

The connection of teachers' beliefs, concerns and ideals to the normative claims of religiously affiliated schools in the Netherlands

by
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Abstract

Teachers can be expected to contribute significantly to their school's orientations and goals. Presumably, the contemporary context of pluralism, individualism and secularisation cause teachers at religiously affiliated schools to experience conflicts regarding their schools' normative claims.

Based on recent and current research on teachers at religiously affiliated schools in the Netherlands, this article probes what exactly these conflicts involve, who causes them and how teachers handle conflicts that arise.

Findings provide evidence that the conflicts do not appear that much in between teachers and their school, but more within teachers themselves, regarding the achievement or non-achievement of personal goals in their work. Findings are discussed with respect to finding a new balance between the individual (teacher) and the collective (the school), and to future research on teachers at religiously affiliated schools.

1. Introduction

Teachers can be expected to contribute significantly to a school's profile. This applies to teachers at all schools. Because answers on substantive questions regarding educational and formative orientations and goals are not univocal, it is presumably by no means easy for teachers to meet these expectations. Teachers at religiously affiliated schools seem to have an even more difficult task because these schools perceive themselves as more than just a temporary stopping place where learners acquire knowledge and skills and also envisage a formative task in regard to the whole person of the learner. In the current context of pluralism, individualism and secularisation, questions on educational and formative orientations and goals pose serious dilemmas, at any rate in the Netherlands. The dilemmas are related to questions as: Do teachers' answers on substantive questions concur with answers that are given by their schools? How do their answers relate to expectations from society as represented by parents or policymakers, for example? Can teachers at religiously affiliated schools anchor their ideas on learning and formation in a religious tradition while society is becoming more and more secularised? Presumably trends as pluralism, individualism and secularisation cause teachers to experience conflicts with the school, with the broad context of society and probably with themselves as well.

In this article I take professional conflicts as a point of departure to probe how teachers at religiously affiliated schools deal with expectations regarding their contribution to their schools' profiles. Professional conflicts refer to conflicts that are related to teachers' professional thinking and conduct in the context of their school. The question is what exactly these conflicts involve, who causes them and how teachers handle conflicts that arise. I want to examine the conflicts so as to establish how teachers' ideas on educational and formative orientations and goals are connected to the context of their school. In the second section I will analyse what is the problem behind the conflicts that teachers face. On the basis of theoretical reflections on teachers' professionalism, I will deliver a diagnosis of these conflicts. This diagnosis will bring me to my research question. And in order to answer my research question, I

will present some findings of recent and current research on teachers at religiously affiliated schools in the Netherlands. Finally, based on these findings, I will present some reflections with a view to further research.

2. Conflicts that teachers face are problematic

Teachers are professionals: they possess a body of knowledge, skills, beliefs, concerns and ideals; they perform activities like instructing and correcting; and they justify and attach meaning to what they do. They do their work in a particular situation, namely a school operating in the broader context of society. One can assume that their beliefs, concerns and ideals influence their professional conduct in this context. The assumed influence is not problematic, but the conflicts it may lead to certainly are.

Conflicts could, in the first place, concern the school context. Teachers experience such conflicts because most schools see themselves as more than just a temporary stopover where learners acquire knowledge and skills, but also envisage a formative task in regard to the learner as a person. The learner's entire person is addressed in all its dimensions: intellectual, expressive, physical and existential. Religiously affiliated schools benefit by this approach, which contributes to good learning results – at any rate, so they claim.¹ Their formative project moreover conforms to the normative perspective of a particular religious tradition. Catholic schools, for example, attune their educational practices to the notion of human beings as the image of God and to practising righteousness or justice. Teachers are expected to contribute significantly to schools' profiles, but everyday practice sometimes suggests otherwise.

Secondly, conflicts may relate to the social context. Society today can be described in terms of phenomena like individualism, pluralism and secularisation.² People evaluate things according to what they contribute to their inner and external well-being. Something is true or meaningful if it translates into what is meaningful to them as individuals rather than as members of a group, a community or society. In addition teachers seem to base their approach on their own notions of goodness and do not really connect these with the collective intentions of the school. Do teachers still share their conceptions of good education? Society is pluralistic, and schools mirror this reality. Teachers and other parties have different ideas about what they should do in order to form children and youths. Globalisation has intensified pluralism because of easy communication across continents and the exposure of individuals to a flow of competing ideas and values.³ Does diversity hamper the sharing of ideas? Nowadays religiously affiliated schools are to some extent made up of learners and teachers with diverse religious backgrounds and worldviews, or with little or no commitment to a religious tradition. Western European society is secularised: religious belief and practice have markedly declined. Many people make sense of life according to this-worldly criteria and not so much in terms of interaction between God and the world. However, religion is not disappearing, but rather becoming one of the many possibilities to make sense of life.⁴ Do teachers still anchor their conceptions of good education in a religious tradition?

