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**Parents coming out religiously.
Secular and religious reasons for their choice of a primary school**

Summary

The secularised Dutch context can be characterised as post-pillarised, referring to the earlier educational context with ‘pillars’ for Protestant, Roman Catholic, Islamic and public/humanistic education. Whereas in former days in the schools teachers as well as pupils adhered to the particular religious or secular worldview of the school, today this is no longer self-evident. This poses the question: “What motivates parents nowadays to send their child to a Christian primary school?” We provide an answer via a qualitative empirical research project in which seven Protestant primary schools participated. National and international research shows the priorities of parents in choosing a school. In our research we focus on parents’ motivations that underpin their prioritizing. The analysis of the interviews shows that parents look with the eyes of a child, that the first formal personal contact with the principal or a teacher of the school where a parent will look around has a huge influence on the final choice - a choice that materialises rather intuitively ("it feels good") and is imbued with care and love. Parents find it important that their child is provided with knowledge of the Christian tradition and that the school has an open mind towards other religions as well.

I Introduction

The Dutch society changed over fifty years from a mono-cultural society in which the Christian tradition was dominant, into a society characterised by multi-culturality and super-diversity.¹ The motives of parents to choose a Christian school for their children seem to have shifted from an emphasis on broadening and deepening socialisation in the Christian tradition (*teaching into religion*) to getting acquainted with worldviews and religions in general and the Christian tradition in particular (*teaching about religions and worldviews from a secularised-Christian perspective*).

With our research we wanted to map the underlying motives of parents in choosing a school. This contribution is based on the analysis of interviews mainly with mothers of schools of the various types that took part in the research project we reported at the REA 2011 Conference.² Later in this presentation, we will make use of the tentative indications of the three types of

¹ Crul, M., J. Schneider, F. Lelie (2013). *Superdiversiteit, een nieuwe visie op integratie*. Amsterdam: VU University Press.

² Bertram-Troost, G.D. C. Kom, I. ter Avest & S. Miedema (2011). The Positioning of Protestant Primary Schools in the Secular Age. Results of an Empirical Project in the Netherlands. In: L. Huffaker (Ed.). *Brain matters: neuroscience, creativity and diversity. 2011 Proceedings of REA/APPRRE*. REA/APPRRE: Toronto.

schools we distinguished then: tradition oriented school, diversity oriented school, meaningful learning oriented school.

The aim of our research is to gain insight in the process parents of young children go through when choosing a school, the values that play a role, and the concretisation thereof in principals' and teachers' actions. Our contribution might help to optimize the communication between school and parents in the process of choosing, also within the framework of enhancing the partnership in education.

In our research the following questions were guiding:

- * How does *the process* of school choice take place?
- * Which *motives* can we distinguish regarding the final choice for the respective school?
- * Which *relation* do parents see between a (possibly) worldview related motive and other motives when it concerns the choice of a Christian school?

II Setup and implementation of the research

We have chosen for a qualitative research setup with focus-group interviews. This choice is self-evident since most young parents are used to discuss all sorts of educational matters together. Young fathers and mothers meet each other at the day-care centre and the playgroup when bringing and picking up their children, and then exchange opinions.

The focus-group interviews stimulate further reflection together - in our case - on the identity of the school and parents' choice. From a focus-group interview suggestions can emerge that could benefit the communication on the identity between team and parents.

The focus-group interview was a semi-structured interview, constituted by key questions related to our research question. During the focus-group interview, two researchers are present all the time: a discussion leader and a minutes secretary.

II. 1 Selection of schools

Regarding the selection of schools for participation in our research we made use of the earlier mentioned 3 school types. Schools were recruited based on the following criteria: school type, national dispersion (countryside and large urban environment), pedagogical concepts (e.g. Jenaplan or Montessori education), and whether or not several primary schools of a different denomination in the near vicinity of the school were present (rich-choice or poor-choice context). From the twelve selected schools that complied with these criteria, parents from seven schools have participated in our research.

II.2 Recruitment of parents

The recruitment of parents for the focus-group interviews went through the principals of the schools.

Parents of children from groups 1 and 2 were approached, since those parents have made the choice of the school most recently.

II.3 Method in the focus-group interviews

The focus-groups consist of five to eight parents on average, mainly mothers. The interviews were recorded with a voice recorder. Each interview was analysed by both researchers immediately upon completion, and the most important points of discussion were noted down.

