Title: The classroom – place and space of interfaith encounters
An exploration of the complexity and the interrelatedness between theoretical concepts and practical situations of interfaith education in a secular(ized/izing) age

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Introduction
Religious Education is under pressure in a secular/secularizing age. Efforts are made to include in Religious Education non-religious and secular worldviews. Other scholars defend the inclusion of religious and other worldviews in citizenship education. In our presentation we start with revisiting the concept of faith as an encompassing concept for the different ways people commit themselves to particular value- and life-orientations. In the second section we present the disturbing quantity of different concepts used for the inter-aspect of education including and elaborating upon peoples’ different commitments. In the third section we take a look at two promising theoretical perspectives regarding classroom practices of ‘inter’-education. The fourth section is dedicated to the evaluation of ‘best practices’. We end our presentation with some preliminary conclusions and recommendations for further research.

1. The concept of ‘faith’ revisited
Our revisit of the concept of ‘faith’ starts with the exploration of the way James Fowler in his publication ‘Faith Development’, opening up new horizons. Fowler describes the concept of ‘faith’, and the distinction between faith, religion and belief. For Fowler faith is a verb. ‘Faith is a person’s or group’s way of moving into the force field of life. It is our way of finding coherence in and giving meaning to the multiple forces and relations that make up our lives. Faith is a person’s way of seeing him or herself in relation to others against a background of shared meaning and purpose (Fowler 1981, 4). Fowler follows Wilfred Cantwell Smith in his definition of religion as a ‘cumulative tradition’ that in its many forms addresses “the mundane cause” that awakens present faith’ (ibid., 9). Belief – in line with Smith - for Fowler is ‘the holding of certain ideas’(ibid., 11). In the course of the ‘awakening of present faith’ Bob Jackson (2002) distinguishes the just representation of religion(s), the interpretation thereof and reflection thereupon by the pupil, resulting in what he calls edification, which comes close to what Fowler means by ‘faith development’. Faith development seems to be a relational process, and as such, interfaith education seems to be a pleonasm, since the ‘inter’-aspect is already included in the concept of ‘faith’ and its developmental processes.

The concept of ‘interfaith education’ is articulated in comparing it with ‘intercultural education’, ‘interreligious education’ and ‘inter-worldview education’. This theoretical investigation discloses the close relation between context and understanding. Within the English-speaking world, the concept ‘interfaith education’ is explicitly used instead of other neighboring terms, despite their overlapping consensus, i.e. in promoting mutual understanding and reciprocal respect among pupils, thus contributing to solidarity and peace. Contrary to the English-speaking world, European countries seem to favor the concepts of religion and worldview in relation to intercultural education (Jackson, 2014; Miedema, 2017).

1 This presentation is based on our research, initiatied at the United Religions Initiative (URI) Europe meeting in 2015 in Plovdiv, Bulgaria. The results of this research are extensively described in ‘Interfaith Education for All; Theoretical Perspectives and Best Practices for Transformative Action’ (Eds. Wielzen & Ter Avest 2017).
However, ‘worldview’ encompasses both religious and non-religious, i.e. secular systems of ‘faith’, such as, individualism, atheism, consumerism, and capitalism. (Smart, 1984; Valk, 2007, 2010, 2017). Worldview is a view or vision of life and on life. It is something each person has, and something s/he develops in greater or lesser degrees of complexity as s/he journeys through life. (Naugle, 2002; Sunshine, 2009). With the concept of ‘faith’ the emotional commitment to a value- or life-orientation is articulated.

Interfaith education in our view is a way of introducing pupils in the world they belong to because of their birth and upbringing. In this world the child is exposed to ever present signals inviting/challenging processes of meaning giving/-finding – a construction of meaning that is imbued with the language of plausibility in the child’s world (Taylor, 2007; Groot, 2017). It is the invitation to developmental processes that is stimulated in interfaith education. Interfaith education in our view should be part and parcel of all children’s education, independent of the worldview or life orientation that inspirers their parents in raising their children by way of their non-professional and implicit pedagogical activities at home. The ‘inter’- aspect points to the radical dialogical approach in interfaith education (see Wielzen & Ter Avest, 2017, 273 ff).

2. Different scholars, different practitioners, different concepts of ‘inter’-education

The different theoretical definitions of interfaith education and its neighboring concepts, as well as the variety of concrete classroom practices, challenge what is called a ‘conversational analysis’ (Genç, Ter Avest, Miedema 2011) of the definitions and their practices in different contexts. Whereas one scholar uses the concept of interreligious education in the sense of the mere presence of pupils with different ethnic, cultural and (religious or secular worldview) backgrounds in their classes, another scholar points to conversation and dialogue as the core of the very same concept. A different interpretation can be read in between the lines in one of the ‘examples of good practice’, that is the openness for information about different religious and secular worldviews. In the unruly practice of a classroom situation this concept seems to be interpreted as clarification of each pupil’s point of view and a mere exchange of each other’s background.

