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Ina ter Avest & Cok Bakker

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## RE Rooted in Principal's Biography

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### ABSTRACT

Critical incidents in the biography of principals appear to be steering in their innovative way of constructing InterReligious Education in their schools. In this contribution, the authors present the biographical narratives of 4 principals: 1 principal introducing interreligious education in a Christian school, and 3 principals constructing a way of living apart together from a Christian, Islamic, and humanist point of view respectively. To understand (*Verstehen*) the principals' narratives and their innovative initiatives, the authors take as their theoretical frame of reference the concept of critical incidents, the dialogical self theory, and the concept of materialized religion. From the analysis of the principals biographies, the authors arrive at a tentative conclusion that a solid education in a life orientation (be it humanistic, Christian, or Islamic) paired with an authentic curiosity toward "the other" seems to be preconditional for innovative actions in RE preparing pupils for a future they themselves are going to build.

### KEYWORDS

Biography; critical incidents; religious education

It is the personality of the teacher that is of decisive importance in the way the formal curriculum is concretized in a lived curriculum in classes—in primary school as well as in secondary school and higher education. The personality of the teacher can be seen as the outcome of processes of family socialisation and professional socialisation in the context of the culture a teacher is raised and educated. It is not the teacher that is central in this article, but principals and their leadership in a team of teachers. In this article we explore the relation of the biography of the principal and the introduction of innovative ways of (inter-)religious education in his team, in the context of the plural society of the Netherlands.

In a changing society like the Netherlands, changing from homogeneity regarding people's religious worldview to a plurality of religious, secular, and so called multiple-belonging worldviews, principals of primary schools

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Ina ter Avest is a psychologist of religion and culture. She is Emeritus Professor of Religion and Education at the Inholland University, and former senior lecturer at the VU, Amsterdam, the Netherlands. In her private practice her focus is on coaching and consultancy regarding existential questions and identity development. ✉ [Ina.terAvest@Inholland.nl](mailto:Ina.terAvest@Inholland.nl); [k.h.ter.avest@vu.nl](mailto:k.h.ter.avest@vu.nl)

Cok Bakker's educational background is in Theology and Educational Theory. At the Utrecht University he holds the chair 'Worldview development in a multi-religious context.' At the Utrecht University of Applied Sciences his focus is on 'Normative Professionalism.'

✉ [c.bakker@uu.nl](mailto:c.bakker@uu.nl)

in different parts of the country explored innovative ways of religious education (RE) to adjust to this new situation. About 25 years ago in a small town in a rural area in the Netherlands, an inclusive way of interreligious education (IRE) was introduced in a Christian primary school, including Christian and Islamic RE classes, as well as classes of mutual recognition. About 10 years ago in the metropolitan area of Amsterdam, the Bijlmer district, principals of three primary schools with a different school ethos (public, Christian, and Islamic) decided to cooperate wherever possible and at the same time stick to their own school identity whenever necessary.

In the process of researching biographical narratives of principals, we tried to put together pieces of stories like in a jigsaw puzzle, attempting to interpret what was said in a way that does justice to their story, and to distinguish general themes and particular characteristics.

To structure the story of our research, we used an old Indian folk narrative (“The blind men and the elephant”), adapted for young children.<sup>1</sup> The adapted story is about different animals wondering about the identity of a newcomer in the wood. Each of the animals, the inhabitants of the wood, can perceive only a small part of the newcomer, guessing in a partial way the newcomer’s identity. By bringing parts and pieces together at the end of the day they arrive at a shared conclusion. Similarly, by bringing together different complementary theoretical frameworks, and comparing different biographical narratives we will arrive at a preliminary conclusion regarding the future of religious/worldview education in difference.

The wood and its characteristics are presented in the first paragraph of this article; *the wood* representing the Dutch pillarized educational system. The theoretical framework is presented in the second paragraph. The core concept of Geert Kelchtermans’ theory on professional identity (critical incident) complemented with the core concepts of Hermans’ valuation theory (VT) and the dialogical self theory (DST) and its self confrontation method (SCM, affective commitment), constitute the theoretical lenses through which we look at the principals’ biographies. The third paragraph is dedicated to the principals’ narratives—inhabitants of the wood—their life trajectory and the way they interpreted the newcomer, representing changes in the Dutch society. In the fourth paragraph the preliminary results of the analysis of the principals’ narratives are presented and reflected upon, focusing on their relation with the materialization of religion in the subject of RE in their schools. Recommendations for future developments of RE in difference are formulated at the end of this contribution.

### **The wood: The Dutch pillarized system**

In the Netherlands the educational system is characterized by so called pillars.<sup>2</sup> In each pillar a particular religious or secular world view dominates more or less the school’s ethos and subsequently daily practices in the school.<sup>3</sup>

For a long time three types of schools constituted the pillarized system: Protestant schools, Roman-Catholic schools, and state schools. Two-and-a-half decade ago, a new type of schools was added to the Dutch educational system: the Islamic schools.<sup>4</sup> All schools in the Netherlands (including schools with a religious identity) are financially supported by the government, and controlled by the Inspectorate for Education.

