Religious Education – Violation of university teachers' comfort zone?

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Abstract

In the Netherlands most of the academic curricula of teacher training for religious education (TT-RE) focus on shortfalls of students, like a lack of knowledge of the plurality in interpretations in their own Christian tradition.

In our research project the focus is on university professors and lecturers of the subject of 'religious education'. The main aim of the project is to gain a better insight in the complexity of academics' own *positionality* in the plurality of the roman catholic tradition they adhere to. For this investigation we made use of a research instrument based on the Dialogical Self Theory and its Self Confrontation Method for Teams (Ter Avest 2014).

In our presentation we focus on the intervention with this research instrument and present preliminary results. We reflect upon the results and formulate recommendations for further research.

Introduction

In the Netherlands, being one of the most secularized countries of Europe, only a small part of the generation of students entering university in the last decade is raised in a homogeneous

religious family and educational context. The greater part of students nowadays is raised in a secularized (Christian) family context, visited a secularized Christian or public secondary school and meets peers in membership groups outside the church or any other religious community. They know little about their own tradition and are confronted with different discourses regarding 'truth claims' of tradition(s) (Versteegt 2010, 72-74). This is so for students in different departments, including teacher training for religious education (TT-RE).

In this highly secularized and plural context regarding religious and secular worldviews, a successful completion of an academic career by obtaining an academic degree to be licensed as teacher in religious education can be problematic. This is so for secular(ized Christian) students, but even more so for students entering university with a well defined but unreflected exclusively interpreted religious conviction or a so called 'foreclosure' in the development of their religious or semi-secular worldview (Marcia 1980; Bakker & Ter Avest 2008).

For many students entering TT-RE it can be said that they know little about their own and other religious traditions, although they are not indifferent to secular and religious rituals and symbols. On the contrary, they show to be highly interested in worldviews, religiosity, spirituality and related traditions. This generation students are self defined members of 'unaffiliated spirituals' (Van de Donk *et al.* 2006).

Instead of focusing on *students'* deficiencies, like for example their lack of knowledge of religious and secular traditions, in our research we focus on *university professors and lecturers* of the subject of 'religious education' and their held religious beliefs and convictions. It is the task of university professors and lecturers to train their students to become 'good teachers of religious education' – a good teacher for students in secondary education – be it in schools with a Christian identity or in state schools. That means that in the first place the development of so called *instrumental professionalism* is central in the four years' training program. Students have to be taught *about* the Christian tradition – for some students the tradition their parents were related to in some way or an other – and about other secular and religious traditions people in the Netherlands adhere to; Islam beint the second religion in the Netherlands. Students also have to be taught in pedagogical strategies, classroom management, leadership styles, and the educational and political arena in the Netherlands. Next to that, in the curriculum of a TT-RE attention should be given to the reflection on students biographically rooted value orientation and its relation to their own positionality in the field of religious and secular worldviews and the politics of education. Instrumental professionalism subjected to a person's value orientation developing into an authentic positionality, is included in what is called by Bakker normative professionalism (Bakker 2014). In order to train students in their instrumental professionalism ànd coach them in the reflection on their value related positionality (normative professionalism), *academics themselves* should be aware of their own positionality with regard to the above mentioned aspects of instrumental and normative professionalism.

The stimulation and support of the academics (professors and lecturers) in their development to facilitate students' professional identity development includes a provocation and even seduction to leave the 'comfort zone' of held beliefs, to face uncertainty, to long for what is

left behind (retrospective nostalgia) as well as to long for a new situation of high status for the implemented new curriculum of their roman catholic teacher training institute (prospective nostalgia) (Du Preez 2011).