A third researcher has listened to the recorded interviews in full, gave comments on the researchers' interpretations of the context and/or parents' wording, and added literal quotes from parents to the report.

II.4 Method for analysing the focus-group interviews

Three *verbatim*s were analysed by the researchers independently from each other and revealed the following themes in the school choice process and parents' considerations:

- process of school selection
- worldview in upbringing and education
- parent perspective versus child perspective
- motivation of parents in relation to school type

The reports of the other focus-group interviews were analysed on the basis of these four themes.

III Results of the analysis of the focus-group interviews

Below we will present the most striking results from the analysis of the focus-group interviews, focusing on the process, the worldview/educational aspect, the parent and child perspective, and the Christian aspect of the identity of the school. In our quotes we refer to the parents of the type of school their child is attending.

III.1 Process of school choice

By far most parents think about the school choice by the time the fourth birthday of their child comes nearer.³ Sometimes the choice has implicitly already been made because the child attended a playground that is associated with a certain primary school. Sometimes it turns out that the choice was already made previously, since one or more older children already attended the school.

A mother whose child attended a meaningful learning oriented school in a rich-choice environment briefly and aptly depicted her school choice process: "At first we received a booklet at home. We already had looked around a bit on the Internet. The religious schools performed better than the public ones. We visited both. Here we were welcomed very pleasantly."

A mother whose child attended a traditional school explains that after paging through an information leaflet, she went to take a look at those schools: "Just at the school yard, what sort of parents and children are there, do you think you can have a 'click' with them?"

During each focus-group interview, parents mention the intake interview with the principal or a teacher as an important moment at which they develop a further impression on the school.

But not only during that phase. Being and staying on speaking terms is also important for parents in case of a difference of opinion, as a mother of a child attending a traditional school explains as a result of the turmoil that had occurred on the story of the Creation versus the evolution theory. "However, we had a sound discussion on that with the principal."

Sometimes, prior to the intake interview, a parent just takes a look how things are going in the school yard. When this mother (child attending a traditional school) saw that the teachers were doing far more than "just chatting with each other", she concluded that it was good. "And once things feel good, why should one look any further then?"

³ Waslander, S., C. Pater, M. van der Weide (2010) *Markets in Education: an analytical review of empirical research on market mechanisms in education*. Paris : OECD.

Some individuals that collect information via the website of the school also consult the social media: “What do they themselves post on the Internet, for example: what sort of hobbies they have?” This provides “a rather good image” of the school, according to one of the mothers. The municipal information guide in which qualifications of schools are included is a source of information for some parents as well during this phase. However, this group of parents is an exception.

III.2 Ideology in upbringing and education

Generally speaking it seems that for parents it is difficult to distinguish between the education at home and at school. During the interviews on what one considers as valuable in the upbringing at home, the focus quickly redirected to the education at school. One mother of a child attending a traditional school finds it important that there is correspondence with the approach at home. Another mother from the same school is pleased that at school additional information is provided. “Everything is explained properly here, for example what Palm Sunday stands for.”

Another parent speaks of another school where she initially had a look: “Over there, the Christian part did not mean that much: there was only one celebration by the end of the month.” In general, parents are not looking for a very strict Christian school. “The very strict part is not necessary for me, like wearing skirts and a compulsory visit to the Church ... but yet still a little bit, so that my daughter knows about it” (meaningful learning oriented school). “The Christian stories are nice for the children”, one mother (traditional school) states, who explains that she herself is not religious. “I find it good to get acquainted with those stories during childhood”, a mother from a meaningful learning oriented school says. “I did miss it myself indeed: I attended a public school. It is part of Dutch culture”. A mother from a child attending a traditional school says on this: “I find it important that they know what the Christian holidays are about”. Contrary to this, according to this mother, “Public schools do have a Christmas tree, but they don’t tell a story with it.” “At home we don’t celebrate that much, but it is nice that here at school they do something with it”, a mother of a meaningful learning oriented school states.

III.3 Parent perspective versus child perspective

When reasoning on a school choice, the parent appears to be motivated by the interests of the child at some occasions (looking through the eyes of the child), yet at other occasions the motives of the parents themselves appear to be decisive (looking through the eyes of the parent, with the memories of their own childhood). An example of the child perspective is provided by a mother who finds it important for her child that school-friends live close-by, and that children from the neighbourhood meet each other at school. One mother of a child attending a meaningful learning oriented school interprets the child perspective in view of ‘the future’ pointing to the importance that they (the pupils) “already learn a little how to present themselves, since there is quite some pressure on them. So I think: the sooner they start out with such a stage, the less fear they will have for it as well”.

