme was not shown in the classroom in the Islamic school:

Emine: I want to make sure my kids don't see that in the first place. That's the advantage of our school. If they [teachers] know there is such a thing, they just skip over it, you know. They talk about it, but without showing those images. [Those images] are really shocking to me; I don't even want to see them myself. I would be very upset if my son saw them. I'd really hate that. He doesn't need that at all, you know? It's not my way of parenting.

However, although here it seems that parents isolate their children from unwanted influences, importantly, they also seek to construct an age-appropriate context for their children to develop religious agency. To this end, some parents, nevertheless, appear to think about the appropriate age to confront children with unwanted influences. For instance, Selim notes how in the Islamic school, children are prevented from learning about 'lifestyles' that are contrary to the parents' faith. By 'lifestyles', Selim points to specific ages to confront children and young people with sex and gender education, 'talking about sexuality':

Selim: But why put children into that situation when they don't really need to be. There's an Islamic school, it's an extension of here [at home] . . . erm, no lifestyles are explained to our children that we don't want them to learn at this age. (. . .) Look, talking about sexuality, with us, that's only at puberty, not at the age of four. At the age of four you should not ask children; 'Do you already have a boyfriend or girlfriend?' [In schools other than Islamic schools] they start talking about boyfriends or girlfriends at the age of five. We're strict about that: you don't need to. They don't have to read about it, and nor do they need to be read about it. That's important to us.

In essence, Selim does not want his children to be exposed to lessons on sexuality at an early age. He, thus, seems to prevent his child from entering a situation in which

the child must ‘resist or negotiate’ (Hemming 2018, p. 157) religious messages in an educational situation. Instead, he seeks to postpone this enactment of religious agency until ‘puberty’. Similarly, Derya notes she wants to provide her children with space to discuss sensitive issues, but also to ‘be a child first’, relating this to content children encounter on smartphones and the internet:

Derya: And I’m like, because of the internet and smartphones, those kids are already seeing a lot. It’ll happen. But you know, let them be a child first.

Later on, Derya and Ramazan mention they even changed their school choice from a state to a Protestant school for their younger child. They expect that these issues are discussed more ‘carefully’ in this non-Islamic school:

Ramazan: We also know that state schools, in fact all schools are told to discuss this by the government. Some might be really good at it . . . but some . . .

Derya: Do it carefully.

Ramazan: Do it carefully, which is why we have also chosen to send our youngest daughter—who goes to primary school next year—to a Protestant school as well. As they treat things like this with a little more respect there.

Thus, Derya and Ramazan actively seek to affect their children’s context, so that influences, by these parents regarded as unwanted, will not impact their children. These parents do this by choosing Islamic or other religious schools. Although this seems to strongly align with a strategy of religious continuity and direction, similar to Selim, these parents show they also think about age-appropriate contexts for their children’s agency.

In contrast to these parents, Meryem describes the advantage of a state school, as her child can explain the Islamic faith to other children in that context. She, thus, seems to prefer the state school for her child to express a religiously coloured agency:

Meryem: . . . but on the other hand I also thought, erm, then my children can—it’s actually a very white school, let me put it like that—and then my children can also talk to them [the non-Muslim children] about their faith. And show them. Because with Eid ul-Fitr [the celebration at the end of the month of Ramadan], we always give treats. Or with the first day of Ramadan they can simply tell the class what Ramadan is, and why we fast. And things like that.

Later in the interview, Meryem argues that her children can encounter a ‘diversity of cultures’ in state schools, in contrast to Islamic schools:

Meryem: (. . .) those children who go to those [Islamic] schools over there, are all the same. So I don’t think my children could experience a diversity of cultures there. I also think that as we live in the Netherlands, they should also be taught the norms and values of Dutch culture.

Meryem, thus, shows that she values a context in which her child encounters a ‘diversity of cultures’. However, similar to the other parents, Meryem states that she prevents her children learning about specific secular ideologies with regard to sex and gender education. She mentions that, if needed, she would take her children out of school for particular lessons, reflecting her preference for a specified context for them:

Meryem: But otherwise [if they had had to learn about those things] I would have kept them at home. I really don’t care.

