



THE SCHOOL EDUCATION OF MUSLIM CHILDREN IN EUROPE: A REVIEW OF COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES

Vasco Fronzoni (PhD)*¹

*Professor (Muslim Law), University of Naples "L'Orientale", Italy

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Abstract: *Over time, the world has become a global village. People of different colors, races, religions and other identities have started living in one place in one society. Where this lifestyle has brought some advantages and conveniences to the mankind, it has also caused a lot of problems in various dimensions. Out of these challenges, religious harmonization along with other cultural issues is main concern for European immigrant Muslim children. This challenge becomes more serious for Islamic school children when they enter into secular education system which is totally different from their Islamic schools in terms of environment and spend more of their time into it. The objective of the study is to review the experiences of different societies in Europe on topic and to highlight the importance of problem to be dealt in handfull way. The study submits that Muslim immigrant children faces series of problems like gender separation in coeducational environment for girls, cultural issues, language berries, and dressing codes for girls. The study concludes that children whether they be Muslim or belong to other religious or cultural communities, are fully entitled to grow up in a healthy way, harmoniously developing their personal skills, in the context of the frame of reference envisioned for them by their parents or by those with parental responsibility, who have the onerous task of ensuring their smooth transition towards adulthood.*



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¹ Email: m.ashfaq.hrp@gmail.com



1. Introduction

In contrasting Islamic religious-judicial institutions with those of Western society, knowledge of each, together with a harmonization of traditions, religious precepts and cultural traits are today the aim of integration. In the present multicultural European society, numerous benchmark institutions and legal arguments need to be understood, if an effective integrated effort is to be achieved, particularly when the issues at stake have to do with religious feeling.

Religious affiliation with the Muslim community establishes an obligation for all believers to behave in a certain way, adopting and observing particular codes of conduct and acts of worship in an unconditional and ineluctable manner, independently of whether the believers live in Islamic States, in secular Nations or where a different religion is predominant.

Any conflicts may be managed through mutual understanding. The desire to know and understand each other would be best addressed first through Islamic youth, who are inevitably more exposed to the consequences of possible critical issues. In fact, Islamic schoolchildren, especially those coming from immigrant environments, face a series of problems from their first entry into the education system where they inevitably spend most of their days. Objective of the study is to review the experiences of different societies in Europe on topic and highlights the importance of problem to be dealt in handful way. Yet the topic is explored at limited level.

2. Pluralism for integrated schools

When Muslim children go to “diaspora” schools for the first time they often seem disoriented, in that they come across the first main differences from their background, starting with the teacher-student relationship. In the new educational system, in fact, the absence of severity and the continuing dialogue with teachers are often misinterpreted as weaknesses and lack of authority, and it all seems far too permissive. Consequently, in such an apparently liberal context, the new pupil believes that anything goes. Whereas instructional upbringing in the home environment is based on firmness with little paternal flexibility, in a manner consistent with Islamic pedagogic methods, the permissiveness that pervades the school environment generates a significant contrast that may

disconcert even the strongest and most resolute characters.¹

A further issue is gender interaction.² In the Muslim world, girls and boys are separated from the age of seven and any form of contact ceases at home, since any possible communication is effectively suppressed. This separation also continues in the school environment where pupils have teachers of their own sex. In Italy, as in the rest of Europe, where teachers can be a mix of male and female, it may be that male Muslim pupils have to follow the instructions of female teachers, and subjecting to a woman undermines the concept of male virility that exists across the Muslim world. Children have not been educated to distinguish sexual identity and roles and have difficulties in adapting.³ Moreover, in Western schools where classes are mixed, children no longer encounter separation between girls and boys, as they are accustomed to in their countries of origin. It happens much more often than one might think that children have difficulty in interacting in such a casual environment, when they actually may refuse, more or less freely, to attend school.

A Muslim boy finding himself in a new context is torn between trying to integrate into the host society and the desire/need to retain the cultural values and benchmarks of his origins. He is thus put under considerable stress.⁴ The delicate task of teachers is to help young Muslims to deal with this conflict, but they do not always manage to do so.

