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Author: Ouden, J.A.J. den

Title: Zachtjes schudden aan de boom: Een onderzoek naar rationales en kernpraktijken van eerstegraads docenten Godsdienst/Levensbeschouwing gericht op de levensbeschouwelijke identiteitsontwikkeling van hun leerlingen

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Summary

‘Gently shaking the tree’

Many religious education teachers and researchers see worldview identity development as one of the overarching goals of Worldview/ Religious Education (RE). But although didactic⁸⁵ research into RE produced valuable theoretical insights into student’s worldview identity development, systematized descriptions of the teaching methods and underlying motivation of experienced RE teachers are still lacking. This study is meant to fill this gap. It examines the rationale and didactic approaches of experienced teachers in RE in Dutch secondary education (senior general secondary education and pre-university education) who consciously try to contribute to the worldview identity development of their students.

This is related to the idea that a professional knowledge base for RE needs to be grounded in theory as well as in practical knowledge of experienced teachers. A systematic description of the practical knowledge base of experienced RE teachers is needed in the first place to enable translating theories into practice-based situations that are recognizable by other teachers. Secondly, this practical knowledge contains rules of practice that help to realize the theoretical goals within the complexities of everyday teaching. Thirdly, insights from the field can reveal whether the theories formed were in any way incomplete and can subsequently refine the theory. And finally, a systematic description of teacher behavior in combination with the description of their norms and values, mission and goals brings us to the core of normative professionalization of teachers.

In order to contribute to this growing professional knowledge base of RE I studied two things: the rationale of experienced RE teachers and their relational and didactic core practices. The overarching question guiding this study was:

How do Religious Education/Worldview Education teachers contribute – in terms of their rationales and core practices, and within the complex context of teaching – to the worldview identity development of their students?

⁸⁵ In this summary the English word ‘didactics’ will be used to convey the meaning of *didactiek* (Dutch language), *Didaktik* (German) and *didactique* (France).

The central concepts within the question are defined as follows:

A **rationale** is the normative orientation of teachers which guides their decision-making or justifies decisions made in a specific context. A rationale is formed by their opinions on rational issues and expresses their mission, goals and didactic principles.

The **core practices** describe the intentional and motivated actions of teacher. Core practices are more concrete than general guidelines and involve more than just individual behavioral rules. The core practices defined here are derived from the intentional actions and decisions of experienced teachers themselves, while theoretical search lights were used for analyzing, selecting and classifying the data. In this study the core practices have been given a title, a description of the teacher's actions, the motivation, and an overview of actual teacher behavior within the core practice.

The **complex context** refers to all levels of the complex reality in which RE is taught. Typical aspects of this complexity at the macro-level are increasing secularization, negative or sometimes one-sided coverage of religions, and increased social, cultural and economic inequality accompanied by polarization and segregation within society. At meso-level these factors include a low status of the subject and a lack of time, in combination with the trend towards the demanding incorporation of highly appreciated educational themes like *Bildung* and citizenship education in RE. At micro-level the complexity is linked to the diversity of the target group, as in each classroom teachers meet pupils with diverse social and religious backgrounds. This diversity is a challenge in a both positive and a negative sense: it contributes to increased diversity in prior knowledge and personal experiences of the students, but it often is an obstacle for safety as well.

Identity development concerns the development of the individual as a whole and occurs in one's social, cultural and philosophical context as well as in one's various life roles. This development is seen as a hermeneutic process that is interactive/dialogical in nature.

Worldviews include both personal views and institutionalized religious views. These are always current and relevant since they are determined by the cultural-social context and the social context of one's immediate environment. Crucial to the development of worldviews are the interpretation of and respect for the substance of religious practice, as well as the experiences felt in relation to how religious views are discussed in, for example, the media, classroom, church or mosque. The **adjective 'worldview'** allows room for diverse perspectives on identity development, certainly in comparison to alternatives such as 'religious'.

In order to answer the overarching research question, I have carried out three sub-studies in conversation as well as co-observations and co-analysis with the teachers

themselves. Theories on teaching related to worldview identity development functioned as ‘search lights’ to elicit practice-based information from individual teachers and deduce systemic connections. In a fourth sub-study, using the Delphi technique, a different group of RE teachers reflected on the descriptions of the core practices in order to reach consensus about a shared set of core practices.

All of this resulted in descriptions of a rationale and eleven core practices which form part of the didactic and relational repertoire of experienced RE teachers.