Therefore, although Meryem clearly expresses that she encourages her child’s religiously coloured agency in a state school, when it comes to unwanted influences from secular ideologies in this school, a strong religious direction emerges. Overall, these Muslim parents express valuing specific contexts for their children. In this, several parents relate the enactment of the child’s religious agency to specific ages. To this end, these parents seek to influence their children’s contexts. Thus, throughout these findings, the parents integrate a direction into the religiously coloured agency.

3.4. Deeper Intentions

Although the findings presented above suggest that the Muslim parents mostly focus on a religious direction integrated within the children's religiously coloured agency, the parents also mention they seek to avoid directing their children's religious behaviours by forcing the faith. Yet, while these parents do not 'force faith' (Barrow et al. 2021), the findings suggest that they still seek to integrate a religious direction into the agency of their children. In essence, they teach their children about the deeper intentions and religious rationale behind their choices. For example, Semra describes how she encourages her child to enact religious activities out of love for Allah. However, instead of focusing on teaching these particular activities, she instils the religious rationale of these activities. She mentions this as she discusses her daughter's decision about wearing a headscarf:

Semra: So [in her neighbours' views] children are told by their parents to do so [wear a headscarf]. Actually, it shouldn't be like that. (. . .) I can say to her: you have to, and she will do it, but then she will do it for me, not for Allah. That's of no use to Allah. She shouldn't do it for me, because I want her to. I need to explain it to her, but not force her.

As Semra notes, 'she shouldn't do it for me, because I want her to'. Here, Semra encourages her child to develop agency, to be a 'religious (actor) in their own right' (Hemming 2018, p. 157). Semra describes how she encourages her child to individually make religious choices and describes her own role as needing 'to explain it to her, but not force her'. As a result, here, the religious colouring of the child's agency clearly emerges. In other words, the religious direction is subtly integrated in this encouragement of the child's agency. Likewise, Emine argues from a similar perspective of love for Allah. In this respect, she encourages her child to think about Allah as seeing them. Consequently, she seeks to instil an agency in her child to do things for Allah:

Emine: Because Allah created us out of love, so to speak. And I want to pass that on to him, so when he does things secretly, I say: 'There's someone [Allah] who's watching you; he's watching you. He sees, and he'd be very sad if you lied to your parents, or if you bullied your sister. He wouldn't like that. Also our Prophet wouldn't like that at all, you know?' That's how I try to explain it to him, so that he does or does not do certain things, out of love. Do you get what I mean? That internally . . . that he develops it that way, instead of thinking: if I do it secretly, no one will see it. No, then Allah sees it, so let's not do that, you know.

Similarly, Derya describes conversations she has had with her daughter and notes that she leaves the choice completely with her daughter, who does not want to wear a headscarf:

Derya: Because then they would say, if you give this as an example, my daughter always says—my son is very easy, but she always says, 'yes, but I'm not going to wear a headscarf, mum.' And I reply: 'You don't have to. You don't have to wear a headscarf. You have to feel complete the way you feel'. I tell her that I feel complete. And now she notices herself, if I don't have a headscarf on and now and then the doorbell rings—then she runs, then she grabs a headscarf for me. And I say to her: relax, slow down—that's what I say. Yeah, yeah.

Although these findings indicate these parents foster their children's agency by discussing the deeper intentions in their choices, in doing so, these parents also seek to provide their children with clear religious directions. In other words, the religious colouring of the child's agency emerges, as the religious direction is integrated in this encouragement of the child's agency. Additionally, the parents repeatedly mention the importance of the previously described dialogues with their children. Once again, listening to their children emerges as central to the parents.

3.5. Rewards

As described above, the Muslim parents state that they encourage their children to enact a religiously coloured agency. In several cases, the parents also mention the importance of rewarding or complimenting their children, in order to encourage their

agency. For instance, Meryem extensively describes how she observes her child showing religious agency. She recounts how her child started the fasting practice and mentions how she gave him compliments for fasting ‘those three, four hours’:

Meryem: But my children are, [they] come to it themselves: ‘we want to try’. And [name of child] got up at 9 am [started fasting], and then at noon he says, ‘I want to break my fast’. [Meryem starts laughing] I tell him: ‘You did well, young man, those three, four hours.’

