

A Catalogue of Protestant primary schools in the secular age. Results of an empirical research project in the Netherlands

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Abstract. *Since the end of the so-called ‘School struggle’ (‘Schoolstrijd’) in 1920 both Dutch state and denominational schools are equally financed by the government. This outcome formed the basis for the Dutch pillarized educational system, with separate schools (Protestant, Roman Catholic and State schools) following religious dividing lines. However, the way schools give shape to their (religious) identity, has changed over time. As a result of changes in society and individualization of religiosity, the formal identity of schools in the (post)pillarised educational system is neither fully representing the religious identity of teachers, of pupils or of their parents anymore. Religious schools make their own decisions regarding the way they give shape to their religious identity. However, we lack information on how they actually do this nowadays. We present the outcomes of an empirical study (both qualitative and quantitative) on how Protestant primary schools position themselves in relation to the cultural and religious diversity in society that is in the secular age.*

Introduction

After a period known as ‘School struggle’ (‘Schoolstrijd’) both Dutch state and denominational schools are equally financed by the government since 1920. This outcome formed and is still forming the basis for the Dutch pillarized educational system, with separate schools (Protestant, Roman Catholic and State schools) following religious dividing lines. As a result of multiculturalization and the individualisation of religion, the population of teachers in denominational schools changed. Next to the change in teachers’ religious identity, the population of pupils in denominational schools changed as well. Until today, the ‘pillars of the building of education’, are still existing as an institutionalized structured pluralism. In this still pillarised educational system, denominational schools count for approximately 70% of all schools, mainly providing RE from Protestant or Roman Catholic or inter-confessional background. In 2009 28% of all primary school pupils attended a Protestant school, 34% attended a Roman Catholic school (together 62%), and 31% attended a State school. In 2009 8% of the primary school pupils attended ‘other denominational education’ This category contains of other confessional schools (like Islamic schools) and denominational schools which adhere to a pedagogic ‘denomination’ (e.g. following the pedagogical conception of Maria Montessori, Rudolf Steiner or of Dalton education).

Due to processes of changes in society and individualization of religiosity, the formal identity of schools in the (post)pillarised educational system is neither fully representing

the religious identity of teachers, pupils or of their parents anymore. Religious schools make their own decisions regarding the way they give shape to their religious identity. However, we lack information on how they actually do this nowadays. Seen the developments in society (including secularization, individualization, and growing religious diversity) we have strong arguments to suppose that the way schools give shape to their religious identity nowadays differ from the way they did 10-15 years ago. Therefore we question in our research project whether the conceptualization of religious (Christian) schools that was formulated in 2001 (Wardekker & Miedema 2001, 42-45) is still valid. We need actual data to investigate how Protestant primary schools give shape to their identity as well as position themselves regarding the actual developments they are confronted with.

As the conceptualization that was formulated in 2001 is still used in practice (for instance in in-service courses of principals of Dutch primary schools in order to help them to reflect on the identity of their own school, see Bakker et al, 2007) and is still the only elaborated theoretical framework with regard to school concepts in the Netherlands, we will give an overview of this conceptualization. Subsequently the research questions and methods of our empirical research will be described. Then, we will describe some preliminary findings. In the conclusion we will relate these findings to the 'original' conceptualization.

Theoretical background

On the basis of conceptual analyses and empirical research four types of denominational (i.e. Christian) schools have been distinguished (Wardekker and Miedema, 2001): segregated schools, program schools, encounter schools, and interreligious schools. One important distinguishing characteristic between these four types, is the interpretation schools give to religious truth claims. To characterize the school identity types by this constituent element, the concepts of exclusivity, inclusivity, and plurality from the theology of religions are used (cf. Ziebertz 1994, 151 ff.). "The *exclusivity* concept in the Christian tradition claims that there is no other way for people to find salvation aside from the belief in Jesus Christ. (...) Characteristic for the *inclusivity* concept is the view that God's revelation and real experiences of God can also be found in other religions than the Christian one. However, the revelation related with Jesus Christ is interpreted as the ultimate salvation. (...) In the *plurality* concept the relational nature of the truth of all religions is emphasized. (...)" (Wardekker and Miedema, 2001 p. 43).

