

Religious Identity of Dutch Cooperation Schools.

Abstract.

This paper focuses on the religious dimension of the identity of and the religious education at Dutch primary schools that are known as so-called ‘cooperation schools’: schools that are a product of a merger between one or more schools for public (i.e. non-religious) education and one or more schools for non-government (religious) education.

The paper describes how these schools see themselves in a religious perspective of their identity and how this perspective is shaped in the organization of religious education. Next to results of theoretical research, results of empirical research will be presented. This research will map the field of cooperation schools in The Netherlands and their religious identity and religious education. The duality of public and non-government education is still identifiable within a cooperation school. This means that a diversity of values concerning the (religious) education of a student is brought together in one school. In The Netherlands it is up to the cooperation school and its board itself to organize the forms and contents of the religious education for the different denominations. But how is this done in practice?

1. Introduction.

As all education in The Netherlands primary education is characterized by its duality: a Dutch school can be either a school for public education (a public school) or a school for non-government education. Since 1917 the Dutch constitutional law indicates that public education on one hand is initiated by government and that on the other hand private organizations or persons can found a school based upon a religious or philosophical orientation: non-government education (Glenn & De Groof, 2012; Noorlander & Zoontjens, 2011; Zoontjens, 2003). Unique for The Netherlands is that both are constitutionally settled and are equally financed by the government.

Some schools for non-government and for public education merge or consider merging. A school that is a product of this kind of merger is called a cooperation school .

Concerning the religious identity of this cooperation school we see that a non-religious school (t.i. public) has merged with a religious school. Two distinctive identities come together in a new school. The central question in this paper therefore is: how do these schools construct their identity and what are the implications of this identity for the organization of religious education?

2. Dutch educational system and cooperation schools in legal perspective.

2.1. Religious school identity.

School identity can be seen in two ways: restricted and integrated.

De Wolff (2000) describes a multi-dimensional concept of school identity: identity is not only interpreted in a religious way, but also pedagogical, educational and sometimes organizational and social. Ter Avest et al. say that in this 'integrated' way the religious dimension influences the other dimensions of identity (Ter Avest et al., 2007, Ter Avest, 2003). Next to this 'integrated' school identity also a 'restricted' way can be distinguished: the identity of the school is interpreted as and recognized in the religious activities in education (Ter Avest et al., 2007; Ter Avest, 2003).

2.2. Public education and religious identity.

Regarding the integrated school identity one of the main values of public education is its religious neutrality (Bakker, 2012; Zoontjens, 2003; Ter Avest, 2003; Noorlander, 2011; Ter Avest et al., 2007): the school cannot define or motivate its education from any religious point of view.

However next to this value another characteristic of public education is defined by the Dutch educational law. Public schools engage religious backgrounds of their students actively; religious expressions and thinking are acknowledged in all its diversity: 'active multiformity' (Braster, 1996).

This implies that public education has an 'open door' policy regarding the admittance of every student and staff member disregarding cultural, ethnic or religious background or sexual preference (Bakker, 2012; Zoontjens, 2003; Ter Avest, 2003).

Religious education can be organized in different ways.

In the first place religious education in a public school can be in the form of educating students in different religions and life stances. Every school in Dutch educational system is required to integrate these contents in the curriculum (Ter Avest et al., 2007; Ter Avest, 2003).

The second form is the obligation of a public school to enable students to receive some kind of voluntarily denominational religious education. This kind of education is provided by religious affiliated teachers who are not part of the school team and are sent by the religious group.

2.3. Non-government education and religious identity.

Several religious and philosophical groups can found their own schools. Characteristic for the Dutch Constitution is the right for every non-government school to receive governmental subsidy. Therefore the authority of the non-government school has to belong to an acknowledged orientation and education and teaching staff have to meet standards of quality and virtue (Zoontjens, 2003; Noorlander & Zoontjens, 2011; Glenn & De Groof, 2012). About 67% of all primary schools are non-government schools: most are religious schools based on the Protestant or (Roman-) Catholic tradition (each 30%) (Bakker, 2011). Non-

government schools are differentiated within themselves: schools of one specific religious tradition can interpret their integrated identity differently (Miedema & Vroom, 2002). This differentiated practice is illustrated by the right of a non-government school to admit or to remove students (Zoontjens, 2003). Because of the open admittance policy of most of the non-government schools groups of students at these schools are religiously differentiated (Bakker, 2011; Ter Avest et al, 2007).