Additionally, she describes how her child explains his fasting to non-religious friends, as he explains the meaning of it:

Meryem: [name of child] simply said: ‘Yes, it’s the holy month of Ramadan, so we are not allowed to gossip, we are not allowed to argue, we have to be extra nice to each other, we have to be an example for each other and um, I’m also fasting. That’s to cleanse my body, and uh, feel how poor people experience the world. And that’s really hard,’ he said. ‘But I’m glad, because God still gives me courage to hold on.’

Overall, Meryem reflects the strategies Barrow et al. (2021) formulated regarding how parents support child agency. Meryem is *not forcing* her child to fast (1), but rather *allows her child to explore* the fasting practice (2) and *shows respect* for her child’s agency in this (3), by complimenting her child for fasting ‘three, four hours’. Nevertheless, for Meryem, there is no lack of clarity in the religious direction she expects her child to take. Thus, while she encourages the child’s agency, it is coloured by a religious direction. It is important to note here that children’s ages can play a role in expectancies regarding the enactment of religious practices. Here, Meryem, nevertheless, spontaneously outlines how she deals with her child enacting religious practices, while she does not mention the impact or meaning of age in this regard. Notwithstanding, it is important to realise the importance of age, which can affect a, more or less, stronger emphasis on religious direction.

This religious direction more strongly emerges later in the interview, when Meryem mentions being relatively strict about her children eating halal food. She describes how she forbade her child from eating a snack at a classmate’s birthday, but then during a conversation with this classmate’s mother, discovered that her child had, nevertheless, taken a snack. Meryem explains how she acted on this:

Meryem: So we explained that this is not allowed. And that that is really not . . . it’s really not possible that this is allowed with us, as then your pearls [a metaphor used by Meryem] will disappear. Because in the past [referring to her childhood years] we were always told: ‘Yes, but God will burn you, things like that [eating snacks] are not allowed.’ But um, at least that’s what we heard. But I don’t want to pass that on to my children, because that’s not the case. If I now say to a 5-year-old child: oh, you have eaten a [non-halal snack], and you’re now going to burn, then my child will not love but hate Allah. So I turned things around with my child and conveyed it in a better way, so that they now also pick up the faith more easily.

Here again, receiving rewards for religious behaviour emerges. Meryem mentions a metaphor of earning ‘pearls’, which would disappear if her child eats the non-halal snacks. At first, Meryem indicates that she explained to her child that eating these snacks ‘is not allowed’. She is clear on this and, thus, provides her child with a clear religious direction. However, although the religious direction seems to be Meryem’s primary approach, as she continues, it is the intrinsic motivation of her child towards fulfilling religious practices that seems paramount. In essence, she says she wants to avoid that her child would ‘not love but hate Allah’. In this regard, Meryem contrasts ‘the past’ to her own approach, stating that she aims for her child to ‘pick up the faith more easily’. By pointing to rewards, Meryem seems to encourage her child to intentionally and individually undertake religious activities, without being externally forced to. In short, this again shows this Muslim parent integrating a religious direction into the encouragement of child agency, resulting in a religiously coloured agency.

4. Discussion

According to the [Dutch Education Council \(2021\)](#), a tense field where conflicts may arise in the educational context is ‘when protecting the rights and freedoms of one conflict with those of another’ ([Dutch Education Council 2021](#), p. 25). In particular, there is a tension between a child’s right to freedom of religion and parents’ right to provide their children with religious direction ([Dutch Education Council 2021](#)). Here, parents can be faced with different ‘normative systems’ ([Haga 2019](#), pp. 124–5).

