2017 REA Annual Meeting, Nov 3-5

Title: Learning in Encounter between Secular and Christian Students in Merged Schools.

Abstract.

The feature of religious diversity in the Netherlands is very explicit at schools that are the result of a merger of a public and a confessional school, the so-called cooperation school. This PhD-research concentrates on a thick description and an action research concerning the design of a new religious celebration at one specific cooperation school. Focusing on this activity we ask the question how and based on what motives teachers of this religiously diverse school construct a celebration for students from various religious backgrounds. We present the analyzed values and content that are practiced in this activity of religious education in which encounter between students from Christian and of secular background is organized. Based on these results we draw conclusions concerning religious diversity and encounter in education.
1. Main concepts/issues

In the religious plural society of the Netherlands we detect an increase of a special type of school: the cooperation school. This school is the result of a merger between a confessional school and a public school. The first is religious affiliated, the second is neutral and active multiform. Religious plurality is particularly evident in these cooperation schools. Our previous research indicated this plurality of the student population as a key characteristic of these schools.

In the completed three articles of our research we have answered the following questions:

1. How are core values of cooperation schools formulated and how is religious education at these schools organized?
2. How do the core values relate to collective moments of contemplation?
3. How do the core values relate to segregated moments of contemplation and collective religious celebrations?

In these questions the position and the appreciation of the school values play a major role. In particular in the case studies of articles 2 and 3 it appeared that there is a tension between the school values of equality and encounter and practices of religious education. According to literature, these practices can be identity markers of these values. However, the original identities of public and denominational education are expressed in the practice of the moments of contemplation and celebrations. Also an explicit place is reserved for sources from the Christian tradition. Besides the question of how the core value of equality relates to this attention to one tradition, it is important to examine how the core value of encounter can be stimulated in these practices.

In a broader and international context, the above-mentioned tension is important because it addresses the question of how practices of religious education can be motivated and organized in such a way that they do justice to the plurality of the student population. By addressing this question we refer to literature about religious education and diversity. As an example we quote: ‘Not only students who are socialized in a religious tradition, but also students from secularized families should be welcomed in schools that want to foster interreligious teaching and learning, and they should feel at ease too. It is in such schools that students are taught, learned, and practice to build bridges between people, bridges between religions and worldviews, bridges from today until tomorrow. (Miedema en Ter Avest, 2011, p. 417).

In the final stage of our PhD-research teachers of one school conducted action research in a so called Professional Learning Community: they designed a religious celebration for students from secular and Christian backgrounds.

We selected this school to complement our previous research because its teachers recognized the discrepancies between ideals and praxis and supported the necessity of implementing dialogue. With the teachers, we designed a new practice of interreligious dialogue, introducing a new element in our research: the construction and implementation of a concrete practice of religious education and its valuation by the teachers. In this design, the teachers created a religious celebration, focusing on implementing dialogue, for students from secular and Christian backgrounds, which is optimal in the context of a rural cooperation school. In the case of this particular school, the teachers also faced a new challenge: they had little or no experience with interreligious dialogue because of their segregated moments of contemplation and the character of the celebrations: during these celebrations, students present to each other
on stage and do not interact about religious subjects (Renkema, Mulder, and Barnard 2017). By developing this celebration in action research and by investigating the motives of the teachers, we explored a new way of dealing with the discrepancy between the core value of encounter and the practice of religious education. The resulting celebration tells us more about the process and content for religious activities involving plurality.

Our main question in this research is: How and based on what motives do teachers of a cooperation school construct a religious celebration for students from these backgrounds? This celebration is a practice in which encounter between students of different religious views can be implemented. We explored this question by examining the following sub questions:

1. What do teachers see as core values of the school and how are these related to the formal school values?

2. How do teachers express their values in the design requirements of a celebration for students from secular and Christian backgrounds and in their concepts of the term ‘celebration’?

3. How do teachers express their values in the content of a celebration for students from secular and Christian backgrounds?

4. How do teachers evaluate the celebration related to the school core values and the design requirements?

5. How does the academic researcher contribute to the process of the meetings by putting forward the concept of dialogue?

These questions are investigated from a theoretical perspective of encounter in religious education. This concept plays an important role in the academic discourse on religious education and diversity.

2. Description of methodology for addressing the topic

We conducted a single case study using qualitative data. A thick description of this school provides us with detailed information about current motives and practice of teachers dealing with religious diversity in classroom. For this thick description we studied formal school documents concerning the history and the recent policy and practice of this school. Next to this study of documents we conducted an action research in designing a religious celebration. Based on the results of our previous, descriptive research, this action research is oriented at development and participatory in nature. The teachers are encouraged to participate as researchers. This means that their questions and their practice are the starting point. In our case we put teachers of Christian and of secular education together in a group that was given the assignment to design a celebration that reflected common values. The research focuses on the concrete practice and the improvement of this practice. In our case this is the implementation from encounter between students from Christian and secular backgrounds. We used action research as a method by setting up a so-called Professional Learning Community (PLC).

We analyzed the results by coding, based on which we could draw conclusions for the
practice of religious education in schools that deal with religious diversity and are challenged to organize encounter between students of Christian and secular world view.

3. Description of the school

The cooperation school in this study is a primary school in the southwest of the Netherlands, situated in a rural village with a population of 1300. The school is the only school in the village and is attended by 155 students. The school website and the school guide outline the vision on religious education, expressing the school identity as an “encounter school”: “a school where teachers, students, parents of various religious backgrounds work together and have joint responsibility for education and upbringing” (school guide 2014-2018, 4). Parents can choose between two types of religious education: Christian and general.

4. Conclusions

Based on the thick description of the school and the action research we have drawn conclusions that concern dialogue in religious education between students from secular and Christian backgrounds. These conclusions lead us to a more distinct perspective on the expressing of the school values of encounter and dialogue in the concrete practice of religious education. In our presentation we will ask questions that deal with this expression and that focus on learning in encounter between students from secular and Christian backgrounds. This way we take a close look at the theme of our REA Meeting using a Dutch practice with an international significance.

5. Sources grounding the presentation