¹ See COLEMAN, HOFFER & KILGORE 1982; HILL, FOSTER & GENDLER 1990; BRYK, LEE, & HOLLAND 1993; SULLIVAN 2001.

² See ESTER, HALMAN & DE MOOR 1993; TAYLOR 2007.

³ See JACKSON 2004.

⁴ See TAYLOR 2007.

It is often thought that these social developments present teachers at religiously affiliated schools with a dilemma and lead to conflict. If this is so, we will indeed be facing a serious problem.

3. Exploration of professional conflicts from a broad conception of teachers' professionalism

In this section I will explore teachers' conflicts further, trying to arrive at a diagnosis of the problem. Teachers' conflicts are professional: they are enhanced in the professional environment of their schools and related to their professional thinking and conduct in this context. Hence I speak of professional conflicts which I will approach from the teacher's perspective. One could also look at it from the school's perspective, but this would not be in line with my major focus. We therefore need to determine what teachers' professionalism entails, which aspects are pertinent and how they interrelate. Based on this diagnosis, I will come to my research question in the next section.

What does it mean to be a professional teacher? Professional teachers are people who possess a body of knowledge, skills, beliefs, concerns and ideals, and who perform professional activities such as instructing or giving feedback. In teaching practice teachers often find that it is not enough just to have a command of subject matter and didactic knowledge and skills, and then to apply these.⁵ The teaching profession requires more than just technical and instrumental use of knowledge and skills; it also entails an ability to evaluate the application of knowledge and skills. According to this broad conception, teachers' professionalism includes the justification and meaning ascribed to actions. The yardstick of most teachers' self-evaluation is what their professional actions contribute to children's development.⁶ The nature of this contribution and their reasons for making it entail some carefully considered choices. These choices relate to what teachers judge to be good from a pedagogic, educative, ethical and worldview-related point of view. In other words, professionalism has a normative orientation. Since the 1990s the question of the normativeness of professional conduct has been discussed anew. This is partly because of a growing interest in the values informing teachers' pedagogic and didactic choices.⁷ Teachers are not comfortable with instrumental thinking – they feel that it cramps their scope for action and reduces their profession to the application of a few skills. But they cannot simply switch off their involvement with learners ('their children').

Their professionalism is normative: teachers face substantive questions and dilemmas in their professional thinking and conduct. They face the same questions and dilemmas in the context of their school and society at large. Thus, in my view, teachers' professionalism comprises three elements: (1) teachers, their beliefs, concerns, ideals and conduct; (2) schools, their substantive orientation and educational and formative practices; and (3) the social context in which teachers and schools operate and what it expects of them. This conception of teachers' professionalism concurs with the vision of Kunneman on professionalism who bases many of his ideas on the German philosopher Habermas.⁸ Following Kunneman's vision of professionalism, it can be expected that relations between teachers, schools and the social context are considered to be reciprocal: one would expect them to influence one another. Thus, expectations of what teachers find meaningful and worthwhile influence the school's

⁵ See KUNNEMAN 1996; BAKKER & RIGG 2004; SHUELL 1996.

⁶ See LUTTENBERG 2000.

⁷ See HERMANS 1994; BAKKER & RIGG 2004.

⁸ See KUNNEMAN 1996.

orientation, and vice versa. These relations are interrelated and should be studied as such. For example, the relation between educational goals that teachers value and the goals that schools want to achieve, such as practising righteousness or justice, cannot be isolated from the social context. In short, the model consists of three relevant elements that influence each other and cannot be viewed separately.

Teachers, like all professionals, can correlate their work, their beliefs, concerns and ideals, the school and the larger context by telling their professional story. In this story they do not only tell what they do (or don't), but also how they relate their professional conduct to the context of their schools. They also tell which ideals or concerns their conduct is related to or based on, and how they anchor their educational and formative orientations and goals. The latter point of anchoring is not exclusively, but at least particularly important for teachers at religiously affiliated schools. Teachers at all schools can anchor their educational and formative orientations and goals in a religious or worldview tradition, but in particular teachers at religiously affiliated schools can be expected to do so.