Theoretical framework

We follow the analysis of Charles Taylor (2009) as presented in 'A secular world' for the description of the development of secularization as well as for its meaning for identity development of people today. According to Taylor it is the change in the process of identity construction that has had and still has a huge impact on the way people position themselves in their context. The main principle of organization and structuring a person's position in society (the hierarchical principle of status and belonging to a certain family, belonging to a group of respected craftsmen, belonging to a religious community) fades away to make place for the principle of dignity of all human beings, the dignity of citizens on a democratic society. In a democratic society there is equal recognition of people's dignity. Recognition of this dignity becomes an important issue, because it does not go without saying anymore like it was in earlier days recognizing people's status based on their place of birth; recognition in modern times is something you have to gain, and in the attempt to gain it you might fail. The result is an individualized identity, closely related to the ideal of authenticity. Whereas in earlier days knowing what to do to be a good member of society was based on knowing about good and evil as this was transmitted in the Christian tradition, in these days knowing what to do is the result of an inner process searching for 'the source of the good' in the Self. This inner process leads to an individualized way of being 'a good human', 'I do it my way'. In case a person cannot find the authentic own way 'I miss the point of my life'. 'In articulating the point of my life, I am also defining my Self (Taylor 2009, 31). However, according to Taylor, this process can only be successful in dialogue with 'significant others'; 'This crucial feature of human life is its fundamentally dialogical character (ibid., 32). 'We define our identity always in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the things our significant others want to see in us. Even after we outgrow some of these others – our parents, for instance – and they disappear from our lives, the conversation with them continues within us as long as we live. We need relationships to fulfil, but not to define, ourselves (ibid., 33). Following Taylor we conclude that authenticity and recognition are two sides of the same coin. It seems that it is precisely difference as a constitutive part of a constructive dialogue in which identity is constructed, has been ignored, glossed over, and assimilated to a dominant or majority identity And this assimilation is the cardinal sin against the ideal of authenticity (ibid. 38), leading to a false homogeneity (ibid., 44). The need for recognition of dignity as well as the recognition of difference and autonomy, not only as a person but even more so as a starting professional, makes students vulnerable and makes professors and lecturers responsible for a pedagogy of challenge and care, a so called provocative pedagogy (ter Avest&Bertram-Troost 2009). The loss of cultural identity, that is the way out of the comfort zone of a well respected professor or lecturer in Re in the Dutch plural context is preconditional for facilitating new ways of normative professionalism of today's RE teachers in secondary education (cf. Roy, in Oudenampsen 2014).

For the description of the context of our research we further make use of theories on student's development of commitment of their religious or secular world view development as well as theories on the influence of peergroup and membershipgroups (constituting the life world) on youngsters' (religious) identity development (Marcia 1980, Bakker&Ter Avest 2008). According to Marcia identity develops in four phases: the phase of exploration being a crucial phase since in this phase a person explores a variety of value orientations and world views and the respective positions with regard to existential questions. This phase of exploration, or what could also be names as a phase of research, results in a stable commitment – with regard to a choice for a profession, a political stance and a 'companion for life'. In our view knowledge about and adaptation to this phase of identity development of students is crucial for professors and lecturers at teacher training institutes.

For the construction of the valuations we made use of Biesta's work on 'good education', Bakker's work on technical and normative professionalism (2014), next to the reports of the meeting in which professors and lecturers discussed about the core characteristics of teacher training in religious education. The main part of our theoretical framework consists of the core concepts of the VT (Hermans&Hermans-Jansen 1995) and DST (Hermans&Hermans-Jansen; Hermans&Gieser 2012).

Research Methodology

To investigate academics' positionality we make use of a SCM[1]-related instrument. At the basis of this instrument is the Valuation Theory (VT) and the Dialogical Self Theory (DST), developed by Hermans&Hermans-Jansen (1995) and reviewed, renewed and extended by Hermans&Hermans-Konopka (2010) and Hermans&Gieser (2014).

According the Valutation Theory (VT) persons are motivated by two basic motives: the S-motive aiming at strengthening self awareness and self esteem, and the O-motive directed towards care for others and belongingness to others. Through emotional responses to persons or situations the S- and O-motive become visible. For example the emotion 'tenderness' refers to the O-motive and the emotion 'pride' to the S-motive in a positive way. The VT states that a person can experience different emotions at the same moment or in a similar contexts. For example walking in the woods with my dog gives me a feeling of happiness while at the same time I feel powerless when the dog starts to chase a rabbit, and a feeling of pride when the dog immediately turns back to me when I call my dog.