This study focuses on Dutch-Turkish Muslim parents handling this tension. The theoretical concepts of providing children with ‘religious direction’ and ‘religious agency’ ([Lollis and Kuczynski 1997](#); [Hemming and Madge 2012](#); [Hemming 2018](#); [Greene and Nixon 2020](#); [Barrow et al. 2021](#)) were used in the analysis of a limited number of interviews ([Parr 2015](#)). The findings indicate these Dutch-Turkish Muslim parents create a complex interplay of both religious direction and religious agency. In other words, the parents seek to promote a religiously coloured agency. In five different ways, they integrate the ‘religious direction’ into an encouragement of the child’s agency. As summarized in [Figure 1](#), these Muslim parents do this in dialogues, by living their daily lives, guiding children’s contextual factors, focusing on the deeper intentions of the child’s religious agency, and by rewarding and complimenting the religious agency of their children. Thus, whilst children are regarded as ‘religious actors in their own right’ ([Hemming 2018](#), p. 157), parents aim to influence this agency in their children. In that sense, parents influence their children’s individual choices to ‘resist or negotiate’ ([Hemming 2018](#), p. 157) religious messages, whilst integrating a religious direction.

Interestingly, these findings illuminate how parents can purposefully influence their children’s agency. Whereas [Lollis and Kuczynski \(1997, p. 448\)](#) define child agency as an ability of ‘intentionally influencing and resisting parents’, the findings in this study suggest that parents might be actively involved in children’s development of this agency. Similarly, observations on child research by [Hemming and Madge \(2012\)](#) suggest that child agency implies that children diverge from parents’ choices. However, the findings in this study rather suggest that a child’s agency does not necessarily reflect a diverging from parents’ views, but rather that it develops alongside parents’ influences. Thus, regardless of the child’s age, it could even concur with their parents’ views.

In this regard, [Shillitoe and Strhan \(2020\)](#) refer to the idea of ‘docile agency’, developed by [Mahmood \(2005\)](#). This docile agency reflects that, in contrast to non-compliance and resisting parents, children can comply with parents’ religious actions. By religiously colouring the child agency, the parents in this study seem to especially foster such ‘docile agency’. Although children then comply with parents, and whilst parents are involved, children ‘nevertheless create their own meanings and individual experiences’ ([Shillitoe and Strhan 2020](#), p. 630). Overall, this stresses the comprehensive impact of the dynamic parent-child relationship, in which both the child’s agency and the parent’s role in influencing this agency reside ([Lollis and Kuczynski 1997](#)).

The parents, thus, implicitly encourage their children to make use of their right to express their views, as well as their right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. However, without ‘forcing faith’ ([Barrow et al. 2021](#)) and whilst taking into account the power balance in the relationship between parent and child ([Sevón 2015](#)), parents seek various ways to guide and religiously colour the expression of these rights. In essence, the findings in this study show that a fostering of child agency does not necessarily limit a parent’s influence, but rather could result in a religiously coloured child agency. As such, these findings elucidate the complexity in the earlier-mentioned tension between the child’s right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, and parents’ right to provide their children with religious direction.

This extensive role of parents in colouring their children’s religious agency could inform approaches, which include child agency in the field of children’s right to religious freedom ([Wyness 2013](#); [Hemming 2018](#); [Greene and Nixon 2020](#)). For example, it contrasts with recent notions of the [Dutch Education Council \(2021\)](#), which argued that children’s

freedom of religion limits parents' right to provide children with religious direction. The five presented ways in this study rather illustrate a deep complexity in this, whilst it also reflects religious groups' differences in exercising agency, making it 'not a straightforward issue' (Hemming and Madge 2012, p. 44). As such, the findings in this study warn against an understanding of children's agency as a 'simple binary, having or not having agency, capacity or power' (Oswell 2013, p. 269, in Shillitoe and Strhan 2020, p. 628).

In this regard, it is important to note that these five presented ways are nowhere near a finished or definite set. Rather, they indicate possible ways in which these Dutch-Turkish Muslim parents seek to combine religious direction and their children's individual agency. Additionally, these five facets are neither sole, independent constructs nor mechanisms the parents adapt. Instead, parents are shown to continually interconnect and combine these in their parenting. In this, a foundation seems to emerge in the 'open', 'loving', and 'trustful' approach of the parents, which they regularly contrast with their own childhood experiences. As such, the small-scale nature of this study allowed an in-depth exploration of the concept of parents fostering children's agency. Rather than abstracting from the personalized aspects, it elucidated more detailed aspects in the parents' perceptions regarding their religious raising of their children. Nonetheless, the low number of respondents requires a careful interpretation of the findings and does not allow for generalising any of these findings.

