

ADVENT AS INTERVENTION: TOWARDS INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS

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Abstract

In the Netherlands, especially in the urban context, diversity within Christian schools can be rather substantial. In this article the focus is on religious diversity, including secular worldviews as well. The question is how schools can relate to their Christian background and be open to pupils and teachers from other (religious) traditions at the same time. A secondary school, which expressed the wish to enlarge an inclusive perspective on diversity in the classroom, school and neighbourhood, served as a pilot. In supporting the school in this process, we carried out educational design research (EDR). EDR combines theoretical insights and practical solutions in real world context together with stakeholders. Theoretical insights of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks on building an inclusive society were used to develop an inclusive perspective on society-building. On the basis of Sacks' perspective on society-building, the SOLVE-model is developed in order to design an intervention: an educational product of an inclusive Advent season.

Keywords

Diversity, inclusive education, Jonathan Sacks, Christian schools, design research

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INTRODUCTION

The search for a contemporary design of Christian inspired education, inclusive to those with different worldviews, for example secular Muslims and Jews, is very current. The Netherlands has a “pillarized” educational

system of state and denominational (Protestant and Roman Catholic) schools. This system dates to the so-called “school struggle” (‘schoolstrijd’) of around 1920. Since then both state and denominational schools are equally financed by the government. (Ter Avest, Bakker, Bertram-Troost and Miedema 2007) However, due to processes of change in Dutch society, the formal identity of schools in the pillarized educational system is not fully representative of the religious identity of their teachers, pupils or parents (Bertram-Troost, Kom, Ter Avest and Miedema 2015). One response to this situation is to attempt to create an inclusive Christian identity in schools so that everyone feels at home, independent one’s (religious) background and without the schools abandoning their religious identity or heritage. The general issue is then how schools can relate to their Christian background and be open to pupils and teachers from other (religious) traditions at the same time (Borgman 2017:13).

In our contribution we will seek a concrete answer to this question by focussing on the way Christian schools can celebrate the Advent season leading up to Christmas in an inclusive way. Inclusive is described as a way in which there is room for everyone’s own (religious, cultural et cetera) identity. We have identified at least two reasons for this focus. First, almost every (Christian) school celebrates Christmas, so it does not demand extra work for the school involved. Second, the question of how to clearly celebrate Christian feasts like Christmas and Easter is felt to be a need within Christian schools with a diverse community. Research by Bertram-Troost, Versteegt, Van der Kooij, Van Nes and Miedema (2015) shows that many Christian schools struggle with balancing ‘identity’ and ‘openness’. This struggle becomes most visible in relation to the celebration of Christian holidays. Some teachers report their feelings of unease while being ‘forced’ to participate in the celebrations and others complain when non-Christian pupils (and their parents) do not attend when the school has its annual celebrations.

In this article a particular secondary school is used as a pilot. This school is a gymnasium, preparing pupils for university, with around 630 pupils and 60 employees (45 full time equivalents). It is rooted in two traditions: the classical Latin and Greek and the “interconfessional”, meaning that the identity of the school is rooted in the diverse states of Christian expression. The school is located in a city in the middle of the Netherlands with around 200.000 residents of 181 different ethnicities and 153 different nationalities.¹ This diversity is reflected in the school,

¹ The name of the city and the school are not mentioned for reasons of anonymity.

which has pupils from secular, Hindu, Muslim, Jewish, atheistic and Christian backgrounds.

Our central research question is: ‘What are the characteristics of an Advent program aimed at an inclusive school community in the context of a Dutch Christian gymnasium with teachers and pupils from different religious and secular backgrounds?’