According to the Dialogical Self Theory (DST) the different feelings represent different 'voices' in my self, voices who can flexibly change position in my self, as a result of change in context. For example the voice of 'I as a happy person' comes to the fore walking with my dog, but moves backward at the moment the dog chases a rabbit; at that specific moment the voice of 'I as a powerless person' comes to the fore. Or, in an other context, the voice of 'my mother' comes to the fore (for example ironing my clothes, I remember her showing me how

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[1] Self Confrontation Method (Hermans&Hermans-Jansen 1995).

to do that), but in the context of a seminary for colleagues the critical voice of 'my mother' will make place for the voice of 'my professor' whose constructive criticism still is supporting me in my mind. Validated lists of emotions visualize the direction of the motivational commitment (positive –P- or negative –N- directed) and the preference for the S- or the O-motive in a certain situation or towards a certain person.

In our research we make use of the Self Confrontation Method (SCM) adapted for groups and organisations (SCM-org.) An adapted list of emotions is constructed to gain insight in direction and strength of the motivational commitment of university professors and lecturers to a new and to be implemented curriculum for teacher training in religious education.

In a meeting of the university professors and lecturers the new curriculum was discussed, and core characteristics established. By way of example below some characteristic statements are presented:

An RE teacher trained at the roman catholic training institute (RCTI) is familiar with the catholic tradition and experiences this tradition in an authentic way.

An RE teacher educated at the roman catholic training institute (RCTI) is trained as a theologian as well as a pedagogue, and thus well equiped to explore existential questions with students in secondary education.

An RE teacher trained at the roman catholic training institute (RCTI) in the first place is a theologian.

Students of the roman catholic training institute (RCTI) learn about the catholic tradition, as well as about other religious traditions.

Society asks to include in my lessons youngsters' own culture.

FUTURE: We are highly respected in Europe as the Roman Catholic Training Institute (RCTI).

These core characteristic are presented to the university professors and lecturers in statements, so called 'valuations'. This is one of the interventions in this multi-facetted and multi-methodologically designed process -, aiming at insight in the own *positionality* on the personal level, regarding their adherence to the roman catholic tradition as well as the team's *positionality* regarding the roman catholic training institute (RCTI) as a whole and its relation to the roman catholic church and tradition.

The academics then are invited to score on a scale from 0 - 5 to what extent each of these valuations elicited each of a list of 16 feelings (referring to S- and O-motive, and related to P and N feelings). Below the list of emotions is presented, as well as the relation to the S- of O-motive, and the P- or N-direction of the respective emotion.

Self-esteem	S-motive
Strength	S-motive
Self-confidence	S-motive
Pride	S-motive
Care	O-motive
Tenderness	O-motive
Friendship	O-motive
Team spirit	O-motive
Enjoyment	Positive
Satisfaction	Positive
Inner Calm	Positive
Trust	Positive
Inferiority	Negative
Anxiety	Negative
Guilt	Negative
Anger	Negative

The scores of the participating academics are analyzed using software of Psycron. In sum 17 persons participated in the research, 3 woman and 14 men.

Presentation of data, results of analysis and recommendations

We present the data of our study on the development of insight in the 'voice' of tradition(s) with the help of different scatter diagrams of respondent's reactions on the so called valuations. These scatter diagrams were analysed together with the professors and lecturers, including them as co-researchers in our research. To enable them for their task as co-researchers we developed tasks with regard to the interpretation of outcomes of their reactions ('scoring') of the valuations.

As a result of the analysis and the interpretations of professors and lecturers involved, we wrote a 'state of the art', wording their positionality towards a new curriculum-to-be-

constructed and the possible feelings of either being 'violated' or being invited to leave their comfort zone and enter the internal and external dialogue on the new curriculum-to-be-constructed; a curriculum aiming at recognition today's students' own culture in the construction of the identity of an RE teacher in secondary education (cf. Knausgard 2014).

Next to include professors and lecturers in the process of formulation of the so called valuations, and in the process of analysis and interpretation of the results, we recommend to include the research population in the validation process – a crucial process in the Self Controntation Method. The validation process consists of a growing awareness of each person's positionality with regard to the core characteristics (the valuations), the developmentof will power to leave the own comfort zone and create a shared commitment towards the new curriculum and last but not least reflect upon the process in order to learn from their shared history on their way to a shared future of the Catholic Teacher Training Institute as a highly respected institute in Europe.

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