

Article

Assessing Islamic Religious Education Curriculum in Flemish Public Secondary Schools

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Abstract: Islamic tradition promotes a holistic approach of personality development in which, we argue, three educational concepts take the centre stage: *tarbiyah*, *ta'leem* and *ta'deeb*. Looking through the lens of these concepts, we analyse two Islamic religious education (IRE) curricula: the 2001 and 2012 curricula for Flemish public secondary education provided by the Representative Body for IRE. We conduct a systematic thematic document analysis of the 2001 and 2012 curricula to map curricula elements that potentially contribute to Islamic personality development through IRE classes. Crucially, this article seeks to investigate whether the 2001 and 2012 curricula for Flemish public secondary education are in line with these central IRE concepts. We observe that the 2012 curriculum does contain relevant anchor points to work on *tarbiyah*, *ta'leem* and *ta'deeb* and to strengthen an Islamic personality in Muslim pupils. Hence, we argue that there is an urgent need for a new, adequate and sufficiently comprehensive IRE curriculum for Flemish public secondary education, developed by an expert committee—which should include Belgian-educated educational experts—in order to meet the expectations of all the stakeholders. Since in our view, this is the first step for a qualitative update of Flemish IRE. Further reflections on both curricula and recommendations for a new IRE curriculum are outlined in the discussion and conclusion sections.

Keywords: *tarbiyah*; *ta'leem* and *ta'deeb*; Islamic identity; Islamic religious education; Muslim pupils; curriculum evaluation

1. Introduction

Religious education is in the midst of heated international political debates since 9/11 (*Comité I, Comité I 2001*). In West-European countries, terrorist attacks such as London 7/7, Madrid 3/11, Amsterdam 11/2, Paris 2015 and Brussels 2016 have intensified these debates. When, on 22 March 2016, three coordinated suicide bombings occurred in the Brussels region, the Belgian population struggled with the question: 'How can Belgian-educated young Muslims become terrorists, and commit such terrible acts in their own country, and home town Brussels?' (*Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers 2016, 2017, 2018*). Heated debates in the public space and at the political level were widely reported and followed in the (social) media. Yet, at the same time, a crowd of Belgian citizens—regardless of language, ethnicity, nationality or religion—gathered in the centre of Brussels to send a strong positive signal to the world. One consequence of the attacks was that the Islamic religious education (IRE) provided by Flemish public schools was questioned and—surprisingly enough—simultaneously brought in as a positive lever against violent radicalisation (*Radicalisation Commission 2015a, 2015b; Flemish Government 2015b, 2016, 2018; De Standaard 2017b; VRT NWS 2015*).

In the aftermath of the Paris terrorist attack on 7 January 2015, the federal Belgian government, i.e., National Taskforce, updated the Plan R (*National Taskforce 2015*). The Flemish government, in turn, set up the Radicalisation Commission on 14 January 2015 (*Radicalisation Commission 2015a*). Shortly afterwards the Flemish government launched an *Actieplan Radicalisering* (Action Plan Radicalisation,

Flemish Government with consecutive plans in 2015b, 2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2018). In the context of the *Actieplan*, the Ministry of Education and the *Executief van de Moslims van België* (EMB, Executive of Muslims of Belgium, representative body for Islamic rites and worship) were identified as stakeholders and partners (Flemish Parliament 2015a, 2015d, 2016b, 2016c, 2017a, 2017d, 2018b; Flemish Government 2015a, 2016, 2017a, 2018). In the Action Plans Radicalisation that followed, an important preventive role was assigned to compulsory (public) education in countering the radicalisation processes of young people (Flemish Parliament 2015d; Radicalisation Commission 2015a, 2015b; Flemish Government 2015b; Flemish Department of Education and Training 2016; *Gemeenschapsonderwijs* 2015; *Katholiek Onderwijs Vlaanderen* 2016; Flemish Education s.d.). In addition, the Ministry of Education promoted and facilitated the implementation of various projects, such as the mission statement for Interreligious Dialogue and Competences (28 January 2016, Ministry of Education and Training 2016b; Lafrarchi 2017a, 2017b), the funding of a Network of Islam Experts (1 October 2015), the setting up of a free Islam info line (installed on 30 March 2016; Radicalisation Commission 2015c; Flemish Parliament 2016e) and, last but not least, the implementation of a qualitative Flemish IRE teacher training programme (TTP) in regular organised Flemish teacher training (Ministry of Education and Training 2016a, 2016b; Education Commission 2015, 2016b).

The installation of the new IRE teacher training programme was also a response to the growing shortage of qualified Dutch-speaking, Belgian-educated IRE teachers (Flemish Parliament 2006, 2015c; Education and Equal Opportunities Commission 2009, 2011c; *De Tijd* 2017). The Flemish Parliament, the Flemish Government and the Flemish Education Commission have been placing high expectations on IRE teachers—such as imams, for instance—for almost two decades now (Education and Training Commission 2009; Education and Equal Opportunities Commission 2011d; Flemish Parliament 2012, 2016g, 2017d, 2019a; Education, Training, Science and Innovation Commission 2009; Education Commission 2015, 2016b, 2016c, 2017a). As a consequence of the terrorist attacks, the expectations have become focused on de-radicalisation processes and counter-discourse (Flemish Government 2015b, 2016, 2017b, 2018; Colaert 2017; *De Standaard* 2017b; *De Morgen* 2015, *Federale Overheidsdienst* 2018). Still, much remains to be done to fulfil the high expectations—which were already formulated two decennia ago—regarding the role of IRE teachers, as reflected in the various reports (Education and Equal Opportunities Commission 2009, 2011a, 2011c, 2011d, 2013c; Education and Training Commission 2009; Flemish Government 2015b, 2016, 2017b, 2018). Amongst other formulated expectations, an update of the current IRE for primary and secondary education is urgently needed (Flemish Parliament 2015e, 2017a, 2017d; Education Commission 2016b). The *Centrum voor Islamonderwijs* (Centre for Islamic Education), the Executive of Muslims of Belgium and the Flemish Ministry of Education and Training signed a mission statement in which the ‘modernisation’ of the IRE curricula was included (Education Commission 2016b; Flemish Parliament 2017a, 2017d; Ministry of Education and Training 2016a). In this article, the subject of investigation are the Flemish IRE curricula for public secondary education of 2001 and 2012, since this is the first step for a qualitative update of Flemish IRE.

Recently, Jaminé and Fadil (2019) created an overview of all the policy initiatives and programmes at the Belgian federal, community, regional and local level. To this end, she interviewed social workers, municipal officers, and civil servants in charge of de-radicalisation. Her conclusion was that de-radicalisation policy takes the shape of a complex whole of fragmented policy lines, characterised by multifacetedness. Striking is that social workers and educators are specifically pointed out as partners in the implementation of de-radicalisation processes and counter-discourse. Nowadays, we observe a shift in the ongoing debates on radicalisation as a general concept, and in the questions that are raised about the effectiveness and impact of the currently implemented de-radicalisation and counter-discourse measures, their financing and the criteria on the basis of which subsidisation is regulated.¹ This shift has

¹ The eight funded projects (a budget of €650 000) can be found on following webpage: <http://www.sociaalcultureel.be/nieuws-jeugd2015/020.aspx>.

found its way in the academic world (De Waele et al. 2017; Coolsaet 2019; Fadil et al. 2019; Jaminé and Fadil 2019) as well as in the field (Henskens and Kastit 2019; Van Bouchaute et al. 2018). Contemporary studies draw attention to the negative effects of de-radicalisation and counter-discourse programmes, in the sense that these programmes seem to have effects opposite to what is intended. However, the purpose of this article is not to evaluate the effects of de-radicalisation or counter-discourse measures.

It is clear that IRE has received (re-)newed attention in Flemish public education since the Paris and Brussels attacks of 2015 and 2016. For instance, an active role is now assigned to IRE teachers with regard to policy documents. More specifically the development of a positive Islamic identity of Muslim pupils during IRE courses is put forward as a positive key in the de-radicalisation process. Therefore, one key concept in this article is Islamic identity development. Although research has been conducted into identity development and IRE teacher praxis at public schools and Islamic schools, these studies remain explorative and are largely confined to West-European countries (Ahmed 2012; Berglund 2009, 2013, 2018; de Souza et al. 2006, de Souza 2014; Merry and Driessen 2016; Halstead 2004; Jackson 2003; Kimanen 2016; Merry 2014; Sahin 2005, 2013a, 2013b; Rissanen 2014a, 2014b).

