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Coming out religiously Life Orientation in public schools

Abstract

In the post-pillarized society of the Netherlands, RE still is organized according to religious dividing lines. RE in confessional schools is compulsory Christian RE; in public schools, taking a neutral position with regard to religious traditions, RE is an optional subject, taught to pupils on parents' request. Nowadays, due to processes of modernization, globalization and individualization, the position of religion in society changes and subsequently its position in classes. That's why in public schools principals and teachers reflect upon their positionality regarding (religious and secular) worldview education. In this contribution we present our findings from document analysis and from (focus group) interviews with principals and observations in public schools, resulting in a plea for 'Life Orientation *for all*' as a compulsory subject in all schools for all pupils.

Introduction

A century of 'pillarized' education has resulted in a compulsory subject called 'Godsdienst/Levensbeschouwing' (Religious Education) in Christian (Catholic and Protestant) and Islamic primary schools. In public schools, being strictly *neutral*, differentiated confessional RE (GVO; 'Godsdienstig Vormings Onderwijs') is offered as an optional subject on request of the parents - this being a parent's right. In everyday school life this results in a selected group of pupils is separated from their classmates to attend the optional RE-lessons. The optional lessons RE/GVO aim at "informing children about Christianity (and other religions) and the Bible. By way of telling stories, making use of symbols and rituals, children gain insight in 'the world of faith'. Religious literacy facilitates children to reflect upon their own world view."¹ These classes are not covered by the school's responsibilities. This confessional RE is organized by external bodies, who bear the responsibility for their RE teachers' education. In a similar way as RE/GVO, 'Humanistisch Vormingsonderwijs' (HVO, Humanistic World View Education) is offered as an optional subject during school hours. HVO aims at "facilitating the development of values that are central in pupils' life orientation. They learn to make choices and to be responsible for their actions and the consequences; they are encouraged to communicate about what they think, experi-

¹ www.pcgvo.nl

ence, their will power and their actions. In HVO lessons children do not learn what to think, but learn to value thinking and reflection in itself.”² In everyday practice either RE/GVO or HVO is chosen and resulting from parents’ preferences only these two subjects are offered in public schools as an optional subject. Next to the above described different forms of RE, in all primary schools an objective informative subject is included in the curriculum called ‘Geestelijke Stromingen’ (GS; Religious and Philosophical World Views).³

At 56% of the public primary schools one or more types of RE (Christian, Islamic) or Humanistic World View Education is offered (for approximately 15% of all children). On 30% of the public schools the registered claim for denominational RE, Islamic RE or Humanistic Life Orientation could not be met.⁴

In these days the role of religion in the public domain is fiercely discussed. Decreasing membership of religious communities and an increase in interest in spirituality is noticeable.⁵ This development in society is reflected upon in public schools, which challenges the views on education with regard to ‘*life issues*’ as an essential and self-evident subject in the curriculum.

In this contribution we draw upon our empirical research, an analysis of policy documents and the interaction with principals of a foundation of 64 public primary schools in the harbor city of Rotterdam. Our case study shows how public schools in a metropolitan context explore possibilities to cope with this historically generated dilemma of ‘neutrality with regard to religion’ versus ‘the need for enculturation in a context of religious diversity’. ‘Coping with’ in this case shows itself as: actively pioneering, exploring and discussing possible ways to teach pupils to live together in diversity.

In general

People have to deal with existential questions, like ‘How do I cope with the loss of a family member?’ or: ‘Which training and what kind of profession should I choose?’. Asking these questions, and as a teacher in the classroom responding to them, is independent of a confessional or neutral identity of the school. Existential questions we see as an anthropological constant, to be dealt with by each teacher, in public schools as in any other school.

In spite of high working pressure and the urgency of maximizing learning performances, each teacher pays attention to a question of a pupil that might hide an important or even an existential issue. Differences in responding to pupils’ questions are easily observed, in all schools. Possibly, religiously affiliated schools (65% of the Dutch schools: Protestant, Catholic or Islamic schools) use a more explicit framework to explore with the pupils this type of questions, but self evidently such schools are not more confronted with pupils’ (existential) questions and they do not have an ex-

² www.humanistischverbond.nl

³ Zootjes, Paul (2003). Bijzonder en openbaar onderwijs. In: Ton Bertens e.a. (red.), *Recht en religie, Ars Aequi*.

⁴ Aarsen, E.K., R.G.H. Hoffius, B. Verberne (2007). *Godsdienst en humanistisch vormingsonderwijs; Onderzoek naar huidig lesaanbod en verwachte vraag*. Leiden: Research voor Beleid.

