# School as a Space for Recognition: Reading the Motivations of Turkish-Belgian Parents through Spatial Identification

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ABSTRACT    *This paper explores a school in Brussels, L'Ecole des Etoiles, as a space whereby Turkish-Belgian parents aim to negotiate and change "the terms of recognition" and as a choice that provides parents with opportunities to realize their dreams regarding the education of their children. Conducting semi-structured interviews and participant observation, I carried out fieldwork among Turkish-Belgian mothers and investigated their motivations for choosing to send their children to L'Ecole des Etoiles; their motivations are strongly related with how they imagine the school as a space. A particular emphasis is placed on the Hizmet Movement, a voluntary, transnational, faith-inspired civil movement, which has inspired the opening of schools around the world, including L'Ecole des Etoiles. The spatial identification of parents with the school is influenced to a certain extent by how they relate to the movement and its ideals.*

## Introduction

The role of schools in multicultural politics has been significant; they have been considered "as a site both of tension and risk around culture and diversity but also as a possible solution to racialized prejudice and inequalities" (Byrne & De Tona 2014:478). Mixed schooling has been promoted in some countries to reduce segregation by making daily encounters possible between students of different origins (Abbott 2010; Knox 2011). However, structural limitations in most communities and segregation in many schools significantly restrict the opportunities for creation of a diverse school environment and possibilities of interaction between pupils from different groups (Wilson 2014). Initiatives like integrated school projects in Northern Ireland aim to provide education to children with a different or no religious background in a system where segregation prevails. A group of parents from two main cultural communities (Catholic and Protestant) were concerned about the negative outcomes of strict segregation in

schools and their efforts led to the opening of first integrated school in Belfast in 1981 (Abbott 2010). One aim of these schools is the "nurturing each child according to their own ethnic, religious and cultural background, in order to foster within them respect for each other's different values and beliefs" (Abbott 2010:847). The role of parents in mixed schools has also attracted attention in the sense that they make a conscious choice to send their children to these schools and to meet parents from a different ethnic, religious or cultural background in the school environment, which acts as "key sites of encounter and incremental learning for parents" (Wilson 2014:102). These sites transform the way parents perceive the school as a space and the way they position themselves in the school "while shifting the dynamic structures and boundaries of the spaces in which actions take place "(Carreon et al. 2005:468).

There is a plethora of research investigating the education and integration of minority children within the multicultural communities they live, however, the motivations and views of minority parents with regards to schooling of their children have not received sufficient attention in Belgium (Hermans 2006). Drawing from school-based observations and semi-structured interviews with parents of *l'Ecole des Etoiles*, this paper investigates the identification and engagement of Turkish-Belgian parents with school space and how their identification is projected into their motivations for choosing *l'Ecole des Etoiles*. Most research participants are highly-educated women with a compelling aspiration to send their children to "white schools" where they can both receive a high quality education and befriend native Belgian children. However, their choices are severely restricted due to their ethnic background, which can significantly define to what extent they can have access to certain schools (Levine-Rasky 2009). For these parents, *l'Ecole des Etoiles* acts as an inclusive school space providing them with the opportunity to voice their opinions about the schooling of their children and bringing them "into a visible sphere of engagement" (Lea et al. 2011:265).

The article briefly mentions the historical background of migration in Belgium and educational gap between native and minority students. Secondly, Turkish-based educational initiatives and the educational activities of Gülen Movement are discussed from various perspectives as well as the implications of the educational philosophy of Gülen. The article then looks into how parents negotiate terms of recognition in relation to spatial identification with the school and argues that this identification and negotiation of recognition is reflected in their motivations in choosing *l'Ecole des Etoiles*.

### Historical development

Belgium has attracted large numbers of immigrants since the 1920s. The first wave of immigrants came from Poland and Italy, followed by Moroccans

and Turks in the 1960s (Phalet et al. 2007). The inescapable industrial recession of 1974 slowed immigration, but the process of family reunification continued (Atalik & Beeley 1992). Immigrants, initially considered as guest workers, became permanent residents, and consequently, the second-migrant-generation overran the labor market because of the transition from industrial economy to the service sector (Phalet et al. 2007).

The first generation of Turkish immigrants left their homeland in search of better economic standards and higher incomes. The Turkish government had hoped then to ease growing unemployment and to gain foreign currency through its emigrants (Castles & Miller 1998). The region of Emirdag, located in the province of Afyon, had sent out the biggest number of immigrants to Belgium (Timmerman 2000). Emigrants from this rural part of Turkey generally lacked proper education. The opportunities for them to acquire high levels of education and professional skills were limited, if not non-existent. In general, most men coming from this part of Turkey had achieved primary education, whilst women had spent even fewer years in school. Farming was considered the main means of survival and subsistence rather than schooling, which was regarded as optional and not contributing to the household economic productivity (Martin 1991; Crul & Vermeulen 2003).

The number of Turkish immigrants in Belgium in 1993 was registered as 88,269, 0.9% of the total population (Poulain 1994), but the flow of immigrants began to decline in 1999. By then, large numbers of Turkish immigrants had acquired Belgian citizenship (Diedrich, Cook & Lindo 2004), and up to 2001, Turkish immigrants still counted as the third largest minority group in Belgium, after Italians and Moroccans (Phalet et al. 2007).