Educational Design Research

In order to focus on how Christian schools can celebrate an inclusive Christmas and, in doing so, make room for pupils and teachers from diverse religious and secular worldviews, we make use of EDR. The EDR research methodology has been defined as “... a genre of research in which the iterative development of solutions to practical and complex educational problems also provides the context for empirical investigation, which yields theoretical understanding that can inform the work of others. Its goals and methods are rooted in, and not cleansed of, the complex variation of the real world” (McKenney and Reeves 2012: p. 7). Primary research functions of EDR are designing and developing. Plomp (2013) gives the following description of the functions: “To design and develop an intervention (such as programs, teaching-learning strategies and materials, products and systems) as a solution to a complex educational problem as well as to advance our knowledge about the characteristics of these interventions and the process to design and develop them, or alternatively to design and develop educational interventions (for example, learning processes, learning environments and the like) with the purpose to develop or validate theories” (p. 15). In order to fully realize these elements often more than one design research needs to be applied depending on whether the focus is on development or on validation. Plomp distinguishes *development studies* from *validation studies*. He defines development studies as “the systematic analysis, design and evaluation of educational interventions with the dual aim of generating research-based solutions for complex problems in educational practice, and advancing our knowledge about the characteristics of these interventions and the process of designing and developing them” (p. 16). Validation studies are defined as “the study of educational interventions (such as learning processes, learning environment and the like) with the purpose to develop or validate theories about such processes and how these can be designed” (p. 16). Our study can be interpreted as a development study as we aim both to improve educational practices and to advance theoretical knowledge.

Design research is cyclical in character: “analysis, design, evaluation and revision activities are iterated until an appropriate balance between ideals (‘the intended’) and realization has been achieved” (Plomp 2013, p. 16). In this cyclical process the search for solutions to educational problems and theoretical understanding are combined. In general EDR consists of a number of phases: “a preliminary research phase (needs and context analysis, review of literature, development of a theoretical framework for the study), development phase (iterative design phase... with formative evaluation as the most important research activity aimed at improving and refining the intervention) and an assessment phase (summative evaluation to conclude whether the solution or intervention meets the pre-determined specifications. As also this phase often results in recommendations for improvement of the intervention, we call this phase semi-summative)” (Plomp 2013, p. 19).

In the preliminary research phase of the EDR interviews were held at school to refine the problem and to get a clearer view of the needs of the school concerning inclusiveness. The term ‘problem’ is here defined as the discrepancy between the existing and the desired situation (McKenney and Reeves 2012). In this phase also literature on inclusiveness was studied to develop a theoretical framework for the study. In the second phase (development phase) the intervention was tried out during Advent 2017 at this school. In the third phase we come to a semi-summative assessment of the intervention.²

Outline

The article is structured along the three phases of EDR: a preliminary research phase, a development phase and a semi-summative assessment phase. In the two sections on the first phase, in which the problem is further defined, a theoretical perspective on dealing with diversity is described and the central question is stated. In the section on the second phase the focus is on developing an intervention, in particular an educational product for an inclusive Advent. A formative evaluation of the trial run is part of this development phase. In the final section conclusions and implications are drawn. These last two sections are part of the assessment phase.

² In this article we can only report one research cycle (based on the intervention of Advent 2017), therefore we can only give a semi-summative evaluation, which is closely related to the formative evaluation of the first intervention.

PRELIMINARY RESEARCH PHASE: NEEDS AND CONTEXT ANALYSIS

The first phase of EDR begins with an initial orientation. We started with an orientation on education in the Netherlands in general and Christian schools in particular. In recent years, education in the Netherlands has been dominated by an instrumental approach, in which ‘measurable objectives’ (like grades, percentages of graduates) are seen as indicator for success, both for the school and its pupils (Bertram-Troost et al. 2015). Currently, within the educational field there is discussion on the value of the instrumental approach versus attention to personhood formation. The plea of those who hold a view on education in which, next to a focus on instrumental qualifications, personhood formation and socialisation within a multicultural society are acknowledged as educational goals (o.a. Biesta 2010) gradually gets more attention. This is expressed in the growing critique on the status difference between school subjects which represent instrumental value (like math, economics, and to a certain extent languages) and those school subjects who stimulate personhood formation, cultural, social and worldview development (including religious education). This critique is also expressed in the recommendations of the governmental educational advisory board (‘Onderwijsraad’) to avoid the risk of a too narrow view on education (Onderwijsraad, 2013). The Onderwijsraad advocates, amongst other things, a reappraisal of non-cognitive capacities.

It is against this background that schools for Christian secondary education in the Netherlands feel the need to reflect on their identity (e.g. Bertram-Troost et al 2015). Questions are raised like ‘Who are we as a school community?’, ‘How can we integrate our views on education with our religious identity?’ and ‘How can we relate to our Christian background and be open to pupils and teachers from other (religious) traditions and worldviews at the same time?’ In our EDR we mainly focus on the latter question but in a broader sense all these questions are included.