2.a Interrelatedness of theoretical concepts and every day's practice

In the exploration of practical situations of what is called by teachers themselves as ‘interfaith education’ the complexity of the classroom situation is presented; the complexity of flexibly balancing between the teacher’s own faith commitment and doing justice to the pupils in the context of the school with its mission and vision on (inter)religious education (Kunneman 2013), as well as the complexity of balancing between tradition and innovation. ‘No shining without grinding’. Or, stated in another way: the tangible tension between what is transmitted in stories and narrations of different (religious) worldview traditions and the need for transformation in a secular(ized/izing) age. This is experienced in different contexts (from Finland to Turkey, from the Netherlands to Malaysia), and approached from different theological and pedagogical perspectives.

However different various authors’ approaches are, the trend is to present what is given in traditions and adapt it in such a way that pupils recognize their own everyday experiential knowledge and acknowledge the difference with ‘the other’. This facilitates the developmental process as Jackson (1997) describes this in his ‘interpretive approach’ - facilitating transformation and at the same time caring for the vulnerability of pupils who are challenged to leave their comfort zone and be open for the intended transformational processes.
The theoretical concepts related to religious and non-religious faith and worldviews connect increasingly to classroom settings in plural societies. These purvey to ‘the classroom as a space for interfaith encounters.’ There are several theoretical models underlying interfaith education and tested in research that can enhance the educability of pupils and students in light of the various intentions of interfaith education (De Jong, 2017). We will limit ourselves to two of these.

3. Promising theoretical perspectives
In this section we present two models for ‘inter’-faith education – both of them crossing boundaries of academic domains. The first one is a transformative model for Islamic RE from a psychological developmental perspective based on Islamic pedagogical principles which, however, is in our view a workable method in other than Islamic contexts. The other model takes the perspective of citizenship education in an plural linguistic context.

3a. Transformative model for Islamic RE
One of the models for transformative teaching and learning is described by Abdullah Sahin (2014). This transformative model (Sahin 2014), combines critical education with contemporary reflective pedagogies. Sahin discusses the formation of rigid religiosities – what is called by Taylor (2007) ‘fanatism’ a way to combat post-modern life and face the doubts accompanying the post-modern era. In order to practice such a transformative pedagogy in classrooms, it’s urgently needed to implement in teacher training a subject called ‘religious literacy’, in the first place in its literal sense of language needed to express experiences regarding one’s own positionality-in-context. It is the language that is available (‘literacy’) that enables us to name our experiences, communicate them and articulate them (Groot, 2017). But included in ‘religious literacy’ is also knowledge about the history of the development of different worldview traditions, their historical encounters and the way they are influenced by these encounters – whether in peace or in religious conflicts (Taylor, 2007). In combination with the development of teachers’ religious literacy, the training of intercultural and interreligious communication is urgently needed (De Jong, 2017). Knowing about and practicing communication strategies that enable partners in the dialogue (teacher and pupils, classmates among each other) to express their worldview position and learn from and with each other is preconditional for interfaith education. Included in teacher training this comes close to Bildung, and will enable (novice) teachers to make interfaith education an integral part of the general education of all children in primary school.

3b. Citizenship education in a plural linguistic context
An other challenging model is presented by Hussien et al. (2017), elaborated upon by Lafrarchi (2017). Hikmah pedagogy (Hikmah is originally an Arabic word, which literally means wisdom) is based on the Philosophy for Children program (P4C), introduced by Matthew Lipman in the early 1970s as a form of philosophy based education in the classroom (Hussien et al. 2017). Lipman believed that philosophy was the appropriate tool to trigger and develop children’s natural curiosity through the teaching and learning process. One of the aims of P4C is to develop and establish a Community of Inquiry (CoI) in the classroom. Lipman introduced a philosophical thinking programme for primary students through a series of novels. Hikmah pedagogy, according to Hussien et al. (2017) can help to create a Community of Inquiry as a safe space in the classroom (Community of Inquiry; CoI). Such a safe classroom context facilitates pupils to learn to inquire and question ordinary and everyday subjects with the purpose of engaging in deep thinking and arriving at a better understanding of an issue collaboratively. The CoI encourages students to independently think and consider different
answers to the questions raised, doing so at the end of the day arriving at an own and authentic positionality regarding the subject at stake. Furthermore, students/pupils learn not to hastily assume that there is only one right answer to an issue. Instead, students learn that it is quite impossible to arrive at one final answer, since some answers can be considered as better than others based on their evidences or argument. Following Lipman’s approach, and considering the plural (regarding language and ethnicity) context of classrooms these days P4C can be transformed and include religious novels and ethical values relevant to the plural society in Malaysia (Hussien et al. 2017), and as Lafrarchi convincingly argues also in the Belgian/Flandres’ context characterized by diversity, if the right conditions are met, such as the proper training of teachers to implement such pedagogical strategies. (Lafrarchi 2017).