### Educational gap

In Belgium, schooling is compulsory, and primary education begins at the age of six. Secondary school succeeds primary education and ends at around the age of twelve. At this stage, the secondary school is divided in its turn into four general sections or directions: the General Secondary Education called ASO (*Algemeen Secundair Obderwijs*) for Dutch, or ESG (*Enseignement Secondaire General*) for French, which both allow students to continue studying in university or college; the Technical Secondary Education or TSO (*Technisch Secundair Onderwijs* or *Enseignement Secondaire Technique*) which focuses more on technical education and prepares students for the job market as well as for higher education; the Vocational Secondary Education or BSO (*Beroepssecundair Onderwijs* or *Enseignement Secondaire Professionnel*) which is a very practical and very job-specific education; and the Art Secondary Education KSO (*Kunst Secundaire Onderwijs* or *Enseignement Secondaire Artistique*) which offers a more developed general education

with active art practice and performance (see also Phalet et al. 2007; Eurydice 2009/2010; Fleischmann 2011).

Free education is a guaranteed and a protected "right for all" in Belgium; however, there is a discrepancy between discourse and practice in the sense that education for children of immigrants has for a long time been a highly debated topic in many host-countries, including Belgium. Perhaps at the origin of such controversial debates is an existent gap between native Belgian students and immigrant students. Compared with other OECD countries, Belgium has recorded large achievement gaps between native and other ethnic-minority children (Marks 2006). Although since 1991 Belgian migration policies have been adopted, shaped and adapted to optimize integration (Phalet & Heath 2011), immigrant children remain disadvantaged for several reasons: lack of opportunity to learn Dutch or French at home; parents' lack of sufficient knowledge about the Belgian education system and its functions; and parents have poor social capital and in some cases face racial discrimination because of cultural and religious differences (Alba & Waters 2011; Stevens 2008; Fleischmann 2011).

Children of Turkish origin are among the most disadvantaged ethnic-minority groups when it comes to educational attainment within Norway, Belgium and the Netherlands (Heath & Brinbaum 2007). On a wider European scale, schooling systems in Sweden and France are said to be "more open", whereas those in Germany and Austria are seen as "more challenging" for immigrant Turkish children. On a different note, Belgium fits into neither one of the two previous schooling systems. It is rather located in-between. Even though Belgium offers relatively good opportunities for immigrant children to follow a potential academic track, it ranks high in the number of dropouts from lower secondary school. This is mainly linked to the early tracking, or "downstreaming" that most Belgian students face when repeating their school year, compelling them to follow a lower educational track (see also Crul et al. 2012).

According to the 2001 Belgian Census, "in order of importance, parental education, accumulated wealth (as measured by ownership and quality of housing), employment and occupational class explain most educational inequality" (Phalet et al., 2007:390). When related to Turkish immigrant students, education level among the first generation of Turkish immigrants is low (Crul et al. 2012). This in turn impacts the parents' profession and consequently the type of schooling that their children follow. In the central area of Brussels, it is estimated that more than 80% of the parents of students in technical schools were born abroad (mostly in Morocco, the Congo and Turkey). Although Belgian students in technical education form 87.5%, there is an under-representation of students of foreign descent in general education with an over-representation in vocational schools (Jacobs & Rea 2007; Neels 2000).

Between 1995 and 1996, the number of Belgian students following general education in the last year of secondary school was 35% higher than non-EU students. Compared with vocational education, the ratio was 22% Belgian students against 60% non-EU students (Timmerman 2000). A more recent study, however, has shown that children of Turkish origin are six times less likely to acquire a university degree than their non-minority counterparts (this is equivalent to a ratio of 3% against 18%) and three times more likely to have less than full secondary qualifications (36% against 13%) (Phalet et al., 2007:399). Apparently, Turkish-Belgian students outnumber Belgians in drop-out rates (European Commission 2013; Phalet & Swyngedouw 2003; Crul et al. 2012). The majority of them attend vocational schools, labeled "ghetto schools", mostly common in urban communes (see also Timmerman 1995; Fleischmann 2011; European Commission 2013). Although in Belgium the choice of school is not confined to one's residence and neighborhood, immigrant parents seem to be left with little alternative but the "ghettos" (Fleischmann 2011).

**Turkish-based educational initiatives**

The educational projects of Turkish-Belgians are provided either by faith-based and affiliated inspired organizations, or by state-organized projects that seek to safeguard and protect the cultural, linguistic and religious values of this minority group. At the European level, institutions such as schools, mosques and education centers are usually founded by well-known transnational organizations such as The Islamic Federation of Belgium (*Milli Gorus*), the Turkish Islamic Foundation of Belgium (*Diyanet*) (Yanasmayan 2010), and the *Hizmet* movement. Although a few initiatives and extensions from larger local organizations in Turkey are available, *Milli Gorus*, *Diyanet* and *Hizmet* remain the most popular and attract large numbers of followers and members from the Turkish-Belgian community (Yildirim 2012). Elaborating the work of these organizations and movements goes beyond the scope of this paper. I shall, however, try to give a broader idea of their educational activities, with particular focus on the role that the Hizmet movement played in founding *l'Ecole des Etoiles*, enforcing a uniform conformity with its principles, its values and norms.