The notion of anchoring in this context does not mean that a religious tradition normatively prescribes educational thinking and conduct – it is more complicated, multi-dimensional and open. Education and formation are based on pedagogic and educative principles, which are ideals directing teachers' activities. This applies to all teachers irrespective of their institutional or ideological background. Education is normative; it therefore depends on underlying ideas, concerns and beliefs. Hence, education raises both pedagogic and worldview-related questions. Worldview-related ideas can help to integrate, orient and criticize pedagogic and educative ideas, or to recapitulate these, for instance by pointing out the meaning of life (and hence of education). Thus the meaning of life presented by religious traditions can raise pedagogic activities to a higher level and at the same time keep them fundamentally open. In other words, educational and formative orientations and goals can, on the basis of worldview-related ideas, be integrated, oriented, criticized or recapitulated.⁹

The teachers' task is to harmonise their beliefs, concerns and ideals with their school's substantive orientation and social expectations. Teachers cannot pass this buck on to anyone else: they have a personal responsibility. This makes them extremely vulnerable and brings a lot of conflicts along. The vulnerability is inherent in the profession, hence it forms part of the teachers' professionalism.¹⁰ We expect that the current social context of pluralism, individualism and secularisation makes it difficult for teachers to harmonise all three dimensions mentioned above, and this makes the insights gained by the empirical research presented in the following not only scientifically interesting but also socially relevant.

4. Research into teachers at religiously affiliated schools

4.1 Research question

The hypothesis is that teachers experience conflict as a result of schools' normative claims (and in principle this applies to both religiously affiliated and state schools) and social developments like pluralism, individualism and secularisation. The question is what exactly these professional conflicts involve, who causes them and how teachers handle conflicts that arise. I want to examine the conflicts so as to establish

⁹ See VAN DER VEN 1998.

¹⁰ See KELCHTERMANS 1994, 1999.

how teachers' ideas or beliefs on educational and formative orientations and goals are connected to the context of their school.

The key question is: *What professional conflicts do teachers at religiously affiliated schools experience in the current context, and how do they deal with them?* I expect the answer to be two-pronged: on the one hand teachers can adapt, on the other hand schools may modify their demands.

4.2 Method

I will try to answer my research question mainly on the basis of ongoing research into teachers at religiously affiliated schools in the Netherlands. Firstly, I will present some findings of mainly qualitative research on how teachers deal with the confessional identity and increasing diversity of their religiously affiliated schools. Secondly, I will show provisional results of research on the inspiration and motivation of teachers at religiously affiliated schools. These findings are presented with a view to my research question on professional conflicts and how teachers deal with these.

To grasp the situation it must be understood that religiously affiliated schools in the Netherlands are all fully funded by the Dutch state. Protestant and Catholic Christian schools, like public schools, respectively constitute some 30% of all schools in the country. To be more precise: In the school year 2007-2008 1.552.500 pupils went to regular primary schools in the Netherlands; 31% of them to public schools, 28% to Protestant schools, 34% to Catholic schools, and 8% to other denominational schools. In the same year 941.500 students went to regular secondary schools; 26% to public schools, 22% to Protestant schools, 26% to Catholic schools, and 26% to other denominational schools (not specifically confessional or religiously affiliated).¹¹

4.3 How teachers deal with school's confessional identity and diversity

In the Netherlands, researchers examined how Catholic and, more especially, Protestant teachers handle conflicts arising from their beliefs, concerns and ideals in relation to the confessional identity and increasing diversity of their religiously affiliated schools. Scholars such as Ina ter Avest, Cok Bakker and Siebren Miedema interviewed teachers at Protestant schools on critical incidents.¹² They asked about experiences in their personal and professional lives that, in the teachers' view, have altered their professional thinking and conduct, supposing that these experiences condense the substance of their professional development. Findings from analyses of these interviews are remarkable: counter to the researchers' expectations, teachers experience very little strain in relation to the orientation of their Protestant Christian schools. They feel that Bible stories should be discussed in their schools, Christian feasts like Christmas and Easter should be celebrated, even morning prayers could be said. Increasing diversity of the learner population makes little difference in this respect. While the admission of – mainly – Muslim learners necessitates attention to other religious traditions, this does not pose much of a problem. Teachers are open to pupils of various religious backgrounds. When it does raise issues regarding participation in certain activities, they are handled pragmatically. In Catholic schools the picture is more or less the same: teachers find Christmas and Easter celebrations at their schools desirable as well as collective gatherings at the beginning of a new term, and also objects like a crib and a crucifix.¹³ Teachers also indicate their willingness to participate in various activities that can be related to school's confessional

¹¹ See JAARBOEK ONDERWIJS IN CIJFERS 2009, 154, 165.