The questions we try to answer in this contribution is: What critical incidents constitute a common thread in the personal and professional narrative of each of the pioneering principals (the make up of their professional identity),<sup>5,6,7</sup> What is the characteristic of this common thread, and how is this common thread concretized in their everyday practice of RE in their school?

Below we first present our theoretical framework, before we listen to the voices of the principal.

## **Theoretical framework**

The focus of our research is on pioneering principals' critical incidents in their life trajectory, constituting the common thread in their narrative, and the possible relation with their initiative for some kind of teaching and learning in difference in the Dutch multicultural and multireligious society.<sup>8</sup>

### **Geert Kelchtermans**

The concept of critical incident is central in Kelchtermans' research and writings on teachers' subjective theory on education.<sup>9</sup> In interviews with teachers, Kelchtermans focuses on the verbal expressions about experiences in situations and, or with persons that apparently strongly influenced teachers' present day's subjective theory on education. Kelchtermans called these *critical incidents*. In his biographical interviews, Kelchtermans asks teachers to tell about their memories of their careers as a pupil and student. These experiences contribute to what Kelchtermans calls the "subjective educational theory" (cognitions about education). Together with the teacher's professional self-understanding (cognitions about one self as a teacher) this results in a personal interpretive framework for daily practices in the classroom, and subsequently daily actions and interactions with students.

Law focuses on the way people arrive at and handle these so called critical incidents<sup>10</sup> and distinguishes in this process the stages of sensing, sifting, focusing, and understanding what happened.<sup>11</sup> With the concept of sensing Law points to the aspect of gathering remarkable situations, without any information added yet about the meaning of such a situation. Sifting points to the search for causality by way of comparison between different remarkable situations. From this comparison of concrete situations abstract concepts and values emerge. In the next stages—focusing and understanding—through

insights gained in the first two stages, a person arrives at the underlying story and value orientation of her or his professional career.

### **Hubert Hermans**

Meijers and Lengelle follow Hermans and Hermans-Konopka in identifying professional identity as a dynamic multiplicity of personal (in contrast to social and cultural) positions or voices regarding work.<sup>12</sup> The concept of multi-voiced self, or dialogical self was introduced by Hermans and Kempen<sup>13</sup> and elaborated upon by Hermans and Hermans-Jansen.<sup>14</sup> Following these authors' line of thought we state that a variety of critical incidents are voiced in a so-called dialogical self constituting a plot in a person's narrative.<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, Hermans adds to Law's and Kelchtermans' cognitive approach to the affective commitment. Hermans formulates it as a "valuation"—a one line description of a situation that evokes a mixture of feelings.

### **Birgit Meyer**

Last but not least, Meyer in her public lecture at the Utrecht University focused on the material aspects of religion.<sup>16</sup> In her research Meyer studied the way people make religion happen in sets of practices, "in concrete acts that involve people, their body, things, pictures, texts and other media through which religion becomes tangibly present" and in what way religion plays a part in the development of a person's (religious or secular) worldview.<sup>17</sup> For Meijer the location of religion is in everyday's practice (the micro level of religious world-making), making the invisible visible and tangible. Religion, according to Meijer, refers to "particular, authorised and transmitted sets of practices ('sensational forms') and ideas aimed at 'going beyond the ordinary', 'surpassing' or 'transcending' or gesturing towards ... 'the rest-of-what-is'."<sup>18</sup> This concept of materiality of religion, focusing on sensorial registers and multiple media (objects, rituals, texts, images) that can mediate between the immanent and the transcendent, paves the way for a clear sight on the particular way of concretization, materializing the common thread of principals' critical incidents in RE.

### **Inhabitants of the wood: Principals' life trajectory**

Below we introduce four principals, innovators regarding RE in the Dutch multicultural and multireligious context. We had open interviews with these principals, asking them to reflect upon their life trajectory, according to the concept of wool gathering: gathering in retrospect important events in their upbringing and in their professional career. All four interviews were taperecorded and transcribed in verbatim, sent to the interviewees to correct misunderstandings or add information if needed for a better understanding. The analysis took place by way of sensing and sifting.

The first principal we introduce is the one who laid the foundations for interreligious education (see B., Principal of the Interreligious ‘Juliana van Stolberg’ Primary School). The three principals thereafter (see R., T., and C.) started the association of three schools with a different school ethos.

### ***B., principal of the Interreligious ‘Juliana van Stolberg’ primary school***

In his childhood, B. lived in the rural area in a village characterized by a conservative Christian climate, and so was the family of B. He remembers the teacher of Grade 6 telling stories in the church service of missionaries in New Guinea<sup>19</sup> resulting in B.’s wish to become a missionary. B. remembers that one evening the principal came to his father’s house. B. himself was upstairs in his bedroom. “The house had wooden floors, I laid down, my ear against the floor and heard how—downstairs in the living—the principal begged my father to allow me to go to the gymnasium ... Unfortunately my parents did not give permission to do so” because, according to them, “gymnasium is far too expensive, and besides that such an education is not for our kind of people.” B.’s ambition was overruled by assumed values of “our kind of people.”: “I feel sad when I remember this, at the same time also emotionally touched and grateful that this principal recognized my ambitions and pleaded for me.” In that same period, B. recalls a text from the Bible read at his confirmation: “You shall be my witness.” B. regarded this text as an inspiration for his innovative concretisation of interreligious education at the ‘Juliana van Stolberg’ primary school—“though in a different way than had the priest in mind at that moment, I think,” B. adds smiling.