The Turkish Islamic Foundation of Belgium (TIFB) was established in 1982. It currently owns and runs 67 mosques and more than 100 associations. It has 28,000 members and offers services to 140,000 people, among them 5,000 students following classes in religion and cultural values. The foundation's main mission is to educate Turkish-Belgians about the history, culture and religion of their native homeland and to provide religious services through teaching the *Qur'an*, *hadith* (a collection of traditions containing sayings of the Prophet Muhammad) and about the life of the Prophet. Other educational classes offered by

the foundation include the French, Flemish and Turkish languages, computer and needlecraft, mother and child care, and driving lessons in Turkish. There are also cultural lessons which offer Turkish folk-music, Sufi music and Turkish musical instruments. But one of the main motives of the foundation is to provide students in need with scholarships, funded through alms and donations (http://www.diyanet.be/Anasayfa.aspx).

The Islamic Federation of Belgium (IFB) is a branch of a transnational organization spread around Europe (Yanasmayan 2010). Services provided by this federation do not differ, in theory, from the ones offered by the TIFB. In practice, however, different methods are applied in terms of dealing with educational issues and transmitting cultural values. The IFB emphasizes the unification of the role of Islamic religion rather than the reinforcement of cultural and ethnic bonds. The TIFB, for instance, considers both cultural and religious education as two intertwined items. Volunteers at the IFB teach Qur'an along other religious services. They give language courses, organize socio-cultural activities and even help children with their homework. Part of the IFB is the Avicenna Institute, an Islamic school for girls, not recognized by the Belgian state, which attracts students from all over Europe because of its particular Islamic education in Arabic. Students at the Avicenna are also taught social and cultural sciences alongside Islamic education. The school was opened in 1991 and currently has 150 enrolled students (Yildirim 2012).

The Hizmet movement is a voluntary, faith-inspired, transnational civil society movement founded on the principles and ideas of Fethullah Gulen, a classic Turkish-Muslim thinker and writer. Followers of Gulen have supported the foundation of four schools in the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, with 1230 enrolled students, and one in Brussels with 340 enrolled students. *L'Ecole des Etoiles* is the only French school founded by the movement, with two locations, one in Charleroi and the other in Haren where I conducted my research.

### The Gulen Movement in educational activities

Since the beginning of the second millennium, the Hizmet movement has become a global subject of interest to many scholars in the field of social and political sciences. The voluntary, apolitical, religion-inspired and transnational nature of the movement has inspired many books, conferences, seminars, workshops and scholarly articles. My interest in the movement grew along my research work, since *l'Ecole des Etoiles* was founded by people inspired by Gulen, and some informants were themselves active members of the movement. An extensive analysis of the movement stretches beyond the scope of this work. I shall, however, tackle the educational activities of the movement, since they influence and are linked to the motivations of parents to send their children to *l'Ecole des Etoiles* (see Khan

2011; Cetin 2010; Ebaugh 2010; Hunt & Aslandogan 2007; Unal & Williams 2000; Gulen 1996).

Gulen is a Turkish Muslim preacher, writer and activist who has inspired the foundation of more than one thousand schools in many countries around the world, as well as dormitories, universities, and educational, cultural and interfaith dialogue centers (Ebaugh 2010). Gulen served as a preacher during the 1960s in Turkey. His ideas influenced many people from different sectors of Turkish society, not only because of his vast teaching about traditional Islamic knowledge, but also due to the diversity in the topics he delivered (Western philosophy, sciences, human rights, the importance of education and knowledge accumulation) (Ebaugh & Koc 2007).

His views diverged greatly from those of other scholars in Islam. For instance, he argued for the compatibility of Islamic values and faith with modern life and science, and proposed a tolerant approach towards non-Muslims by suggesting common grounds that can be achieved through dialogue and tolerance (Aras & Caha 2002; Agai 2002; Kalyoncu 2007). He called on people to build schools instead of mosques and to take active roles in society, merging activism with piety, which Ozdalga (referring to Weber, 2000) defined as 'worldly ascetism'. The main characteristic of the Gulen movement – or the Hizmet movement – is the provision of non-stop service to others and self-dedication to good deeds (Ebaugh & Koc 2007).

As Afsaruddin has stated, "Hizmet, service to God through one's work, particularly teaching, is a central tenet of Gulen's educational philosophy and has been taken to be indicative of "worldly asceticism" on his part" (2005:20). Thus, according to the movement's ideology, the way to salvation is not only attained through traditional religious practices and going to the mosque, but also through alternative contemporary forms of Islamic activity (Agai 2002:34). Gulen says that the consent of God can be achieved by serving one's society through self-discipline and hard work (Aras & Caha 2002). Therefore, the movement places great emphasis on good manners, hard work and shared responsibility towards other people (Ozdalga 2003).