4. The classroom – place of interfaith encounters
Preliminary results of the analysis of the examples of classroom conversations show that the classroom as a safe space is a ‘must’ for interfaith education. Safe for each and every participant in the dialogue. Dialogue is a skill to be learnt by all. Each of the participants should feel free and be encouraged to express her/his thoughts – be it a adhering to the majority or representing a minority’s position. Preconditional for entering into a dialogue is the ability to structure one’s thoughts and express them in a language understood by the partners in dialogue. Additionally, each participant should be able to evaluate and value an other’s opinion or contribution; empathy is a basic quality to be developed in each partner in dialogue. Last but not least is the will to listen to the other – not only to the words spoken but even more so to the intentions included in the language-in-context (Ter Avest 2011; see also the ‘dialogue hand’-method (Bouva and Wielzen, 2017, pp. 208-209; Searle’s speech act theory as discussed by De Jong, 2017). A good relationship between the teacher and the pupils, and the pupils among themselves, paired with the teacher’s qualities of critical thinking and openness for a child centered approach, and the competency for dialogue seem to be preconditional to learn to talk to each other, to celebrate the richness and stand the complexity of diversity, and learn from each other the benefit of intercultural and interreligious exchange. “Encounter is the key term for formation of the self” (Beyza Bilgin). Moreover, in order to turn conflicts in a constructive pedagogical strategy the teacher must be able to take her/his responsibility ‘on the spot’, and decide for the best way of responding to the conflictuous situation (Kelchterman 2012; Todd 2007). Each participant should be able to evaluate their classmates’ contributions as if they were ‘stepping into someone else’s shoes’; empathy is a basic quality to be developed in each partner in dialogue. Last but not least is the will to listen to the other – not only to the words spoken but even more so to the intentions included in the language-in-context (Ter Avest 2011).

5. Conclusion and Recommendations
A good relationship between the teacher and the pupils, and the pupils among themselves, paired with the teacher’s qualities of critical thinking and openness for a child centered approach, next to mastering the competency for dialogue are preconditional to learn to talk to each other, to embrace the richness and stand the complexity of diversity, and learn from each other the benefit of intercultural and interreligious exchange. Next to that, in order to turn conflicts in a constructive pedagogical strategy the teacher should be able to take her/his responsibility ‘on the spot’, and decide for the best way of responding to the conflictuous situation (Kelchterman 2012; Todd 2007). It’s all about the teacher – being at the centre of the educational process. It’s all about the teacher – as a pedagogue being at the center and the first responsible person in the service of the teaching and learning process of the child (Brown Wright, 2011, pp.93-94). As a child of one’s time, it is the personal biographical and


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professional development, and the competency to respond in a way that makes sense to the challenges of encounter in a divers classroom (Ter Avest & Bakker 2016; Sahin 2014) that turns the classroom into a safe place - a place of interfaith encounter. As is shown in some of the ‘best practices’ a narrative approach – doing justice to the narrations of worldviews as well as recognizing the value orientation in the personal stories of children - in particular seems to be a constructive way to explore and embrace differences, and respond to the ongoing process of interfaith education in the classroom.

We recommend teacher training, focusing on the complexity of (hybrid) religious/secular identity development of primary school pupils, socialized in a secular age (Taylor 2007), an age of transformation of cultural and religious traditions - ongoing work-in-progress. “When children and their teachers encounter the religion of other people it is like meeting another world. The same is true of the situation in which one meets a disabled person” (John Hull). Preconditional is teachers’ awareness of possible discrepancies between ‘theory in use’ and ‘espoused theory’, and their own positionality as constituent part of the development of their normative professionalism (Gardner et al. 2017; Gardner 2017). This way of including teachers’ Bildung in teacher training will open up a space for radical dialogical faith education for all.

For interfaith education to be transformative, ‘safe spaces’ are required where dialogue is learnt by practice and interaction, encounter and conversation, trial and error. It not only requires a physical place, but even more so an intellectual and affectionate space for the child to be heard and seen entirely as an interdependent person. In such a context, the child learns to embrace diversity as an intrinsic part of his/her social life, and stand it in case of insurmountable differences.

It is our contention that such a safe space is conducive to communicating about self and others and move beyond tolerating differences to accepting and appreciating diversity in whatever form it manifests itself.

Selected bibliography