After the initial orientation, a field-based investigation took place. In May 2017 interviews were held with the rector and a teacher of the described school.³ In these interviews it became clear that within the school there is the need for developing the school’s own narrative in interaction with the pupils, their parents and the teachers. It was decided

³ The interviews at the pilot school which were held during these two phases are reported.

to start with a focus on designing an inclusive Christmas. There are two reasons for this. First, the school celebrates Christmas anyway and designing an inclusive Christmas seems not demand too much extra work for the pilot school. Second, the question of how to celebrate Christian feasts like Christmas is felt to be a need within this school. Parallel to the field investigation in the school, a study of the literature on dealing with diversity was employed as well. This led us to the theoretical framework which is described in next section.

PRELIMINARY RESEARCH PHASE: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theological or philosophical theoretical perspective that guides this project comes, maybe surprisingly, from the work of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. Sacks was Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Commonwealth (1991-2013). He currently serves as the Ingeborg and Ira Rennert Global Distinguished Professor at New York University. In several of his writings Sacks contributes explicitly to problem-solving, in Hebrew *Tikkun Olam* (repairing the world). In the context of this article special attention is paid to his book *The Home We Build Together* (2007). The metaphor for society building he develops in that book is both rooted in the biblical tradition and is inclusive to other (religious) worldviews, thus it might be helpful for creating room for diversity among pupils and teachers in Christian schools in the Netherlands.

Sacks' metaphor of 'the home we build together' is an attempt to replace earlier metaphors of living together in society where society is a country house with one single culture, that of the host, with others treated as guests, or society as a hotel, where everyone is a guest, and hence equal, but no one belongs. The former (society as a country house) depicts society in terms of assimilation, in which the majority expects minorities to give up their identities. According to Sacks this happened in Great Britain until the 1950's. The latter (society as a hotel) refers to society with no dominant culture. According to Sacks this is the multiculturalism that emerged in Great Britain in the 1970's partly through immigration and partly through the breakdown of old structures of religion and class. However, neither was adequate. "By 2001 it was clear that multiculturalism was not working. It was keeping groups apart. It was hindering their integration into British life. It was failing to prevent divisive attitudes and sometimes violent conflict (Sacks 2007: p. 20).

Rather than returning to the country house metaphor of a country with one dominant culture, Sacks asks us to imagine a third metaphor of society as the home we build together. Everybody is seen as a member of society with newcomers interacting with the other members of society as they build homes that are recognizably of the place where they are, not the place they have come from. “Not only have they made a home; they have made themselves *at home*, in this landscape, this setting, this place” (Sacks 2007: p. 14). According to Sacks, the society of the metaphor of “the home we build together” is one of integration without assimilation.⁴

Sacks’ metaphor of “The home we build together” is developed to address to the liberal democratic society of Great Britain when it comes to society building. However, in his book he also deals with society-making in other Western liberal democratic societies. Although the societal and political structures in Indonesia greatly differ from those in Europe, our contention is that it is at least worthwhile to reflect on the possibilities of relating Sacks’ insights to the Indonesian context when it comes to the question how to deal with societal diversity. The reason for this is that Sacks has cooperated in stimulating peace and friendship among religions with Patriarch Bartholomew (Orthodox Church), Grand Mufti Shawki Allam (Islam), Pope Francis (Roman Catholic Church), the Dalai Lama (Buddhism) and Mata Amritanandamayi (Hinduism). (See ‘Make Friends’ 2017) Such an initiative refers to Sacks’ metaphor of the home we build together but at the same time clearly goes beyond liberal democratic societies, providing a way forward to society building in every context.

It is significant for this project in Christian schools in the Netherlands that Sacks derives his metaphor of society as the home we build together from his interpretation of the Biblical narrative of the Exodus.⁵ A recent publication *The Bible at School* (De bijbel op school) (Nagel-Herweijer and Visser-Vogel, 2017) has shown that, within Christian schools in the Netherlands, the use of the Bible is not without questions as teachers and/

⁴ This metaphor includes insights from Sacks’ bestseller “The Dignity of Difference” (2011). These insights do not only state that people are all the same (universal). It also argues that people are different (particular). In religious terms the main question is: “Can we find, in the human ‘thou’, a fragment of the Divine ‘Thou’? Can we recognize God’s image in one who is not in my image?” (Sacks 2011: 17).