As a matter of fact, schools founded by Gulen-inspired volunteers, often referred to as "Gulen schools", were named regardless of Gulen's personal wishes (Michel 2003), as there seems to be no organic link between Gulen and the schools other than a spiritual one (see Mohamed 2007:561). The educational philosophy of Gulen can be summarized in the following quotation from one of his books:

"As for man, real life is accompanied by knowledge and education. Those neglecting learning and teaching, even if they may be alive, can be considered as dead, because the aim of man's creation consists of seeing, understanding and teaching learned knowledge to others". (Agai 2002)

Historically, the first educational initiatives took place in Central Asia after the fall of the USSR in 1991 (Clement 2007). It was basically the historical, linguistic and ethnic proximity to those countries that attracted volunteers from the movement to take such initiatives that they considered a sacred vocation (Demir, Balci & Akkok 2000). Soon after, these initiatives spread to other parts of the world, stretching from the Caucasus to Africa and from Russia all the way to the Philippines. Volunteers on these missions included Turkish businessmen, teachers and ordinary people (Williams 2007). The schools they founded are secular and follow the national curriculum of the country in which they have settled. Notably, each school is an independent institution in the sense that administrative decisions and regulations are set by principals and teachers (Mohamed 2007). Schools funds, however, are supplied through various resources such as Turkish private companies or state support (Woodhall 2005; Peuch 2004; Michel 2003).

In many parts of the world, the quality of education provided by Gulen schools is relatively high, especially in the field of physical sciences where high technology laboratories and computer rooms are provided. Perhaps shedding more light on the educational philosophy of Gulen is appropriate here. There has not been one particular ideology promoted within the Gulen educational philosophy. Rather, a more ethical and moral pedagogical approach has been applied, in which educators act as role models for students to follow (Ozdalga 2003; Michel 2003). From Gulen's perspective, teaching is of a sacred nature, and accordingly, teachers need to be equipped with the skills and values necessary to deliver their knowledge to pupils through role modeling (Mohamed 2007; Said 2006).

For Gulen, science and faith are not "only compatible but complementary" (Ebaugh 2010:35). He imagines a "Golden Generation" whose mind is nurtured by science and whose heart is enlightened by faith (Agai 2002; Nelson 2005; Mohamed 2007). From this perspective, Gulen's educational philosophy is one of an encompassing and humanitarian nature (Afsaruddin 2005:21), and accordingly these schools irrespectively accept Muslim and non-Muslim students (Peuch 2004; Aras & Caha 2002; Michel 2003). In fact, Islamic religion is not being taught in Gulen schools if it is not part of the national curriculum and no explicit reference to Islam has been observed in the curriculum of schools. Despite the fact that religion is the inspirational source in the emergence of the movement (Agai 2002), the ethos promoted in the schools is universal and encourages hard work, tolerance, compassion and honesty. These ethical codes, referred to by Agai as "Islamic ethics on education" (2002) are underpinned in the Islamic doctrine;

however, their expression is not restricted to Muslims (Michel 2003; Agai 2002; Clement 2007). Their humanitarian and "trans-confessional" approach is what characterizes Gulen schools and the movement itself (Ozdalga 2003:67).

Even so, the Gulen movement has been subject to criticism by several social and political scientists. The fact that the exact number of its members is not known raises doubts as to whether the movement holds a second hidden political agenda. The movement has been viewed as an Islamizing threat to Turkey by some whilst other critics have accused the movement of having an anti-democratic and hierarchical structure within which Gulen exhibits his omnipotent power to drive his followers to bring the government down (Ozdalga 2003; Aras & Caha 2002). Other accounts, like Ozdalga's, presume these criticisms to be a counter-action to the movement's educational achievements. The fact that no thorough analysis has been made about the volunteers' position, status and their relations to one another may raise doubts as to whether the movement benefits from a strict hierarchical network or a 'de-centralised polymorphic' structure (Williams 2007:586; Toguslu in press; n.d.).

### Methodological Reflections

*L'Ecole des Etoiles* was founded in 2005 in Schaerbeek municipality of Brussels. At the time of research (September 2012-February 2013), there were 380 students in primary section and 180 students in secondary one. According to the enrolment data, 58 percent of the students were Turkish-Belgians, 32 percent Moroccan Belgians, eight percent native Belgians and two percent from other national backgrounds. As a private non-confessional school, *l'Ecole des Etoiles* was subsidized by the French Community. The school was a member of FELSI (*La Fédération des Etablissements Libres Subventionnés Indépendants*) during the research.

School directors and parents committee facilitated my meetings with parents. Once I established rapport with a few parents, I accessed others through snowballing technique. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents (12 women, 1 men) and two school directors. The interviews lasted between one and three hours and they were transcribed verbatim. The interview language was Turkish. Most parents had a bachelor's degree. Being a Turkish, Muslim female researcher helped to build an intimate relationship with the participants, who often considered me an insider.

I used the ground-theory method to analyze the data. Open-ended interviews at the onset of the research helped to discover some preliminary insights and seek new horizons (Charmaz 2006). Semi-structured interviews allowed an in-depth exploration of the participants' worlds through "probing beneath the

surface and digging into the scene" (Charmaz 2006:23). One challenge may be the difficulty of accessing parents from different socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds. Due to barriers such as time, language and distance, the research group could not be more diverse. Still, I tried to achieve "theoretical saturation" for emerging categories (Glaser & Strauss 1974).

