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‘Dutch Islam’: Young People, Learning and Integration

Introduction

Despite the long-standing existence of separate forms of state-assisted education for Protestants and Catholics in the Netherlands, the development of a separate form of Muslim education worries mainstream Dutch society and local authorities. A debate is currently underway in the Netherlands on the question of how to react to Muslim requests for state-assisted separate education. Why should Muslims want their own forms of education, such as Islamic schools and homework assistance programmes located in the mosque, for their own children? Would this not be a move towards segregation and isolation from the rest of society, as critics argue? Or is it, as those who support the initiative say, a strategy to integrate the Muslim community into Dutch society through the development of a positive self-image among Muslim children and the creation of the conditions for emancipation?

First of all, we have to know what we actually mean by the terms ‘integration’ and ‘segregation’. But it is not easy to explain these notions, especially as the literature is inconclusive (Vermeulen and Penninx, 1994; Entzinger, 1996; Geujen, 1998). Perhaps we can better ask whether these two concepts really are at odds with each other? Is it not more a question of what Struijs (1998) called ‘the balance between (social) cohesion and (cultural) diversity’? If so, then who decides whether the balance has been struck? A much clearer statement is to say that the challenge is all about the search for a type of social cohesion that leaves room for greater cultural diversity. However, to meet this challenge the existing balance of power between Muslims and non-Muslims will have to change. In this article, I intend to show that Islamic schools and homework assistance programmes at the mosque are not meant to promote segregation or isolation, but rather are focused on the integration of this

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community into Dutch society. The question arises: why are those who promote these forms of assistance accused of being against integration, while they, the ones involved, see themselves as working towards integration through their own institutions and are even supported in this by the Dutch constitution? In other words: why have homework assistance in a mosque and Islamic education been turned into a social problem? To examine this question, I subscribe to the approach of Gerritsen and de Vries (1994). These sociologists propose that social problems can be seen as symbolic issues of struggle. Social problems are usually symbolic problems: ‘circumstances that, in a figurative sense, clash with important values and norms in a society’ (Gerritsen and de Vries, 1994: 13). From the perspective of a symbolic struggle, these forms of self-help constitute a transgression of social norms. So I have to focus on the question of which social norms Muslims transgress when establishing their own forms of assistance and education.

To make clear how these separate Muslim education forms perform, in the following sections I first present an account, based on anthropological research, of a homework assistance programme in a Moroccan mosque in Gouda, a small city in the western part of the Netherlands. Thereafter I describe the background to Islam in the Netherlands and focus on young people and education. This is followed by a discussion of the position of Moroccans as an ethnic group in the Netherlands and the problems that Moroccan parents face with respect to their children. Finally I examine the opposition that this form of Islamic guidance for young people is facing in the Netherlands and explore the question of how these forms of self-help can be seen as symbolic issues of struggle through which Muslims are trying to wrest recognition and confirmation in Dutch society.

The Moroccan Mosque in Gouda and Islamic Schools

Around 3 p.m., the area in and around the Moroccan Mosque Nour in Gouda is teeming with young people, both boys and girls. Girls with and without headscarves enter and leave the mosque. Boys are fewer in number, but noticeably present. These young people have come to the mosque for help with their homework. Such a phenomenon is apparently quite rare in many Muslim communities. Usually young people visit the mosque less often than adults, and women in Morocco do not visit the mosque at all (Mernissi, 1975; Bartels, 1997).

It is a well-known problem that, among Muslim immigrants, girls are often taken out of school when they reach puberty. However, at this mosque teenage girls are welcomed, supported and assisted with their homework and general school career, helped in conflicts with their parents and encouraged to spend their free time together at, for instance, parties, dances and on
excursions. Girls also learn how to cope with questions about wearing the headscarf or the ban on wearing them, for instance at school, as well as with issues of sexuality and virginity, and with the apparent differences in gender-based relationships in the home and at school.

Boys have other problems and often they leave school early, without earning a diploma, and as a result have few opportunities on the job market. At the mosque the boys are helped with their homework, encouraged to participate in sporting activities and reminded of their responsibility to do their homework, to their family and on how they spend their free time.