⁵ Donk, W.B.H.J. van de, A.P. Jonkers, G.J. Kronjee, R.J.J.M. Plum (red.) (2006). *Geloven in het publieke domein. Verkenningen van een dubbele transformatie*. Amsterdam: University Press.

clusive approach to elaborate upon them. A teacher in a *public* school should in a similar way be sensitive to the importance of pupils' questions and subsequently take the decision if and how to pay attention to the question(s) raised.⁶ How to assess on the individual level? How to relate individual assessments to the collective identity of the public school? These are the questions we focus on in this contribution.

Identity of public schools

'Identity' in the Dutch educational context is strongly related to a school's religious affiliation. The idea that only religiously affiliated schools do have an identity was corrected by a study of Braster.⁷ In his dissertation Braster shows that 'neutrality' of public schools is an illusion and that a public school always has had a certain preference be it that this preference changes over time: from the more or less 'christian school following the Reformation' (*nota bene*: we are talking in those days about *public* schools⁸) to a school where commonly accepted social and christian values and virtues are taught, to a strict neutral school from the second half of the 19th century. Braster shows convincingly that the latter interpretation of neutrality has been very important in the course of the 20th century, with the (side-) effect that attention to religious traditions and beliefs was considered a taboo. On the basis of his historical analysis Braster concludes that the identity of the public school seems like a chameleon, the 'chameleon-hypothesis'. In his analysis, one quarter of the public schools represents an 'unbiased market-place' of philosophies and religions, as one would expect from the idea of 'active pluralism'. The vast majority of public schools adapts largely to contextual factors, like e.g. the context of the school (neighbourhood). Braster distinguishes a public school with many migrant children, making multiculturalism to a core issue, or a public school in a conservative Christian context (like the so called 'Bible Belt'), that pays a lot of attention to Christianity and national cultural festivities. So, different public schools have different identities. These differences show similarities with the differences in identities of confessional schools. A protestant school in the inner-city of Rotterdam differs profoundly from a protestant school in the Veluwe-region, which is part of the 'Bible Belt'.⁹ The pillarized structure of the Dutch educational system is under debate.¹⁰

⁶ Todd, Sharon (2007). Teachers judging without scripts, or thinking cosmopolitan. In: *Ethics and Education*, 2:1, 25 — 38.

⁷ Braster, J.F.A. (1996). *De identiteit van het openbaar onderwijs*. PhD thesis. Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff.

⁸ Ter Avest, Ina, Cok Bakker, Gerdien Bertram-Troost & Siebren Miedema (2007). Religion and Education in the Dutch pillarized and post-pillarized educational system: historical background and current debates. In: Robert Jackson, Siebren Miedema, Wolfram Weisse, Jean-Paul Willaime (Eds.). *Religion and Education in Europe; Developments, Contexts and Debates*. Münster/New York/München/Berlin: Waxmann.

⁹ Bakker, Cok (2004). *Demasqué van het christelijk onderwijs?; Over de onzin en zin van een adjectief*. Oratie. Utrecht: Universiteit Utrecht.

<http://igitur-archive.library.uu.nl/th/2005-0130-130551/ORATIEBakker.pdf>

¹⁰ Ter Avest, Ina, Cok Bakker, Gerdien Bertram-Troost & Siebren Miedema (2007). Religion and Education in the Dutch pillarized and post-pillarized educational system: historical background and current debates. In: Robert Jackson, Siebren Miedema, Wolfram Weisse, Jean-Paul Willaime (Eds.). *Religion and Education in Europe; Developments, Contexts and Debates*. Münster/New York/München/Berlin: Waxmann.

Ter Avest, I. & S. Miedema (2010). Noodzaak tot recontextualisering van onderwijsvrijheid vanuit (godsdienst)pedagogisch perspectief. In: *Tijdschrift voor Onderwijsrecht & Onderwijsbeleid*. September-December 2010, p. 77-88.

Heading towards ‘Religious Education for all’

in documents:

In public schools, in the context of the plural Dutch society, many questions are raised about the school’s identity and more specifically about the way to establish a relation between optional confessional RE, the compulsory subject ‘Religious and Philosophical Worldviews’ and teachers’ ways to respond to pupils’ existential questions. The question is whether ‘*active pluralism*’ should result in the public school as a ‘market place’ of diversity, or as a ‘meeting place’, a place where pupils, teachers and parents learn to live together, respecting differences.¹¹ All policy and decision making should be related to a well-thought vision on diversity, being aware of the fact that whatever position taken it always is contested.