⁵ Exodus is a large narrative in the Torah. The prophet Moses is called to lead the Israelites out of Egypt to the promised land. It is part of what Christians often call the ‘Old Testament’ in the Bible. In this article we do not use the Christian designation term ‘Old Testament’, but refer to the Hebrew Bible.

or pupils who lack a clear view on the relevance of the Bible are now questioning the formerly self-evident role of the Bible in Christian education. This appeared to be the case in the pilot school as well. In order to be sensitive to this situation and not to prescribe a solution which is ‘too biblical’ or ‘too religious’, we have developed a model, drawing on several of the assumptions underlying Sacks’ interpretation of the Exodus. (Hasselaar in progress) Here we have built on these assumptions in terms of a five-element model we call “SOLVE” which can be seen as the theoretical framework of our EDR. The acronym SOLVE makes clear that the model aims to solve the problem at hand, namely how schools can relate to their Christian background and be open to pupils and teachers from other (religious) traditions at the same time. In the next section the five elements of the SOLVE-model are explained.

SOLVE-MODEL

The first key element we draw from the Exodus story is “S”, for *Stop* or *Sabbath*, a regular and public period of ceasing daily work in order to celebrate the present and reflect on the next steps forward. This is different from times for religious worship or teaching. Instead, it is a time for stimulating relations of love and trust (see below). It can be shaped in different ways and on different scales, from a momentary pause in a meeting to inclusive celebrations of, for example, Christmas or Easter.

“O”, for the Dutch word ‘*Onderweg*’ (in English ‘*On the way*’), recognizes that society-building is not a quick fix like a plumber repairing a leaking pipe. It takes time to change the images and identity one lives by.

“L” is for ‘*Liefde*’ (in English ‘*Love*’), the motivation to change one’s heart by recognizing both oneself and the other as subjects, not merely object, and seeing the possibilities in both. It is in face-to-face relationships, not only with the neighbour, who is almost like oneself, but also with the stranger, who may be completely different. (Sacks 2007:180) This type of love is both individual as well as societal. It creates new relationships on which societies and economies can be built. (Sacks 2012: 164)

“V” stands for the Dutch word *Vertrouwen* (in English ‘*Trust*’. A culture of trust is one in which all can participate on their own terms and in their own way. Motivated by love, trust must not be undercut

with fear, doubt or scepticism. Because it can develop and degrade, it must be nurtured in regular moments of celebration and reflection, as noted above.

Finally, “E” is for *Exodus*, which refers here to the biblical tradition in general, which is interpreted here using the work of Sacks in order to find a way to keep the biblical tradition as the DNA of the Christian schools in a diverse society and on the other had make room for a variety of views and traditions. In the pillarized educational system of the Netherlands in the 20th century, it was self-evident for Christian schools to refer to the Biblical tradition. Nowadays, however, the use of the Bible in Christian schools is not always without question, as we have just described. As argued above, we are sensitive to this situation. Nevertheless, Sacks’ method of reading the biblical stories may be a way forward to deal with these stories at schools with a diverse population of pupils and teachers. The reason for this is that Sacks tries to explain the biblical narratives coherently and, in a way, accessible to all. (Sacks, 2012, p. 82) Sacks refers to this method as the ‘concealed counter-narrative’. (Sacks, 2015a, p. 5) Before we continue describing the Design phase, we will briefly explain this method.

CONCEALED COUNTER-NARRATIVE

The notion of ‘concealed’ means that the biblical narrative has a layer under the surface. The meaning and significance of this layer can only be grasped by closely reading or listening. The notion ‘counter’ means that the layer below the surface is not only concealed. It usually also turns out to be radically different than the surface layer. The layer under the surface may go in the opposite direction. Sacks stresses for example that many readers may think that the story of the Exodus is about the divine intervention liberating the Israelites by ten plagues from slavery in Egypt. However, for Sacks, such a reading misses the complete meaning of the narrative. Sacks stresses that to understand the Exodus we have to go beneath the surface of the biblical text itself. There is a second layer which tells another story. Sacks shows that the Exodus contains a number of double narratives, whose significance becomes clear when we put them together (Sacks, 2010, p. 15):

1. *There are two battles*, one immediately before, the other immediately after the crossing of the Reed Sea, the first against Pharaoh and his chariots, the second against the Amalekites.