This assistance is offered not only to Moroccan young people, but several Turkish, Iraqi and Moluccan children have also found the mosque to be a welcoming place. The main criterion for a young person’s participation is not nationality or the father’s link with the mosque, but whether they benefit from it. Young people with problems are given priority. As stated by the chairman of the mosque: ‘A mosque has a social responsibility to bear. We start with the child.’

The assistance is provided by Dutch and Moroccan professionals and volunteers. The professionals work for a foundation for youth assistance, however, the collaboration with external partners was initiated by the mosque’s council, which requested assistance for its young people. The children that take part in the homework assistance programme rarely have to repeat a school year and there are some years in which all final year students pass their examinations. After passing their examinations, instead of hoisting their school bags up the flagpole, as is the tradition in the Netherlands, they hang them on the minaret at the mosque (see Figure 1).

The success of this homework assistance programme and school career support, which over the last eight years has grown from a few secondary school children to approximately 130 participants, aged 11–20 and including boys and girls from the final year of primary school, is now being noticed by schools in Gouda. Young people with behavioural problems are now often given a second chance by their school on the condition that they enter the homework assistance programme. The attendance of Moroccan parents at parents’ evenings is comparable to the attendance of Dutch parents.

Despite this success, the homework assistance programme is controversial. It is not the nature of the activities, but the programme’s Islamic character and the connection with the mosque which make many Dutch people wary. This mosque is committed to providing support to young people and offering them an Islamic environment where they can feel at ease and which is also acceptable to their parents. In the past, the local authority kept its distance, but according to the city council, homework assistance belongs at home or at school. However, many schools offer no opportunities for doing homework and, if they do, they provide no assistance with it.

The same kind of discussion is being carried out concerning applications
for the certification of Islamic primary and secondary schools. In the Netherlands there are 28 Islamic primary schools with 7000 pupils. Recently, there have been requests for establishing more Islamic schools and, after considerable negotiations, permission has been granted to start a secondary school in Rotterdam next year. In Rotterdam an Islamic university has already been established (Driessen, 1999).

Here, I can raise the question: is it an accident that Moroccans in Gouda and Muslims in the Netherlands are choosing through this variation of Islam, focused as it is on young people and education, to earn a place for themselves in Dutch society? In Belgium, for instance, there exists only one Islamic school (Hermans, 1999). Can we speak of a matter of ‘choice’ here? And can we place this choice within the development of a ‘Dutch Islam’?
‘Dutch Islam’?

Javanese, Moluccan and Surinamese Muslims were the first groups to bring Islam to the Netherlands after the Second World War. Later, foreign labourers from Spain, Portugal, Italy, Morocco and Turkey came in the 1960s. At that time Islam was a temporary and marginal phenomenon in Dutch society but, with the arrival of Moroccan and Turkish families (since the end of the 1970s), and with the coming of additional Muslims from Surinam, Islam became visible in the Netherlands and took on more of a permanent presence. In total, it is estimated that there are now over 600,000 Muslims in the Netherlands (Strijp, 1997), over 4 percent of the population.

The ethnic diversity among Muslims in the Netherlands makes it difficult to speak of Islam as a single community. The use of the language of the country of origin for Friday prayer services and for religious education only works to maintain the ethnic divide. Added to this is the fact that there are different branches within Islam itself, such as Sunnis and Shiites, with a range of smaller ideological divisions. There are also different ecclesiastical schools, mystical societies and religious-political movements.

So many differences make the development of a particular form of ‘Dutch Islam’ anything but simple. There is not so much a single Islamic experience in the Netherlands, but rather a range of Islamic variations that have come about in response to the situation in the country of settlement. Islam is by definition just like every other religion, a mosaic of religious experiences and practices. Landman (1992) speaks about ‘Dutch Islam’ and uses the metaphor of a delta with many flows; a patchwork of different organizations, views, interpretations and practices that are themselves subdivided in accordance with different languages and immigrant backgrounds. They are actually combinations of Islamic elements that change and differ according to time and place. The Islam developing in Amsterdam is different from the one found in London or Paris, but also different from Rotterdam or Gouda. This process, of course, is nothing new. Islam is spread through many countries and this has led to the development of local forms of the world religion (Jansen, 1993).