Emblematic in this sense is the case in 2013 in Denmark where an external examiner in the town of Horsens in Jutland had previously announced that, because of his observance of the Islamic faith, he would not shake hands with the female students under examination. One of these female students, probably not happy with the teacher's attitude, had reported the school for discrimination. Controversy arising from this action involved even high-level authorities such as the Minister of Education, who pointed out that it was the specific responsibility of the school administration to create a tranquil environment where the students could

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1. Antonio Cuciniello, "Aspetti pedagogici dell'islam" in *Islam a scuola: esperienze e risorse*, ed. Costanza Bargellini & Elisabetta Ciccirelli (Milan: ISMU Foundation, 2007), 47.
 2. Rosalba Lo Cicero, "L'autobiografia interculturale" in *La scuola delle culture. Riflessioni pedagogiche situate*, ed. Fabrizio Manuel Sirignano & Pascal Perillo, (Lecce: Pensa Multimedia Editore, 2019), 304.
 3. Cuciniello. *Aspetti pedagogici dell'islam*, 47.
 4. Maria Rita Vittori. *Famiglia e intercultura*. (Bologna: Emi, 2003), 64.

take their examinations.⁵ Lending support to this episode is a similar case in 2016 in Switzerland, regarding two Syrian brothers. They had refused to shake hands with their female teacher, contravening a customary practice at the school in *Therwil* (Basel-Country) but which, for them, contravened the Islamic rule of non-interaction between the sexes.⁶ The school administration exempted the two brothers from the handshake – a decision that triggered a wave of indignation and reactions even from the authorities themselves, including the Swiss Minister of Justice, who stated that the situation was not acceptable in the name of freedom of belief.⁷ Because of the tension caused by the episode, with the submission of parliament interpellation no. 098/2016,⁸ the Basel-Country Department of Education, Culture and Sport issued a circular that sanctioned shaking hands with teachers as obligatory and a token not only safeguarding religious freedom, but also an important action for the future integration of students in their professional lives. The document justified this decision by stating that public interest in equality between men and women and in integration of foreigners should prevail over the religious freedom of individual students. The school authorities further maintained that unwillingness to shake hands with a teacher of the opposite sex posed a new problem, aside from those of wearing the veil and of swimming lessons, about which the courts of the Confederation had already commented. The circular was therefore necessary since the refusal by a student to shake hands on religious grounds involved the teacher and classmates in a religious act against their wishes and violated their religious freedom. For these reasons, it needed to be sanctioned with a fine.⁹

3. Intercultural approaches

As far back as 2012, the Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research sanctioned the need to establish suitable intercultural approaches to teaching:

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5. Accessed November, 13, 2019, <http://cphpost.dk/news/national/handshake-refusal-continues-to-stoke-debate.html/>
 6. Accessed November, 13, 2019, <https://lenews.ch/2016/04/05/muslim-school-pupils-exemption-from-handshaking-causes-a-stir-in-switzerland/>
 7. Accessed November, 21, 2019, https://www.ilmattino.it/primopiano/esteri/svizzera_scuola_esonera_alunni_musulmani_da_stretta_di_mano_con_insegnante-1650276.html/
 8. Accessed December, 05, 2020, www.baseland.ch/
 9. Canton Basle-Country, Department for Education, Culture and Sport circular of 25 May 2016 with rules for handshaking in schools, in *Diritto e Religioni*, 1/2016, 698.

*“(…) until the recent past, schools had a duty to train national citizens in a uniform culture. Today, however, schools play a wider role in training about living together, precisely through appreciation of the diverse identities and cultural roots of each student (…) schools must plan and establish specific teaching programmes to respond to the educational needs of their students. Particular attention should be given to pupils with non-Italian citizenship (…) among these are pupils who have just arrived in Italy and those who were born here. These pupils need different measures not only covering the teaching of Italian, but also the overall teaching plan of the school and the staff of every discipline”.*¹⁰

Therefore, the choice is for integrated education. A core feature of school integration for pupils of non-Italian citizenship is their allocation among schools and in classes. In order to avoid a concentration of non-Italian pupils in particular schools and instead encourage well-balanced allocation, MIUR has established certain organizational criteria. According to these provisions, the number of pupils of non-Italian citizenship with a limited knowledge of Italian should not normally exceed 30% of all students in each class and in each school.¹¹

4. Language skills

Newly arrived students with limited language skills are generally put in classes on their own or they take preparatory lessons in order to acquire the appropriate skills to attend normal lessons. Nevertheless, such a separation may hinder the rate of the integration process so that 21 countries, including Italy, limit its length, generally up to a maximum of one or two years. Moreover, a somewhat dated statutory provision establishes that when allocating classes, pupils of the same language group should be together, where possible. However, they should not be more than five per class.