In 1973/1974, B. was principal of a Christian primary school in the southern part of the Netherlands. When the first Turkish children arrived in the classrooms of this school, the board of this Christian school became aware of the difference of these children. Board and teachers wondered, “Can we accept Muslim pupils in our Christian school?” According to B., this was a strange question, because the children with their origin in the islands of the Moluccas (one third of the school’s population!) were Muslims as well. Until then, they had been approached and labeled as children from the former Dutch colony of Indonesia without any reflection on the religious identity of these families and their children. For B. this reflection process regarding a Christian school and Islamic children started when one of the Turkish pupils brought a booklet from home including stories about the prophet Isa (Jesus).

B.’s growing awareness and increasing interest to respond to religious and other differences moved quickly upon entering the ‘Juliana van Stolberg’ primary school, at that time a school with more than 200 pupils. A parallel experience was his awareness of the special educational needs of his physically handicapped son. This resulted in B.’s pedagogical approach to see the child not only in its needs for cognitive or physical development, but to include the

background of the child, his upbringing in the family's value orientation, and "all that goes together with that" B. followed a course in Transcultural Pedagogics and Gestalt Psychology. Also he was supported by one of the board members to participate in a research project, 'Every Child Is a Child With Special Needs' a project on innovative experiments in education regarding children of minorities, as they were named in those days. "I recognised the 'special needs' of migrant children, the danger of being overruled by a school system." Parents favored Islamic RE during school hours, by an imam, because their children "hardly have any knowledge of Islam." The inclusion of the Islamic RE in a Christian school resulted in a proces of reflection on christian school identity and education by encounter. In 1989, The 'Juliana van Stolberg' primary school, until then under a board of Christian schools, continued its intercultural and interreligious approach.

A team of Christian and Islamic theologians from local religious communities in close cooperation with a psychologist and a musical teacher constructed a 3-year curriculum and developed lessons for interreligious RE classes: Christian classes and Islamic classes separately, and shared lessons—so-called 'lessons of recognition' a mix of teaching about and from religions. Narratives of religious traditions and from children's books, fairy tales, songs, and nursery rhymes as well as different kinds of practical activities materialized religion. These were used to invite the child in different ways to get to know its own tradition, to recognise the other's tradition and share what they have in common.<sup>20</sup>

How does this inhabitant of the wood, the Dutch pillarized society, perceive the newcomers? *Knowledge* and *recognition* of the other's otherness are keywords in this principal's biographical trajectory. "Knowing my roots, literally and metaphorically, are the make up of my identity." This principal's subjective religious education theory includes the man who saw him as an eager child with his educational needs, and his son's physical handicap that led him know the child-in-context and recognizing what the child brings into the school from the parents' house.

### ***Principals of the association of three primary schools 'DE Brede School'***

#### ***R., principal of the Islamic primary school 'As Soeffah'***

R. was born in Surinam, a former Dutch colony in the northern part of South America. After more than 50 years living and working in the Netherlands, R. now lives in Surinam again, because "my roots are in Surinam."

R. is the youngest child in a family of nine children. During his childhood his father was imam in the main mosque in Surinam, his mother was a housewife. "In Surinam in a complete natural way people from different ethnic backgrounds, cultures and religions live together; living together in peace is grafted onto all in Surinam." Because R. was the youngest child, his father took him with

him when he visited different religious communities. When R. was 17, he left his father's house and went to the Netherlands. R. was driven by curiosity and saw it as "an adventure to go to the Netherlands." Because there was a lack of money R. had to take a job during day time and followed courses during evening hours. He lived in lodgings that "I do not regret, but I missed my parents ... there was no alternative, I made up my mind ... it was a conscious choice!"

In the city of Groningen, R. was asked to be the imam of the Islamic community consisting of Muslims from all over the world. Part of the World Islamic Mission, related to the Sunni and Sufi streams of Islam, the Muslims in Groningen were brought together in one religious community in one mosque and were united in their prayers, despite their differences.

In the capital of Amsterdam, R. was asked to found an Islamic primary school. He became a member of the board and was appointed coordinator of founding and organising this Islamic school, inspired by the ideas of the World Islamic Mission. Motivated by his bridging experiences in Groningen, R. saw it "like an adventure, it was challenging to start a new school, not in the last place because of the resistance met by the boards of other schools in the neighbourhood." It was said that "an Islamic school can not meet the qualitative standards of good education." One day, one of the other schools instigated pupils to throw tomatoes at the trucks that carried the temporary units in which the Islamic school was supposed to be housed. "The muslim pupils were not allowed to play on its playground on Wednesday afternoons" (when the children of this public school were at home!). On the question what moved R. to persevere, he answered, "I had made up my mind ... it was a conscious choice, I had a mission!". R.'s mission was "to give each child what it needs, in particular to learn to live with differences, not only from a theoretical point of view, but even more so in practical situations. ... Meeting each child's needs, that's my mission; stimulating the child's cognitive and social development and the conservation of her/his religious identity. "Regarding RE this means that for some children we had to start from scratch, since their parents did not practice Islam according to the rules." R. favors family learning in the sense that children bring home what they learn in school, thereby including the parents in their (religious) education.

