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Identity of a Christian School: conceptions and practical significance. A Reconstructive Comparison

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Introduction

In the Netherlands, as in other western European countries and the USA, the existence of denominational and more specifically Christian schools is widely debated. The discussion centres around two themes. The first is the need for Christian schools: are Christian schools desirable and justifiable in culturally and religiously diverse and pluralistic democratic societies? The second theme is a cluster of issues related to the practical significance of identity of Christian schools, for instance the specific challenges and dilemmas that arise for Christian schools in particular contexts and the practical obstacles and requirements needed for the realisation of Christian schools (cf. McLaughlin, 1999).

In the discussions around both themes the concept of identity is used, but it is not always clear what the authors precisely mean by 'identity'. Moreover, we have the impression that the authors use different conceptualisations of 'identity'. Therefore, we wanted to get a better insight into the differences and similarities in the use of 'identity', or more generally the use of 'Christian schools'. This article describes and discusses the outcomes of an analysis of Dutch, Anglo-American and German literature on Christian primary and secondary schools. A large amount of publications were analysed, but in this article we restrict ourselves to key publications. First, we focus on the way in which 'identity' is conceptualised in the phrase 'identity of a Christian school'. Secondly, the practical impact of identity in Christian schools is addressed: What questions and demands arise in Christian schools in light of their identity? Finally, we discuss the relation between the authors' conceptions of identity and their views on the practical significance of identity.

Conceptions of 'Identity of a Christian School' or 'a Christian School'

This section describes six conceptions of 'identity of a Christian school' or 'a Christian school'. We found three conceptions in the Dutch literature (further referred to as Dutch 1, 2 and 3), two conceptions in the Anglo-American literature (further referred to as Anglo-American 1 and 2) and one conception in the German literature. Interestingly, there are no authors in these countries that can be subsumed

under conceptions from other countries. This seems to indicate that the countries have a unique internal discussion driven by specific historical and societal circumstances. The reconstruction will show that the conceptions are unique, even though they sometimes have similar viewpoints. A summary of the six conceptions of 'identity of a Christian school' or 'a Christian school' is given in Table I.

The first point in which the conceptions differ is their definition of 'identity of a Christian school'. We found two definitions. The first, 'what makes a school a *Christian* school', is the Christian commitment of the school. We found this definition in Dutch 1 and both Anglo-American conceptions.

The second definition is 'what makes a (Christian) school *this particular* (Christian) school' or the peculiar characteristics of a particular school. We found this definition in the Dutch conceptions 2 and 3. In the German conception both definitions are used, namely as the Christian commitment that is typical for Christian schools and as the peculiar characteristics of one particular Christian school.

In addition to the definition of identity, three themes or normative positions influence the conceptualisation of 'identity'. The first theme is directly related to the definition of 'identity', namely whether the 'identity of a Christian school' (or 'a Christian school') is one-dimensional or multidimensional. According to the one-dimensional interpretation, the 'identity of a Christian school' or 'a Christian school' has one, namely a religious, dimension. In other words, a Christian school is defined by its religious characteristics only. Generally speaking, what defines a school as being a Christian school is that it serves a specific religious purpose, i.e. transmitting the Christian tradition. This is the position of Anglo-American 1 authors (see Lambert & Mitchell, 1996; and see also McLaughlin *et al.*, 1996) and several—but not all—Dutch 1 authors (cf. Aarnoudse, 1994). Some authors whom we see as representatives of the Dutch 1 conception make or presuppose a distinction between *the identity* of a Christian school and *a Christian school*. These authors define the 'identity of a Christian school' in purely religious terms, but have a multidimensional conception of 'a Christian school' (cf. Hordijk & Steenhuis, 1992). A multidimensional conception means that a Christian school is characterised by several dimensions instead of just the religious one. Dimensions that are often mentioned are the educational, the pedagogical, the religious and the organisational dimension. These dimensions are seen as relatively autonomous; they are interrelated but only to a degree. Christian schools have a religious commitment and therefore seek to educate children from a Christian perspective, but the religious view or commitment should not dominate the aims and practices of Christian schools, neither should the aims or practices be deducted from religious views and positions. This, for example, would be the case in a school that only teaches about biblical creationism in its science lessons. Dutch 2 and 3 authors and Anglo-American 2 authors hold a multidimensional interpretation. According to the German conception, the 'identity of a Christian school' is both one-dimensional and multidimensional, which is coherent with their dual definition of 'identity'. 'Identity' defined as the Christian commitment of the school is religious, whereas 'identity' defined as the characteristics of the school is pedagogical, educational and religious in character.