The Belgian/Flemish context, for nearly one decade now there have been heated debates about the organisation and subsidisation of RE courses in public schools (Franken and Loobuyck 2013; Franken 2014; Franken 2017a, 2017c). Even the possibility to reduce the two hours to one hour—as in Wallonia—is a topic of discussion (De Standaard 2019a; Education Commission 2016a; Flemish Government 2019). Franken and Loobuyck (2011, 2014) suggest replacing the two allocated hours of religious education in public education by what they call LEF. LEF stands for *Levensbeschouwing, Ethiek en Filosofie* (Lifestance, Ethics and Philosophy). They argue that the present-day societal context and secularisation calls for a ‘neutral’ course in which pupils are taught ‘about’ all religions (Franken 2016, 2019; Franken and Loobuyck 2014). Above all, they state that by gathering all the pupils together in one classroom, they can ‘practise’ as one demographic regardless of their religious background. In connection to this, Loobuyck and Franken (2011) argue that civic education is a cross-curricular achievement that needs to be supervised by the state—it should not to be left (only) to RE teachers, since the latter are answerable to independently recognised religious bodies (Franken and Loobuyck 2011, 2013; Loobuyck 2019). They assert that the LEF approach will contribute to critical thinking, openness, dialogue, and increased tolerance and mutual understanding of all pupils, which are described as tools against radicalisation processes. In almost the same breath, they criticise the current Flemish IRE organisation, IRE textbooks and IRE curricula (Franken 2016, 2017b, 2018; Knack 2017, 2018). Additionally, questions raised in the Education Commission (2016a) and Flemish Parliament (2019b) regarding the quality and ‘religious’ approaches demonstrated in the available IRE textbooks edited and produced by the Turkish community.

In terms of the 2001 IRE curriculum for Flemish public secondary education (CIO 2001), it must first be mentioned that this document is a translation of an IRE curriculum implemented in Wallonia (IRE programme of 2001). Similarly, the 2012 IRE curriculum for Flemish secondary education (CIO 2012) is mostly based on the German didactical framework (cf. bibliography of CIO 2012). Furthermore, it is a translation of and mostly based on a Turkish curriculum. During the translation of this IRE programme, some additions were made (Sections 4 and 5; CIO 2012). The bibliography contains chiefly Turkish and German references. So far, the Flemish IRE curricula of public secondary schools have not been the object of *in-depth systematic analysis* (Lafarchi and Van Crombrugge 2014; Lafarchi 2018; Education Commission 2018b). A research gap that also extends to the didactical-pedagogical methods and lesson material.² It must be remarked that the IRE provided in Flemish schools is confessional in nature and aims at socialising pupils into Islam (IRE programme 2012) from the internal perspective. This article seeks to investigate whether the 2001 and 2012 curricula for Flemish public secondary education are in

² So far, only one handbook has been produced by the Belgian-Turkish community. The handbook was subsequently launched in collaboration with Diyanet (the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs) in 2010.

line with the three central concepts in IRE education: *tarbiyah*, *ta'leem* and *ta'deeb*. These concepts take central stage in the holistic approach of Islamic personality development. The ultimate aim is thus to systematically evaluate the former (2001) and currently (2012) implemented IRE programme in light of these three central concepts.

2. Method

The research method used was a systematic document analysis of the Flemish 2001 and 2012 IRE curricula for public secondary education. For this textual analysis, we had two documents at our disposal, both available in digital format. These were: the official (now outdated) 2001 IRE curriculum, and the official (currently implemented) 2012 IRE curriculum for Flemish public secondary education; which we both³ downloaded from the website of the *Centrum voor Islamonderwijs* (Centre for Islamic Education, CIO⁴ 2001, 2012; www.centrumislamonderwijs.be). CIO is the body responsible for IRE in Flemish primary and secondary public schools. Our analysis consisted of 3 steps. First, we compiled a list of the various elements and subjects discussed in the curricula that could be linked to the concepts, *tarbiyah*, *ta'leem* and *ta'deeb* (Appendix A). These three key concepts refer to Islamic—religious—education and imply a holistic educational approach, since they encompass the aspects of Islamic upbringing (*tarbiyah*), intellectual development (*ta'leem*), moral and social behaviour, and good manners (*ta'deeb*) (cf. Section 4). We choose these three concepts as the lens through which we analyse the Flemish IRE curricula for secondary education.

Secondly, we searched both documents for text material that referred to identity and personality development as such. This second research step, by which we sought to further identify curricula elements that might be linked to Islamic identity or personality development through IRE, was itself divided in two parts. First, a list of keywords was compiled to search the 2001 and 2012 curricula for text fragments that explicitly referred to Islamic identity or personality (Appendix A). Keywords that were used were for example: *adab*, behaviour, companions of the Prophet, ethics, identity, intellect, Islamic ethics, Islamic identity, Islamic personality, mind, moral development, moral behaviour, personality, Prophet, religiosity, social behaviour, soul, *tarbiyah*, and values. Since we had access to electronic copies in Adobe Reader, it was possible to enter these words as search terms in the search bar of this software package. Secondly, after this digital search, we proceeded to a manual, non-digital analysis of both curricula. This manual analysis consisted of an extensive, page-by-page inspection of the 2001 and 2012 document. During this research step, we looked for sentences, descriptions and words that referred directly or indirectly to Islamic identity or personality development. Words and descriptions that were located during this manual search, were, for instance: behaviour, the Prophet as role model, good manners, Islamic identity, Islamic personality, Islamic behaviour, moral, moral behaviour, moral principles, Qur'anic rules, way of life. As we progressed with the manual search, going through the curricula, new, pertinent keywords suggested themselves and were included in the search list, for example: exemplary behaviour of the Prophet, humility, *ihsan*, intellect and behaviour, *imaan*, morality, the Prophet and the *Ahadith* corpus, life and conduct of the Prophet, racism.

Then, in the third step of our document analysis, we scrutinised the didactical-pedagogical guidelines presented in the 2001 and 2012 curricula, and the lesson plans included in the documents. For this part, we screened all the chapters on the didactical and pedagogical guidelines (pp. 2–40, 241–276 in the 2012 document), including all the statements on the curricula objectives, the educational and religious approach, the approach to knowledge and competence acquisition (skills and attitudes), the learning process, the teaching methods, and learning strategies. We did not systematically analyse

³ The IRE program of 2001 is not available anymore on the CIO website. I downloaded the programme on 30 September 2016 and 19 April 2018 of the CIO website.

⁴ CIO is the abbreviation of Centre for Islamic Education.

the detailed lesson plans included in the documents, but we took account of the work sheets about learning goals, teaching methods, learning methods and didactical (digital) material.

3. IRE in the Belgian/Flemish Context

3.1. The Belgian Constitutional Framework

Belgium officially recognises and subsidises six religions⁵ and humanism. Article 24 of the Constitution protects and guarantees the right of every child attending compulsory education to receive religious education (RE) or instruction in humanism, subsidised by the state (*Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers* 1994). Every recognised religion and humanism are regulated by a representative body⁶—only these bodies have the authority to organise RE in compulsory public education.⁷ They can also set up teacher training programmes outside of, or integrated in, existing educational institutions. On the basis of the Belgian constitution, in which the separation of church and state is the most important principle, the state has no authority over the content of RE courses. Coming to the concrete curricula, we note that Belgian Catholic Education modernised its RE programme in 1999 (*Boeve* 2012), and twenty years later launched its new curriculum in January 2019.⁸ The humanist organisation launched an updated curriculum in the school year 2017–2018.⁹

Belgium is unique in the Western world in terms of the large-scale provision of Islamic religious education in public schools. In 2014–2015, 730 IRE teachers were active in Flemish primary and secondary schools (*Flemish Parliament* 2015e), and in 2017–2018, nearly 900 IRE teachers taught IRE in public schools. The number of Muslim pupils in Flemish public schools has increased (*Flemish Parliament* 2003, 2015b, 2016a; *De Standaard* 2017a, 2019b, 2019c) by one-third between the school years 2012–2013 and 2017–2018. For the city of Antwerp, primary education counted no less than 52.4% Muslim pupils in the municipal schools (*Franken* 2016).

3.2. IRE in Flanders

In the 1960s and 1970s, the Belgian government allowed IRE teachers from Morocco and Turkey to teach in Belgian schools, since there were no Belgian-educated French or Dutch-speaking IRE teachers available. At the time, this was part of the nation's foreign policy (*Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers* 1964). In 1975–1976, one year after the official recognition of Islam (*Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers* 1974), the first IRE courses at the Islamic Cultural Centre (ICC)—also known as the Central Mosque of Brussels—were organised. Since 1986, all IRE teachers must be Belgian nationals or be able to demonstrate a minimum residency of five years and their ability to give instruction in either Dutch or French (*Leman and Renaerts* 1996). During the 1990s, IRE teachers were appointed by the *Executive of Muslims of Belgium* (EMB), after attending a limited number of courses organised by the ICC or the EMB (*Maréchal and Busetta* 2004; *Merry and Driessen* 2005; *Shadid and van Koningsveld* 2008). However, the training and recruitment organised by the EMB was not sufficient to meet the growing demand for Dutch-speaking IRE teachers in the Flemish public schools (*Flemish Parliament* 2003, 2011, 2013, 2015a, 2017a; *De Tijd* 2017; *De Standaard* 2019b, 2019c). In order to reduce the shortage of IRE teachers, the EMB started negotiations with the Flemish teacher training institutions in the 1990s. The first

⁵ Roman Catholicism (1830), Anglicanism (1835), Eastern Orthodoxy (1985), Protestantism (1930), Judaism (1931) and Islam (1974).