Non-government schools have the right to organize their education and their religious education according to their values (Glenn & De Groof, 2012; Ter Avest et al., 2007). The government only has say over the quality of the education.

Concerning the restricted identity the religious bases is recognizable in several practical choices and activities. First at most schools teachers are appointed in accordance to the religious identity (Kuyk, 2012). Then: although institutional religion is absent at non-government schools (Ter Avest et al, 2007), religious education at most non-government schools is based upon a specific religious tradition. And thirdly: like public schools non-government schools are obliged to teach about different religions and life stances.

3. The cooperation school and religious identity.

A cooperation school is neither a school for public nor a school for non-government education. In order to do justice to the dual system cooperation schools are obliged to offer both public and non-government education (Senat, 2011; Onderwijsraad, 2000; Noorlander, 2011). The duality is still identifiable within a cooperation school.

Especially in the decades of 1960 and 1970 the number of attempts to start a cooperation school increased (Derriks, Roede, en Veugelers, 2000). Although they were an exception to the common system they were tolerated by the government. It was not until 2011 when educational law was adjusted (Glenn & De Groof, 2012). Then a cooperation school was described as follow: ‘A cooperation school is a school in which public as well as non-government education is offered.’ (Senate, 32 134, 2011, p.2).

In 2006 the possibility to create a cooperation school is founded in an adjustment of the Dutch Constitution: it was added that public education can be received ‘whether or not in a public school’ (Dutch Constitution, Article 23, section 4). Local authorities are obliged to insure that students can receive public education (Noorlander & Zoontjens, 2011). By law one of the ways is a cooperation school. The cooperation school therefore has to be accessible for all students (Noorlander, 2011; Senate, 32 134, 2011).

Here it must be added that a cooperation school cannot be founded: it can only be a product of a merger (Onderwijsraad, 2000, Zoontjens, 2003, Noorlander, 2011, Huisman, 2010).

Cooperation schools appear in so called ‘shrinking areas’ in The Netherlands: in those areas the amount of students decreases.

Special characteristic of both the integrated and the restricted identity is the fact that a diversity of religious values and religious education comes together in a school. In groups of students and of teachers non-religious education (t.i. public) has merged with religious education. Both identities have to be presented in educational practice. But based upon what values and what (new) identity is this done and what are the implications of this identity for

the organization of religious education? We will answer this question in the empirical part of this article.

4. Empirical research of the identity of cooperation schools.

4.1. Design and method.

In order to sort out the relevant cooperation schools for the research first all so called schools were selected in a list of all primary schools. 35 schools were found. These are all the cooperation schools for primary education in The Netherlands in February 2013: 0,51% of all primary schools.

During March and April 2013 an online questionnaire was sent to the principals of these cooperation schools. Several questions especially tried to find out how the integrated and the restricted identity express public education.

17 principals (48,6%) had replied by answering the questions. The semi-structured questionnaire, with 25 questions, was divided into four categories: facts of the school, vision and identity, policy and choices, religious education. The categories of vision and identity and of policy and choices contain questions about the integrated school identity; the category of the religious education focuses on the restricted identity.

4.2. Some facts of cooperation schools.

Most of the 17 cooperation schools (9) started by merging in this century. In a relatively short period more cooperation schools started than in the years before 2000. There was a strong increase of this number in the last 4 years: from 2010 until May 2013 6 cooperation schools opened their doors.

15 schools are a merger between a public and a Protestant or (Roman-)Catholic school. No schools were found with another religious origin (f.e. Islamic, Hindu, Jewish).

4.3. Integrated religious identity.

By analyzing the data of the 17 schools two values appear to be dominant in the way principals interpret the religious identity of their school.

First the value of 'encounter' is a central feature. This is interpreted as a certain attitude towards differences within the school population and in society. One respondent writes: 'The thought behind a cooperation school is seeing the school as a place of encounter between different life views.'

Secondly: if all life views and backgrounds are equal and valuable every student and every teacher counts. Almost all schools therefore practice an open admittance policy for students and staff without selection based upon criteria concerning religion, culture, ethnicity or sexual preference.