Segregated schools are schools which held an exclusive interpretation of religious truth. The belief in the God of the bible and in Jesus his son is the absolute truth. This truth should be spread in both the school, the family and the church. The school is closed to teachers and pupils who adhere to another religion. This religious homogeneity is an important characteristic of this type of schools.

Unlike the segregated schools, *program schools* have a religiously heterogeneous student population. In order to avoid that the way shape is given to religious education becomes dependent on the religions of the pupils and their parents, the teachers communicate the religious position of the school very clearly via the school program. All teachers adhere the Christian religion. All students are welcome, as long as their parents respect the basic religious assumptions of the school as formulated in the school's program. Within this school type two subtypes can be distinguished, depending on whether the basic religious

assumptions of the program, which have an exclusive character, are interpreted in daily school practice in an exclusive way (*Program 1*) or in inclusive way (*Program 2*). In the latter case the school's problem is how to deal with an inclusivist praxis combined with an exclusivist program. (See Wardekker and Miedema 2001 for a further elaboration on this problem).

Typical for the (Christian) *encounter school* is that "the God of other religions (at least the one of the monotheistic religions) is considered to be the same as the God of the Bible, but the exceptional value of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ is maintained. The school is open to students from all religions, and sometimes also teachers from other than the Christian religion are appointed. The teachers explicitly try to deal with the cultural and religious knowledge, practices, and experiences that the students embody on the basis of their family upbringing. Other religions, however, are always put into a perspective based on the Christian tradition." (Wardekker and Miedema, p. 45). *Interreligious schools* emphasize that truth in itself is pluralistic and by its nature relational. The focus is on mutual religious communication and dialogue about the diverse underlying assumptions of the religions embodied by teachers and students. The school is open to students and teachers who are in an active way committed to a religion. It is this situation of religious pluriformity that gives this school its specific denominational identity profile.

Although the interpretations given to religious truth claims have a strong influence on the way a certain school is categorized, two other aspects are also taken into account when it comes to the categorization of the four types. These components are respectively the conception of education (transformation or transmission) and the conception of the content of teaching and learning (preclusion, equality, or pluralistic strategy). This last conception describes the used strategy in dealing with the present plurality of cultural meanings.

Wardekker and Miedema elaborated, from a theoretical perspective, on the question if and how these different components can be combined into consistent identity conceptions of schools. They conclude that not all of the possible combinations are consistent and that it is worthwhile to investigate from an empirical perspective which combinations are used in practice and whether the persons involved recognize possible contradictions and if so, how they deal with that. It is especially this focus on school practice which we have taken up in the current research project. As already mentioned, an important issue is whether the distinguished components are still the most adequate ones to describe actual school identities. Having good reasons to doubt this, we conducted an empirical research aiming at shedding light on actual school identities.

Method

Research questions

In order to discover which are nowadays useful conceptualizations of the way Protestant schools for primary education give, shape to their identity in the light of actual developments they are confronted with, a couple of (sub) research questions have been formulated. Among them are the following ones:

1) What are the actual developments (both inside and outside the school) which influence the possibilities of the school to be the school the principal would like it to be?

- 2) Which motives are given (by principals) to explain how their school relates to the developments the school is confronted with?
- 3) Can we distinguish 'categories' or 'types' in the way schools give shape to their identity, in relation to the developments they are confronted with and the motives the principal is providing of the way he/she relates to these developments?