The Islamic As Soeffah school started with 80 pupils. "Parents liked the way I concretised religious education, I sung songs, and I played games with the children." Parents were surprised; they were familiar with learning about the five pillars, about prayer, but "that it was possible to have fun learning Islam, for the parents was a surprising new aspect of their belief." Although a few parents objected in general against singing songs, they did not object against R. singing songs, because R. was part of their religious community, present at the mosque where he translated the sermons of the Urdu speaking Sufi imam. Characteristic for Sufi is "love for God, love for the prophet and love for the other." This love is materialized in RE in R's Islamic school



in singing hymns and playing, and saying prayers five times a day, which reassured parents: “My child learns the right things in this school.”

In cooperation with the public and secularized Christian school, R. states that a space is created for learning to live and work together: “There is no alternative, only by doing things together, people get to know and respect each other.”

How does this inhabitant of the wood perceive the newcomers? *Curiosity* about the otherness of the other, together with the *awareness of urgency* to work and live together despite differences (“there is no alternative”) are the main constituents of the thread of this principal’s life trajectory. Added to this is R.’s willpower rooted in the critical incident in his adolescent life when he came to the Netherlands as a young boy of seventeen: “There was no alternative ... I made up my mind ... it was a conscious choice!”

### ***T., principal of the public primary school ‘Bijlmerhorst’***

T. is raised in a Roman-Catholic family. He worked as a teacher at Curacao, a small island in the Caribbean Sea, and former Dutch colony. One day an angry pupil shouted at him in the Papiamentu language; this was not understood by T. When he asked a colleague about the meaning of what was said, this colleague explained it to him and added that he should “never accept a pupil shouting at him that way, this is a way slaves shout at their masters.” This made T. aware of his whiteness amidst colored people, and of the history of which he is part, “whether I like it or not.” In conflicts with teachers at work, he did not want people making it a colonial conflict, in the sense of “Now I have to bow my head, because the white master is speaking.” Nor, the other way around, “What makes you speak like that? Are you aware of the pains your people caused in the lives of my forefathers?” For T. making jokes was, and still is, his way of living in difference, to endure what is different.

After a period in Curacao T. lived in the Antilles, a smaller group of islands in the Caribbean, also a former Dutch colony. There he met his Antillian wife.

Over 400 pupils populated the primary school ‘the Bijlmerhorst’ when T. became the principal of this public primary school. With their poor and crowded families these pupils lived in apartment buildings that badly needed renovation. Another problem was the ethnic composition of his team: “Older Surinam women, not only born in Surinam, but also educated in Surinam, and subsequently adhering to a particular pedagogical approach.” According to these teachers they did their work well when all the children were quiet “working and not asking questions, only saying something when the teacher asks them and not speaking up to the teacher.” These two problems made it urgent for T. to look for partners to cooperate with. “I got to know R. the principal of the As Soeffah primary school and later also the principal C. of the Polsstok, with its buildings at the other side of the ring road.” These three men liked each other, and that’s how the cooperation started. In the autumn of 2001 “all of a sudden, out of the blue, a million Euro’s fell down from

heaven! To be spent before the end of the year! ... This was a real stimulation to start to make serious plans for a shared educational vision and plan a new housing for our three schools. For T. financial reasons dominated, and “an identity based approach is lacking in the public school.” “In general,” T. states, “the description of a public school is a negative one: we are not christian, we are not supporting any belief system whatsoever.”

According to T., a school identity is a solid framework for reflection, a verification of doing the right things. In T.’s opinion a lot could be learned by bringing the teams of the three schools together in a cooperative association. “In my school old Surinam teachers dominated pedagogical discussions. New perspectives would come in in a natural way, that’s what I hoped from this cooperation.” C. was inspiring at this stage “a real idealistic person, but I held back. I was not yet sure about R.’s position; would he be prepared to mix some water in the Islamic wine?”<sup>21</sup> T. had the impression that R. was more liberal, “or to put it in another way, more Surinam” than the other Islamic schools in Amsterdam. Next to that, T. thinks R. was the greater politician of the three principals. R.’s way of doing reminds T. of his experiences in Curacao and at the Antilles, where he learned that sometimes it’s better not to explore and discuss differences in depth, but to take a distance and make a joke.

“I left ‘the Bijlmerhorst’ in 2003, I was tired. Working in the Bijlmerdistrict, in the Bijlmerhorst, drains your energy. ... The conflicts of every day practice are not just smaller differences of opinion. Underneath, however, there is this greater conflict of former slavery in the Dutch colony of Surinam.” The way people respond to this kind of conflicts is imbued with unexpressed feelings of supremacy paired with guilt, T. states.<sup>22</sup> “There are not many white, Dutch people who force others to adapt to our way of living, however, there are many ways in which implicitly these people exclude others.”

In the school where T. works these days, narratives from different traditions are included in RE, “narratives about others to learn about your self.” T. and his team aim at creating moments of encounter—meetings with different people in real life as well as in “narratives, different people with different value orientations, solving conflicts, thinking about existential questions, and living their everyday life in difference.”