Most importantly, the findings indicate that a straightforward approach of considering parents fostering their children's agency versus enacting a religious direction could limit an in-depth understanding of a more complex process. Furthermore, the findings in this study illuminate the comprehensive role of the home context in the societal realm of education, which, thus far, seems largely underestimated in broader societal debates, as well as in academic literature (see also van Schoonhoven 2021; Kolb 2021). This study, therefore, joins recent calls to include the voices of religious parents in the field of educational research and policy (Rissanen 2020; Kolb 2021; van Schoonhoven 2021) and policy regarding informal religious education.

Funding: The qualitative data used in this article is collected within a PhD study, funded by a full university scholarship by the Canterbury Christ Church University. The findings as presented in this article are not presented in the PhD thesis, and as such, this research is only partly funded by the Canterbury Christ Church University.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research of the British Educational Research Association and the Dutch Code of Ethics for Research in the Social and Behavioural Sciences involving Human Participants. An Ethics application was submitted and approved by the Ethics Committee of Canterbury Christ Church University (number ETH1920-0267, 31 July 2020).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data used in this study are interview transcripts from qualitative interviews. The data are not publicly available as, if made publicly available, this might undermine the anonymity assured to participants.

Acknowledgments: The author wants to thank Bob Bowie and Lynn Revell for their support in the research process, and, in particular, the participants who kindly agreed to participate in this study.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- Altinyelken, Hülya Kosar, and Semiha Sözeri. 2019. Importing mosque pedagogy from Turkey: An analysis of contextual factors shaping re-contextualisation processes in the Netherlands. *Comparative Education* 55: 47–65. [CrossRef]
- Barrow, Betsy Hughes, David C. Dollahite, and Loren D. Marks. 2021. How parents balance desire for religious continuity with honoring children's religious agency. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 13: 222. [CrossRef]
- Bilic, Sanja. 2013. Muslim Women in the UK and Bosnia: Religious Identities in Contrasting Contexts. Ph.D. dissertation, University of York, Heslington, UK. Available online: <https://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/5298/1/SanjaThesis28.pdf> (accessed on 23 March 2021).