2. *There are two sets of stone tablets recording the revelation at Mount Sinai*, one before the episode of the Golden Calf (broken by Moses on his descent from the mountain), the second after the people have been forgiven for the Calf.
3. *There are two times that God is revealed in a cloud of glory*, once at Mount Sinai (24:15-18), the other, at the end of Exodus, in the Tabernacle (40:34-35).
4. *The Sinai covenant was declared twice*, once by God (20:1-14), the second time by Moses, reading from the book of the covenant he had written to record God's words (24:1-11).
5. *There are two accounts of the construction of the Tabernacle*, one before (25-30), the other (35-40) after the Golden Calf.

Sacks argues that in all these cases, the same shift of responsibility takes place. It is a movement from divine initiative to human endeavour. Exodus tells a double story. The first of the paired episodes tells about an act done by God alone. The second one involves human participation. In the first example the Israelites did not fight against the Egyptians, but they did fight against the Amalekites. In the second example, first Moses was passive, in the second set of stone tablets Moses had shared in the making. In each of the first of the paired episodes it is God who delivers the people by a set of miracles. In each of the second ones people are participating. Why this process from divine initiative to human endeavour?

To describe this process, Sacks uses two types of divine-human encounters drawn from Kabbala, Jewish mysticism, namely *itaruta de-leyah* (an awakening from above) and *itaruta de-letata* (an awakening from below) (Sacks, 2010, p. 272). The first term represents the divine intervention, e.g. the ten plagues in Egypt, the division of the Reed Sea and so on. Sacks writes that each of these supernatural events were an intrusion of God into the natural order:

An "awakening from above" may change nature, but it does not, in and of itself, change human nature. In it, no human effort has been expended. Those to whom it happens are passive. While it lasts, it is overwhelming; but only while it lasts. Thereafter, people revert to what they were. An "awakening from below," by contrast, leaves a permanent mark. (Sacks, 2010, p. 272)

According to Sacks the transition of an awakening from above towards human responsibility is the underlying argument of the Exodus. If there is an overarching theme in the Hebrew Bible then it is this story of the

transfer from divine initiative to human initiative (Sacks, 2005, p. 155). Humans are called to freedom by internalizing conflicting forms of interest. God wants humans to learn to fight their own battles, because only then can people change their identity and become liberated from an identity that holds them captive. Identity is seen by Sacks as the images people live by—images of themselves, others and the world. For Sacks, the journey of the Exodus is about individual and societal transformation of the identity people live by.

To sum up, in the preliminary research phase the following question was traced: ‘How can we relate to our Christian background and be open to pupils and teachers from other (religious) traditions and worldviews at the same time?’ Thereafter a theological or philosophical framework was developed to be able to answer this question. This framework is built on the metaphor “the home we build together” of Jonathan Sacks and results in the SOLVE-model.

DEVELOPMENT PHASE: DESIGN

The second phase of EDR is the design and testing of an intervention, as a result of the first phase, in order to contribute to solving the problem of how schools can relate to their Christian background and be open to pupils and teachers from other (religious) traditions at the same time. Here we focused on the S of the SOLVE-model, on pausing the ordinary activities of the school to focus on building community and trust. Christmas, and the Advent season which precedes it, can be used as an S moment in the school. Although the focus is on Stop, other elements of the model resonate, for example Love. The reason for this is that the model is a kind of cluster of concepts. It is hard to highlight one element without including another.

By November 2017, the design was ready. A committee of four—the school’s rector, a teacher, one school identity-advisor and one advisor/researcher, who is a theologian—developed four criteria for the design phase as they planned an inclusive Advent celebration:

1. The program must be both inclusive towards pupils from all backgrounds *and* attractive to the pupils of a gymnasium in the Netherlands.
2. Likewise, it must be both inclusive towards *and* attractive and understandable (in the sense that they understand the main principles of Sacks’ approach) to teachers with all kinds of backgrounds.

3. It must be designed in a way that does justice to the Christian roots of the festival and of the school.
4. It must be developed with the full involvement of the participants, particularly the teachers.