A multidimensional conception of the 'identity of a Christian school' gives rise to the question of how authors precisely perceive the relationship between the dimensions of identity. We found two opposite positions among the 'multidimensionalists'. The first position considers the religious dimension to be the most important dimension of a Christian school, stating that aims and practices of a Christian school

TABLE I. Six conceptions of '(identity of) a Christian school'

That which makes a school ...	Characteristics of the conceptualisation of 'identity' or a Christian school													
	Definition of 'identity'		One-dimensional: Purely religious		Multi-dimensional: religious, pedagogical, educational		Shared by different schools, relatively abstract and relatively independent of context and practice		Related to one particular school, relatively concrete, dependent on a particular context and practice		Dynamic, developing			
	Chr. school	Identity	Chr. School	Identity	Chr. school	Identity	Chr. school	Identity	Chr. School	Identity	Chr. school	Identity	Chr. school	Identity
Dutch 1	X		X	Partly	Some: religious as dimension is foundational	partly the same identity	X (mostly)	?(*)	X	X	?/X	?	X	X
Dutch 2		X							X	X	Some: Christian identity view of the school is unchanging	the same as Christian identity	X	X
Dutch 3		X		X	X	X			X	X			X	X
Anglo-American 1	X		X	X			?	X (mostly)			Some: dependent on the context		?	?/X
Anglo-American 2	X		X		X	X			?		Mostly: dependent on the context		?	X
German Conception	X	X	X	(as the world view of the school)	X	X	X	(as the world view of the school)	X	(as the characteristics of one school)	X	(in both meanings)	X	(in both meanings)

* A question mark means that no explicit statements are made on this issue.

should somehow be related to and always be legitimised by the Christian tradition next to pedagogical or educational justifications. They perceive the religious dimension as being fundamental to the other dimensions, though they stress that this does not imply that the religious dimension is dominant, i.e. that the other dimensions could somehow be deduced from this dimension. We found this position in Dutch 2 (cf. Hermans, 1993; Knevelbaard, 1992). German authors who describe the Christian commitment as the foundation of the school seem to take a similar position (cf. Ilgner, 1992; Nipkow, 1990; Scheilke & Schreiner, 1999). The second position emphasises the primacy of the pedagogical and/or educational dimension: the development and practice of the religious commitment would be subject to pedagogical and educational criteria. Many Dutch 3 authors and Anglo-American 2 authors take this position (cf. Astley & Francis, 1994; Miedema, 1994; see also Francis & Lankshear, 1993). This position could lead to a practice in Christian schools where Christian commitment plays an implicit role only. For instance, the ethos of the school is inspired by the Christian commitment, but the school has no explicitly religious aims.

The second theme that plays a role in conceptualising identity is the relatively abstract and 'universal' or concrete and contextual nature of identity. The question is whether or not the 'identity of a Christian school' (or 'a Christian school') is historical and bound up with a particular context. Dutch 2 and 3, Anglo-American 2 and the German conception emphasise that neither a Christian school nor its identity can, or should be separated from the complex and diverse context in which the schools operate. This position implies that the aims and practices of Christian schools should be discussed and reflected upon continuously. What is seen as the most desirable Christian school varies from context to context and from time to time. Dutch 1 and Anglo-American 1 authors, on the other hand, seem to conceive the 'identity of a Christian school' as something that is relatively independent of a particular context and daily practices and that applies to Christian schools in general. They give the impression that the 'identity of a Christian school' predominantly relates to the religious premises of the school (see Francis & Lankshear, 1993). The reason for being cautious in our interpretation is that these authors write about Christian schools in a normative way, i.e. what a Christian school should be, and therefore tend to focus more on the Christian premises, which are perceived to be relatively abstract instead of contextual. A few Anglo-American 1 authors, however, take an opposite view. They argue that Christian schools should be rethought and discussed continuously, because the social context of the schools is changing continuously. If Christian schools want to survive they should respond actively to social developments, instead of withdrawing themselves from society (see Lambert & Mitchell, 1996).

The third theme is related to the second, and concerns the question of whether the 'identity of a Christian school' (or 'a Christian school') is static or dynamic. Does the 'identity of a Christian school' mainly stay the same or does it develop in response to changes in belief, context and circumstance? According to Dutch 2 and 3, Anglo-American 2 and the German conception, the 'identity of a Christian school' (or 'a Christian school') is relatively dynamic. Identity is understood as a temporary outcome of the interaction between the school's beliefs and values on the one hand, and everyday practices in the school on the other. Beliefs and values, as well as everyday practices, are part of the 'identity of a Christian school'. Additionally, a tension between a school's beliefs and values on the one hand, and everyday

practices in the school on the other, will lead to a development of, or change in, the identity of the school. Most Dutch 1 and Anglo-American 1 authors do not address the issue of the dynamics of Christian schools or the 'identity of a Christian school'. Those who answer this question, take different positions. Dutch orthodox Protestant authors, for instance, argue that the 'identity of a Christian school' is stable (cf. Aarnoudse, 1994). In practice, this position may lead to the decision of a Christian school to withdraw from society into its own community, because the school wants to conserve an explicit Christian school ethos, while society is considered to be increasingly anti-religious. As alluded to earlier, some Anglo-American 1 authors argue against such a reaction of Christian schools, because they believe this reaction will lead to the disappearance of Christian schools (see Lambert & Mitchell, 1996).