- Choluj, Kais. 2019. Parenting and ‘Home-Making’ in the New Polish Diaspora in Britain. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Kent, Canterbury, UK. Available online: <https://kar.kent.ac.uk/79035/1/69Kasia%20Choluj%20thesis%20Parenting%20and%20home-making%20.pdf> (accessed on 25 August 2021).
- de Bruin-Wassinkmaat, Anne-Marije, Jos de Kock, Elsbeth Visser-Vogel, Cok Bakker, and Marcel Barnard. 2021. Influencing contextual factors in the religious identity development of strict reformed-raised emerging adults in the Netherlands. *Religious Education* 116: 1–16. [CrossRef]
- Dutch Education Council. 2021. *Grenzen Stellen, Ruimte Laten. Artikel 23 Grondwet in Het Licht van de Democratische Rechtsstaat [Setting Boundaries, Leaving Space. Article 23 of the Constitution in Light of the Democratic Constitutional State]*; Den Haag: Onderwijsraad. Available online: <https://www.onderwijsraad.nl/binaries/onderwijsraad/documenten/adviezen/2021/10/05/grenzen-stellen-ruimte-laten/OWR+Grenzen+stellen%2C+ruimte+latten.pdf> (accessed on 1 August 2022).
- Flick, Uwe. 2009. *An Introduction to Qualitative Research*, 4th ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Greene, Sheila, and Elizabeth Nixon. 2020. *Children as Agents in Their Worlds: A Psychological–Relational Perspective*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Haga, Rannveig. 2019. Somali parents in Sweden: Navigating parenting and child wellbeing. In *Wellbeing of Transnational Muslim Families*. Edited by Marja Tiilikainen, Mulki Al-Sharmani and Sanna Mustasaari. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 112–28.
- Hand, Michael. 2003. A Philosophical Objection to Faith Schools. *Theory and Research in Education* 1: 90–99. [CrossRef]
- Hemming, Peter J. 2018. ‘No offence to God but I don’t believe in Him’: Religion, schooling and children’s rights. *Ethnography and Education* 13: 154–71. [CrossRef]
- Hemming, Peter J., and Nicola Madge. 2012. Researching children, youth and religion: Identity, complexity and agency. *Childhood* 19: 38–51. [CrossRef]
- Kolb, Jonas. 2021. Muslim diversity, religious formation and Islamic religious education. Everyday practical insights into Muslim parents’ concepts of religious education in Austria. *British Journal of Religious Education* 1–14. [CrossRef]
- Lollis, Susan, and Leon Kuczynski. 1997. Beyond one hand clapping: Seeing bidirectionality in parent-child relations. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 14: 441–61. [CrossRef]
- Mahmood, Saba. 2005. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, revised ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Oswell, David. 2013. *The Agency of Children: From Family to Global Human Rights*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Parr, Sadie. 2015. Integrating critical realist and feminist methodologies: Ethical and analytical dilemmas. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 18: 193–207. [CrossRef]
- Pels, Trees, Marjolein Distelbrink, and Liselotte Postma. 2009. Opvoeding in de migratiecontext. *Review van recent onderzoek naar de opvoeding in gezinnen van nieuwe Nederlanders, in opdracht van NWO [Education in the migration context. Review of recent research into the upbringing in families of new Dutch citizens, commissioned by NWO]*. Utrecht: Verwey-Jonker Instituut. Available online: https://www.verwey-jonker.nl/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Opvoeding-in-de-Migratiecontext_2699.pdf (accessed on 1 June 2022).
- Rissanen, Inkeri. 2020. Negotiations on inclusive citizenship in a post-secular school: Perspectives of “cultural broker” Muslim parents and teachers in Finland and Sweden. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research* 64: 135–50. [CrossRef]
- Rubin, Herbert J., and Irene S. Rubin. 2012. *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Schweitzer, Friedrich. 2017. Children’s Right to Religion in Educational Perspective. In *The Bloomsbury Reader in Religion and Childhood*. Edited by Anna Strhan, Stephen G. Parker and Susan Ridgely. London: Bloomsbury, pp. 181–89.
- Sevón, Eija. 2015. Who’s Got the Power?: Young Children’s Power and Agency in the Child-Parent Relationship. *International Journal of Child, Youth and Family Studies* 6: 622–45. [CrossRef]
- Shillitoe, Rachael Marie, and Anna Harriet Block Strhan. 2020. ‘Just leave it blank’ non-religious children and their negotiation of prayer in school. *Religion* 50: 615–35. [CrossRef]
- Sözeri, Semiha. 2021. The Pedagogy of the Mosque: Portrayal, Practice, and Role in the Integration of Turkish-Dutch Children. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Available online: <https://hdl.handle.net/11245.1/1286a623-a609-40f2-939a-fbe2d5162810> (accessed on 9 February 2021).
- Taylor, Rachel. 2017. The child’s right to religion in international law. In *The Bloomsbury Reader in Religion and Childhood*. Edited by Anna Strhan, Stephen G. Parker and Susan Ridgely. London: Bloomsbury, pp. 355–62.
- Timmermans, Stefan, and Iddo Tavory. 2012. Theory construction in qualitative research: From grounded theory to abductive analysis. *Sociological Theory* 30: 167–86. [CrossRef]
- van Schoonhoven, Renée. 2021. Respect voor de godsdienst en levensovertuiging van ouders [Respect for the religion and belief of parents]. In *Vrijheid Voor Onderwijs: Een Pleidooi voor Meer Ruimte voor Kind, Ouders, Leraar en School [A Plea for More Space for Children, Parents, Teachers and Schools]*. Edited by Chris Hermans. Eindhoven: Damon Uitgeverij, pp. 136–50.
- Wyness, Michael. 2013. Children’s participation and intergenerational dialogue: Bringing adults back into the analysis. *Childhood* 20: 429–42. [CrossRef]