If we speak of a ‘Dutch Islam’, it implies a continuing process in which Muslims reorganize and reinterpret their religious heritage in light of the new social context in which they find themselves as immigrants. Redefining themselves goes hand in hand with the selection and adaptation that ensue from and are connected with the new context. This Islam is, if you will, the result of a number of choices that people make when they call themselves Muslim and, from this standpoint, choose their position in the Netherlands. The Mosque Nour in Gouda chooses, in this process of redefinition, to be a mosque that is a house of prayer with social responsibility. There is another mosque in Gouda that, in the past, has expressly limited itself to being a house of prayer. There, no social activities have been organized, but there is now discussion about setting them up.5
There is clearly a matter of choice here. Traditionally, a mosque is a place for prostration, a location where Muslims kneel for prayer. However, in Islamic tradition, its social function is also established. In Medina, the Prophet used the courtyard next to his house as a place for people to gather for worship, but also for political and social activities. The education of children in the Qur’an, the Qur’anic school, is also an activity that takes place in most mosques. And the foundation of schools and universities is not strange or new in Islam. Study, that is reading, is an activity that is highly appreciated within Islam. A good person is considered to have good sense with much aqel, which means wisdom, understanding and control. The rearing of children is also focused on instilling considerable aqel in them. The road to aqel runs via qraya, or study/learning.⁶

So neither the taking of social responsibility nor making a central issue of children/young people and study/education is a new phenomenon. In fact, these are established central themes of Islam. Also the process of redefinition is, as already mentioned, not new or exceptional. This development concerns, more than anything else, the question of why many Moroccan immigrants wish to profile and organize themselves on the basis of Islam and why, for their Islam, they have chosen these themes (young people/children and education) and via this path are trying to make a place for themselves in Dutch society. To find the answer to this question, I would first like to consider what the position of Moroccans is in the Netherlands.

Moroccans in the Netherlands

Moroccans in the Netherlands can be characterized as an ethnic group of immigrants. Minority ethnic groups are groups whose members see themselves as being different from people in the majority society and are seen by the majority society as different on the basis of their cultural characteristics which are considered to be socially relevant.

Ethnic identity in this view is not a psychological concept that points to the characteristics of a personality or a manifestation of the selfhood of a person. Here it is a matter of social or group identity, a cultural construction through which a group of people indicate how they see themselves. In this identity construction, they cope with how others see them. It involves interaction between the two: how people see themselves and how other people see them. It concerns identification and projected identity. Because of this interaction, identity is a dynamic concept; it is continually being redefined and created in relation to others.

At the same time, within the continually changing identity that is projected on to them, people try to find an identity for themselves or achieve a feeling of continuity in their lives. Roosens (1994) calls this search for
continuity in connection with ethnic identity the search for origin, common ancestors or the same cultural tradition. For immigrants as an ethnic group, the feeling for or the awareness of and continuity with the past is problematic; identification with the past, with one’s origins, often means setting up boundaries. The queries raised in this article address how people, in the construction of their history, develop and use symbols in the process of group formation and the promotion of the group’s interests, which are embedded in the continually shifting balance of power between the minority immigrant groups and the ethnic majority.

Kemper (1996) makes it clear that Moroccan working-class immigrants of the first generation (first-arrival immigrants) profile themselves as Moroccan with the help of their religious identity. The essential question this raises is: why do they choose to orient themselves according to their religious beliefs and not, for instance, their language or nationality? This question must be placed within the social relationships in which they, as an ethnic group, take form and survive.

In Morocco, a range of languages is spoken. The largest group of Moroccan immigrants in the Netherlands are from the Rif area of northern Morocco and their mother tongue is Tamazight. Moroccan Arabic is known and even spoken by many, but the written language which Moroccans use is classical Arabic. For Moroccans in the Netherlands, the linguistic background is therefore very divided and complex. The same is true for the political situation: in Morocco there are sharp political contrasts that continue to affect the relationship between people in the Netherlands.

Religion, on the other hand, is in general a superior ‘ethnic marker’ (Kemper, 1996) and Islam especially so. Islam, the last revealed religion, gives, like most other religions, the opportunity to know the difference between Good and Evil. People who are or become Muslim, people who recognize Good, are part of the ummah, the community of Muslim believers. The familiar metaphor – Muslims everywhere in the world are a part of the ummah – provides a history and a place in the present amid the world’s other major religions, transcending local differences in politics, differences of an ethnic and social nature (among Moroccans in the Netherlands, for example, between Berbers and Arabs, between city dwellers and country people) and finally giving the group supranational legitimacy.