How does this inhabitant of the wood, the Dutch pillarized society, perceive the newcomers? *Inclusion* of the other’s uniqueness and a continuous exploration of ways to endure differences are important ingredients of the common thread of T.’s narrative, rooted in the critical incidents with his team consisting of mainly poor educated Surinam teachers. According to T. every school and every teacher has to explore his or her positionality regarding differences in its relation to the construction of RE or secular worldview education in the particular situation of *this* school and *these* pupils. “It is an everlasting search for good RE and at the same time a search for points of reference for good RE.”

### *C., principal of the secularized Christian primary school 'Polstok'*

C. was born deaf in a conservative Roman Catholic family. At the age of 4, as a result of an accident, the ability to hear was regained. From early childhood, C. has “learned to face situations and discover possibilities and chances.” C. states that he moves “towards the Light, God; that’s what moves and motivates me.” His mother taught him to be “the good Samaritan”; his father was more straight forward and favored learning by doing, which resulted in “becoming aware of what I did not want, and taking the freedom to make my own choices.”

In his family the border line between good and bad behavior was very clear. In adolescence he learned that it is not as simple as that. “What I missed in my youth is the recognition that there are different value systems, that are good in their own way.” Some values C. took with him throughout his life, like equality of all people, respect for the other, integrity. A saying that has influenced his life is, “When people are hungry, don’t give the fish, but teach them to catch a fish.” In his teams in complex situations this has resulted in the question “is it about eating or fishing?”

C. worked in Indonesia as a language teacher for a couple of years. “I jumped into a situation in which I knew nothing, and was forced to ask questions.” He allowed his pupils now and then to sit on his chair and give tasks to their classmates. Master and pupils changed roles; by doing so C. learned a lot about the child’s perspective.

Transactional Analysis and Neuro Linguistic Programming are but two of the courses C. participated in to enrich and structure his knowledge and experiences. “I like to explore new ways; I always see new possibilities, chances.”

In 2007, a serious eye injury was diagnosed. He lost over 50% of his sight, which according to his board in those days made it impossible for C. to be a class teacher anymore. Looking for other possibilities C. applied for a position as principal of a primary school, which was agreed upon by his board.

C. favors teaching and learning, keeping in mind the product with a focus on the process. In the process the teacher is at times professional educator, coach, and friend according to the developmental needs of the child. “It’s important to be able and to take responsibility to switch roles when it’s needed.”

*Encounter* is a keyword in C.’s subjective education theory. “Go and visit each other in the classroom, ask questions, and see what you can learn from each other.” The same holds for children: wonder about “the other’s otherness, ask questions and enrich your point of view.” When a parent comes to C.’s office, complaining, C. tells himself not to forget about the reciprocal aspect of any communication. We both, the sender and the receiver, should take a we-perspective. If both “I’s are prepared, willing and able to take the ‘we’-perspective a dialogue can start.” According to C. it’s important to give arguments for decisions, to give words to inner motivations, to express

feelings. “We hardly do that in education. Teachers should be a role model in telling their pupils what they do and why.”

In a similar way, according to C., the tension is felt between the autonomy of the parent and the school’s perspective. “The moment I judge a parents’ way of doing as wrong, I cannot see the different shades of ‘good’ anymore.” C. is of the opinion that staying in touch with the other, also in situations of conflicting interests, is very important. “Such conversations are not always pleasant, though very valuable because of establishing clear boundaries.” As such, according to C., in these conversations teachers and parents are role models for the children, “already a child of four has to learn to on the one hand to mark border lines and on the other hands to be prepared to cross boundaries.”

“Pillarization is out, cooperation is in,” according to C. “We have to learn to live amidst different value orientations and respond to that in a proper way.” This also holds for different religious orientations. “Learning from and with each other” is the core of religious education in C.’s school and as such part of citizenship education. Creating spaces for encounter C. sees as core business in education, “a space to learn from each other’s value orientations, provides some straws in the wind in times of transition.” “*Vreedzame school* (Education for Peace)<sup>23</sup> in that sense is a promising concept to elaborate upon,” according to C.

C. favors the development of a “pedagogical constitution” for the three schools-in-context, structuring a space for encounter, awareness of the other’s and one’s own choices based on different religious or secular world views.

How does this principal interpret the development from a homogenous to a diverse Dutch society; how does he perceive the newcomers? Perceiving *chances* in the encounter with the other-who-is-different, asking *questions* about unfamiliar and different ways of behavior and *change of perspective*, together constitute the common thread in this principal’s approach of the other, be it a pupil, a teacher or a parent/caretaker. According to C. we should open our eyes and hearts for “possibilities, instead of focusing on impossibilities”—this clearly is related to his critical incident of losing sight. C. is of the opinion that the encounter with the other, staying in touch with the other, however different the other may be, is of utmost importance.

### ***“The plural of togetherness is future”***

R. situates the start of the association of the three schools in the Amsterdam project Heart and Soul, in which the As Soeffah school participated with its pupils. Children were the guides for children from other religious communities visiting the mosque; a child-to-child introduction—an innovative way of encounter initiated by R.