Procedure and instrument

The research has an explorative character in the sense that our only 'hypothesis' was that the actual school types differ from the school types described by Wardekker and Miedema (2001). No alternative school types have been formulated beforehand. Semi-structured interviews with school leaders (N=7) of a variety of Protestant schools have been carried out in order to get more insights into the actual developments schools have to deal with and how schools deal, from their own identity profile or conception, with these developments. The interviews have been analyzed by close reading, making use of Kwalitan (a computerprogram for qualitative analyses). The (online) survey was based on the structure and outcomes of this qualitative study. Quotations of the principals have been reformulated into statements with a five point Likert scale. Besides that, we made use of (parts of) existing questionnaires (e.g. Van Hardeveld, 2003), partly with an eye on possible comparisons.

Main topics of the questionnaire are: 'composition of the teacher- and pupil population', 'educational goals', 'actual themes/developments', 'motives influencing the way a school deals with actual themes/developments', 'the way shape is given to religious education'. The completed questionnaires were analysed with the help of the program SPSS. With the help of principal component factor analyses with varimax rotation (a minimum eigenvalue of 1.00 and the scree-test) individual items were combined into scales. The mean scores of schools on these scales have been used as nominal variables in a Two Step Cluster analysis. Besides, some categorical (binary) variables have been added. (For instance 'only hiring protestant teachers or not', 'religious upbringing as general aim or not'). As "Two Step Cluster analysis does not involve hypothesis testing and calculation of observed significance levels, other than for descriptive follow-up" (Norušis, 2011, p. 380), it is a useful method for our explorative study. In the end it are the interpretations and aims of the researchers (and the way the interpretations are recognized by the 'field', e.g. principals) which determine what kind of clustering is most useful for the researcher in respect to the descriptive power of the outcomes.

After the clustering has been made, there will be another round of interviews with a different group of principals in order to find out to what degree the school types are recognizable to these principals themselves and, if so, how they would position themselves, or how they would refine the description of the school models. On the basis of this second qualitative study we will refine the clusters. Finally, we will get back to the all the principals, to whom we sent the questionnaire, with a very short online survey asking them how they would position themselves in relation to the described clusters.¹

¹ As these last steps are still to be carried out at the moment this paper was written, the findings of this part of the research cannot be described here.

Sample

All primary schools (N=1807) which are member of the *Besturenraad* (a Dutch association for Christian education) were invited, via internet, to participate. In toto 166 principals spread over the whole country, completed the questionnaire. This is a relatively low response (9,2%). However, the geographical distribution of the participating schools reflects the geographical distribution of the whole group. Besides that, an inventory taking of reasons for non-participation made clear that there were no content related arguments for not participating. The main reason for not participating was time pressure. All in all the sample is useful for our explorative aims.

Findings

Data analyses of the on-line inventory gave insight into the actual developments and themes school are confronted with nowadays (question 1) and the motives given by principals to explain how their school relates to these developments (question 2). In general, the developments and themes which have (in the eyes of the principals) a reasonable or strong influence on the possibilities of the school (all Christian, denominational schools) to be the school they would like to be, are mainly related to government's policy. Among the themes mentioned are 'governmental budget cuts', 'increasing administrative duties', 'regularly changing government's policy'. Also the increasing attention for efficiency and 'measurable results' influence the possibilities of schools to be the school the principal would like it to be. Developments like 'increasing religious diversity among pupils', 'increasing religious diversity among teachers', 'decreasing amount of teachers with a Christian background', 'decreasing influence of Christian churches in society' have far less influence.

In dealing with these influencing developments (question 2) different motives play a role. It is striking that, generally speaking, motives which have an eye for the broad development of pupils play a relatively strong role (e.g. 'our strive for being a school all pupils feel welcome', 'our strive for preparing our pupils as well as possible for a life in society'). Also motives related to the wish of meeting the needs of the government play a relatively strong role. Motives which explicitly refer to the Christian background of the school seem to be far less important (e.g. 'our strive for maintaining our Christian identity', 'our strive for remain standing in the Christian tradition').