Islam thus serves Moroccans very well as an orientation point in the process of group formation. But how does this work in the surrounding community? In the 1960s immigrants were still seen as being temporary inhabitants and were treated positively. With the reunification of families, the economic crisis of the 1970s and the resulting unemployment among the first generation of immigrants, migrant people realized that their return to the mother country was not going to happen.

Immigrants, especially Moroccans, have acquired a negative image among
the ethnic majority Dutch. They have become associated with problems including integration, unemployment, poor performance at school, crime, the drugs trade, welfare fraud and the oppression of women. In addition to this, there are a range of political developments, such as the wars in the Middle East, the Iranian Revolution, the Rushdie affair and the religious-political changes in Algeria, through which Islam has come to be recognized as a political factor.

When cultural characteristics function as lines of demarcation between groups, then these characteristics themselves are put under pressure. At the same time, these lines of demarcation imply that there are large groups of people with whom the majority ethnic group in society share little and with whom people maintain only limited interaction. Ethnic barriers, therefore, do not make interaction with foreigners impossible, but they do limit the interaction. This lack of interaction is the origin of the tendency to see the other group in terms of cultural differences. In such a process minorities are often no longer considered as individuals, but instead identified as members of a group and carriers of characteristics that belong to that group. These minorities are therefore seen as being homogeneous (i.e. all the same).

How homogeneous do immigrants and Muslims appear to the white ethnic majority and what significance does this give to Islam? Sunier (1997) speaks about the Islamization of immigrants. By this he means the reduction of the cultural background of a certain category of immigrants to a representation of Islam itself. In the process of Islamization, the discourse on migration and migrants is focused on the perceived exceptional character of Islam as the most important identifier for the situational identity of Muslim immigrants. Characteristics that highlight differences and the visible expression of the presence of Muslims are seen as being in conflict with integration into Dutch society. This is the reason that local governments withhold certain categories of provisions.

In the Islamization of this discourse on migration and migrants, we come up against a paradox: manifestations of Islam are seen by the Dutch as an expression of segregation and isolation, and of ethnic awareness, while Muslims see it as trying, as a group, to become a part of Dutch society. Moroccans do not see a contradiction between adhering to Islamic rules of life and participating in Dutch society, between religious involvement and integration (Kemper, 1996).

As long as the ethnic majority Dutch experience problems with expressions of Islamic belief, the problems of integration into Dutch society will be blamed on Muslims. It becomes clear that these immigrants are, in fact, not yet accepted and not considered as members of the perceived Dutch society (Anderson, 1992; Sunier, 1996, 1997). Their presence continues to be seen as a problem. Islam in the Netherlands is, therefore, not only a powerful ethnic marker in the process of group formation, but is also a symbolic point in the struggle for the right to exist.
Islam can be seen as an affirmative identity (Kepel, 1997), an identity construction that operates as a system of differentiations in direct competition with other possible constructions. A requirement for affirmative identity is that the minority group defines itself positively with respect to a point that is also seen by the majority society as positive and worth striving for. For Muslims this is difficult because, for the majority society, Islam continues to signify negative attitudes and behaviour.

Moroccan Parents and their Children

In the Netherlands, immigrants in general, and Moroccans in particular, are associated with social problems. It is young Moroccan men and women who appear to be the source of these problems and Moroccan parents often complain about difficulties in rearing their children. The differences between the Moroccan society that the parents grew up in and Dutch society is enormous, especially in the area of parent–child relationships and sexual relationships. Due to their participation in both the Moroccan environment and in Dutch society, Moroccan children grow up in social contexts that sometimes sharply differ from one another and, in a number of respects, are hostile to one another (Pels, 1991). For this reason it is often difficult for Moroccan parents to control the behaviour of their children. The position of parents as childrearers is made even more difficult because Moroccan young people often feel more at home in Dutch society than their parents and because the parents themselves are dependent on their children for a range of services (Brouwer, 1997; de Koning, 1997).

A relatively high number of Moroccan young people do not finish school and enter the job market without a diploma. If they do finish a continuing course, it is often with a technical qualification, making their starting position in the Dutch job market comparatively low skilled. There is a high degree of truancy from school and many Moroccan young men (and even boys) are well known to the police.