In the following we mention some observations, based on the analysis of recent policy documents of umbrella organizations of public education (‘Vereniging voor Openbaar Onderwijs’, VOO, Foundation for Public Education, and ‘Vereniging van Openbare en Algemeen toegankelijke scholen’, VOS/ABB, Foundation of Public and General Education). Next to that our observations are based on our involvement in coaching and research activities the Rotterdam foundation for public education.

In the publication “*Levensbeschouwing: juist in het openbaar onderwijs!*” (Life Orientation: right so in public education!) of VOS/ABB, it is indicated that philosophical and religious education of the pupil is an important task of the public school. Reference is made to Grimmitt’s distinction of ‘teaching *in*, *about* and *from* religion’ to clarify the organization’s point of view.

In this document the option ‘*into*’ is reserved to characterize Christian and Islamic RE. In this document it is stated that RE can not be the school’s responsibility, but should be cherished and maintained because of the realization of ‘active pluralism’. The option ‘*about*’ focuses on the transfer of phenomenologically based knowledge about different secular and religious worldviews. Teaching about the variety of religious and secular worldviews should be taught in the subject ‘*Geestelijke stromingen*’ (Religious and Philosophical Worldviews).

Finally the document of VOS/ABB pays attention to the option ‘*from*’. On this point recent policy making in public education is innovative: a plea is made that *all* children should learn to recognize, acknowledge and discuss philosophical and religious worldviews and experiences under the guidance and responsibility of the school’s (!) class teacher. The aim is socialization into the Dutch multicultural and multireligious society.

in teacher education

At teacher training colleges there is an option – in order to become qualified for teaching in religiously affiliated primary schools - for student-teachers to enroll in courses for an additional diploma RE. In addition to that at some teacher training colleges such a program has been developed for teaching in *public* schools, focusing on the specific neutral/active plural character of public schools. The public school, being ‘neutral’ in a context of diversity, requires that a teacher is aware of the meaning of

¹¹ Skeie, G. (2001). Citizenship, identity politics and religious education. In: H.-G. Heimbrock, C.T. Scheilke & P. Schreiner (Eds.), *Towards Religious Competence. Diversity as a challenge for Education in Europe*. Münster: LIT.

‘neutrality’ in the school, as well for her/him self, and is trained to reflect thereupon. This changing approach is illustrated by an interesting document concerning the competencies of teachers, in particular those teachers teaching at public schools (in: ‘Daarom! Openbaar onderwijs verbindt’, *That’s why! Public education brings children together*). This document includes an informative instrument for self evaluation.¹² The document raises the following interesting points:

- (...) the acknowledgment that religious and philosophical traditions are determined by cultural components; that they play a role in the mutual encounters of children and teachers, and that they therefore deserve attention (p. 3);
- (...) the observation that ‘views on life and religion’ are pictured as one of the five core values of public education (p. 6);
- (...) the remark that a public school teacher must be prepared and equipped to reflect upon his/her own life orientation and relate this to an own professional identity and work concept;
- (...) the additional comment that individual reflections are expected to be related to the corporate, collective identity of their public school (p. 19).

In short: philosophies of life and religion are taken seriously and acknowledged as being of fundamental influence. At the same time traditions are understood as differentiated in itself and perceived as dynamic constructions.

in public schools

In dialogue with the board of governors of the above mentioned Rotterdam foundation of public schools, and well informed by the results of quantitative research (inventories), observations, interviews with teachers and focus group interviews with pupils, and in close cooperation with ten pioneering public primary schools, we present the following points of attention (re)thinking RE in public schools.

Principals and teachers are not happy with the situation that for the optional classes in RE (Christian and Islamic, GVO) and Humanistic World View Education (HVO), children are separated according to their parents’ wish for confessional or humanistic education. From a pedagogical point of view principals fear that this way of organizing separated RE/HVO paves the way to segregation. Besides, principals are not happy with the pedagogical strategies of (most of) the RE and HVO teachers. Next to that, and as far as principals and teachers know about it, they state that there is insufficient monitoring on the content of RE/HVO by the organizations that are responsible for these classes. RE/HVO classes give principals and teachers a feeling of not being in control of (part of) their pedagogical task. They believe a school should support the personal, moral and (religious or secular) worldview development of *all* pupils.

As a response to present days’ feelings of uncertainty regarding the (religious or secular) worldview development of *all* pupils, in public schools a variety of solutions is explored. These innovative responses were developed by principals and teachers in an informal process of ‘action research’, in the context of their own school. Below we present three different ways of public schools in Rotterdam responding to their task of qualification, enculturation and subjectification¹³ of all pupils as future citizens of a multicultural society.