Based on the four criteria, the committee developed lessons for three class sessions to be held during Advent. After an evaluation with the rector, the teacher, the advisor and two academic researchers (the theologian and an educationalist) the final version of the intervention, namely lessons for three class sessions, was adopted. The main change was to develop not just individual classes or a daily 5 minute opening, but a whole teaching package of half an hour, consisting of three stories in which the first two chapters of the Gospel of Matthew were interpreted using Sack's Biblical method. This interpretation was combined with stories from the world of the pupils of the gymnasium, accompanied by discussion questions and a clip from YouTube. Pupils read Matthew 1-2 in "The Bible in Plain Language" (*Bijbel in Gewone Taal*) translation because its use of everyday language and short sentences was a better fit than the more traditional translations for pupils less familiar with the church and Bible. The bible verses were linked to actual life stories which are attractive to young people. For example, one of the stories used was of a young Dutch boy called Tijn who was terminally ill but still wanted to do good things for others, the money collection took place during Serious Request 2016 (a national fund-raising campaign during the Christmas season).⁶ Finally, a color brochure and a companion PowerPoint presentation were prepared. Two teachers out of the staff of 45 (one of whom was already involved) accepted an e-mail invitation to participate in the trial run of the inclusive Advent.

DEVELOPMENT PHASE: FORMATIVE EVALUATION OF TRY OUT

This section evaluates the trial run of Advent 2017. The evaluation is based on interviews with 5 persons of the school: the two teachers involved, the vice-rector and rector of the school and the director of the umbrella organisation to which the school belongs as these were the persons involved in this first round of the EDR

⁶ See for instance: <https://nos.nl/artikel/2149663-nagellak-actie-van-zieke-tijn-6-overdondert-rode-kruis.html> (accessed at January 18, 2019)

Evaluation by teachers involved

An observation is that the present shape of Advent creates more interaction with the pupils about the content of Advent than the general celebration from the previous last year. Such a general celebration is often experienced by the pupils as time off. One teacher argued that the teaching package made it easier to relate Advent to the pupils and their own world.

Another point of evaluation is that, according to the teachers, the intervention demands certain competences from the teacher him/her self, amongst which is the courage to be vulnerable. The reason for this is that in a setting where the teacher is vulnerable it is easier for the pupils to become vulnerable as well. Teachers namely serve as important role models for students' (social) behaviour (see e.g. Allred, 2008). The teachers indicated that it not always easy to be vulnerable and that they themselves and their colleagues as well could need support here (see recommendations).

In relation to this observation on teachers' vulnerability, the teachers involved observed that the Advent lessons created space in the class for pupils to become vulnerable, in the sense that the material invited pupils to share personal life experiences. For example, in the first week of the brochure there was a question asking if students knew people who could use some music in their lives. A new pupil at school told that her father died seven years ago during Christmas time. Another pupil explained that her neighbour might need some music, because he is divorced and not allowed to see his children. As a consequence of the story of the brochure a pupil with a Jewish background told about her Bat Mitzvah and about Chanukah. The teachers were very positive about this outcome as they are of the opinion that this openness creates a fruitful bed for personal exchange and (identity) development.

A fourth observation relates to the fact that the package was not just an opening, but it provided the opportunity to spend a whole lesson on it. The disadvantage is that it can cause a delay in regular lessons. The advantage is that it provides the opportunity in the classroom to give space and profundity to stories of the pupils that aren't otherwise shared. The teachers value the advantage over the disadvantage. They consider it a privilege to offer such a lesson during Advent. What is more, they stated that they are proud that their school has contributed in the development of such a brochure. They argued that such events can be used in the advertisement, in terms of 'this is how we are as a school'.

At the same time, the teachers state that it would be good if more teachers would participate, also to spread the time spent in Advent lessons more equally among colleagues. The question is then how to motivate more colleagues to engage. Four suggestions were offered. First, it might work if more time is spent in a team meeting, promoting this project. Second, a sign-up list might be helpful, also to make sure that all classes are given such a lesson. Third, it might be an idea to develop the brochure earlier and pay attention to it during the study afternoon. Fourth, a blog written by the two teachers involved this year about their experiences with the brochure in the class could give other teachers an idea how it works. A fifth point is that the package was considered very attractive not only because of the content, but also because of the design—a full color brochure, including the pictures. A last evaluation point is that it took time in the process to build trust between the participants, especially to show that Sacks' way of working with biblical stories is open and respectful to people from different worldviews and backgrounds.