All principals recognize starting points of public education in their identity and policy (see graphic below: fig. 1). Especially 'active multiformity' (15) is mentioned. Also the policy regarding the admittance of students and staff is recognized as a value of public education by most principals. Further research can focus on those few schools from which the principals

don't answer the question about the supporting of these values by referring to this policy of admittance: don't these principals lay down a policy of this open admittance or don't they relate this policy to values of public education?

Next to this it is also notable that not all respondents (8) refer to 'neutrality' when asked for values of public education in their integrated identity. Further research can point out if the respondents don't see their schools as neutral or if they don't connect this to an explicit value of public education.

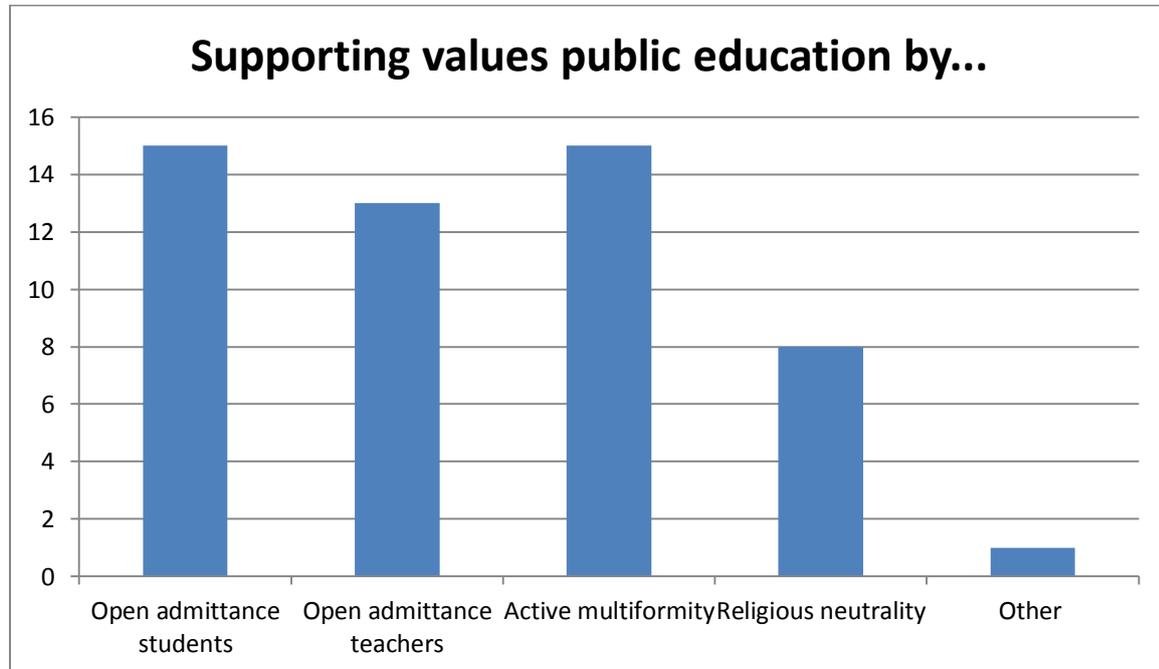


Fig. 1

4.4. Restricted religious identity: religious education

Dutch Constitution obliges the cooperation schools also to offer public education. Therefore the respondents were also questioned about the very concrete transfer of values of public education in religious education and the organization of religious education.

One specific question was asked about this expression: in what way do you offer religious education according to values of public education? As the graphic below (fig. 2) shows 9 principals refer to the lessons by which students are educated in different religions and life stances. Obviously this education is seen as a characteristic of public education by these principals.

Next to these lessons it is remarkable to see that 9 principals recognize values of public education in voluntarily religious education according to the Protestant or Catholic denomination. 4 respondents (also) offer voluntary religious education according to humanistic values. 6 principals see values of public education in offering lessons in public, secular education on a voluntary basis. 3 schools offer required public, secular education. Further research can tell us more about the content of this specific education and compare this content with other ways of offering religious education: do the respondents see this required public education as different from f.i. the education in religions and, more important, in what way do they claim to insure that non-government education is expressed in this required

secular lessons?