Moroccan girls clearly perform better at school than their brothers, but their position in the Dutch educational system is not comparable to that of Surinamese or Dutch girls (Dekkers, 1996). Girls perhaps cause few social problems, but they can put their parents under considerable pressure when they start to demand freedom to socialize more than their parents are willing to allow (Brouwer, 1997).

The rapid changes that immigrants have experienced and the continual adaptations that immigrant parents have to make in the Dutch situation often lead to a feeling of powerlessness in their dealings with their children. Immigra- nation has not fulfilled their hopes and expectations and many parents have the feeling that they have not only lost their past, but also their children.
Studies of problems with young people show that parents often react by placing extra restrictions on their children (Brouwer, 1997) and/or by sending them back to the family’s country of origin for secondary schooling.

Moroccan parents also often display a type of weariness or resignation, particularly with respect to their sons, who are in danger of losing their way socially (de Koning, 1997). They do not ask for help from Dutch youth assistance centres, even if they know who and where to ask, and do not want anything to do with these facilities out of fear of losing their children when they seek assistance (de Koning, 1997). For this reason, Moroccan young people seldom find their way into assistance organizations on a voluntary basis, but instead are overrepresented in court-associated correctional or mandatory youth assistance programmes.

The policy answer of the Dutch government has focused on education (education priority policy) and mandatory assistance. Recently, the Ministry of Justice entered the discussion and, as a result, policies have become focused on crime prevention. As a tool in this intervention, child-rearing support has taken a central position; however, the debate on this new approach is still under way (Comenius, 1998). The central question is whether the Ministry of Justice should play such a central role and whether child-rearing support can have positive results when it is structured according to a top–down model and is made mandatory. How Moroccan parents themselves view these problems has not really been made a point of discussion.

Because integration policy (ethnic minority policy) is so heavily focused on the job market, the first generation of immigrants has, in fact, been written off and has become invisible in policy-making (Kemper, 1996). But even if this generation has little chance in the job market, they are still the parents of immigrant young people. Evaluations of youth policy clearly show that the living situation of young people should be the starting point for support and assistance. How parents are involved with their children and, more importantly, how parents formulate their own definition of problems with their children is hardly ever discussed. If Islam fulfils an essential function in the orientation of Moroccans of the first generation then it is not surprising that Moroccan parents, in any case the first generation, also seek answers to the problems of raising their children within Islam.

What can Islam offer these parents? Does Islam give them answers to questions they face in Dutch society about the changed relationship between parents and children? For the development of Islam in the Netherlands, it is essential that the next generation is also ‘made’ Muslim. Parents also bear a religious obligation to give their children a religious upbringing. This raises the question of whether not only the parents, but also the survival of their Islamic beliefs are in crisis. Perhaps the biggest issue for Muslim immigrants in the Netherlands is not in the area of sexual relationships, which seems to be the case in many Muslim countries (Jansen, 1993), but actually in the
relationship between parent and child. And are not many parents looking for an answer to this problem within Islam? These propositions bring us to the connection between Islam on the one hand as the provider of an affirmative identity, a positive context for orientation and a reference point for the definition of the character of the group by themselves, in the struggle for recognition in Dutch society, and on the other hand Islam as the guideline for answers to questions concerning parent–child problems. Homework assistance, youth work and schooling are highly valued in Dutch society and offer a positive point of orientation. By choosing a form of Islam in which these aspects are given a central position, the group creates an avenue for expression and at the same time Muslim parents are given a familiar tool with which to confront the problems they have with their children.

In Conclusion: Symbolic Struggle

In the preceding section we have seen that Islam can provide Moroccans with answers to questions concerning their group identity in connection with the problems that arise with their children. But why are those who promote these forms of assistance accused of being against integration, while they see themselves as working towards integration and are even supported in this by the Dutch constitution? In other words: why have homework assistance in the mosque and Islamic education been transformed into a social problem? In the introduction, I proposed to examine this question from the perspective of a symbolic struggle. Homework assistance in the mosque and Islamic education constitute a symbolic transgression of a social norm.