In this regard, it seems sensible to allocate a few foreign pupils per class, in order to help their language integration gradually, while it may be

10. MIUR. Ministry of Education, University and Research, *Annali della Pubblica Istruzione. Indicazioni nazionali per il curricolo della scuola dell'infanzia e del primo ciclo d'istruzione*. (Florence: Le Monnier, 2012), 10-34.

11. MIUR circular no. 2 of 8 January 2010 with guidance and recommendations for the integration of pupils of non-Italian citizenship.

useful to form groups of more than five in moments of specific language activity. It is at school that children of immigrants learn to interact with those “others” whose mother tongue, surname and, in some cases, appearance itself are different.¹² It is in the classroom that foreign children bond with the linguistic and cultural codes of the society in which their parents have chosen to live. It is here too that they acquire the practical and cognitive tools with which, once they have grown up, they may attain social integration. For these reasons, in studying the phenomenon of migration, the scientific community immediately focused on schools.¹³

5. Food and Religion

The school cafeteria is yet another imperative for Muslim students. In order to promote social integration and coexistence, a multicultural school must take the eating habits and needs of its students into account. This refers both to health factors such as allergies and intolerance, and to religious values.¹⁴ Nevertheless, balancing a *halal* menu in a school cafeteria does not only mean eliminating pork, as is often mistakenly believed. It means following a broader more complex procedure. On the topic of meat, all food consumed by believers must have reached the end product through observance of clearly defined product specifications that trace the origin of the product, method of slaughter, processing, preparation and distribution of food for and in school cafeterias.

Yet even by observing *halal* product specifications, schools would still not be integrated and mindful of their Muslim students’ right to religious freedom. Care is also needed when serving food, in order to respect the religious requirements of the children properly. In fact, during the month of fasting, believers must abstain from food, drink (and sexual intercourse) from dawn to dusk.¹⁵ Such commitment is no small matter and the school administration – apart from not expecting too much from Muslim pupils in this specific period of the year (Month of *Ramadhān*) when they are subject to a special regime and to stress – should also attempt

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12. Presidential decree (D.p.r.) no. 722 of 10 September 1982, Implementation of directive (EEC) no. 77/486 relative to the education in schools of children of immigrant workers.
 13. Marco Orioles, *E dei figli, che ne facciamo? L'integrazione delle seconde generazioni di immigrati*. (Rome: Arcana, 2015), 139.
 14. Maria Chiara Giorda, Luca Bossi & Elena Messina, “Il progetto A tavola con le religioni. Alcuni dati” in *Reset Dossier*, 6/2014.
 15. Cornelis Christiaan Berg, s.v. “Sawm”. In *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, (Leiden: Brill, 1997), IX: 94.

to think of alternative ways of serving a meal. For example, the school cafeterias could prepare lunchboxes or packed lunches, as they already do for trips, so that the children could eat at *iftār* as they return home or once they get there.

6. Physical education and religion at school

Another aspect to be considered in schools is physical education, which in Western contexts is taught in mixed classes. In Islamic ethics, the sexes must not interact in public places and separation of the sexes is considered a factor of social rules and coherence, in order to maintain a chaste society, free from awkward situations, from close contacts and from any form of sin. Control of the collective morality is expressed through control of the female body and, in fact, in Islam little girls are brought up from childhood to regard the rules of separation as the foundation for all social action. Moreover, in a large number of religious school systems in Islamic countries, physical education for girls is not envisaged on the curriculum.¹⁶ It is therefore easy to imagine, in contexts with a non-Islamic majority, how prejudices and difficulties arise in attending a mixed class.¹⁷

The problem is exacerbated when it comes to attending the hour of physical education. The closeness and physical togetherness that often characterize physical activity at school are not seen as appropriate by those parents who have a more conservative view in the Islamic sense. They may even be firmly opposed if the gym outfit means uncovering the female body, as may happen with athletic shorts or, in an extreme case, with a swimming costume. In these scenarios, daughters are not allowed to participate in such school activities. In some cases, particularly when the school does not accept these objections and expects compliance with compulsory schooling and the right to education, Muslim girls are withdrawn from school.¹⁸ There are not many such cases in the European

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16. Paul de Knop, Marc Theeboom, Helena Wittock & Kristine De Martelaer. *Implications of Islam on Muslim Girls Sport Participation in Western Europe. "Literature Review and Policy Recommendations for Sport Promotion"* in *Sport, Education and Society*, 1996, 2: 153.
 17. Alessandro Ferrari. *Islam in Europa, Islam in Italia: tra diritto e società*, (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2008), 176. Accessed December 16, 2019. <https://www.dailymuslim.it/scuola-no-alle-classi-miste-mamma-musulmana-non-vuole-promiscuita-in-palestra/http://espresso.repubblica.it/inchieste/2015/04/08/news/islam-contro-la-promiscuita-io-educo-i-miei-figli-a-casa-1.207228/>
 18. Sandra Chistolini. *L'antirazzismo in Italia e Gran Bretagna. Uno studio di educazione comparata*, (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2000), 121.

context, although some situations are reported that may also involve the law.