### Negotiating Terms of Recognition

Charles Taylor, in his work on the politics of recognition, analyzed the dialogical character of identity as connected to the matter of recognition. He believed that socially constructed identity and the recognition of it became problematic only after the modern period. Today the problem is "not the need for recognition but the conditions in which the attempt to be recognized can fail" (Guttman 1994:35). He connected the argument on the politics of equal recognition to the increasing need for the recognition of the ideal and authentic culture, and argued that after the acknowledgment of the identity as constructed in dialogue with others, recognition has gained more significance today. He stated that there are two levels in which the discourse of recognition can be studied: "the intimate sphere" and "the public sphere". The former is where identity is constructed in relation to significant others whilst the latter refers to a sphere where the significance of the politics of equal recognition increases day by day. Taylor focused on the two different meanings of the politics of public recognition in the public sphere. The first meaning is about the politics of universal dignity which refers to the recognition of the same equal dignity of everyone universally, and the second is the politics of difference, which is recognizing the unique and distinct identity of everyone. He analyzed the overlapping and clashing implications of these two meanings and looked into the extent that liberal discourse, which can also be seen as another particular idea with claims of universal recognition, can meet the needs of both. According to him, individuals have the potential both for equal worth and for belonging to a culture and defining an identity in relation to it. The proponents of the first interpretation claim that the second one goes against the idea of non-discrimination, whilst the supporters of the second meaning believe that the first interpretation does not allow the survival of alternative identities but establishes homogeneity.

It has been generally acknowledged in multicultural communities that there is an increasing need not for "a difference-blind social space" but for spaces where distinct characteristics can be maintained and cherished (Guttman 1994:40). Taylor argued that "the demand for recognition is now explicit" and that this demand requires "acknowledging the worth" of cultures and "recognizing the equal value" of what these cultures have (Guttman 1994:64).

**Achieving Recognition in School Space**

Schools are "multidimensional spaces" embedded within a complex and diverse network of social relations (Bowen 2010:112). The multidimensional nature of school space can create new and alternative ways of "thinking and using space" (Mei-Hui Yang 2004). Yang pondered on the "new forms of collective identities" constructed within those spaces and underlined that they are different from the ones championed by the state. According to Yang, representational spaces are "new civil spaces of grassroots organization, kinship regrouping, fund raising for the public good, local community building, and reconstructions of the terrain of ritual polities" (Mei-Hui Yang 2004:728).

*L'Ecole des Etoiles* functions as an official educational space as well as a civil space founded by the support of grassroots organizations and commoners who were motivated to educate particularly immigrant-origin younger generations. Parents often attributed a symbolic and transcendental meaning to the way the school is organized and manifested as a space by directors, teachers, students and themselves. Obviously, *l'Ecole des Etoiles* "has a social centrality for those who share a structure of feeling and seek to establish an identity around it" (Hetherington 1998:108). Hetherington defined them as "spaces of occasion in which the values and political views of a group might be expressed and around which identities are at the same time performed" (Hetherington, 1998:108). The common goal around which parents' desires are gathered is to achieve a value-sensitive education which will incrementally transform the terms of recognition through a differentiated self-image (Hetherington 1998:126). The struggle for recognition goes along with getting rid of the imposed, demeaning self-images (Guttman 1994:65). For parents, becoming part of a space where they have an influential role in negotiating the norms and ethos and hence gain recognition can be defined as "a performative process that has a distinct spatiality". (Hetherington 1998:102). On a related note, they reconstruct the politics of recognition (Guttman 1994), defined as terms of recognition by Appadurai, which means an "ethical obligation to extend a sort of moral cognizance to persons who shared worldviews deeply different from our own" (2004:78).

Parents thought that in *l'Ecole des Etoiles*, the linguistic and cultural background of children was valued and considered an invaluable asset. Mrs Temizer, the director of the primary school, explained how they guide teachers on how to approach students when they speak their ethnic language:

> If students speak their own language, never ever give the impression that their languages do not matter. You have to get them to agree that they are advantaged in that they have access to several languages and they experience several cultures. They have got very high potentials and they can

achieve a very good status in the future. They have to develop their ethnic language too, but not in the school. You have to learn French in the school, because you cannot learn it anywhere else. So, we need to show the advantages of their languages and make it meaningful for them.

Since parents feel that their cultural background is respected by the school management, they feel at ease about discussing certain issues with the school directors and teachers. School space acts as a platform where they can raise their doubts and concerns about their cultural sensitivities besides their children's education. One of the parents, Elif, mentioned that their religious values were not being judged and no one questioned the legitimacy of them in *l'Ecole des Etoiles*. She referred to an incident between a teacher and her daughter:

> There was an aid campaign for Africa in the school and my daughter told her teacher that she thought God was not fair, because God did not give enough food to people in Africa. Her teacher explained that it was not God but there were bad people in the world and they were the reasons for the poverty in Africa. Just after this happened, her teacher called me and told about my daughter's question and her response to it. She said she may not have given her the correct answer, so I should know about it and explain it to my daughter again.

Such incidents seem to have reinforced parents' feelings of confidence in school while increasing their attachment to the humanitarian ideals promoted by school and the Gulen Movement. This is not only a recognition of the cultural background of students but also their parents whose engagement have been made visible in school sphere and whose opinions have been deemed necessary with regards to certain matters. Seda, who worked as an Islam teacher in several schools, remarked that she felt different in L'Ecole des Etoiles:

> I am not speaking out of imagination, I know by experience. I go to six different schools to teach then go to L'Ecole des Etoiles to pick up my children. In L'Ecole des Etoiles, I feel the relations are more humane, softer. I feel relaxed as a person, not like an object or someone being talked to for the sake of formality. I can flexibly wander around the school corridors, ask any question I like.