The most important goal of the **first sub-study (Chapter 2)** was to gain insight into the rationales of experienced RE teachers working at interconfessional schools in the Netherlands, in terms of the worldview identity development of their students. Teacher rationales as explored in this study were connected to prevailing theoretical approaches in the Netherlands, categorized as six distinct groups and classified under the four main educational settings described in RE literature:

Confessional	confessional		multi-confessional		secular
Specific religious or denominational approaches	Spiritual approaches	Theological approaches	Interpretative approaches	Ethical, action based, and citizenship-based approaches	Scientific/religious studies approaches

Teacher rationales were deduced from in depth interviews with eleven selected RE teachers. After creating individual teacher ‘portraits’ we repeatedly cross-analyzed and compared the data, and came to the following findings:

- 1) With respect to the domain of their rationale, the teachers regarded identity development as a relational, dialogical, hermeneutic process in constant development. They considered answers to life questions as well as knowledge of religious and worldview issues as the core of this domain.
- 2) With respect to their mission, the teachers unanimously expressed concern in regards to their students growing up in such a complex society. Central to their mission is contributing to the social and individual well-being of their pupils, leading to good mutual relationships, and – ultimately – a humane society.
- 3) With respect to their goals, the teachers believed socialization and individual – personal – goals to be important, in close connection with educational goals concerning qualification. In fact, they see the acquisition of knowledge as paramount to the aspects of both socialization and personal identity development.

- 4) With respect to their principles, a focus on the relational aspects of teaching activities dominates. The teachers combine this with didactic principles such as translating abstract knowledge to more useful and relevant knowledge and developing motivating hermeneutic learning processes.

The central question of the second **sub-study (Chapter 3)** was:

Through which didactic core practices do experienced RE teachers contribute to the worldview identity development of their pupils, within the context of daily classroom teaching?

The participants were the same teachers as in the first sub-study. Two theoretical methodologies from the multi-confessional approaches were used as searchlights: Erricker's methodology for conceptual enquiry and the "Handreiking Godsdiens/Levensbeschouwing als examenvak" (Guide for Religious Education as an exam subject).

Videos were made of a full day of teaching for each teacher. At the end of the day, each teacher determined which lesson, in their opinion, had clearly contributed to the development of their students' worldview identity. The recording of this lesson was used for a *stimulated recall interview* to explore the teacher's behavior during the lesson. Two questions were crucial: which strategies or actions are you employing here and how does this contribute to worldview identity development? After analyzing the interviews, five didactic core practices could be defined which were relevant to every teacher.

The first didactic core practice, 'Stimulating and building the learning process through short, hermeneutic learning cycles', was geared to the whole learning process during one lesson. The second didactic core practice, 'Integrating content', concerned the concluding phase of the learning process in the lesson. The other three core practices described the teaching strategies throughout all stages of the learning process: 'Contextualizing abstract worldview concepts and making them concrete', 'Creating a shared learning process', and 'Training and deepening critical thinking skills'.

The central question of the third **sub-study (Chapter 4)** was:

Through which relational core practices do experienced RE teachers contribute to the worldview identity development of their students, within the context of daily classroom teaching?

The participants were the same teachers as in the first and second sub-studies. Data was collected as in the second sub-study. The key concepts in this sub-study were safety and building trust. The searchlight used was a theoretical model by

psychologist Jan Smedslund that describes six necessary and required conditions for safe teacher-student relations: *Caring, Understanding, To be respectful, To have own-control, Relevant know-how and Presence*.

After analyzing the interviews, six relational core practices could be defined which were relevant to every teacher: Caring, Advancing moral awareness, Being a significant other for the student, Challenging the students emotionally and cognitively, Creating togetherness, and Playing a serious game.

The six conditions of Smedslund's theoretical model could not be directly transferred into all relational core practices, but important aspects of all of them could be incorporated into the final descriptions. It was found that the individual element (dealing with questions of personal development and well-being) in all relational core practices is inextricably linked to the social element (relationships with and concern for others). It was also apparent that all relational core practices have a cognitive component too. Upon closer study, it was evident that the two core practices Caring and Advancing moral awareness are the overarching relational core practices. Compassion for the student and contributing to moral awareness cannot be detached from the four other relational core practices. These two core practices form the foundation of the relational dimension in teaching.

The **fourth sub-study (Chapter 5)** was a digital Delphi study. A panel of twenty RE teachers gave feedback on the second and third sub-studies in three separate rounds. The teachers all worked in (inter)confessional secondary education and were selected on the basis of pre-established criteria. The most important goal was to reach consensus on how best to formulate the eleven core practices that contribute to worldview identity development. This resulted in the following findings.

In the first round, all eleven core practices were recognized by the panelists. The greatest recognition applied to four of the eleven core practices: Showing engagement and care, Advancing moral awareness, Critical and structured thinking regarding worldview subjects, and Integrating and applying subject matter.