On the basis of these and other questions we could derive from the questionnaire, a tentative clustering of 'school types' have been made (third research question). The best Two Step Cluster solution is a solution in which clusters are both enough discriminating from each other and also well interpretable (and recognizable). After we have add several variables to the cluster analysis, investigated if and how this influenced the possible cluster analysis and discussed the usefulness of the respective clusters within our research group, we came to a preliminary solution of three clusters. As mentioned earlier, these clusters will, in the next stage, be elaborated and specified on the basis of additional interviews.

Cluster 1 (N= 57) exists of schools which have a (relative) strong focus on the bible and the Christian tradition. Religious education is clearly seen as an aim of education. To most of these schools it is an important educational aim to introduce the gospel of Jesus Christ to their pupils. Christianity is not so much stressed because of its cultural values

(and because it forms the background of our society) but because of the importance of belief in the God of the bible and Jesus. Compared to the other clusters, schools in this cluster are less inclined to stress equality between religions and/or to evaluate religious diversity positively. The schools lay a relatively strong emphasis on (pupils adhering to) their own (Christian) religion. Apart from that, they seem to focus more strongly on transmission (of religion) than on transformation/ identity formation of the pupil as an individual human being. Quite some of the schools only have protestant teachers. Quite some of these schools mainly have Christian (protestant) pupils. There are, however, also schools within this cluster which mainly have non-religious pupils or pupils with a different religious background. Many of the schools have only protestant teachers. Some of the schools also have for instance some catholic teachers. There are no Muslims, Jews or Hindus etc. working a teacher at these schools.

Characteristic for *Cluster 2* (N=48) schools is that in general religious education is not seen as an overall goal of education. Also the aim to introduce pupils to the gospel of Jesus Christ is not highly valued. Unlike the Cluster 1 schools, schools in cluster 2 do stress the importance of getting children acquainted with Christianity because of the fact that values in our society are based on Christianity. Next to that, in religious education relatively much attention is paid to other (world)religions and societal questions.

Almost all schools have also non-protestant teachers. Next to that, at most schools the pupils have a different religious background. Religious diversity is relatively strong appreciated (in comparison to cluster 1 and cluster 3 schools). In comparison to the schools in the other clusters, the fact the school has (officially) a Christian background, is relatively unimportant when it comes to how the schools deal with actual developments.

In comparison to the schools in cluster 2 and especially to the schools in cluster 1, *cluster 3* schools (N=52) attach great importance to the edification ('Bildung') of every pupil. Stimulation of development and collaboration and learning children to think for themselves and to be open towards others, from the perspective of the own (Christian) tradition, are also evaluated as relatively important. The personal development of individual pupils is rather important here. In comparison to schools in cluster 1 and 2 'meaning making/giving' is an important topic which often gets attention in religious education.

For cluster 3 schools it is not necessary the case that all the teachers have a protestant background. A significant percentage of schools in this cluster has mainly pupils with a Christian background. Quite some schools, however, have pupils with diverse religious backgrounds.

Conclusions and discussion

Although the descriptions of the three clusters will probably be refined on the basis of the next round of qualitative interviews, some preliminary conclusions can already be drawn. One conclusion is that on the basis of our present empirical study we found less distinct and meaningful school clusters (namely three) than we would expect from the perspective of the theoretical analysis of Wardekker and Miedema (2001). Besides that, the clusters do (partly) have also other characteristics than the types which were distinguished in the past. Seen the data one possibility is that, currently, governmental policy (including cuts and regular changes) has such a strong influence that schools are less occupied with

issues such as (religious) identity. As already mentioned, we have the impression that the increased religious (and ethnic) diversity in society in combination with processes of secularization and individualization also influence the way schools give shape to their identity. However, in our research these issues are, in general, hardly mentioned by the principals themselves. It could be that many schools already had dealt with these issues in the last decennium and that nowadays other developments (like governments' policy) have a stronger influence on school identity formation. The qualitative data of the (first round) interviews also seem to point in this direction as some principals clearly indicate that in the past they have had discussions in their schools on for instance whether or not to accept non-Christian teachers, but that since the situation has changed there are other issues which need to be addressed.

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