Seda developed an identification with the school due to the warm welcome and positive environment, where she enjoyed the flexibility and received respect as an equal individual. For most informants, their feelings about the school were shaped by how they were approached by the teachers and school staff, since this defined to a certain degree whether they could develop a positive spatial identification with the school.

**Why L'Ecole des Etoiles?**

Parents develop strategies with regards to what kinds of schools they prefer. They compare the opportunities provided by different schools while evaluating their expectations about the future of their children. The choices they make about schooling can impact the decisions of others who share similar social environments. The motivations of Turkish-Belgian parents for choosing to send their children to L'Ecole des Etoiles are various. It is important to underline that their choice for this particular school space does not only guarantee an education for their children but also satisfies their aspirations to a certain extent by recognizing their position as parents and hearing their voices. What they want for their children in a sense becomes what they want for themselves. They do not only ask recognition of their children's culture, language and religion, they also ask for their background to be recognized and respected.

Many parents dreamt of a more mixed school environment for their children. Yet, they were also aware this was hard to achieve soon considering the current structural challenges in their communities. The fundamental motive for most of informants was the attitude of the teachers towards their children and to them as parents. Parents were in general relieved to see that teachers and directors genuinely cared about the future of their children and tried to improve student outcomes. They also desired a moral education rather than a directly religious one. Some parents chose L'Ecole des Etoiles on the grounds that it was founded by Gulen-inspired people and Gulen's ideals were expected to be visible in the school space. Yet, it is rarely given as the sole reason for their choice.

**Dreaming of Multiculture**

Schools with "a social centrality for those who share a structure of feeling and seek to establish an identity around it are likely also to be what we may call spaces of occasion, in which the values and political views of a group might be expressed and around which identities are at the same time performed" (Hetherington 1998:108). L'Ecole des Etoiles can be considered as a space of occasion with a social centrality for most parents who share the dream of a positive, less discriminatory and less segregated future for their children, whilst supporting the ideals championed by the school and encouraging their children to develop an identity around these values.

The school management wants to address the wider Belgian community, however, the school has rather become a place for discriminated people with mainly Turkish and Moroccan ethnic origins. Despite the welcoming philosophy of the school, it is a matter of debate whether or to what extent the school can be

successful in creating a multicultural school environment. During the interview, Mr Demir referred to the structure of society in Europe and how this was linked to why they could not attract native Belgian students:

> Society is arranged in a compartmentalized way here. There are borders be-tween the neighborhoods and schools. The lines are drawn between spaces. We have not planned it this way. This is how the system works in an elitist and discriminatory way. We invite everyone to our school but what we are doing is like a little drop in the ocean. Plus, there is no alternative. If these students go to another school, it will most probably be a ghetto and there is always the possibility that they will be discriminated against. The conjuncture of the educational system does not provide equal chances for everyone. There are elitist schools which are usually the church schools and ghetto schools mainly for those who have different ethnic origins than Belgium.

In the school, there is a visible effort to promote similarities and togetherness with other ethnic groups rather than an "attachment to otherness, difference and marginality" (Hetherington 1998:108). Although as a mission it seems difficult that this intermingling will be achieved soon, different strategies are being em-ployed by parents outside the school. The school management encourages parents to send their children to clubs opened by municipalities so that their children will have an opportunity to make friends with children of different ethnic origins. It seems to be of the utmost significance to many parents to mix with others and not to live within ethnic boundaries. Deniz was worried about her son growing up without any native Belgian friends and registered the boy on an English course:

> We cannot expect the school to do everything. We have to find solutions ourselves. I want my son to meet children from different segments of so-ciety and become friends with them. If not now, he will meet them when he goes to university. We have to try hard to open their minds to the world outside. I begged him to register with the music academy. The school also advises us to send our children to clubs. I followed him once in this Eng-lish class and saw that he stands outside, puts his hands into his pockets. I told him to go and meet other children there. He does not like to do something he is not used to.

Deniz feared that her son would have adaptation troubles in the future if he did not mingle with other kids, especially native Belgian children. She was aware of the structural challenges and that the school would not achieve to attract other students in the short-term. Most parents wanted their children to receive educa-tion in a more mixed environment and this often appeared to be their biggest concern about sending their children to *l'Ecole des Etoiles*.

Seda wanted her children to adapt to the multicultural society in the future. Although *l'Ecole des Etoiles* did not seem to be achieving this soon, she did not consider it to be an obstacle since she thought that the positive dimensions of the school were more necessary to the individual development of her children. Unlike some other parents, Seda did not believe that the integration of her children would be problematic as long as they completed their individual development in a healthy and peaceful way:

> My children may be in a school where the majority is of immigrant origin. However, they receive good quality education, they are being treated well and they are cared about as individuals. My son's teacher is very thoughtful and conscientious. She apologizes when she thinks she has not done her best and asks parents for support. She treats her students like her own children. He has changed three teachers till now, all of them were like his mothers. Every day before they start the class, they discuss the daily agenda. Before the elections, they learned about the parties and elections. The administration is also very good both in terms of characteristics and managerial skills. My son will grow up with self-confidence, receive good quality education and he will be loved and respected by his parents and teachers. I do not think he could have as much self-confidence in other schools where there is strict punishment. My child is willing to go to school, he wants to stay longer when I go to pick him up. I would stop to think for a while if he did not want to stay there longer. The technology is being used to the maximum level with smart-boards and so on. I believe my children are being prepared for the future in a good way. It may be seen as a ghetto but this is no problem for me as long as he is respected. My priority is that he will have a grounded identity. If he has a peaceful relationship with himself, he can easily be friends with others. In L'Ecole des Etoiles, he is at peace with himself. I have an open-minded outlook to the world and I have friends from diverse backgrounds. They are aware of this, so I am not really concerned about their future.