In Germany, a first incident was an appeal presented by the parents of a little girl, asking for their daughter to be exempted from compulsory school swimming lessons. This was refused by the school authorities and the parents appealed against the decision in that the Islamic faith of the family, and thus also of the child, created a conflict of conscience in the young student, because of the physical contact with her classmates during swimming lessons in the pool. In 2012, the Bremen Administrative Court rejected the family's appeal, judging that a conflict of conscience was extremely unlikely in a child of eight, especially since it is only from the age of 12 and upwards that the German system accepts requests for exemption from physical education lessons.¹⁹ A second ruling, in line with the preceding one, was recorded the following year. Female Muslim pupils in compulsory education cannot be exempted from mandatory swimming lessons with their male companions by invoking the right to religious freedom. However, educational institutions cannot stop them from wearing a *burkini* when taking part in lessons in the pool, since one of the aims of schools is to integrate all the students, and thus promote participation in educational activities, quite apart from the clothing selected to take part in these activities.²⁰

In the United Kingdom, the education system reflects the same approach to multiculturalism seen at the central level. Although recognizing themselves as British citizens and respecting the system, people are encouraged to value their own identities, including their religious ones. Because of this integration promoting diversity, it is possible to choose to attend both single-sex and non-denominational classes at school level. In such contexts, physical education is promoted in that the difficulties caused by mixing the sexes are overcome, thus allowing Muslim girls, but especially families in some cases, to participate without problems in sport interaction without fear of undermining their cultural-religious identities.²¹

19. Court of Bremen (Oberverwaltungsgericht der Freien Hansestadt Bremen), sentence no. 1 B 99/12 of 13 June 2012, accessed December 15, 2019. <https://dejure.org/ext/016b487654b22eb9793998c37eb2da74/>

20. German Federal Administrative Court (Bundesverwaltungsgericht), sentence No. BVerwG 6 C 25.12 of 11 September 2013, accessed December 15, 2019. <https://www.bverwg.de/110913U6C25.12.0/>

21. Jane McGee & Ken Hardman, "Muslim schoolgirls' identity and participation in school-based physical education in England" in *Sport Logia*, 8/2012; Tansin Benn & Gertrud Pfister "Meeting needs of Muslim girls in school sport: case studies

In Northern Europe, communities of immigrants coming from Islamic countries are numerous, particularly the Pakistani community in Norway and Denmark. Various studies show how difficult it is for girls and young women to be able to do sports, both at school and in sports clubs outside school hours.²² Resistance is always due to family conditioning that requires a female role model, who is reserved and retiring compared with males, does not interact and does not get involved even in sports that are less energetic and would require less physical interaction, such as cricket, for example.²³

In Switzerland, in 2010, a particular case had arisen when two parents, of Turkish origin but naturalized Swiss, had decided not to allow their teenage daughters to attend the compulsory swimming lessons at the school in Basel where they were enrolled, given the incompatibility of the mixed swimming courses with the feelings of modesty they wanted to instil in their daughters before puberty, in a manner consistent with their interpretation of the Muslim religion. Because of their decision, the parents had been ordered by the school authorities to pay an administrative fine, against which they had brought proceedings, considering the fine to be a violation of Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights. The Court of Strasbourg with its decision of 10 January 2017, while admitting that the refusal on the part of the school authorities to exempt the girls from the mixed swimming lessons represented interference in the right of freedom of religion, established that the balance of interests should lean towards the right of foreign youth to be protected from any form of social exclusion. Consequently, the importance for students to receive a complete and inclusive education that would help them to integrate fully with the local customs and traditions should prevail over the parental wish to exempt children from mixed lessons, even if for reasons pertaining to the right to religious freedom.²⁴

exploring cultural and religious diversity” in *European Journal of Sport Science*, 5/2013.