Knowledge on religion is regarded by some parents of a diversity school as an asset, since they themselves experienced to have profited from it: “You can take it along during the rest of your life”. Another parent from the same school points out that “lack of knowledge can quickly result in fear”.

An example of a parent perspective is that of a parent who attended a Christian school, and has no negative memories on that (meaningful learning oriented school), or a parent who does indeed have negative memories on the public school she attended and therefore has selected a Christian school for her child (meaningful learning oriented school).

III.4 Motivation of parents in relation to school type

The way in which the Christian aspect is shaped at the traditional school (introducing pupils to the Gospel and make them become acquainted with the Bible and Christianity) connects to what parents say, namely that the school provides a steppingstone for belief in and knowledge of Christian holidays and other traditions, and that for the rest parents should take care of religious education themselves. Parents of traditional schools prefer one line between home and school. This shows resemblance with the description of the traditional school, that the team is mainly of Protestant Christian origin, which contributes to the feeling of familiarity. Parents also address this as ‘odour of the nest’.

As far as the Christian character of the school is concerned, parents of diversity schools find teaching about the Christian and other traditions the most important thing. For these parents knowledge of traditions belongs to a proper preparation for the future: “You profit from it later on in society”. That is the reason why these parents value diversity at school. This corresponds with what is written in the description of the diversity school, namely that one wants to prepare pupils for a life in a multi-cultural society. Furthermore, the description of the diversity school indicates that there is space for encounter; diversity is an opportunity for learning .

Parents of a child attending a meaningful learning oriented school also state that attaching a meaning to Christian holidays is also an important surplus value of a Christian school. Parents also attach value to the praxis of the Christian faith in social activities. Openness towards other cultures and religions is appreciated. The description of this school type reads: “We teach our pupils to deal with various worldviews from our own (Christian) tradition”.

IV Conclusion

We can answer our three research questions now as follows:

During the *process* of school choice, informal informers are important. Parents follow what they hear from family, friends, neighbours, and acquaintances in the neighbourhood. Official documents, the school guide, and the school website play a secondary role. Some parents take a look at the school yard to obtain an impression of the way teachers deal with children and of the other parents standing at the gate. The main role is, however, for the one who conducts the intake interview. During this contact moment, experiencing a ‘click’ or not is of decisive importance.

With regard to the *motives* that parents mention for the selection of the school, the interests of the child come first: their child should feel good going to school, should be given all attention, and should learn how to deal respectfully with others. Secondly, the child should also be prepared for the future. These ‘interests of the child’ appears to be acknowledged in various ways by parents: the interests of their child now, the interests of the child as the parent experiences it, and the interests of the child-inside-the-parent, the child that this parent once was. Above all, the mothers experience the school through the eyes of the young child (infant). The motivation for a Christian school in term of the *relation between a (possibly) worldview related motive and other motives* varies from a predominance of becoming acquainted with the Christian tradition as an extension of home, in addition to home, or as acquiring knowledge on the tradition that is after all part of Dutch culture.

V Discussion and recommendations

The various roles that appear to be available for parents as partners-in-education in the school community don't play a role in the school choice motivation of parents. Firstly they choose for their child. They wish to experience a 'click' with other parents and team members.

Parents experience the school through the eyes of their child during the school choice process. Only in exceptional cases parents look ahead to the development of their child from a four year-old to a twelve year-old. Parents know a lot about the *emotional needs* of their young child, and they realise the need for safety, security, and attention of their infant. However, parents know little about the *learning needs* of the child, hardly of the infant, but certainly not of the growing up child. An important task for the school seems to be left there. The school should take the parents by the hand in the development of their child from infant to adolescent, as well as in the corresponding learning needs.

For both the traditional school, the diversity school, and the meaningful learning oriented school, Sacks' metaphor 'the home we create together' applies for the collaboration between the main stakeholders in the development and shaping of the child.⁴ In this metaphor, the school can be regarded as a home to live in, that materialises because of the efforts of all parties involved. A home where all inhabitants contribute to the maintenance, each by means of his/her own expertise. This creation shows the power of "orchestrated diversity: since we are not the same, we all contribute something unique, something that only one of us can give".⁵ Thus, partnership in education of parents and teachers is a must.

⁴ Sacks, J. (2007). *The home we build together: recreating society*. London: Continuum.

⁵ Ibid. p. 93