What is the substance of the accusation that supporters of immigrant organizations do not wish to integrate? Which social norms do they transgress? It is clear that this is really about a violation of the increasing secularization in society and of the social norm that religion in public activities and facilities should be kept in the background. But also the current integration policy (ethnic minority policy) of the Dutch government, which aims to provide general facilities and discourages categorical facilities, is threatened by the arrival of immigrant-run schools and homework assistance programmes. Despite the priority of education in policy-making and social reforms in education, the government has not been successful in combating the problems surrounding Moroccan young people. This has caused division within the professional ranks of youth assistance programmes. There even seems to be a certain ‘appropriation’ (Gerritsen and de Vries, 1994) of the child-rearing support given to Moroccan families by judicial assistance (Comenius, 1998), such that problems with Moroccan young people have begun to play a role in the competition for status between Dutch youth assistance organizations.
By taking the struggle with these problems into their own hands, Muslim parents are changed from being passive, dependent, powerless parents into active, self-motivated parents (Crul, 1998) and they thus occupy an equal negotiating position. By doing so, they are not only awarding a certificate of impotence to Dutch policy, to the Dutch school system and to Dutch youth assistance organizations, but they are also liberating themselves from the current definition of problems with respect to their children. It was, after all, the policy-makers and implementers that defined what the problems of immigrant young people were, how they should be solved and how parents (if necessary by forcing them) should become more supportive. Homework assistance and immigrant-run schools also, therefore, play a role in the competition for status between Muslim immigrants and the established order. Muslim immigrants have shown that they wish to tackle the problems themselves, not because they are forced to, but from religious inspiration; this gives them a feeling of self-worth (Crul, 1998). Acceptance by the Dutch government of Muslims’ own forms of assistance and education could, therefore, be the next step in the integration of Muslims into Dutch society. As migrants, they were included as people. With the arrival of women and children they were included as families. Via the acceptance of private religious and interest group organizations, the next step is the inclusion of Muslims as part of the institutional infrastructure. The acceptance of Muslim forms of assistance and education symbolically establishes their social status, gives them more power over their own lives and recognizes their right to exist as Muslims in Dutch society. For Muslims, that is integration.

Notes

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1 The population of Gouda is 70,000 people. About 7000 are Moroccans. That is a higher percentage than the total immigrant population in the Netherlands, which is about 6 percent.

2 The anthropological research into the mosque’s homework assistance programme was carried out by myself and by my students, under my supervision, among girls and boys who participate in the programme and among their parents (Bleichrodt, 1996; de Koning, 1997; Teunissen, 1997).

3 Recently, anthropological research was also started in Islamic primary schools, carried out by students of the Free University under my supervision.

4 For Muslims the expression ‘Dutch Islam’ is a contradiction. On one hand they oppose it because, for them, there exists only one Islam, the Islam of the Revelation, the Islam for everywhere and always. On the other hand, the discussion in the Netherlands concerns the development of a ‘Dutch Islam’.
5 Since the beginning of 1998 a third mosque has been established in Gouda. This mosque is still in the process of becoming established. It has not oriented itself with respect to Gouda or to the other mosques.

6 _Aqel_ and _qraya_ are Moroccan-Arabic words. In classical Arabic those words are known as ‘_aql_ and _qara’a_.

7 The alternative name for the Qur’an is _al-Furqân_. _Farq_ means ‘difference’ (between Good and Evil).

8 Not all Muslims in the Netherlands, approximately 600,000 people, would like their children to attend Islamic schools or homework assistance programmes at the mosque. Some Muslims are expressly against this. Recent surveys indicate that the desire of Muslims for more Islamic schools is on the increase.

9 Questions and research into the possibilities of establishing an education programme for training imams in the Netherlands are prompted from the same theme: the search for answers to questions of Muslim immigrants within the context of Dutch society (Strijp, 1997).

10 Recent research on Islamic schools shows that their results will be no better than other schools with a student population of predominantly ethnic minorities (Driessen, 1999). It should not be forgotten here that Islamic schools have had many start-up problems. They have had problems in finding well-qualified personnel. There were also many parents that expected more from Islamic schools than from regular Dutch schools. Especially at the beginning, relatively few children with problems went to Islamic schools.

11 Here there is no question of a development towards an Islamic substructure in society since not all Muslims will be involved in these developments or make use of Islamic education and facilities.

**References**