¹² See BAKKER & RIGG 2004; TER AVEST, BAKKER & MIEDEMA 2008; BAKKER & TER AVEST 2009.

¹³ See DE JONG & VAN DER ZEE 2008.

identity. However, the picture is quite different regarding meetings on the development of the school identity. Apparently, teachers don't want to talk about this.¹⁴ Teachers at Catholic schools, like their colleagues at Protestant schools, are open to pupils from various religious backgrounds. Those who have little affinity with the Catholic community settle for a pluralistic conception of schools, which emphasises openness to other religious traditions. Those with close ties to the Catholic community opt for a dialogic approach, which emphasizes both introduction into the Catholic community and openness to other religious traditions.¹⁵

Why is it that the school's normative orientation – counter to our expectations – causes so few conflicts for teachers? Firstly, it probably has to do with their theological stance. Research provided evidence that the majority of Protestant teachers adopt a liberal attitude towards their own tradition and are open, also theologically, to other religious traditions. A small group of teachers who adopt a more exclusive stance distance themselves from it as far as their professional thinking and conduct are concerned: "That is not (no longer) tenable."¹⁶ This attitude can probably be explained in terms of a concept like the polyphonic self: one individual can reflect the voices of several socio-cultural communities. This calls for further research. At Catholic schools there may be even greater openness to other religious traditions. Teachers are very open to pupils of other religious traditions, because openness to other religious traditions is not foreign to the Catholic tradition.¹⁷ This openness at Catholic schools can be interpreted in the perspective of striving for community: every child is very much welcome to join this community. Whether this openness is changing because of current debates in Dutch society on the alleged influence of Islam, is not yet known. It can be expected that teachers continue in their openness to their learners, no matter what their religious background is.

Secondly, the relative absence of conflict probably has to do with the impact of schools' confessional identity. When asked about the confessional identity of their school, teachers seemed more or less nonplussed. To them it is "an abstract concept that exists rather isolated from daily practices in school and is not really related to this practice"¹⁸. Schools do have mission statements, and teachers know this, but at the same time they perceive these statements as a rather abstract reality. They are not inclined to talk about it and to construct a shared narrative identity.¹⁹ This finding could be explained as follows. Teachers at religiously affiliated schools appear to base their professional thinking and conduct mainly on *personal* notions and only to a minor extent, if at all, on a common, shared view.²⁰ School identity in the sense of a body of goals, norms and expectations that teachers supposedly share hardly influences their choices because often it does not exist. There are few, if any, shared goals, norms and expectations, hence they do not cause conflict.

So, whereas social developments would lead one to expect teachers to have difficulty attuning their professional thinking and conduct to the normative orientation and requirements of religiously affiliated schools, the findings of biographically based research offer little confirmation. Teachers even seem to avoid conversations in order to come to shared goals, norms and expectations. The emphasis is wholly on indi-

¹⁴ See HERMANS ET AL 1999.

¹⁵ See GOMMERS & HERMANS 2003.

¹⁶ BAKKER & RIGG 2004, 192.

¹⁷ See GROOME 1998.

¹⁸ BAKKER & TER AVEST 2009, 133.

¹⁹ See HERMANS ET AL 1999.

²⁰ See VAN HARDEVELD 2003.