⁶ It should be noted that the representative bodies fall under the Ministry of Justice and Cult in regard to financial and organisational aspects, and under the Flemish Ministry of Education in regard to a number of other aspects, such as the salaries of IRE teachers and negotiations with Flemish IRE Teachers' Training for example.

⁷ The Executive of Muslims of Belgium (EMB) has the authority to take initiatives with regard to IRE teacher training in higher education; this means that no Belgian IRE teacher training program can be installed without cooperation of the EMB. To date, no Belgium Islamic faculty or Islamic higher education institution has been founded. The EMB is responsible for the content of IRE courses and appoints Muslim lecturers in deliberation with the coordinators of teacher training programs.

⁸ <https://www.kuleuven.be/thomas/page/leerplan-secundair/>

⁹ <http://nczedenleer.be/leerplannen.html>

recognised Flemish IRE teacher training programme was established in 1998 at the *Erasmushogeschool Brussel* (EhB, Erasmus University College of Brussels; [Flemish Parliament 2003](#); [VLHORA 2007](#), p. 177), while a second programme was established in 2008–2009 by *Groep T* (now UCLL, University Colleges of Leuven-Limburg). Both IRE programmes were established after long negotiations of the EMB with the Flemish Teachers' Training institutions before the urgent need felt by the stakeholders in 2015. Various factors, such as the evolution of the international context, the expectations towards IRE teachers, the lack of qualified Belgian-educated Dutch-speaking IRE teachers, and the pressure of public and political opinion on the EMB and the *Centrum voor Islamonderwijs* (CIO, Centre for Islamic Education, founded in 2008), created pressure to negotiate high quality standards for IRE teacher training ([Education and Equal Opportunities Commission 2011b, 2013b, 2013c](#); [Flemish Parliament 2017d, 2018a](#)). We note that questions and concerns about IRE, the CIO, the EMB, and the qualifications of IRE teachers are not a new phenomenon ([Flemish Parliament 2003, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2016a, 2016c, 2016e, 2017a, 2019a](#); [Education and Training Commission 2009](#); [Education Commission 2016b, 2017a, 2018a, 2018b](#)).

Since the academic year 2015–2016, three¹⁰ additional Flemish IRE teacher training programmes have been set up, mainly in response to—and accelerated by—the violent attacks in Paris in 2015 and Brussels in 2016, on the basis of negotiations between the EMB, the Flemish Minister of Education and the Flemish teacher training departments (TTD) ([Flemish Parliament 2017a](#); [Education Commission 2016b, 2017a](#)). We note that the Catholic University of Leuven established an one year Master in Islamic Theology and Religious Sciences in the academic year 2014–2015 ([Education and Equal Opportunities Commission 2013a](#)). Here, we have to bear in mind that although the Flemish Community, specifically the Minister of Education, can formulate incentives and can stimulate, support and fund initiatives, the legal authority to install IRE teacher training programmes in cooperation with the Flemish teacher training departments lies solely with the EMB and CIO. The Flemish Community and the TTD have no legal mandate to define the content and learning goals of IRE courses, nor the requirements for IRE teachers.¹¹ Only the representative body, i.e., the EMB and the CIO, has the authority to define teacher requirements and the content of IRE teacher training, to train future IRE teachers¹² and to appoint teachers on the basis of their own criteria.¹³ We note that there are no Flemish Islamic primary or secondary schools¹⁴ in Flanders or Brussels.

4. *Tarbiyah, Ta'leem and Ta'deeb*: IRE as Holistic Education

For Muslim pupils, faith emerges as a significant factor in identity formation ([Fadil 2002, 2005, 2009](#); [Peek 2005](#); [de Koning 2008, 2009](#); [Kanmaz 2002, 2008](#); [Ketner 2009](#); [Lafrarchi et al. 2015](#); [Tindongan 2011](#)). [Shah \(2014\)](#), within the context of UK, discusses the challenge of bringing up children who are immersed in two different 'ways of life', i.e., Islamic and Western. In regard to this educational challenge, it is crucial to understand that Muslims experience their religious identity as an integrated and inextricable part of their personal identity ([Ahmed 2012](#); [Azabar et al. 2017](#); [Lafrarchi et al. 2015](#); [Sahin 2013a](#)). In the following sections, we first discuss the meaning of three central concepts in the Islamic educational tradition: *tarbiyah*, *ta'leem* and *ta'deeb*. Secondly, we provide a brief discussion of

¹⁰ In Mechelen (2015–2016), Ghent and Antwerp (2016–2017).

¹¹ Since academic year 2018–2019, the Flemish Ministry of Education requires teachers to have a minimum recognised competence certificate or degree, which demonstrates abilities in terms of learning content and teaching skills as one of the action points of the mission statement signed on the 9 November 2016.

¹² By choosing Muslim teachers in the IRE teachers' training.

¹³ Exceptions: the content and learning objectives of the courses of the *truncus communis* are chosen by the teacher training committee, taking into account the existing (competence) regulations.

¹⁴ Islamic schools are confessional schools based on an Islamic pedagogical framework, i.e. an ethos based on the Islamic religion. In Wallonia and Brussels, there are three Islamic primary schools and one Islamic secondary school. Besides, there are the Flemish Lucerna colleges, which are organised in a school network (in Flanders and Brussels), and Les Écoles des Étoiles, which are both based on the plural approach funded by the Turkish community (in Wallonia and Brussels).

Islamic identity development, which is viewed as a holistic process in reference to these key concepts, i.e., *tarbiyah*, *ta'leem* and *ta'deeb*.

4.1. The Central Role of Tarbiyah, Ta'leem and Ta'deeb in IRE

We focus on three concepts defining Islamic Education, namely *tarbiyah*, *ta'leem* and *ta'deeb*. They can be translated as follows. *Tarbiyah*—which is linked to the word '*raba*'—means 'to grow, to increase, to nourish'. In this way, '*tarbiyah islamiyah*', literally meaning 'growing up Islamically', is a term referring to Islamic upbringing or nurture. *Ta'leem* stems from the word '*alima*'—which means to 'know, to learn'—and the word '*ilm*'—which means 'knowledge'—and is thus related to instruction and teaching. *Ta'deeb* is rooted in the word '*adaba*'—which refers to good manners, politeness, courtesy, etiquette and refinement—and therefore points to the moral and social dimension of personal development. Most authors agree that the three concepts are tightly interlinked, although we found some epistemological discussion about their meaning and translation into Western concepts that are based on the Greek (*paidagogos*) or Latin (*educare*) tradition (At-Attas 1991; Halstead 2004; Niyozov and Memon 2011; Abdullah 2018; Sahin 2018). Another concept related to education is '*akhlaq islamiyah*', or Islamic ethics. *Akhlaq* refers to the achievement of a noble Islamic personality as exemplified by the Prophet, and encouraged in the Qur'an (Azmat 2018). In other words, the goal of Islamic—religious—education is 'a holistic personality development that concerns the whole person of the Muslim (*insan al-kāmil*, the unified human being), encompassing the rational, spiritual, social and moral dimensions'. Islamic (religious) education is thus a lifelong process in which the Muslim seeks to achieve the best Islamic personality based on the Prophet's life and Qur'anic principles (cf. Section 4.2). The *nafs* (self, ego) plays a central role in the effort to follow in the footsteps of the Prophet's life (as an example for the faithful) and the adhere to Qur'anic principles. However, a lifelong process (Fowler 1981) can be a bumpy road and a process filled with doubt during the adolescent's journey (Erikson 1959, 1968). We notice that research in the field of religious identity development shows that doubt is a catalyst for (positive) identity achievement (Baltazar and Coffen 2011). As a state of mind, it forces the individual to question their knowledge, and to integrate newly acquired knowledge and insights. Al-Sharaf (2013) points the Qur'an and the *Ahadith* as the primary sources of critical thought. The early Muslim community, inspired by the transformative divine educational vision, imbued its spiritual devotion with a deeper reflective competence, thus becoming a witness to critical piety inspired by the ethical framework of monotheism (Sahin 2015, 2016, 2017b, 2018). Sahin (2018, p. 7) defines *tarbiyah* as 'human flourishing' and identified it as central to the formation of a critical, reflective Muslim as itself imperative to modern holistic conception of Islamic education. IRE teachers can, as suggested by Mamodaly (2016) and Sahin (2013a, 2018), foster a positive Islamic personality by taking into account their pupils' multiple and conflated identities. Starting from *tarbiyah*, *ta'leem* and *ta'deeb*, Waghid and Smeyers (2014) state that it is possible for IRE teachers to engender pupils' reflexive attitude. Sahin (2017b) notes that the Qur'an itself displays a dynamic educational character. It articulates a transformative educational style that seeks to transform human beings for the better. Nevertheless, there is still a need for guidance and support from adults during this journey (Sieckelinck 2017).