For Seda, her experiences in schools formed the basis of her choice about her children's schooling. She believed that children with other ethnic origins were not treated well when they are mixed with Belgian children in school. Being a teacher herself, she had witnessed several times how her colleagues were referring to children with different ethnic origins and their parents, such as "her mother is stupid, anyway", "her father still does not speak French, he is a truck driver so he is always away for months", "she has six children, which one should she take care of". These negative comments, she stated, often dominate the positive ones.

**The Teacher Question**

The experiences of parents with previous schools are highly influential on how they define their relationship with *l'Ecole des Etoiles* and accordingly their comments incorporated many comparisons between different schools and teachers. It was emphasized by parents that a trusting relationship with teachers was vital for a positive interaction. They were particularly dissatisfied with teachers who were uncaring, not sacrificing, and not idealistic. «The teacher simply did not care about my child's future» was a common phrase during most interviews. Almost all parents believed that the teachers in *l'Ecole des Etoiles* were more willing to sacrifice their time for the students and they paid more attention to thoughts of parents. Parents were particularly content with the fact that their ideas about their children's education mattered to the teachers.

Selin's present choices about her children's education were primarily influenced by what her daughter had experienced in another school:

> She was constantly failing maths, and thus she lost her self-confidence. I went to see her teacher, because just a few students passed the course. I thought the problem was the teacher. I was not taken seriously. I found private math teachers when we went to Turkey on holidays. Plus, my daughter was cringing with embarrassment. She had no friends but one. Now she regained her confidence here.

Besides the failure of her daughter, Selin was worried that she was ignored as a parent. When she decided to send her daughter to *l'Ecole des Etoiles* with the advice of her friends, she especially liked seeing strong links between teachers and parents. Her position as a parent was reaffirmed and recognized by teachers and this served to increase her motivation in choosing *l'Ecole des Etoiles*.

A mother of three, Meral defined herself as a member of the Gulen movement. She was one of the parents who had supported the foundation of *l'Ecole des Etoiles*. During the first three years in *l'Ecole des Etoiles*, she was quite content with the teacher. This last year, she had received complaints about her son and she was surprised because what her son told her and what the teacher said about him were not consistent. Although she was having reservations about continuing to send her son to *l'Ecole des Etoiles*, she believed that she would find a solution to this by cooperating with the school directors and staff. How Meral related herself to the school as a space has implications beyond her son's schooling. She thought that she could at least make her voice heard in this school, unlike what she had experienced in other schools trying to enlist her two older daughters. Her emotional attachment to the school and its ideals obviously made it difficult for her to make

a choice. Also, the fact that she could easily discuss about these problems with school management made her feel less worried about it.

Schools opened by the movement are often criticized on the grounds that they do not "promote free will and individualism, but rather promote a collective consciousness and the schools are less likely to encourage self-reflection and self-realization of individual potential" (Yavuz 1999:598). Roya, a Moroccan mother in her early thirties working as an Islam teacher, argued the opposite, like some other parents:

> In public schools, no attention is paid to the individuality and differences of students. The education is structured, strict and competitive. Here, it is more individual oriented. They adapt it according to the personal differences. I see that children are confident both intellectually and morally, in every way. Their self-confidence is increasing because they are at ease with school. In the previous school, he constantly had remarks as the toleration level was low. The quality of education is high here. You can always talk to teachers, principals. You can easily have access to them, they are very open. We arrange meetings and talk about the potential solutions to problems of our children. The atmosphere is very good.

### Promoting Ethos in School Space

A particular school ethos is prevalent in *l'Ecole des Etoiles* similar to the republican ethos of schools in France (Hemming 2011; Cole 2001). This ethos entails a particular set of values, such as respect, kindness, sacrifice and caring, which are both being taught via an elective class and being actively promoted in the school environment by directors, teachers and staff who consider themselves as role models for their students. More than half of the parents showed concern regarding the moral cultivation of their children. These parents had expectations from the school in that sense, since they imagined the school as a space "providing a moral compass, and instilling a new sense of morality" (Parker & Jenkins 2002:277) into their children. I asked Mr. Demir if they had a special strategy for the transmission of moral values:

> Human beings are composed of three dimensions. These are intellectual, instinctive and spiritual dimensions. The West has broken its bonds with the dimension of moral conscience. The mechanism is built upon the instinctive and intellectual dimension. If you ask people from the West about how they like children to be, they will tell you that they want their children to be knowing, intellectual, standing on their own feet, taking trips around the world, learning new languages and so on. Knowledge and individuality are the first concerns they have. Parents with Turkish origins will base their priorities on the moral dimension. They will prioritize being a good person, doing no harm

to other people, contributing to one's country and to humanity over individual development.