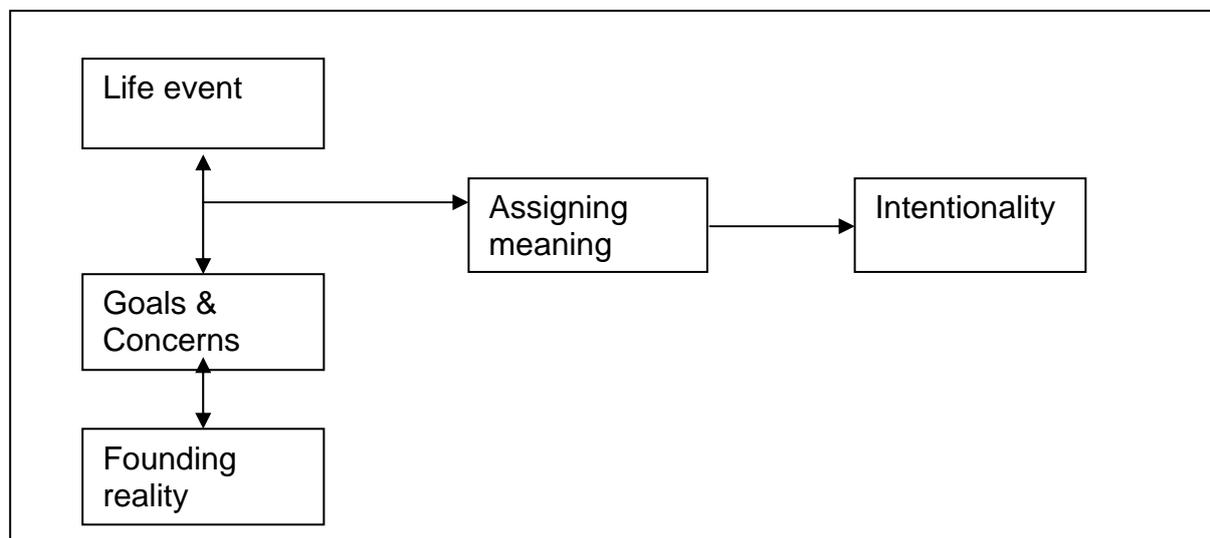
vidual beliefs, concerns and ideals. There is hardly any confessional identity in the sense of a body of *shared* goals, norms and expectations among them.

4.4 *Is the teacher personally at issue?*

Our hypothesis on professional conflicts hardly finds any confirmation. There appears to be little or no conflict. Should we perhaps probe at another level: Have teachers perhaps internalised possible conflicts so that their struggle with them takes place inside themselves? What do we know about the teacher as a person and about the factors that guide her actions?

In Nijmegen a study is currently underway to determine by way of biographical interviews what inspires teachers at Catholic schools.²¹ How is the research structured? Teachers are asked to reconstruct their story with reference to life events, that is events that affect them existentially. The aim is to determine what these events mean to them in terms of their personal goals: what they want to achieve, such as being a good spouse, obtaining a diploma or getting a post at a school. In organising these personal goals ultimate concerns (Tillich) play a major role. They impart unity, coherence and direction to the overall network of goals. Many teachers name “caring about others” as an ultimate concern: they chose teaching as a career because they care about children. Some teachers base this care on God’s transcendent reality, others do not. From their confrontation of life events and goals in the course of their stories one can gather what meaning they assign to these. This meaning motivates their conduct: this is what I have to do. One teacher puts it like this: “It is another commitment you make. You may never let a child down. That means helping them ... when they need help.”²² The theoretical model of life events, goals and concerns, founding reality (transcendent (God) or immanent) and assigning meaning offers a framework for analysing the interviews (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Analysis model for motivation and meaning assignment by narrative reconstruction²³



Provisional results of the analyses of the interviews suggest that teachers do experience some degree of conflict regarding the achievement or non-achievement of personal goals in their work. Non-achievement of these goals brings teachers pri-

²¹ See VAN DEN BRAND ET AL. 2009.

²² Ibid., 76.

²³ Ibid., 58.

marily into conflict with themselves. To them the conflict becomes really acute when they feel that their ultimate concerns are no longer realised, and then they ask themselves whether they should still be teaching. In this way reflection on life events brings conflicts to the surface and urges for meaning assigning. In short, research into their inspiration or motivation seems to indicate that although conflicts are not really visible, they could in fact be taking place within the teacher.

Using a theoretical model the Nijmegen scholars examined whether teachers assign meaning to events *on the basis of* their concerns, and whether it inspires them to act. The findings provide a possible explanation of the exact nature of the conflicts that teachers experience – conflicts that can be traced to the realisation or non-realisation of personal goals and concerns. Naturally values enter into it as well, but so far goals and concerns are the main clue to possible conflicts. Do religion and religious commitment play a role? Indeed they do, inasmuch as religion is a motivating force in the sense that concerns may be grounded in God. Dutch teachers are extremely circumspect and cautious in phrasing this divine grounding. The influence of religious commitment on professional thinking and conduct appears to be mainly indirect. So far the study has not revealed any direct influence.