4.2. Islamic Personality Development and IRE

In accordance with the first revealed Divine Word in the Qur'an, '*iqra*', knowledge about Islam is identified as a precondition to grasp the deep meaning of being a Muslim (Marshallsay 2012). Consequently, only deep knowledge ('*ilm*'), attained through (religious) upbringing (*tarbiyah*) and education (*ta'leem*), within the frame of moral and social values (*adab*), will result in Islamic personality¹⁵ development and the flourishing of a Muslim 'way of life' (Coles 2004, p. 44 in Shakeel 2018;

¹⁵ We prefer the concept Islamic personality development than Islamic identity development (cfr. Section 3.2).

Lafrarchi 2017a). Following this line of thought, the search for knowledge is a religious obligation for every Muslim (Shakeel 2018, p. 7), as stated in the *Ahadith* and the Qur'an (Marshallsay 2012). Through the acquisition of knowledge, the Muslim comes to understand what an Islamic 'way of life' entails (Marshallsay 2012). Applying such insights includes aspiring to the highest spiritual, intellectual and moral values in every aspect of life. *Ilm* (knowledge) acts in a way that serves the development of the 'self' and the whole individual human, so that s/he acts for the sake of God. For Muslims the Here and Hereafter are intertwined in the development of the 'self' through knowledge acquisition. The Qur'anic view of the 'self' is dynamic with an unlimited capacity for development. Thus, the 'self' is not seen as a passive subject. Muslims have the duty and responsibility to develop their entire potential, their full set of talents. The purpose of education, then, is the development of the 'self' according to the holistic approach reflected in *tarbiyah*, *ta'leem* and *ta'deeb* concepts, which is visualised as a journey. It follows that the Muslim 'way of life' does not only include religious praxis in a strict sense via *ta'leem* (knowledge), but also '*adab*' (morality) as part of the religious praxis (Mamodaly 2016). For this reason, presenting religious ideals that inspire people to act virtuously, and teaching pupils to develop their capacities by making them think about their religious ideals is valuable for both pupils and teachers (Sieckelinck 2005, 2009, 2017; Sieckelinck and de Ruyter 2009). By stimulating pupils to think about their ideals, they are invited to project themselves into who they want to be, picture their dreams (Sieckelinck 2007, 2017; Lafrarchi et al. 2015), discuss their religious ideals with their classmates, formulate why they want to achieve those ideals, and discover similarities and differences between themselves and their peers (REDCo 2009). Interaction between pupils during IRE courses fosters their ability to develop an Islamic personality and, simultaneously, creates a platform to practice socio-communicative competences and attitudes such as dialoguing, active listening, tolerance and respect (Hussien et al. 2017), which they will need as adults. Interviews with Muslim pupils reveal that they strive for ideals which are religiously relevant (Lafrarchi et al. 2015). The lens that they use to aspire to Islamic ideals is the life of the Prophet and his companions, which is pointed out as an absolute example to follow. They list their religious obligations—such as the five pillars or fasting—and 'religiosity' as two sides of the same coin which have to be pursued to be fully Muslim (Lafrarchi et al. 2015). In line with these findings, for people of faith, religious ideals are the most important source of meaning-giving and therefore influence an important part of their personal development (Driessen and Valkenberg 2000; de Ruyter 2003, 2006, 2012; de Ruyter and Merry 2009). According to de Ruyter, it is more important for pupils to understand the motivation that underlies religious ideals—i.e., the ideals to which fellow peers aspire—than to know religious rules or dogmas. De Ruyter defines religious ideals as 'ideals that acquire meaning due to a belief in the transcendent or a divine being' (de Ruyter 2006, p. 271). For Muslims, such an ideal could be emulating the example of the Prophet, i.e., striving to acquire his characteristics and following his exemplary behaviour. Since IRE in Belgium is a confessional type of education and—in accordance with the Belgian constitution—is characterised by a 'learning into religion', it can be a lever for positive Islamic personality development. Her point of view is particularly interesting for this study, since it provides a framework to work on positive Islamic personality development. Yet we have to bear in mind that there are other factors that impact personality development, such as the migratory experience, social context, media representation of Muslims, Islamophobia, relation between Muslims and non-Muslims, and so on (Zine 2001, 2004; Verkuyten 2003; Peek 2005; Van Tubergen 2006; Tindongan 2011; Moulin 2012, 2013; Shah 2012; Moulin-Stozek 2015; Berglund 2015; Mamodaly 2016; Rockenback et al. 2017; Thijs et al. 2018).

'Being a Muslim' is not limited to religious practices such as praying, fasting, practicing charity or going on pilgrimages. Crucially, it is an encompassing 'way of life'. Being human is 'a journey' in which the pursuit of one's own ideals, the search for deep meaning, and understanding of ourselves, others, the world, and God take centre stage. The Muslim moral and social values are taken directly from the Qur'an and the *Ahadith*. Based on abovementioned descriptions, we define Islamic personality development in this article as 'a holistic process in which knowledge acquisition is closely interwoven with the acquisition of skills and attitudes via *tarbiyah*, *ta'leem* and *ta'deeb* principles, aimed at shaping

the Islamic personality in the best possible manner, taking into account the three human aspects of mind, soul and heart' (de Souza 2009, 2016a, de Souza et al. 2006). By investing in *tarbiyah*, *ta'leem* and *ta'deeb*, educators are actively involved in realising this holistic approach (Al-Sadan 1999; Abdullah 2018; Alkouatli 2018). For this reason, teaching moral and social values as part of IRE is already in itself a moral duty of the teacher (Shakeel 2018). Islamic personality development is deeply tied to the pedagogical process, in which religious education can play a positive role (Grimmitt 1987a, 1987b; Erikson 1968; Bertram-Troost et al. 2006). On these grounds, a study of the context in which IRE teachers act while forming the personality of young Muslims, is highly relevant (Kimanen 2016).

5. Results: Analysis of the 2001 and 2012 IRE Curricula

This section provides an overview of the main elements of the 2001 and 2012 IRE curricula that can be linked to the three central concepts of IRE, namely *tarbiyah*, *ta'leem* and *ta'deeb*. We will also discuss meaningful links with the concept 'Islamic personality'.

RE is a compulsory subject in Flemish primary and secondary public education.¹⁶ Because Islam is an officially recognised religion in Belgium, IRE is integrated in the public school curricula. The 2012 curriculum, currently in force in Flemish public secondary education (CIO 2012), is compulsory for all IRE teachers regardless of the diversity of the student population in their classroom, which stems from the variety in cultural, ethnic and denominational backgrounds. This means that (it is assumed that) this curriculum is applied during all IRE courses with Muslim pupils in Flemish public secondary schools. In this section we analyse the (now outdated) 2001 IRE curriculum and (currently implemented) 2012 IRE curriculum for Flemish public secondary education in terms of content. To this end, we examine the various components of the subject matter and the overall learning goals that are articulated in both IRE curricula related to the three central concepts, *tarbiyah*, *ta'leem* and *ta'deeb*. Special consideration is also given to the didactical and pedagogical guidelines outlined in the documents. Our findings will allow us to identify gaps in the curricula, unaddressed educational needs, and the knowledge required to design a new, qualitative IRE curriculum for secondary education grafted on the Belgian/Flemish context, taking into account the super-diverse society young Muslims live in.

5.1. Flemish 2001 IRE Curriculum for Secondary Education

The first Flemish IRE curriculum for public secondary education (implemented in 2001) was based on—and a straight translation of—the French IRE curriculum for public secondary education of 2001 (*Leerplan Islamitisch godsdienstonderwijs*, CIO 2001, p. 2). It was implemented in the different types of Flemish secondary education: general, technical, vocational, and special needs. The document consists of 37 pages (including nine blank pages) that cover the six years of secondary education. It includes a half-page long preface that lists the overall themes (*ibid.*, p. 3). The first two years are dedicated to the 'personal world' of Muslim pupils. The third and fourth years focus on their 'social world', while in the fifth and sixth year, special attention is given to their 'worldview' (*ibid.*, p. 2). Each year, there are six study domains: (1) doctrine, (2) worship, (3) Qur'an, (4) *Ahadith* (sayings and acts of the Prophet), (5) moral behaviour, including invocations, and (6) *assira* (biography of the Prophet) and history. A maximum of one page is dedicated to each section. Below we describe the relevant elements that can be linked to the concepts of *tarbiyah*, *ta'leem* and *ta'deeb* and the three dimensions of mind, heart, and soul.