While describing the ethos of the school, Mr. Demir underlined that the intellectual dimension needs to be fed with knowledge and that the moral dimension should be fed with humanitarian values so that a moral conscience can be built. This, he said, is what they aim to give to pupils in the school, spreading a particular form of relationship between teachers, parents and students based on caring, sacrifice, respect, tolerance and understanding. For him, the source of inspiration is Gulen's ideas, yet he carefully added that this should not mean that Gulen himself has any impact on how schools are run. In Demir's opinion, Gulen brings a different interpretation to Islam; this allows them to live together and get on well with everyone. This, he stated, can be only possible through tolerance and compassion towards other people:

> Gulen talks about non-reciprocal love and affection towards other people. He talks about the significance of altruism. We are motivated by the desire to gain the consent of God. We may be motivated by a religious desire, but the purpose is not the transmission of religion. We focus on loving people, and providing peaceful spaces for them, in a way addressing the needs of their conscience, too. This gives peace to people.

It is not possible to speak of a precise Gulen pedagogy used in all schools opened by those who are inspired by the ideas of Gulen. Even the term 'Gulen School' seems problematic. The two things which are common for all these schools is that the initiative is taken by those who are inspired by Gulen and that they have Turkish origins. The contextual factors are almost always influential and even schools within the borders of the same city may be following totally different educational paths, as in the example of *Lucerna* schools and *l'Ecole des Etoiles* in Brussels. The following sections elaborate on the reasons which are conducive to the building of a particular form of interaction within the school space, among teachers, parents and students. The question of why these parents choose L'Ecole des Etoiles provides a perspective into how parents build a relationship with the school space and position themselves with regards to the ideals promoted by the school.

There is no explicit Islamic-oriented training in the school, however, parents have confidence in the school to raise their children in a morally sensitive manner. Some of them emphasized that they allowed their children to go on school trips because they were sure that the teachers would be sensitive about their values. Among those who cared about the moral content of education, some were inspired by the ideas of Gulen and felt that they needed to send their children to this school even though there were things they were not pleased about.

While talking about her motivation, Deniz referred to the sentimental bond that she had with school and added that it would have been awkward to send her children to another school. She was inspired by the ideas of Gulen and her husband was regularly attending and supporting the voluntary activities of Gulen movement in Belgium. Although her first motivation for choosing the school was the inspiration of Gulen, this did not prevent Deniz from developing a critical approach towards the school. To Deniz, the only negative thing about the school was that it was not diverse enough and that her children would have troubles adapting to society in the future. On the other hand, she said that the best thing about L'Ecole des Etoiles was that the teachers and principals were genuinely concerned about the outcomes of her children. When asked about the role of becoming a member of Gulen movement on her choice of L'Ecole des Etoiles, she said:

> It is an important factor for me. The school represents a system I appreciate, internalize, trust and believe in. Because they teach, if not directly, universal moral values to the future generations along with good quality education. It has an ideal of a virtuous, educated, high-standard society. In this increasingly materialistic world of today, I believe that these schools, unlike the classical schools, may be like a ray of hope. I wish everyone from different segments of society would come and profit from such a school.

*L'Ecole des Etoiles*, as a symbolic space represents the system of ideals, values and principles supported by parents like Deniz. They believe that it is not right to choose another school when there is one where they could feel at home.

**Concluding Remarks**

This paper contributes to understanding the way Turkish-Belgian parents relate to a school space and negotiate their positions as parents with a migration background. The spatial identification of parents is reflected in their motivations in choosing to send their children to *l'Ecole des Etoiles*. They not only ask for a school which will respect their ethnic and religious background but which will also take their thoughts seriously and treat them with respect. Once their demands are met to a certain degree, parents find themselves in a position to discuss about their children's education. They dream of a school environment which is more mixed and multicultural and many parents fear their children will not achieve to adapt to the mainstream society once they graduate. Parents were encouraged by the approach of teachers, who cared for the improvement of their children's outcomes and respected their values. The fact that they felt at ease about discussing things with the teachers was a significant determinant in their spatial identification. The attitudes of people (teachers and staff) in the school space had a strong impact on how they felt themselves in the school. Some parents were initially motivated to send their children to *l'Ecole des Etoiles* since it was mainly founded by people who were inspired by Gulen. They believed school represented their values, ideals, beliefs and they could not imagine choosing another

school. Besides a high-quality education, they expected the school to instill moral values in students, albeit not directly religious.

Offering a platform for the parents to negotiate their views and concerns, the school empowers the parents to make decisions and choices regarding their children's education. Since their differences in terms of background is recognized, respected and considered valuable by the teachers, the parents feel entitled to voice their opinions about potential problems and solutions. High level of trust between the parents and the teachers encourages the parents to raise their concerns about certain issues. Proactive engagement of parents in school seems to be contributing to their strong identification with the space and building intimate relations with the school staff and the teachers. Although *l'Ecole des Etoiles* does not offer the best educational environment for those who dream of a more mixed school space, it achieves to attract parents by providing them with the opportunity to negotiate terms of recognition and to voice their opinions.

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