4.5 Summary

It was hypothesized that teachers at religiously affiliated schools experience professional conflicts that relate to the normative orientation and requirements of their schools. Findings, however, offer little confirmation: teachers hardly experience such conflicts. This can mainly be explained by teachers' inclination to avoid participation at meetings on these matters. The emphasis is wholly on individual beliefs, concerns and ideals. There is hardly any confessional identity in the sense of a body of *shared* goals, norms and expectations. Teachers do, however, experience some degree of conflict regarding the achievement or non-achievement of personal goals in their work at their schools. Results of current research indicate that although conflicts are not really visible, they could in fact be taking place within the teacher.

5. Excursion: Influence of inspiring teachers on learners

In this section, I will make an excursion to research on the influence of inspiring teachers on learners. Our investigation of possible conflicts rests on the assumption that not only teachers' beliefs, concerns and ideals but also their conduct relate to the school's normative claims. Is this assumption correct? Do teachers at religiously affiliated schools have an influence on learners that could be linked to these claims? This question can be answered on the basis of findings in a recent study on the influence that inspiring teachers at Catholic schools have on learners.

Schools can envisage a formative task in regard to the learner and opt for formative projects such as values education. Although not a prerogative of particular schools, religiously affiliated schools have long been familiar with such projects. These schools can realise their projects in the contemporary context of individualism, pluralism and secularisation by communicating with learners in a specific way.²⁴ Inspiration is a particular kind of communication: teachers can inspire students by what they say or how they communicate. It can be perceived as mental influence. Its effect is to make learners want to emulate the teacher: "I want to be like that." Hence it is not only cognitive (knowing) or emotive (feeling), but also volitive (willing). In this sense inspiration is normative and offers guidelines for behaviour. In the case of inspiration

²⁴ See VAN DER ZEE 2010a.

the directive is always open. Inspiring someone does not mean that the person will act or choose in precisely the same way as the person inspiring him, although it does prompt a similar kind of action or choice. What is peculiar to inspiration, however, is that it motivates very powerfully and very positively because of the remarkable character of its source, at least in the eyes of those who are inspired by it. People's inspirational impact lies not only in their excellence but also in the other's aptitude. After all, inspiring others implies 'awakening' them to ideas or desires and intentions for which they have a special propensity.

From the foregoing argument one would expect inspiring teachers par excellence to get students to develop. To find out whether these expectations are substantiated a study was made on the extent to which a stimulating influence is attributed to inspiring teachers. My colleague De Jong and I asked 1179 teachers, learners and parents at Catholic schools throughout the Netherlands what qualities they attribute to inspiring teachers, and what effects they attribute to such inspiration: what lasting qualities do learners acquire *as a result of* these teachers' inspiration?²⁵ The findings show that such teachers are credited with subject knowledge (mastery of their subject, interesting lessons), motivating achievement (getting learners to achieve or work hard), imparting meaning (showing what they find meaningful), and paying attention (especially to less gifted learners). Through these teachers' inspiration learners are said to acquire qualities like knowledge and insight (inquisitiveness and eagerness to learn, enthusiasm) and social virtues (a sense of justice, social responsibility) as well as a fair measure of spirituality and a sense of transcendence (appreciation of beauty, gratitude, spirituality). Analyses based on structural models also traced a number of effects of teachers' qualities on those of learners. The most striking finding is that respondents credit inspiring teachers' ability to convey meaning with a positive influence on all three clusters of qualities: knowledge and insight, social virtues, and spirituality and a sense of transcendence.

In short, teachers, parents and students attribute a positive influence to inspiring teachers on the basis of various qualities. Put differently, according to these parties inspiring teachers' conduct does have positive effects on learners. The quality of imparting meaning seems to be crucial for these effects. In view of the importance that teachers, learners and parents attribute to it with respect to learners' development, imparting meaning could well be an interesting point of departure to connect teachers' beliefs, concerns and ideals to school's normative orientation and requirements. Note that substantively the meaning conveyed does not have to correspond with the school's orientation. Further research is needed to determine to what extent the meaning conveyed by inspiring teachers conforms substantively to the school's normative claims.