The theme of the first year is 'the identity of the Muslim: belief and praxis' (*ibid.*, p. 5). It includes the following subjects: knowing Allah; the position of Islam towards other religions; worship; rationale and benefits of prayer; fasting during Ramadan; introduction to the Qur'an and a selection of verses for the pupils to learn; definition of *Ahadith* and *Sunna* (prophetic traditions contained within the *Ahadith*); introduction in *an-niyya* (intention) and *al-kalima at-tayyibiba* (proper speaking); how to behave in public

¹⁶ Although Belgian parents can file a motivated request that their child be exempted from attending RE courses.

places; how to be a good neighbour; *at-tahiyya* or *as-salaam* (how to greet); and the biography of Abu Bakr. The theme of the second year is ‘the Muslim, his family, his (social) group, his Muslim community and the Belgian community’ (ibid., p. 11). This chapter mentions among others the following subjects: *al-iman* (belief); how to behave towards God; rewards and punishments: paradise and hell in Islam; submission to God: definition and meaning; *adab* rules which need to be observed in regard to the Prophet; a selection of invocations for the pupils to learn, to recite after prayer; study of Qur’anic verses; good behaviour towards parents; respect for the elderly; moral and physical purity in Islam; education and the benefits of knowledge in Islam; good manners, rules of decency and the related invocations; the personality of the Prophet; and the biography of Umar ibn al-Khattāb. The theme of the third year is ‘the Muslim and his experience of time and space’ (ibid., p. 18). As a theme, it encompasses the following subjects: the inner life and the afterlife of Muslims, in relation to the need for Prophets; Judgement Day; verses related to the grace of Allah; the rights of deceased Muslims; false oaths; and the study of several Qur’anic verses. In addition, the following subjects are included in the third year as part of the subtheme ‘moral behaviour’ (p. 21): lying and lies; rules of hospitality, referring to the *Sunna*; keeping one’s promises and commitments; acquiring goods in a good (*halal*) manner; adolescence and puberty; the beloved Prophet; and the biography of Uthman ibn Affan and Ali ibn Abi Talib.

The chapters that describe the materials of the fourth, fifth, and sixth year are not divided into sections like the three preceding chapters. Instead, they are divided into fifteen subthemes. In what follows, we provide a summary of the most relevant subjects listed under the three remaining school years. The theme of the fourth year is ‘the Islamic vision on ethics, psychology and society’ (p. 24). Here, we limit ourselves to subjects with a meaningful link to *tarbiyah*, *ta’leem* and *ta’deeb* that are listed under the analysis of the last ceremonial speech of the Prophet (p. 27), including (among other things) the role of men and women in marriage: mutual respect and responsibility and marital common life, equality of race (p. 27); reciprocal help and support in Islam (p. 27); the social function of commending the good and prohibiting the bad (p. 27); the invocations and being mindful of God (p. 28); drugs and narcotic substances (p. 28); shame and decency in Islam (p. 28); patience towards difficulties (p. 28); the importance of time and the Islamic view on life (p. 29); the permitted and the prohibited (p. 29); the social role of the mosque (heart of the city, communal prayer, education) (p. 29); and the principles of justice in Islam (p. 29). The theme of the fifth year is ‘Islam in the West’ (p. 31). It includes the following subthemes: the rejection of indifference in light of solidarity and human rights from an Islamic perspective (p. 32); the Islamic personality¹⁷ (*ash-shakhsiyah al muslimah*, Muslim personality) (p. 32); abuse and paedophilia (p. 32); human rights in Islam (p. 32); study of verses 11–13 of Qur’an chapter 49 (p. 32); racism (p. 32); *zakat* (alms-giving) and the principle of the sharing of wealth (p. 32); respecting public order (civic education) (p. 32); corruption and bribes (p. 32); the value of work and the negative consequences of not working from an Islamic perspective (p. 33); money in Islam and the legal ways to acquire wealth (p. 33). The theme of the sixth, and final, year is ‘the contribution of Islam to civilisation’ (p. 34). The following subthemes are worth mentioning: the feeling/experience of religiosity; study of verses 12–19 of Qur’an chapter 31 (the *Luqman surah*) with the following topics: gratefulness towards Allah, gratefulness towards one’s parents, recommending the good, humility, speaking in a soft tone (3); the meaning of the *Shahada* (the Islamic creed) (6); civic education (7); Divine Decree and free will in Islam (8); trusting devotion to God (12); rules of decency to observe during discussions (13); and Islamic key figures: Aisha (15).

No didactical or pedagogical guidelines were included in the 2001 document (CIO 2001). In terms of content, we find a very limited list of broadly formulated concepts. In regard to Qur’an verses

¹⁷ Here we adopt the terminology used in the Dutch-language document (CIO 2001), namely ‘*de islamitische persoonlijkheid*’. In the French curriculum of 2001 – of which the Dutch-language document (the 2001 Flemish IRE curriculum) is a straight translation – the term ‘*la personnalité musulmane*’ is used. The Arabic word literally means ‘Muslim identity’, hence our use of the adjective ‘Islamic’.

and *Ahadith*, no explanations or guidelines are provided on how their content should be taught to the students, nor are any explicit learning goals formulated. Based on the fact that the organisation of IRE courses in Belgium is anchored in the Constitution—and seeing that nothing is explicitly mentioned in the IRE curriculum, the included themes are tightly related, and the themes themselves refer explicitly to ‘Islamic’ praxis—we assume that all the subthemes throughout the six years underline and emphasise the ‘internal’ approach, i.e., the ‘learning into religion’ perspective. ‘Learning into religion’ introduces the pupil to a specific religious tradition, with the purpose of promoting personal, moral, and spiritual development as well as to build religious identity within a particular tradition.

5.2. Flemish 2012 IRE Curriculum for Secondary Education

The limited scope of this article allows only for a selective non-exhaustive overview of the most relevant elements of the 2012 IRE curriculum for secondary education (CIO 2012). First of all, the curriculum explicitly refers to constructivism as a learning model (pp. 12, 26, 29, 31). In line with (social) constructivism, the learning process is understood as characterised by learning through interaction with others (pp. 12, 29, 30, 34). The 2012 curriculum acknowledges that humans are continuously changing, both on the physical and the psychological level (p. 4). Moreover, the statement is made that adolescence is characterised by a ‘seeking for the meaning of one’s own life’ (pp. 9, 29). Acknowledging the different aspects of the human being, the document states that the learning process involves the cognitive, emotional, moral, social, physical and religious aspects (pp. 3, 5, 8, 11, 13, 14, 16, 28, 58, 61, 243). The starting point of the curriculum is a student-centred approach (pp. 12, 26, 27, 29, 30, 34). Further, the main objective is to teach the Muslim pupils their own religion, so that they can understand—and thrive upon—the scientific¹⁸ information provided by the Islamic sciences (p. 3).

The curriculum is elaborated based on (1) general objectives, (2) basic skills and (3) core values (pp. 15–17, 33). Several general objectives of the curriculum are articulated; however, these are not articulated in a systematic way, but are scattered throughout the text. In addition, the curriculum mentions skills and attitudes that pupils have to master (pp. 3, 8–9, 10, 13–18). Some examples of objectives that are formulated are: getting to know his/her own religion and getting to know other religions in the society one lives in (p. 4); the Islamic pupils know, besides their own religion, the other religions present in the community they live in’ (p. 4); developing skills besides acquisition of knowledge (p. 5); formation of personality (pp. 3, 5, 7); being able to make one’s own choices (p. 5). Furthermore, the curriculum distinguishes six domains: (1) doctrine, (2) worship, (3) the life of the Prophet, (4) the Qur’an, (5) ethics or moral conduct and (6) religion and culture (pp. 18–25). Each of these domains includes six subdomains (p. 45) for the overarching six years of secondary education. These subdomains are the broad framework for the compulsory IRE content and the starting point for the lesson plans. We notice that the document contains cross-references between the six domains, as well as some examples of interrelated subdomains and/or subjects (pp. 17–26). By pointing out these cross-references, pupils are motivated to make links between the different domains and subjects. Per subdomain, the document provides a non-extensive, lesson preparation ‘suggestion’ with some learning goals, supplemented with limited didactical-pedagogical principles and limited teaching and evaluation methods. Although some attempts have been made to include worksheets, the quality of these worksheets absolutely does not meet the current educational standards. The technical material that is described is dated, since mention is made of the use of overhead projectors, photographic slides and transparencies. Additionally: the layout is not attractive, the educational material does not fit with the super-diverse society Flemish pupils live in, and they do not comply with the current didactical-pedagogical standards. It is worth mentioning that since 2010 there is (only) one

¹⁸ The document does not make explicit what the editors mean by ‘scientific’.