¹² www.openbaaronderwijs.nu

¹³ Biesta, G. (2012). *Goed onderwijs en de cultuur van het meten*. Den Haag: Boom Lemma Uitgevers.

philosophy with children

Principals and teachers favoring this solution make space in their curriculum for classes in Philosophy, for all children, during school hours. Characteristic for this approach is the teacher's attitude of 'listening to the voice of the child'.¹⁴ Using the techniques of Philosophy a variety of themes can be explored, amongst them the theme of religious and secular worldview traditions. In these schools Christmas and Easter, as well as the King's birthday and Liberation day, are celebrated as Dutch festivities; time is scheduled for these festivities in the curriculum. Ramadan or other religious festivals are not scheduled in the curriculum, although a class teacher may pay attention to Ramadan in classroom conversations.

education in encounter

Sharing what is in common in the different religious and secular world view traditions is the aim of this approach. Often this approach is accompanied by a method for the development of 'social competencies' and a training of pupils in mediation. The focus is on getting to know 'the other' and learning to live respectfully together. The classes in Encounter are given by a specialized teacher (a theologian) in close cooperation with the class teacher. The class teacher by way of her presence during the Encounter classes shows to the pupils her interest in the subject. Next to that being there enables the class teacher to refer to themes and situations that were explored during the Encounter classes, for example during classes Citizenship Education.

differentiated classes

A third group of 'solutions' to the experienced urgency with regard to RE/HVO is found by organizing differentiated classes in different periods during the year: a period for Christian RE, a period for Catholic RE, a period for Islamic RE and a period for Humanistic HVO. Also in this solution principals and teachers are convinced of the fact that separating children for different classes is unacceptable from a pedagogical point of view since the school has to prepare for living *together* in the context of a divers society. The different classes in different periods are given for all children, preferably by a specialized teacher.

In each of the above presented solutions the role of the teacher, be it a specialized teacher or the classroom teacher, is pivotal. To respond in an adequate way, the teacher has to be competent in acting 'on the spot'¹⁵, and that a teacher must have reflected upon her own positionality with regard to existential questions and the variety of coping mechanisms different people have developed – either or not in dialogue with (religious and/or secular) worldview traditions.

In conclusion

Structural attention is needed for pupils' worldview development as an aspect of identity development – in all schools, be it religious affiliated schools or public schools.

¹⁴ McKenna, U., J. Ipgrave, R. Jackson (2008). *Inter Faith Dialogue by Email in Primary Schools. An Evaluation of the Building E-bridges Project*. Münster: Waxmann.

¹⁵ Todd, Sharon(2007). Teachers judging without scripts, or thinking cosmopolitan. In: *Ethics and Education*, 2:1, 25 — 38.

Principals mention the following aspects that need attention for the implementation of 'life orientation' for all pupils during school hours.

In the first place principals are not sure whether teachers are well enough personally prepared and professional equipped to take their new role in 'Life Orientation *for all*' and fulfill the pedagogical task of facilitating the worldview development of all their pupils – irrespective of and respecting the different cultural and religious backgrounds of the pupils. A point of attention is a lack of knowledge of world view traditions, next to the fact that (most of the) teachers themselves have not (yet) reflected upon their own positionality with regard to the variety of religious and secular worldview traditions. Their own 'coming out religiously' is 'work in progress'.

An other aspect is the lack of development of teachers' competence of dialogicality – with colleagues, pupils and parents. Coaching on dialogicality is preconditional for the implementation of 'Life Orientation *for all*'.¹⁶

Last but not least (most of the) teachers lack knowledge about the theoretical aspects of worldview development, and subsequently they lack a repertoire of actions to facilitate that development, answering the actual developmental need of the pupil and scaffolding the pupil to a 'next-to-the-comfort-zone' phase of his or her (religious or secular) world view development.

Taking as a starting point that commitment to a (religious and secular) world view is at the base of one's positionality in all domains of life, we plea for 'Life Orientation *for all*' as a compulsory subject for *all* children in *all* primary schools. To prepare teachers for this pedagogical task, in the curricula of teacher training programs 'coming out religiously' should be prioritized.

¹⁶ TerAvest, Ina & Cok Bakker (2009). Structural Identity Consultation: Story telling as a Culture of Faith Transformation. *Religious Education*. 104.3 (May), 257-271.

TerAvest, Ina, Cok Bakker & Siebren Miedema (2008), Different schools as narrative communities; Identity narratives in threefold. In: *Religious Education*. 103/3, p. 307-322.