6. Reflections

The theme of the connection of teachers' beliefs, concerns and ideals to school's normative orientation and requirements is not only scientifically interesting but also socially relevant. It is relevant with a view to teachers' professionalism: teachers can be expected to harmonise their beliefs, concerns and ideals with their school's substantive orientation and social expectations. It is also relevant with a view to the question of how teachers can contribute to the school's profile: teachers can be expected to implement their school's formative projects. The importance applies to teachers at

²⁵ See DE JONG & VAN DER ZEE 2008; VAN DER ZEE & DE JONG 2009.

all schools, but it appears that the matter is much more urgent to teachers at religiously affiliated schools.

In this article I have probed teachers at religiously affiliated schools with a view to the theme of the connection of teachers' beliefs, concerns and ideals to their school's normative orientation and requirements. I have taken professional conflicts as a point of departure to investigate the theme. Contrary to scholars' as well as my expectations, professional conflicts seem to be fairly absent. At least they are not really visible. A possible explanation can be found in the emphasis on individual beliefs, concerns and ideals, and in the reality that there seems hardly any confessional identity in the sense of a body of *shared* goals, norms and expectations at Dutch religiously affiliated schools. To prevent these schools and teachers from getting bogged down in individualisation, there is a need for a new balance between the individual (teacher) and the collective (the school). A participatory approach seeks to sail between the Scylla of individualisation and the Charybdis of collectivism.²⁶ The Scylla is discernible in the trend to reduce a school simply to an aggregate of the activities and intentions of individual teachers and others. Yet the school as a totality is more than a set of distinct, individual activities and intentions. People are also given an opportunity to participate. The Charybdis lies in the tendency to reduce people's contribution to the school simply to their collective activities and intentions. To steer clear of both rocks, therefore, teachers should be invited to connect their professional thinking and acting to the larger context of the school. It could well be that the quality of imparting meaning is an adequate point of departure to do so. Imparting the meaning of something requires primarily placing it in larger contexts.²⁷ Teachers who impart meaning assess to what extent things contribute to larger contexts, both socially (community of students, citizens or world citizens) and historically (community of generations). For teachers at religiously affiliated schools it is also appropriate to consider the contribution of things to larger contexts in an ultimate sense (communion with the ultimate or – in a religious perspective – with God). Teachers can promote students' learning, not only by questioning values and the value of things, but also by asking whether their learning is meaningful: "What is this good for?" In order to ask students the question "What is this knowledge good for?" and to further their pursuit of meaningful knowledge, teachers should be able to ask themselves similar questions. Teachers who ask themselves "What is my education good for?" can be expected to be able to ask students the question about meaning and assist their quest for answers.²⁸ The question of meaning is something teachers should be able to deal with, and it is part of the professional judgments teachers in general have to make. Such an orientational perspective is not linked to any particular tradition, although it must be acknowledged that in the Catholic tradition this line of thinking – in part and as a whole – has largely been accepted.²⁹

Although professional conflicts are not really visible, they could in fact be taking place within the teacher. Teachers do experience some degree of conflict regarding the achievement or non-achievement of personal goals in their work. This finding indicates that it is worthwhile to investigate the theme of the connection of teachers' beliefs, concerns and ideals to school's normative orientation and requirements from the perspective of teachers' personal goals and concerns. By narrative reconstruction teachers can explore their goals and concerns, and find a clue of what professional

²⁶ See DE JONG 2007.

²⁷ See ARISTOTLE 1995; TILLICH 1959.

²⁸ See VAN DER ZEE 2010b.

²⁹ See GROOME 1998.

conduct means to them. This approach is not only about the connection to school's normative orientation and requirements, but also about the question of how religion can matter. Teachers' concerns can be anchored in a founding reality like God. Teachers can learn from religious traditions how this anchoring can be done, for example by understanding themselves "in front of a religious text."³⁰ Their fresh self-understanding could support teachers in coping with professional conflicts, whether they are visible or not. In other words, religion can perhaps help teachers to cope with their professional vulnerability. This, too, could be a subject of new research. The theme of the connection of teachers' beliefs, concerns and ideals to school's normative claims deserves further exploration and research. There are still plenty of questions and decisions, then – in short, a lot of work to be done!

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³⁰ RICOEUR 1981.

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