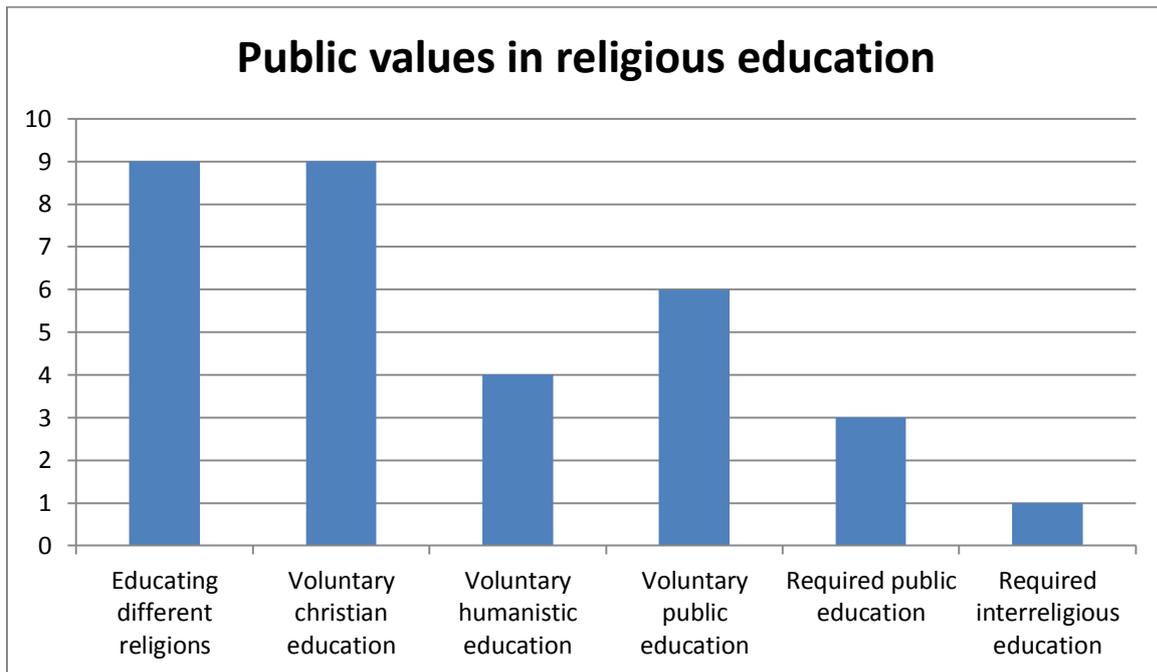


Fig. 2

We see that all respondents recognize values of public education in the offering of (some kind of) religious education in their cooperation school but also that there is a diversity of the organization of religious education according to these values.

But cooperation schools are not only obliged to offer public education: both public and non-government education have to be identifiable. But how is this done in religious education? Can non-government as well as public education be identified in (the organization of) religious education? One dominant result from the questionnaire can be seen in answering this question. Except for four schools religious education is segregated according to the religious origins of the merged schools.

As the graphic below (fig. 3) shows 11 principals indicate that ‘several times a week separate lessons in religious education are provided according to different religious backgrounds by a teacher who is related to this specific background.’

In these schools this teacher always is a group teacher, one of the staff members, and not a religious affiliated teachers who is sent by a religious group. Further research can find out what the respondents see as a ‘separate lesson’ according to public education.

Four schools organize religious education without the mentioned segregation. Further research can indicate in what way values of public and non-government education can be identified.