Dutch textbook available on the Flemish private market¹⁹ (2010, Publishing House Diyanet, Ankara; www.centrumislamonderwijs.be/leerboeken.html). Belgian-Turkish teachers were involved. Those textbooks are produced—and translated under the supervision of a Turkish professor, subsidised by Diyanet²⁰ and edited in Turkey (Ankara).²¹ The textbook was criticised during parliamentary discussions and in the media (Flemish Parliament 2016d, 2019b; Education Commission 2018b; Knack 2018).²²

Critical thinking is mentioned as a faculty to be sharpened, stimulated and promoted, referring to one of the attitudes the Prophet Muhammad encouraged (pp. 5, 8, 11, 16, 30, 39). Furthermore, the editors refer to the Qur'an and the *Sunna* (prophetic traditions contained within the *Ahadith*) as the main sources of the shared fundamental values of Islam (pp. 13, 15, 16, 21, 53, 55). Even though the Qur'an and the *Ahadith* are taken as the authoritative religious sources in the document, the curriculum encourages pupils to explore and probe the religious truths, just as the companions of the Prophet did. Pupils have to investigate (pp. 5, 16, 22, 55, 61), because Islam encourages people not to accept the customs of their forefathers, but instead to use their mind to its full extent, in order to analyse, understand and interpret the Qur'an texts and the *Ahadith*. Referring to human rights, it is pointed out that IRE seeks to support the pupils' individual understanding of the significance of Islam, and their personal view on their place and role as Muslim citizens in broader society (pp. 11, 15–16). Throughout the programme the Muslim pupils are strongly encouraged to pursue values in general, and Islamic values in particular, following the exemplary conduct of the Prophet(s) (pp. 17, 21–22, 25–26, 55). In the curriculum, Islamic values are inextricably linked to Islamic ethics and behaviour (pp. 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 17). Proper behaviour, moral and social behaviour are frequently mentioned throughout the text. The editors refer to Islamic behaviour as an inextricably part of Muslim identity (pp. 51, 56). IRE seeks 'to educate Muslims in their religion' (p. 3). Specifically, it is underlined that examples of excellent behaviour (to emulate) are found in the Qur'an and in the Prophet's 'way of life', *Sunna*, recorded in the *Ahadith* (pp. 13, 20, 21, 24, 53, 55, 59).

We notice that the IRE programme explicitly states that 'the pupils cannot be forced to participate in prayers or any other ritual' (pp. 12, 16). Conversely, we found many references to prayer practice (p. 16, 18), as prayer is the second pillar of Islam (pp. 11, 14, 16, 19–21, 46, 48, 50–51, 64, 99, 158, 203–204, 220, 271, 288). Through these many references, prayer is implicitly underlined as one of the most significant Islamic pillars. A striking point in the curriculum was that, in addition to the concept religiosity (pp. 9, 14, 23, 25), the concept spirituality was also mentioned (p. 9)²³, but no definition was given. Curiously enough, we found only one explicit reference to Islamic identity development (p. 16).

In the content descriptions, but also in the learning strategies, the teaching methods and the exercises, we found proportionally more references to cognitive development than any other form, for example emotional, affective, physical and religious development. The last chapter of the 2012 document is dedicated to evaluation methods (pp. 277–301). Individual, peer and group evaluation methods are included. The evaluation methods are chiefly oriented towards strengthening the pupils' cognitive learning processes and overall cognitive progress (pp. 28, 33–40).

To conclude, it is worthwhile, in the aftermath of the violent attacks in Paris and Brussels, to point to references in the text to extremism (pp. 22, 55) and the emphasis on respect and tolerance towards

¹⁹ It could be ordered through *Diyanet van België* (Diyanet of Belgium) until 2015; and through Ld. Euro-Boekhandel until 2018–2019. Currently it is available through Erfu International. The order form mentions *Diyanet van België and IERS* (Diyanet of Belgium and IERS). Publishing house: Turkiye Diyanet Vakfi/ANKARA. Downloaded 12 October 2018 and 1 November 2019, available and recommended by the three inspectors and the Turkish president of the CIO, who is also the president of the EMB since April 2017. <https://www.centrumislamonderwijs.be/leerboeken.html>, https://www.centrumislamonderwijs.be/uploads/2/6/3/0/26301550/bestelbon_hand_en_werkboeken_islam.pdf.

²⁰ The Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs.

²¹ https://www.centrumislamonderwijs.be/uploads/2/6/3/0/26301550/hand-en_werkboeken_islam_1_doc.

²² We did not analyse the contents of this handbook because of limited space and this didactical material is not part of the topic of our article.

²³ Spiritual values: pp. 3, 23, 24; spiritual thoughts: p. 10; spiritual world: p. 14; spiritual characteristics: p. 23.

others, irrespective of their religious, ethical or cultural background (pp. 1, 3, 12, 15, 17, 20, 24, 25, 61). In addition, there are explicit references to human rights (pp. 3, 11, 59, 245), which is meaningful since the Flemish stakeholders put much emphasis on this aspect.

6. Discussion: IRE Curricula for Flemish Public Secondary Education

This article analysed the Flemish 2001 and 2012 IRE curricula for public secondary education in terms of content that can be related to three central concepts of IRE, namely *tarbiyah*, *ta'leem* and *ta'deeb*. This is our starting point to determine whether these IRE curricula contribute to the development of an Islamic personality. In this article we define Islamic personality development as 'a holistic process in which knowledge acquisition is closely interwoven with the acquisition of skills and attitudes via *tarbiyah*, *ta'leem* and *ta'deeb* principles, which is aimed at shaping the Islamic personality, and takes into account the three human aspects of mind, soul and heart'. The curriculum documents (CIO²⁴ 2001, 2012) do not contain an explicit, clear-cut definition of Islamic personality or Islamic identity. For our analysis, this means that we only found references, descriptions, concepts and subjects that can be indirectly associated with *tarbiyah*, *ta'leem* and *ta'deeb* (Appendix A).

The first Flemish IRE curriculum (implemented in 2001) was edited during the late 1990s, in a totally different societal context (CIO 2001; Maréchal and Bousetta 2004; Kanmaz et al. 2004; Merry and Driessen 2005). It is clear from the structure and the content that it was not thoughtfully elaborated, since only a limited (and rudimentary) summary of subjects and concepts is included. In addition, no general IRE course objectives are included, nor are any learning goals found in the document. Consequently, IRE teachers who consulted the curriculum could find no perspective from which they had to introduce or teach the content. This situation does not improve quality, nor is there any guarantee that a certain standard for the course content will be maintained. This was—and still is—a main concern of the Flemish Parliament and the Education Commission and affects IRE as a whole. Moreover, the Flemish Parliament has made the explicit demand that the IRE content must comply with human rights and international and Belgian legislation (Flemish Parliament 2016c; Education Commission 2017b, 2018a, 2018b). This demand is driven by concerns about non-compliance with principles such as the equality between the sexes, respect for sexual orientation, equal relations between Muslims and non-Muslims, and the prohibition on indoctrination and radical discourse (Flemish Parliament 2017c, 2019a; Education Commission 2018a).²⁵ Coming to the quality of IRE in public education, there was no systematic evaluation or monitoring of the teaching praxis during IRE lessons by any inspection team between 1978–2005 (Kanzmaz et al. 2004). Since the school year 2005–2006, there are only three inspectors appointed for Flemish primary and secondary schools (Flemish Parliament 2005, 2016e).

To meet the current expectations, the Ministry of Education and the EMB drew up and signed a Mission Statement with four²⁶ clearly identifiable action points (9 November 2016). The action points were included in the Mission Statement to improve the quality of IRE in public schools (Education Commission 2016b; Flemish Parliament 2017a, 2017d). Among these, only the implementation of a qualitative IRE teacher training programme was realised relatively quickly (see footnote 10), since the urgent need to do so was felt by all the stakeholders, and because a clear message was sent out by policy makers after the Paris attacks of 2015 and the Brussels attacks of 2016. The first action point was

²⁴ From here on mentioned as CIO.

²⁵ During the past three years, the Flemish Ministry of Education has urged the CIO to discuss these topics during compulsory seminars for IRE teachers. These seminars were organised with the aim of informing IRE teachers about these topics, and to support them in their professionalism in providing answers to pupils when asked about these topics or in including these themes in their lessons. As it currently stands there is no structural follow-up or evaluation of individual IRE teachers on those topics.