In this cooperation, principals (and not the boards!) took the lead and took the responsibility. R. convinced his board and the parents, warning them for

the intensification of the controversy in the Dutch society. “Cooperating with the other schools means they will speak up for us” – which T<sup>24</sup>. in particular really did, R. adds. R. took away parents’ fear. “If your child meets a Christian child, then s/he will become more aware of the own Islamic religiosity. ... In the encounter your child will learn the practice of respect. Surely, we all wish our children to live in peace!”

Reflecting upon the start of the process of cooperation and in particular planning the housing for the three schools, T. thinks that, “a great mistake was that the principals were the active stimulators, whereas the boards had not really committed themselves to this whole process—in particular regarding the financial consequences of this cooperation. An indepth discussion with the boards might have resulted in a serious conflict,” and we did not want to spend time to conflict resolution, we wished to go on with the construction of the building for housing of the three schools, as well as in a more idealistic sense in bringing teams with different (religious and secular) world views and educational views together to learn with and from each other.”

According to C. it was

...in my interest to have a solid public and Islamic partner. ... First of all we explored what we have in common, resulting in celebrating Christmas together. Later we were able to face the differences, for example the differences in rituals regarding existential experiences, like the death of a beloved person.... Each of us brings with him his own ideals from his own life trajectory, which is a constituting element for a shared future. ... It’s more interesting to explore differences, because they are the start for interesting and instructive conversations.

C. is of the opinion that “you cannot watch over your own courtyard without being in touch with your neighbours.”

The three principals agreed upon the slogan of the association of their schools named ‘DE Brede School’<sup>25</sup> in the Bijlmer district: “The plural of togetherness is future.”<sup>26</sup>

## **Conclusions: Completing the jigsaw puzzle?**

Now that we are informed about the different critical incidents and the thread in the narrative of each of the inhabitants of the wood, we take a closer look at similarities and differences.

### ***Similarities and differences in biographies***

First of all we see some similarities in these principals’ biographies: they are all men and members of the same generation—a generation that was raised in a period of peace, increasing economic prosperity, and subsequently an increase of possibilities for education and training. This so called “baby boom” or “protest”-generation is characterized by their idealistic view on society and

their search for social cohesion—aspects that are clearly present in the four biographies. However, also a characteristic of the so called Generation X is clearly present: all four of them respond to society’s growing diversity in a constructive way.<sup>27</sup> All four of them have a degree in teacher training, two of them continued their education in in-service trainings, a characteristic of life long learning of the Generation X.

All four principals enjoyed a solid and articulated socialization in a religious tradition—both in the family, in school and at the Teacher Training Institute. Each of them became aware of the historical context they live and work in, partly due to the fact that they—literally—crossed boundaries and had to respond to the confrontation with another culture—including religion—by living abroad for a while. Their narratives inform us of a mixture of emotions in the way they value their disruptive moments that—at the end of the day—taught them to encourage others, their teachers, pupils and parents, to open up for the other, which is only possible if and only if “we ourselves are willing to pass the revolving door of our own truth.”<sup>28</sup> Not overwhelmed by their emotions in a responsibility by conviction, but informed by a responsibility by ethics each of them has been and still is motivated in his actions in responding to the challenges of living in diversity.<sup>29</sup>

We see some striking differences in these principals’ biographies. Principal R. was raised as a Muslim in Surinam, whereas the others were raised in Christian families in the Netherlands.

“Going abroad” for R. was going to the Netherlands; for the others it meant going to another country than the Netherlands. Principal T. stayed in the Netherlands because Curacao and the Antilles in those days were part of the kingdom of the Netherlands, and Principal C. lived in Indonesia—a former Dutch colony—where he gave Dutch language lessons. The focus of the principals emerging from their life trajectory are slightly different.

B. focuses knowing the child-in-context and responding to every child as a child with special needs. This resulted in a model for RE that recognizes the religious background of the child (Christian or Islamic), at the same time broadening the pupils’ horizon by organizing moments of encounter in RE classes during school hours.

R.’s focus is on curiosity and urgency, “there is no alternative,” to work together in spite of many differences in the Islamic religious community. Although he left his father’s house in Surinam in his teens, he was steadfast regarding his father’s open attitude to different faiths. It is this attitude of openness that is concretized in RE in the Islamic school—openness towards different schools of Islam the parents adhere to, and openness towards other partners in the association of schools.

T. stresses the inclusion of the other’s uniqueness and a continuous exploration of ways to endure differences, resulting in a focus on contextuality of education: it’s all about this school and these pupils. Regarding RE, or as he

named it, worldview education or citizenship education, he introduced story telling, inviting teachers to tell stories from different cultural and religious traditions, including fairy tales and folk stories.

In his subjective educational theory, C.'s focus is on the capability of perceiving chances in the encounter with the other-who-is-different, asking questions about unfamiliar ways of behavior, and change of perspective. Teachers are trained by a Christian coach to teach their pupils and develop their competences in changing perspective and as a result these classes have a Christian flavor combined with an open attitude towards other beliefs.