Evaluation by the vice-rector, rector and director

As the vice-rector, rector and director (of the group of schools of which this particular school is part) were not so much involved in the realization of the Advent openings, the evaluation with them focused on the process that led to the try out. A central observation of the vice-rector and rector is that two layers could be distinguished in the process. First, before the summer holiday 2017 it was already decided to design this project around Christmas. Second, however, during the process it became clear that next to the challenge of designing the Christmas/Advent openings, there was also the challenge of formulating the narrative of the school. Although this desire to formulate a 'the story of the school' was not directly addressed in the present intervention (which focused on the Advent lessons), the school leaders are aware of the fact that these two aspects are, in one way or the other, linked together. Therefore, they expressed the wish to elaborate on this in the near future as well, instead of 'only' focusing on the Advent openings (see recommendations).

During a study-afternoon in October the story of the school was explored with all employees. Here the metaphor of School as the home we build together was introduced. The employees explored what they saw as essential ingredients for their pupils when it comes to society-building. In line with many educational programs and methods (see e.g. Bron, 2006) a distinction was suggested between year 1 and 2, year 3 and

4, and year 5 and 6. In the first two years the focus should be on the pupil him/herself. In year 3 and 4 the focus should be on 'the other'. In year 5 and 6 the focus should be on living together. The remaining question is how to make these educational lines more substantial and embedded. However, it is seen as positive that all employees are involved now in the process of developing a clearer story of the school.

A central impression of the director is that the teaching package is an attractive and suitable form of celebrating advent in an inclusive way. Next year she wants to have such a design in more schools within the same umbrella organization.

SEMI-SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENT: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Now we have described the pilot project, including the two phases of the EDR, we can come to a semi-summative assessment of our intervention. In formulating a preliminary answer to our research question, we will also discuss recommendations and reflect on how gained insights can support other schools (including in other countries, both inside and outside Europe).

Conclusions

The research question for this article was:

What are the characteristics of an Advent program aimed at an inclusive school community in the context of a Dutch Christian gymnasium with teachers and pupils from different religious and non-religious backgrounds?

In order to (preliminarily) answer this question we have focused on the 'S' of the SOLVE-model, the stopping moment of celebration and reflection, as the impetus for an inclusive celebration of Christmas in the school. On the basis of the preliminary research phase and the developed theoretical framework four characteristics were formulated. These characteristics were implemented in the design phase and evaluated with key persons involved. We will now summarize this formative evaluation per characteristic:

1. *Inclusive and attractive to pupils at a gymnasium in the Netherlands with all kinds of backgrounds*: The evaluation with the teachers⁷ involved has shown that the teaching package has created several lessons in the classroom which produced quite a number of stories among pupils from several backgrounds, Jews, Christian, and Muslim. The evaluation made clear that the designed openings were inviting to pupils from diverse religious and secular backgrounds. The approach of biblical texts, as inspired by Sacks, has shown to offer room for people from different (religious) backgrounds to personally relate to the old (religious) texts.
2. *Inclusive, attractive and understandable to teachers with all kinds of background*: In the trial run two teachers participated, of which one was involved in developing the intervention. They considered the teaching package as inclusive towards all the pupils regardless their background. The design of the brochure with its colors and pictures was considered as highly attractive. According to the teachers the intervention was understandable to all.
3. *Designed in a way that does justice to its Christian roots*: The teaching package was about a close reading of the first two chapters of Matthew. The method of the concealed-counter narrative of Rabbi Sacks was used. Although Sacks is a Jew, his work relates to several Christian theologians⁸ and, to a certain extent, can also be used reading narrative in New Testament texts.
4. *Developed with the participants*: The intervention was developed with two representatives of the pilot school. The reason to start with just a small group was because it takes time to build trust and to be able to do justice to all involved. During our pilot program it was said by a participating teacher that staff members appear to be much more reluctant to having an open dialogue on their own (religious) thoughts and experiences than pupils. Where pupils are mainly curious and want to learn from and with each other, teachers have more

⁷ In this first round we did not directly include the pupils in the evaluation. We however asked the teachers to share their impressions on how the pupils experienced the Advent openings. In the second round (based on Advent 2018) the pupils will be involved more explicitly.

⁸ One can refer here to the 'Amsterdam School' with its emphasis on exegesis, biblical theology and Bible translation. One can also refer to Thabo Makgoba, successor of Desmond Tutu as Archbishop of Cape Town and Metropolitan of the Anglican Church of South Africa, who has reflected on lines of thought of Sacks (Makgoba, 2009).

reservations regarding identity related issues. We will come back to this in the implications.