Near complete consensus was achieved on wording of nine of the eleven titles, ten of the eleven descriptions of teacher behaviors, and seven of the eleven descriptions of motivation. At least 95% consensus was achieved on two relational core practices, Advancing moral awareness and Creating a shared learning process, and on all didactic core practices in terms of the wording of *all* parts of the core practices.

Although the differences were slight, consensus was easier to achieve on the didactic core practices than on the relational ones. Consensus was also achieved more quickly on the descriptions of teacher behavior than on the motivations for the behavior.

Chapter 6 starts with reflections on the methods and results of the four sub-studies. It was clear that the different theoretical search lights used in the sub-studies were helpful in structuring data analysis, as well as in finding and interpreting teachers' specific practical knowledge. Subsequently, practical knowledge of experienced teachers revealed some gaps in theoretical knowledge. Clear examples of this are two core practices: Advancing safety and participation through serious games and Stimulating learning and building the learning process through short, hermeneutic learning cycles.

Elements from the concept 'rationale' were useful in exploring the views and convictions that shape a teacher's practice. In particular, the distinction made between mission and goals, and principles were enlightening; the hierarchy as well as the interdependence of goals and principles were clarified, and the perspectives of teachers could be linked more systematically to theoretical approaches.

The distinction made in this study between relational and didactic core practices resulted directly from recognizing the importance RE teachers attach in their rationales to their relationships with students and to the interpersonal relationships among students – and in particular how these manifested in their expressed missions and goals. The teachers' missions were primarily discernible in their relational core practices. In both the relational and didactic core practices the educational, socialization and personal identity goals were observable in equal measure to the principles.

In comparing the teachers' rationales with the theoretical approaches of RE, we must conclude that teacher rationales cannot be unequivocally incorporated into a single approach. Both the rationale and daily practice of RE teachers can be characterized as a practice of *bricoleurs*. At the same time, it is apparent that *bricolage* does not mean arbitrary practice: the teachers base their actions, or their retrospective justifications, on their rationale.

Agreement among the teachers and accordance with theoretical approaches was found in the following: 1) descriptions of the social context, including secularization, polarization and negative coverage of mainly religious worldviews; 2) the importance of worldview literacy, knowledge as a tool for identity, and 3) the hermeneutic approach to the learning process.

Alignment of teachers' specific goals and principles with those of theorists occurred in all approaches, but the alignments with the multi-confessional approaches were most apparent. On the other hand, a teacher's role as 'Being a significant other for a pupil' was more in line with the Confessional and the two confessional (theological and spiritual) approaches. Striking are the teachers' goals and pedagogic-didactic principles that are strongly aligned to the spiritual approaches of the theories: connectedness, awareness of being part of a greater whole, and increased resilience in contemporary society.

The following factors add to the theories. Teachers clearly gear their lessons to the here and now of their students and focus less on abstract and/or big social topics like citizenship. In addition to the building blocks of the learning process outlined in theoretical approaches, teachers first engage pupils to participate by stimulating them, challenging them, surprising them, and generating enthusiasm. The most striking addition comes from the teacher rationales: the focus on the individual student's well-being, or in other words, their happiness as an element of a teacher's mission and goal. While this individual aspect is also present in the Confessional and confessional approaches, it has a more 'religious' connotation in these theories than in the teacher rationales. Such significance is not dealt with in the other theoretical approaches.

The recommendations for further study follow from the limitations in methodology and results identified in the sub-studies. Comparable research is recommended to investigate, firstly, other important overarching goals in RE, and secondly, the core practices that concern the content of RE. Research into a more diverse group of teachers and from schools of different denominations would allow us to gain insight into the practices of all RE teachers. Full insight into the didactic practice of teachers could be gained by extended observation, by analyzing all stages in the development of lesson plans and by looking at various didactic instruments, such as tests. Extended observation can also help us to better understand aspects of the relational dimensions not addressed in this study, such as the differences in core practices between lower and upper level. A specific recommendation is to collect and create a database of *good practice* in core practices, for example by collating cases and video recordings. A final recommendation is to investigate whether and to what extent the results found here could be applied to other school subjects.

Finally, the results have been incorporated into two proposals for the further professionalization of RE teachers. The first proposal is specifically geared to professionalization of individual teachers and integrates peer review and feedback from colleagues and students. The second proposal is specifically geared to the normative professionalization of teachers and teacher-training groups. This proposal integrates aspects of 'professional learning communities', such as relevance of participants' expertise, ownership and self-direction, self-reflection and dialogue. Naturally, elements in both the proposals can be combined. After all, the ethos of 'bricolage' is suitable to professionalization approaches of teachers that counts on ownership and fits well in the presumed willingness to personally and collectively develop their profession.