²⁶ (1) the modernisation of the CIO structure, (2) qualitative IRE teacher programmes embedded in Flemish teacher training institutions, (3) quality of inspection work and appointment of an advisor, and (4) a qualitative update of the minimum requirements and certificates of proficiency for IRE.

the ‘modernisation of the CIO structure’ because, the CIO was evaluated as an inefficiently functioning organisation (Flemish Parliament 2011, 2013, 2016a, 2016c, 2016d, 2016f, 2017b, 2017d; Education Commission 2016b, 2017a, 2018a, 2018b).

Since the school year 2018–2019, every teacher needs to be in possession of a recognised pedagogical certificate to be allowed to teach, yet much work remains to be done seeing that in 2018 only 16% of the IRE teachers in primary education had the necessary certificate (Flemish Parliament 2016c, 2017a, 2018b). The stakeholders (policy makers, lecturers, IRE teachers, Muslim pupils) are still waiting for an update of the Flemish primary and secondary education IRE curricula grafted on the Flemish context and in line with 21st century educational expectations, and for qualitative textbooks that are written by Flemish educational experts and grafted on the Belgian super-diverse context (Flemish Parliament 2016c; Education Commission 2016b, 2017b, 2018b). During commission discussions it became clear that the current Turkish textbook is a literal translation of an existing Turkish manual (Education Commission 2018b). To add to the objections, questions raised regarding the involvement of the Belgian-Turkish coordinator in the production and promotion of IRE textbooks, and on working as an IRE advisor in public IRE (Education Commission 2018b; Flemish Parliament 2017b). Berglund (2015) underlines that the quality of textbooks is a matter of general concern in other countries as well.

Although the 2001 document has a limited scope and limited number of pages, it contains one explicit reference to Islamic identity and one to Islamic personality. It must be pointed out, however, that no explicit definition of Islamic identity or Islamic personality is given. The first reference ties in with the theme of the first year, ‘the identity of the Muslim: belief and praxis’ (p. 5). The educational material of this year includes subjects like *al-kalima at-tayybiya* (proper/good speaking), *at-tahiyya* (greetings, saying *salam*), and how to behave in public spaces. These concepts refer to social and moral behaviour (*ta’deeb*, ethics). As for the second reference, the fifth year explicitly includes the subject of the Islamic personality (p. 32). No explicit definition, content or learning goals are included for this subject (or any other subject). This means that the IRE teacher lacks a guideline on what information s/he should provide, and on how s/he is supposed to work on, sharpen, and strengthen the Islamic personality of the Muslim pupils. What is most notable is that Islamic identity-related ‘concepts’ are mentioned throughout the whole six-year programme. The five pillars (*ta’leem*), the religious commands (*ta’leem*, *ta’deeb*) and religious prohibitions (*ta’leem*, *ta’deeb*, *akhlaq*) are the main components of the educational material of the 2001 curriculum. These appeal to the mind, the soul and the heart (Khan 1987; de Souza 2016a, 2016b, 2017; Azmat 2018). The material of each year contains a section about ‘moral behaviour’, in which the expected Islamic behaviour is described. The concepts listed in these yearly sections can be related to *tarbiyah*, *ta’leem* and *ta’deeb*, and to Islamic identity²⁷ (Kanmaz 2002; Fadil 2005; de Koning 2008, 2009; Ketner 2009; Ahmed 2012; Azabar et al. 2017; Lafrarchi et al. 2015) as viewed in a holistic approach (de Souza 2009, 2016b, 2017). By putting ‘belief and praxis’ side by side in the theme of the first year, the editors made it clear that there is a close link between the two. ‘Belief’ can be linked to the heart and soul, as praxis can be linked to the mind concept. The yearly recurring section ‘doctrine’ also includes elements referring to ‘Islamic behaviour’, like in the second year for example: ‘*adab*’ rules which need to be observed in regard to the Prophet and observing the *Sunna* (Al-Sharaf 2013; Abdullah 2018; Azmat 2018; Shakeel 2018); the meaning and benefits of saying *salam* (CIO 2001, p. 9). The yearly recurring section on worship, rituals and rites includes topics which can be related to ‘social’ behaviour as part of Islamic personality such as brotherhood (pp. 11, 19); Islamic courtesy and hospitality rules (p. 18); responsibility towards others (p. 18); respect for ‘*adab*’ rules in the mosque (p. 19); and the religious and social role of the mosque. As underlined by Hargreaves (2003), teaching is not only a matter of technique and of transmission of

²⁷ In using the term ‘identity’, we adhere to the vocabulary used in the IRE curricula. From a psychology perspective, the similarities and differences between ‘identity’ and ‘personality’ are a topic of discussion. We suspect that the writers/translators of the curricula did not consider this conceptual issue as nothing was mentioned regarding this conceptual difference.

rules (Rissanen 2012, 2014a, 2014b) and course content, but also constitutes a sincere contribution to personality development, and makes up a moral and social duty of IRE teachers (Shakeel 2018).

The 2001 document did not set out any guidelines or clearly defined framework, nor did it provide a clear vision of the role, overall objectives, content and contribution of IRE. In light of the prevalent idea back then that guest workers and their families would return to their home country, and how RE was understood in light of the Belgian constitution, most elements in the 2001 document seem to refer to an internal Islamic perspective. Thus, we can suppose a ‘learning into religion’ approach. We draw the conclusion that the 2001 curriculum was designed first and foremost to contribute to IRE as an integral part of Islamic (nurturing) education.

In our next discussion part, we turn to the curriculum that is currently in force in Flemish public secondary education, the 2012 programme (CIO 2012). This 2012 programme was inspired and based on a German IRE framework and a Turkish IRE programme.²⁸ The bibliography of the IRE programme contains chiefly German and Turkish bibliographic references. The IRE programme does not include copyright information, i.e., information about the editors, names of the Commission members, nor references of any kind to internal approval²⁹. As mentioned above, many questions were raised about the textbooks published by Diyanet. The curriculum still carries the title ‘draft IRE curriculum secondary education’³⁰ (CIO 2012).

Generally speaking, the 2012 curriculum can be seen as an improvement over the 2001 curriculum. The document contains educational objectives (p. 3), a table of contents with broad, general subjects (CIO, p. 45), subject-related learning goals (to a certain extent, pp. 67–68, 78, 82, 88, 102–103, 105–106, 124, 127, 136–137), a list of teaching methods (p. 249), and some notes for teachers on learning processes (pp. 244–246) and evaluation (p. 277). Bearing in mind that the Qur’an, the life of the Prophet and the *Ahadith* take centre stage in Islamic education, we notice that much attention is given to the life and personality of the Prophet (pp. 53–54) as an example to follow. The Qur’an receives much attention as well (pp. 55–57). The *ta’deeb* aspect is underlined through the various moral and behaviour-related topics that are covered (pp. 58–60). The curriculum refers to prayer, fasting, and pilgrimage to Mecca, which are examples of *ta’leem* or knowledge of the pillars of Islam. We need to bear in mind, though, that worship as such contains both a *ta’leem* and a *ta’deeb* component. ‘Being Muslim’ is a ‘way of life’, which implies that the mind, heart and soul are tightly intertwined through the formulation of an *an-niyya* or intention in daily life (Lafrarchi et al. 2015). The topics in the 2012 IRE curriculum clearly focus on shaping the character and the personality of the Muslim pupils, since the majority of topics and subject elements refer to Islamic behaviour (pp. 58–60), role models (p. 46), and worship (pp. 50–52) respectively. Furthermore, the pupil must be taught to ‘manage the religious concepts sufficiently, to be able to deal with changes in a dynamic way’ (p. 13). Sahin (2017a) and Lafrarchi (2017a) underline the importance of religious literacy as a tool and requirement to articulate an ‘Islamic way of life’ as encouraged in the *Ahadith* and the Qur’an. However, it remains the responsibility of the IRE teachers to develop the lesson plans, formulate the learning goals, and to select relevant illustrative lesson material.

It is notable that the 2012 document explicitly states that ‘no explicit position is taken with regard to the different existing schools of thought’ (p. 13). This point of view represents a missed opportunity to discuss internal diversity during IRE courses (Memon and Alhashmi 2018), since in recent years, as a result of successive immigration flows, diversity in the Muslim community is increasing. Notably, the document states that ‘a large part of the course hours should be devoted to the formation of the pupils’ in terms of their abilities to ‘interpret their personal knowledge of religion on the basis of their

²⁸ Information given during the compulsory seminar for IRE teachers.

²⁹ An internal qualitative approval process including for example expert committee of theologians and Belgian-educated educationalists experts selected based on high qualitative criteria, an outlined framework for the development and production process regarding the didactical-pedagogical aspects of the IRE programme, a qualitative evaluation and feedback process carried out by an expert panel.