Apart from evaluating characteristics, this first round (of the iterative EDR cycle) also gave further insights into the whole process of developing inclusive education. In the remainder of this article we will elaborate on these insights.

Preconditions

We concluded, on the basis of our pilot study, that Sacks' metaphor of the school as "the home we build together" and his approach to readings of Biblical texts can be helpful to Christian schools in a diverse context, we will share some further insights which we derived from the pilot study. These insights can be seen as preconditions which appear to be important in the whole process of developing inclusive education.

First, it is important that the school administration is willing to develop a clear vision and offers a framework through which teachers can operate concretely. In our pilot study the rector, vice-rector and also the director took responsibility for the whole process and made sure that the process was not only dependent on incidental events and interventions such as the staff day and Advent openings.

Besides offering an overall 'strategy' it is also important that the people in charge also offer trust and a safe space to the staff members to overcome the stress of change and become acquainted with new teaching approaches. For teachers, the metaphor of the school as "the home we build together" can be quite a paradigm shift. Some teachers might have entered the profession with the idea of 'just' teaching one particular subject to pupils. The idea of teachers contributing to the school community might be not self-evident to everyone. It is important that feelings of discomfort and maybe even resistance are taken seriously throughout the entire process and that everyone involved in the school community is involved and informed regarding the process of (re)formulating the 'story of the school'. After that it is very important that the people in charge clearly show their trust in and enthusiasm for the envisioned goals. They need to be inspiring examples to the teachers (see for instance Specht, Kuonath, Pachler, Weisweiler and Frey, 2017). Finally, one needs to realize that change takes time. Not everything can be done at once. It is also not necessary that all steps toward a final goal are clear in advance. Often this is not even possible. This is the reason we have chosen EDR.

In underlying processes, first steps just need to be taken in order to get closer to the envisioned situation, even if the exact way towards the final goal is unsure.

Recommendations

On the basis of our first round EDR we formulated some additional recommendations, both for the pilot school and for other schools who would also like to be more inclusive. These recommendations also shed further light on characteristics which contribute to inclusive education and form the starting point of the next cycle of our EDR⁹. We have learned from the pilot that it takes time to develop both a vision and concrete plans and to mobilize and motivate teachers to participate.

We noticed that in the process towards inclusive education it is important not to focus too much on ‘religion’ as such. The reason for this is that to a significant number of teachers (and board members as well), Christianity is a sensitive topic. If the focus is on community building and broad educational formation, including citizenship education, it is much easier to include religious elements than to start with religion in order to build a community and stimulate broad development. Community leaders as well as school administrators need to be very aware of this, especially if they are religious themselves and/or attach great importance to religion. If the experienced questions and needs of teachers (and pupils) involved are taken as starting points it will be much easier to involve them in the process. Hereby attention should also be given to the impression that it is not always easy for teachers to be vulnerable and create an open classroom atmosphere which stimulates exchange and personal development. We recommend, for instance, in line with Kelchtermans (e.g. 2009), explicit attention be given to important professional skills and attitudes.

We recommend that the recruitment procedure for new teachers be adjusted to the developing of or developed views on inclusive education. New teachers need to be willing and able to contribute to the school as “the home we build together”. Also for teachers who already have a (fixed) position within the school it is important to know that the process of changing into an inclusive school is not noncommittal. A school as “the home we build together” cannot be realized if some of the people involved purposely withdraw from the building process.

⁹ Which will be designed and implemented during Advent 2018.

All in all we can conclude that the first round of our EDR is promising. The work of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks can be helpful in order to support schools with a Christian background to be faithful to their roots and be open to pupils and teachers from other (religious) traditions and world-views at the same time. In this pilot the focus has been on the ‘S’ in the SOLVE model. However, the other elements of the model, on the way, love, trust and Exodus, resonate as well. The formulated characteristics appeared to be of practical relevance in the design phase. Insights derived from the presented first round of our EDR will be integrated into a second iterative cycle of EDR during next year’s Advent in order to improve the intervention as much as possible. In the meantime, we are of the opinion that insights derived from the first round are, with an eye to inclusive school communities, valuable in itself.

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