Recognition of the other, the child-in-context shows to be the common thread in the narratives of these four pioneering principals. Firstly, because "there is no alternative" to openness and cooperation. Secondly, there is an unconditioned curiosity for the other. All four principals share the need to know one's tradition, and to develop an open attitude towards the other's tradition.<sup>30</sup>

With lenses consisting of the main concept of Kelchterman's theory we see a relation of their subjective education theory with critical incidents. The child B. lying on the floor and listening to the principal's plea for the gymnasium is such a critical incident. In R.'s story, his journey to the Netherlands at the age of seventeen is a critical incident, as is the situation where children hindered the delivery of temporary housing for the As Soeffah primary school. T.'s critical incidents inform us about misunderstanding, because of differences in interpretations, related to the colonial past of the Netherlands. T. has developed a way of denying what you feel, although he is more in favour of expressing his feelings in a straight orward way. C's critical incident has to do with his physical handicaps: being born deaf and losing almost all of his sight in his forties. These critical incidents are interwoven for the respective principals in their common thread as described above.

We see a decisive role for a mixture of affective relations, as they come to the fore in each of the narratives. As an affect-loaden valuation, B.states, "I lay down, my ear against the wooden floor, as a sponge sucking the words of my principal pleading for me to go to the gymnasium." In a similar way we hear positive and negative emotions when R. describes in his life trajectory the Surinam situation with different religions and traditions. Regarding his feelings T. talks about the mixed feelings he has in his professional relationship with his Surinam colleagues. Emotions are clear in the statement of C. when he refers to his loosing his sight and being forced to change his perspective from loss and subsequent *impossibilities*, to chances and their possibilities.

The lenses of Meijer's concept of materialized religion open our eyes for "the outward manifestations" and "concrete acts that involve people", that are present in the interreligious school of B., in the Islamic school of R. and in the open christian school of C. In RE classes these concrete acts, and the meaning thereof for classmates and their parents are related to a

religious tradition. Everyday practice of religion, according to Meijer the microlevel of religious world-making, in the three associated schools in the Bijlmer district is stimulated by the introduction of *Vreedzame School* (Education for Peace).

Each of the principals admits a strong commitment to the heritage of materialized religious traditions. Their respective heritage imbues their efforts in the innovative processes regarding RE in their school. Religious tradition has been a source for understanding their own life. Surprisingly similar are the principal's ideas regarding how religions should be materialized in the future: in dialogue with the narrative of the other, be it in real life—at a grass roots level—or in narratives; there is no alternative! RE and worldview education in this way is located in a praxis of “provocative pedagogy.”<sup>31</sup> This pedagogy challenges teachers, pupils and their parents, and caring for them at the same time, bound together as fellow citizens of the Dutch plural society.

More research is needed on the mutual interpretation of theories and theoretical concepts. Such a mutual interpretation is like the disturbing perception and by consequence its reception of the familiar drawing of ‘My wife and my mother in law’ (drawn by the cartoonist W.E. Hill, published for the first time in *Puck Magazine* in 1915). The ugly nose of the mother in law/a nasty witch at the same time is the well-shaped cheek of the wife/a beautiful young woman; the black hair articulating the ugliness of the witch at the same time accentuates the beauty of the young lady. In a similar way such a disturbing perception and reception of theoretical concepts will open up for new perspectives and subsequent creative interpretations.<sup>32</sup>

From theoretical research amongst others by Van den Ende and Kunneman (2008),<sup>33</sup> and practical research by Bakker and Rigg (2004)<sup>34</sup> and Day et al.<sup>35</sup> we know already quite a bit about the teachers' life trajectory in relation to her/his way of teaching in her/his classes, little is known so far about principal's critical incidents and the relation with their way of implementing innovative practices and models of IRE in her/his school. We recommend more research on principals' life trajectories and the way IRE mirrors the process of wool gathering in their biographies.

We recommend more research to reflect upon the way these kinds of IRE and worldview education in primary schools can be integrated in (religion/worldview related) citizenship education in the Netherlands. In what way can all pupils in all Dutch schools—independent of their religious or secular school identity—be taught and learn about, with and from each other, integrating knowledge about different religious and secular worldviews into an attitude of openness and curiosity—preconditional for dialogue.

Last but not least we recommend longitudinal research to increase our body of knowledge about the effects of the above described practices and models of IRE on the life trajectory of children and young adolescents who



attended these classes, and their integration and active participation in Dutch society. They surely are the citizens who build the Dutch plural society, being work-in-progress.