³⁰ Until 20 August 2019. The CIO changed the front page, but the content did not change at all.

own experiences, and to situate, use, and organise this knowledge within their personal socio-cultural context'. Referring to the [Council of Europe \(2007\)](#) and REDCo report (2009), [Jackson \(2014\)](#) asserts that the present diversity provides a valuable opportunity to work on interreligious competences. By doing so, the IRE teacher—including the other recognised RE and humanism—responds indirectly to the expectations included in the mission statement of 28 January 2016, which stated that a minimum amount of hours needed to be allocated in education to interreligious dialogue and competences ([Lafrarchi 2017a, 2017b](#)). This agreement could be seen as an answer to the concerns formulated at the time by the educational stakeholders and policy makers in light of the Action Plans Radicalisation ([Flemish Government 2015b, 2016, 2017a, 2018](#)), which stress the importance of embedding IRE in the Belgian/Flemish context. Here, it can be noted that respect, tolerance and freedom of thought are inherently characteristic of Islam. The Qur'an stipulates that 'there is no coercion in belief' (S2/V256; [CIO 2012](#), pp. 4, 12, 16).

Coming to the heart of our discussion, we recapitulate that Islamic education is seen as a holistic learning process based on three central concepts: *tarbiyah*, *ta'leem* and *ta'deeb*. This educational approach encompasses the education of mind, heart and soul. In light of these three central concepts, religion is not just a set of religious rituals, rites and/or obligations, but a 'way of life', a system that encompasses and integrates the intellectual, moral, social, emotional, and religious aspects of the human being. First of all, relevant in relation to these concepts is that the document refers to emotional, physical, social and cultural development (p. 14). Nevertheless, the focus is clearly on cognitive development. The statement is made that inquiry, problem-solving capacities, critical thinking, making informed decisions, and learning occupy a central position within Islam (pp. 16–17). In addition, the document states that IRE courses, besides constituting a source of information, also have to stimulate a process through which pupils develop their cognitive capabilities and learn to gather information (pp. 5, 8, 16, 30). This underlines the importance the editors attached to cognitive aspects.

In our analysis section, we indicated that the 2012 curriculum explicitly refers to constructivism as a learning model (p. 34). (Social) constructivism can trigger pupils to think about their views, change their ideas and discuss the (religious) ideals they have ([Sieckelinck 2007, 2017; de Ruyter and Merry 2009; de Ruyter 2007, 2016](#)), bring up values they experience as important and discuss with their peers why these values are important to them; in this way, pupils can be brought together to learn from each other ([REDCo 2009](#)). This is valuable for both pupils and teachers ([Sieckelinck 2009, 2017; Sieckelinck and de Ruyter 2009](#)). Moreover, pupils expect their teachers to have a certain minimal knowledge about religious topics and beliefs ([REDCo 2009](#)). Pupils still need guidance and support from adults during their personality development process ([Sieckelinck 2017](#)) by using illustrative, attractive lesson material, which can stimulate and motivate pupils in their 'holistic' learning process, a process which ought to include critical thinking opportunities with their peers. Although the 2012 curriculum explicitly refers to 21st century education and the will to sustain pupils in a 'dynamic, changing' society, the work sheets do not meet these standards at all.

7. Conclusions

In the current European context, heated debates on the relevance and the place of religious education in public schools are increasingly taking place in the public, political and academic arenas. Islamic religious education (IRE), in particular, is often the object of intense scrutiny. The question 'What goes on during IRE courses?' is on everybody's lips. With regard to this education policy, Belgian stakeholders are placing high expectations on IRE teachers, the *Executief van de Moslims van België* (EMB, Executive of Muslims in Belgium) and the *Centrum voor Islamonderwijs* (CIO, Centre for Islamic Education). All three are explicitly appointed as partners in the 'Action Plan Radicalisation', Plan R, launched by the federal Belgian government ([National Taskforce 2015](#)) and the [Flemish Government \(2015b, 2016, 2017a, 2018\)](#). Moreover, they are expected to actively contribute to counter-discourse in the Belgian/Flemish society and a positive Islamic identity development. However, the question arises as to how these expectations should be realised in practice. We recall that the aim is not to analyse whether

IRE courses fulfil the formulated expectations of the stakeholders. Hence, the renewed attention on the (quality of) IRE courses after the attacks in Paris in 2015 and Brussels in 2016 is an important and relevant impetus to analyse both programmes. Thus, the core of this article is: the analysis of Flemish IRE programmes (CIO 2001, 2012) in light of three central concepts in Islamic—religious—education, namely *tarbiyah*, *ta'leem* and *ta'deeb*. The aim of this article was to evaluate whether these curricula (CIO 2001, 2012) contribute to an Islamic personality³¹ development. Our analysis of the 2012 curriculum reveals that this programme contains anchor points that can be used to promote and strengthen the Islamic personality development of Muslim pupils. The programme explicitly states that 'IRE lessons have the aim to instruct Muslim pupils in their religion'. Furthermore, we found only three references to Islamic identity development. In order to contribute to and stimulate Islamic personality development, IRE teachers need to invest considerable time in elaborating qualitative lessons plans, selecting suitable illustrative learning material and articulating realistic and achievable learning goals. This ought to be guided by the perspective that the learning process takes the form of a holistic learning experience whereby, via *tarbiyah*, *ta'leem* and *ta'deeb*, the minds, hearts and souls of Muslim pupils are positively stimulated and strengthened. Since the majority of present-day Flemish IRE teachers are first-generation Moroccan and Turkish migrants, questions arise about the ability of these teachers to adequately teach young Flemish Muslims who live in a super-diverse West-European society. The lack of an up-to-date, Flemish-specific IRE handbook adds to this problem (and is also an issue for Belgian-educated IRE teachers). Since the 2012 curriculum contains only a non-exhaustive list of teaching and evaluation methods, it is left to the appreciation—and skills—of the individual IRE teacher how best to stimulate and strengthen the pupils' Islamic personality development. In order to remedy this training deficit and to clearly comply with the requirements of the education stakeholders, a three-year Flemish teacher training is a compulsory requirement for IRE teachers since 2018–2019, based on the Mission Statement of 9 November 2016.

These observations lead to the conclusion that there is an urgent need for an updated qualitative Flemish IRE curriculum and IRE textbooks, developed by an expert committee of Belgian-educated educationalists experts. A new Flemish IRE curriculum imperatively needs to pay (more) attention to the development of affective, spiritual, physical and overall cultural skills, referring to the holistic approach of Islamic—religious—education in which the development of the mind, the heart and the soul are strongly intertwined. To achieve this overall education goal, it is necessary to develop a qualitative didactical-pedagogical framework that guides Flemish IRE teachers in tapping into the capacities, talents, interests and passions of the pupils, and in educating the pupils in cognitive and socio-communicative skills, such as inquiring, questioning, relating to others, dialoguing, being inspired, and pursuing religious and non-religious ideals. We recommend formulating coherent IRE learning goals that inform the overarching goals of public schools and meet the interests and needs of the various stakeholders, first of all the Muslim pupils themselves. In writing a new, qualitative, up-to-date IRE curriculum, an expert committee would need to take into account the specific didactical and pedagogical religious methodology and draw from established theoretical frameworks. Additionally, we advise to add explicit references and examples as to how IRE teachers can stimulate and strengthen Islamic personality development through illustrative, active didactical methods. To develop a tailor-made IRE didactics, more research is needed. We suggest investing more in evidence-based IRE research to eliminate the current deficiencies of Belgian/Flemish IRE courses in public schools. Based on the research findings a qualified board can elaborate qualitative framework for IRE in Flanders. Last but not least, we strongly recommend standardising the IRE teacher training programmes in terms of their content, learning goals and competences and developing a tailor-made framework for IRE lecturers in order to elaborate qualitative IRE courses for the training of novice IRE teachers in Flemish teacher training departments.

³¹ We choose to use the concept personality in this article (see footnote 15).

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Appendix A

2001 IRE Curriculum and 2012 IRE Curriculum	
Digital Search	Manual Search
Identity, Islamic identity, <i>akhlaq</i> , <i>adab</i> , <i>tarbiyah</i> , behaviour, moral behaviour, social behaviour, behaviour, companions, ethics, identity, intellect, Islamic ethics, Islamic personality, mind, moral development, personality, Prophet, religiosity, soul	Behaviour, example of the Prophet, good manners, Islamic behaviour, <i>ihsan</i> , <i>iman</i> , moral principles, Qur'anic rules, way of life, behaviour of the Prophet, <i>ahadith</i> , <i>sunna</i> , companions, humility, intellect and behaviour, morality, Prophet and <i>ahadith</i> , life of the Prophet and conduct, racism, Islamic character

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