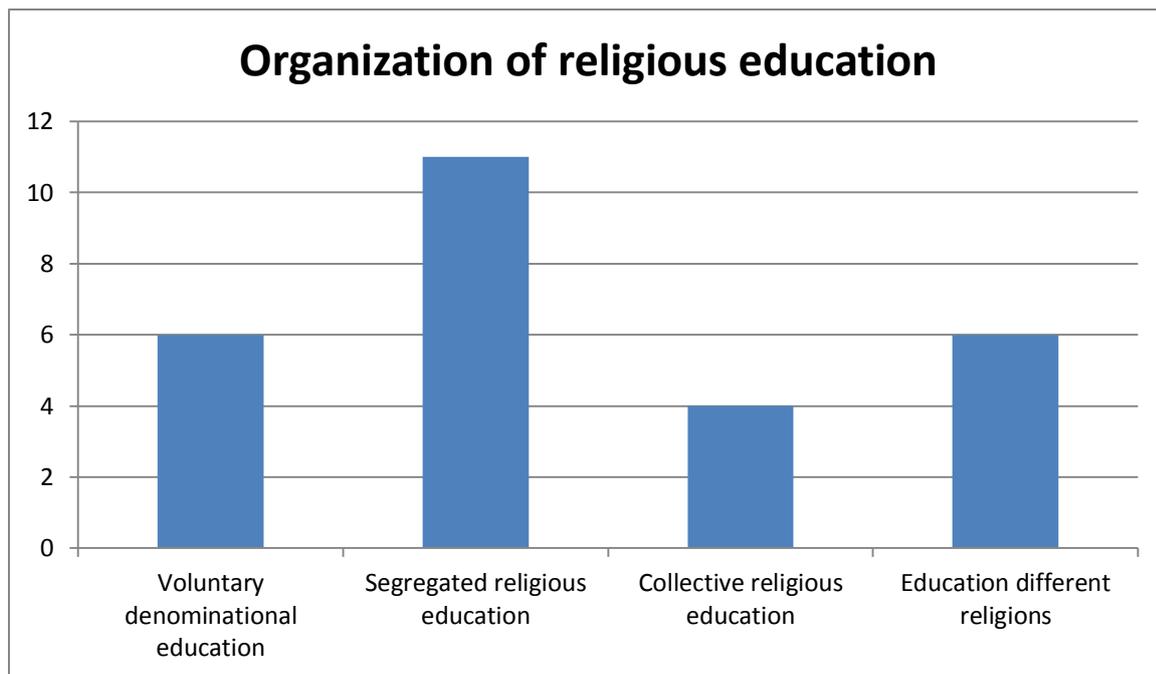


Fig. 3

The response also indicates that the religious identity of the cooperation school is expressed in concrete activities. In the questionnaire the following question was asked: ‘Can you indicate a decision or a reflexion in school practice in which the religious identity of the school plays or has played an important role?’ 13 respondents say they can and refer to concrete activities. For example the celebrations of especially religious feasts are mentioned. But the religious identity is also shown in lessons religious education, in the choice of themes in these lessons, in the selection of staff members.

Next to these activities we must mention that almost all respondents indicate that the religious identity is often or always discussed during another kind of concrete activities: the job interviews with potential new staff and the intakes with parents.

5. Conclusions and discussion.

A cooperation school formally is not a public school. But students at these cooperation schools do visit a school where values of public education are supported and where this education is offered. This is an important first conclusion, concerning the integrated identity. A cooperation school, like a public school, is accessible for all students and staff members. The respondents also indicate this accessibility as a key value of their cooperation school as well as a way in which public values are guaranteed. Next to this correlation between a cooperation school and a public school public education can also be identified because of the active multiformity and the neutrality. We can conclude that the respondents indicate that values of public education correspond with those of their schools. In this way there is no difference between a public school and a cooperation school. The adjustment in Dutch Constitution, concerning the receiving of public education ‘‘whether or not in a public school’ can be seen as a grounded adjustment towards cooperation schools.

Secondly we can conclude that the respondents see the religious identity of their schools especially expressed in concrete activities such as the celebrations of religious feasts and in religious education. Apparently the respondents interpret the integrated identity of their

schools as transferred in restricted identity.

The third conclusion concerns the restricted identity. The results confirm that public education, in the form of religious education, can be received at a cooperation school. But this education is very diverse. And, different from a public school, most cooperation schools offer religious education in another way and by the group teachers themselves; segregation of religious education according to the religious origins of the merged schools is a specific feature of most cooperation schools.

Further research can focus on the religious education according to public values. In the results so far there is no conformity concerning this education. And what can we learn from the few cooperation schools that say to provide public religious education for all students without the segregation? What can these schools tell us about the motivations and the ways in which religious education contributes to the dialogue between students (and teachers) with different kind of religious backgrounds?

A second focus for further research can be the policy of appointing teachers and the neutrality of the school. Not all respondents say these items are an expression of values of public education. What perception do they have of neutrality and do they select teachers based upon religious, cultural or ethnic background or sexual preference?

And thirdly we can investigate what the perception of non-government education in a cooperation school is. After all, this school is obliged to offer both public and non-government education. In the questionnaire no questions were asked about the status of (values of) non-government education other than those about the restricted identity in religious education.

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