## Notes

1. M. Rinck, *Ik Voel Een Voet* [I Sense A Foot] (Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Lemniscaat).
2. I. ter Avest, C. Bakker, G. D. Bertram-Troost, and S. Miedema, "Religion and Education in the Dutch Pillarized and Post-Pillarized Educational System: Historical Backgrounds and Current Debates," in *Religion and Education in Europe. Developments, Contexts and Debates*, ed. R. Jackson, S. Miedema, W. Weisse, and J.-P. Willaime (Münster, Germany: Waxmann, 2007), 203ff.
3. G. D. Bertram-Troost, S. Miedema, C. Kom, and I. ter Avest, "A Catalogue of Dutch Primary Schools in the Secular Age: Empirical Results," *Religion & Education* 42, no. 2 (2015): 202–17.
4. B. Budak, C. Bakker, and I. ter Avest. "Identity development in the first two Islamic schools in the Netherlands," in *European Perspectives on Islamic Education and Public Schooling*, edited by J. Berglund (Sheffield, UK: Equinox, 2017).
5. T. van den Ende and H. Kunneman, "Normatieve Professionaliteit en Normatieve Professionalisering," in *Goed werk. Verkenning van Normatieve Professionaliteit*, ed. G. Jacobs, R. Meij, H. Tenwolde, and J. Zomer (Amsterdam, The Netherlands: SWP, 2008), 68–87.
6. C. Bakker and E. Rigg, *De Persoon van de Leerkracht; Tussen Schoolidentiteit en Leerlingendiversiteit* (Zoetermeer, The Netherlands: Meinema, 2004).
7. C. Bakker, *Het Goede Leren. Leraarschap als Normatieve Professie* (Utrecht, The Netherlands: Hogeschool Utrecht, 2014).
8. B. Roeben, *Godsdienstpedagogiek van de hoop* [Pedagogy of RE of Hope] (Leuven/Voorburg, The Netherlands: Acco, 2007).
9. G. Kelchtermans, *De Professionele Ontwikkeling van Leerkrachten in Het Basisonderwijs Vanuit Het Biografisch Perspectief* [The professional development of teachers in primary education from a biographic perspective] (Leuven, The Netherlands: Universitaire Pers Leuven, 1994). See also G. Kelchtermans, "Who I Am in How I Teach is the Message: Self-understanding, Vulnerability and Reflection," *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice* 15, no. 2 (2009): 257–72.
10. *Critical incidents* have different names: "boundary experiences" (Meijers and Lengelle 2012); "disruptive moments (ter Avest 2014); "turning points" (Kuusisto 2016), to name just a few.
11. F. Meijers, and R. Lengelle, "Narratives at Work: The Development of Career Identity", *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling* 40, no. 2 (2012): 157–176. doi:10.1080/03069885.2012.665159.
12. Ibid.
13. H. Hermans and H. Kempen, *The Dialogical Self: Meaning as Movement* (San Diego, CA: Academic Press, 1993).
14. H. J. M. Hermans and E. Jansen, *Self-Narratives: The Construction of Meaning in Psychotherapy* (New York, NY: The Guilford Press, 1995).
15. Ibid., see also H. J. M. Hermans and A. Hermans-Konopka, *Dialogical Self Theory. Positioning and Counter-Positioning in a Globalizing Society* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
16. B. Meyer, *Mediation and the Genesis of Presence. Towards a Material Approach to Religion*, Public Lecture (Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Utrecht University, 2012).

17. Ibid., 7.
18. Ibid., 23.
19. A former Dutch colony, nowadays part of the Republic of Indonesia.
20. I. ter Avest, “Dutch Children and Their God”, *British Journal of Religious Education* 31, no. 3 (2009): 251–62. doi:10.1080/01416200903112425
21. The Dutch saying is “to add some water to the wine, which means: changing your point of view, in the sense of toning down, widening the scope.
22. See also: G. Wekker, *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).
23. ‘Vreedzame School’ (Education for Peace) is the name of the teaching materials used in the three schools involved in the association of the three schools.
24. T. is the principal of the public school involved.
25. ‘DE Brede School’—inclusive education in DE neighbourhood of the Bijlmer district; DE referring to the names of the street in this neighbourhood that all start deliberately with the capital D or E.
26. In Dutch, “Het meervoud van samen is toekomst.”
27. A. C. Bontekoning, “Generaties in Organisaties [Generations in organisations]” (Doctoral thesis, Tilburg University, Tilburg, the Netherlands, 2007).
28. P. Scheffer, *De Vrijheid van de Grens* [The freedom of the boundary]. Stichting Maand van de Filosofie (2016), 19.
29. Ibid., 59.
30. R. Burggreave, *From Self-Development to Solidarity. An ethical Reading of Human Desire in tis Socio-Political Relevance according to Emmanuel Levinas* (Leuven, The Netherlands: Peeters, Center for Metaphysics and Philosophy of God, Institute of Philosophy, 1985).
31. I. ter Avest and G. D. Bertram-Troost (eds.), *Geloven in samen leven* [Faith in living together] (Amsterdam, the Netherlands: Science Guide, 2009).
32. See A. Visser in his farewell lecture *Theorieën vanbinnen en vanbuiten* [Theories from an inside and outside perspective] (The Netherlands, Utrecht University, April 22, 2016). <http://www.uu.nl/agenda/afscheid-van-albert-visser-meld-u-nu-aan>
33. T. van den Ende and H. Kunneman, “Normatieve Professionaliteit en Normatieve Professionalisering,” in *Goed werk. Verkenning van Normatieve Professionaliteit*, ed. G. Jacobs, R. Meij, H. Tenwolde, and J. Zomer (Amsterdam, the Netherlands: SWP, 2008), 68–87.
34. C. Bakker and E. Rigg, *De Persoon van de Leerkracht; Tussen Schoolidentiteit en Leerlingendiversiteit* (Zoetermeer, the Netherlands: Meinema, 2004).
35. D. V. Day, P. Gronn, and E. Salas, “Leadership Capacity in Teams,” *The Leadership Quarterly* 15 (2004): 857–880. (Cited in: A. Hargreaves and M. Fullan. *Professional capital: Transforming teaching in every school* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2012).)