22. Tansin Benn, Symeon Dagkas & Haifaa Jawad, “*Embodied faith: Islam, religious freedom and educational practices in physical education*” in *Sport, Education and Society*, 1/2011.
23. Kristin Walseth & Ase Strandbu, “*Young Norwegian-Pakistani women and sports: how does culture and religiosity matter?*” in *European Physical Education Review*, 4/2014, 494.
24. European Court on Human Rights. Application 29086/12 (Switzerland: Osmanoglu and Kocabas) v.

In Italy, the situation is similar to the European context where cases, although present, are limited. However, there are some cases where families with pupils of school age, sensitive to the disapproval of the ethnic and cultural environment of their origin or to the more traditionalist views of Islam, take their rejection of “promiscuousness” to the point whereby they withdraw their daughters from school.²⁵

This inflexible non-acceptance is faced with the two elements of safeguarding religious diversity and freedom on the one hand while respecting the obligation for compulsory schooling and training on the other, where teachers assume the parental responsibility for children and their related right to education. The attitude of parents is not always endorsed by the imams of their local mosque, from whom they often seek advice. The imams feel that it is pointless to oppose contact between the sexes in a school environment since this nonetheless happens in daily life. They acknowledge the situation and suggest an intermediate approach, which reconciles compulsory school attendance with the desire for modesty. They suggest wearing an extra-large tracksuit for the hour of physical education and, if possible, a veil as well.²⁶ This pragmatic approach, which selects permissibility of contact according to the degree of cover-up, may find an obstacle in regard to swimming lessons or other activities in the pool. In fact, the regulations on swimming activities, in general, for reasons of hygiene do not provide for the possibility of wearing a *burkīni*.

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25. [https://www.ilmessaggero.it/scuola/scuola musulmani rifiuto](https://www.ilmessaggero.it/scuola/scuola_musulmani_rifiuto) _classi_miste-4135136.html/ ;<http://espresso.repubblica.it/inchieste/2015/04/08/news/islam-control-la-promiscuita-io-educo-i-miei-figli-a-casa-1.207228/>; accessed 20, 2019.
<https://www.dailymuslim.it/scuola-no-alle-classi-miste-mamma-musulmana-non-vuole-promiscuita-in-palestra/> Accessed December 20, 2019.
26. Renzo Guolo, “Islam e scuola pubblica: orientamenti di genitori di religione islamica in Piemonte” in *Ricerche di Pedagogia e Didattica*, 4/2009, 11.

7. Conclusions

In conclusion, young people, whether they be Muslim or belong to other religious or cultural communities, are fully entitled to grow up in a healthy way, harmoniously developing their personal skills, in the context of the frame of reference envisioned for them by their parents or by those with parental responsibility, who have the onerous task of ensuring their smooth transition towards adulthood.

This principle is reinforced when the frame of reference is religiously oriented, according to the rules of divine inspiration intended to structure a prosperous, healthy and virtuous society. If, therefore, respect for the rules, however unwavering and invariable, does not undermine other State principles of order, such as public decency or even public safety or individual health (as sometimes happens with certain pseudo-religious sects), the sense of democracy of an ancient legal culture such as that of European Nation may accept a religious pluralism without falling into religious identity neutralization in the public arena or assimilationist secularism, which represents cultural illiteracy.²⁷

Young Muslims, therefore, have the right to be able to grow up as Italian or European citizens, or even just as residents, without having to relinquish their religious sensitivity. National legislation, community-level policies and dialogue among European courts comply with the specific religious requirements of a monolithic monotheism such as Islam, albeit with due regard for national boundaries of order. This is rich area of research that can be extended to harmonize the differences among nations.

27. For an overall view of the subject see, among others, Alberto Melloni (ed.). *Rapporto sull'analfabetismo religioso in Italia*. (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2014); Enzo Pace, *Le religioni nell'Italia che cambia*. Mappe e bussole. (Rome: Carocci, 2013); Paolo Naso, "Per una didattica del pluralismo religioso come patrimonio sociale" in European Federation for Freedom of Belief (ed.). *Diritto e libertà di credo in Europa, Un cammino difficile*, (Pisa: Pacini Editore, 2018).

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13. <https://www.baselland.ch/>
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16. https://www.ilmessaggero.it/scuola/scuola_musulmani_rifiuto_classi_miste-4135136.html/ ;<http://espresso.repubblica.it/inchieste/2015/04/08/news/islam-contro-la-promiscuita-io-educo-i-miei-figli-a-casa-1.207228/>
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