Practical Significance of Identity in Christian Schools

The second theme we have investigated in our analysis of the literature concerns the ideas of authors about the practical significance of identity in Christian schools. What kind of influence does the identity of a school have on the education, the curriculum and the pedagogy of the school? We clustered ideas about aims and practices of Christian schools in four domains, namely the religious, the pedagogical, the didactical/curricular and the organisational domain. The last domain refers to the management of the school and issues at institutional level, for instance admission and staff policy, relationships between the staff members, the relationship with parents and the 'marketing' of the school. We found that the ideas of the authors were highly similar in the pedagogical, didactical/curricular and organisational domains and that they were only clearly diverse in the religious domain. We will describe the similarities first.

In the *pedagogical domain* authors argue for a 'commitment to community'. With regard to the teacher, for instance, they state that the pedagogical attitude should be based on relationship. The teacher should highly value a personal relationship with pupils and an attitude of trust and openness. Authors also argue for a democratic school life, for instance for pupils to be treated as active participants by creating opportunities for them to participate in decision-making processes in the school. Finally, this commitment can imply that pupils participate in community service learning projects, in order to stimulate community values.

In the *didactical/curricular domain* authors stress that religious education should permeate the entire curriculum. Where appropriate and possible, religious and moral beliefs and values should be considered in each subject area. For instance, teachers can clarify which religious and moral beliefs and values are embedded in the topics the students are learning about and stimulate pupils to reflect upon these beliefs and values by organising classroom discussions. Furthermore, authors take the view that Christian schools should attempt to take into account the individuality of each child. Schools should give each child individual attention and create possibilities for the development of cognitive as well as the social-emotional and creative faculties, for example by offering extracurricular courses (music, drama, sports, etc.). Additionally, schools should differentiate in teaching methods and content in order to enable all children to learn at their own level, in their own way.

In the *organisational domain* authors underscore the importance of an open, supportive climate among staff members in which the individuality of each member is respected and in which possibilities are created for the professional development

of each member. Additionally, they argue for partnership with parents and the local community, for instance by offering parents possibilities for voluntary assistance within the school and by collaborating with social institutions and the local church.

The clearest differences were found in the *religious domain*. Authors who conceptualise Christian schools in purely religious terms (Anglo-American 1 authors and some Dutch 1 authors) propose a normative and specific Christian aim of religious education, i.e. the formation and deepening of Christian beliefs, values and attitudes of children (see Lambert & Mitchell, 1996; McLaughlin *et al.*, 1996). Authors who conceptualise 'identity of a Christian school' as multidimensional propose more open and formal aims of religious education. In their view, Christian schools should aim to foster the religious development of children by using the Christian tradition. However, the authors have different views about the interpretation of this aim. According to some authors a Christian school should teach *about* the Christian religion, i.e. teachers should only give information about Christianity. By teaching about Christianity pupils are enabled to make an autonomous and well-informed choice about religion and worldview (see Astley & Francis, 1994; Francis & Lankshear, 1993). Other authors who conceptualise a Christian school as multidimensional argue for teaching *into* the Christian religion, just like authors who conceptualise a Christian school as one-dimensional. In their view, however, this induction into Christianity should not be the ultimate aim of the school. They regard learning of Christian beliefs, values and attitudes as a first step in the development of autonomy (cf. McLaughlin, 1999; Thiessen, 1993). By teaching into Christianity pupils can acquire reasons and arguments as well as capacities and attitudes that are necessary to reflect on the meaning of life, to gain a coherent sense of identity and to make a personal choice concerning religion and worldview (cf. Nipkow, 1990; see also McLaughlin *et al.*, 1996; Scheilke & Schreiner, 1999).

In addition to different aims of religious education, authors take different views on the way in which and to what extent the Christian commitment should determine aims and practices of Christian schools. Authors who adhere to the one-dimensional conception argue for Christian schools in which all aims, the entire school life and the curriculum are determined by the Christian commitment. Aims, decisions and organisational arrangements of the school should be based on a set of principles and beliefs that is either derived from, or a specification of, the Christian commitment. In practice, this position means that all aspects of the school should be organised in such a way that pupils become Christian believers who shape their live according to a strong, authentic Christian commitment. According to the authors who have a multidimensional conception, a Christian school should base its aims, decisions and organisational arrangements on an integrated concept that includes the pedagogical/educational principles of the school as well as its Christian commitment. In this view the Christian commitment provides a framework of beliefs and values that is relevant to the management and organisation of the school, including matters relating to admission and staff policy, school life, school climate, the curriculum and questions relating to teaching and content. Accordingly, religious education should permeate the curriculum and school life.

We found that authors who interpret a Christian school as multidimensional have different ideas about the way in which the Christian commitment should permeate the school. Some authors argue that Christian schools should aspire to exercise a kind of 'holistic influence' (cf. McLaughlin *et al.*, 1996, 1999). They conceive the Christian commitment as a body of beliefs and values 'which penetrates and informs

every moment of its educational activity' (McLaughlin, 1999, p. 66). This view implies that aims and practices of a Christian school will always be distinctive in some way as a result of the holistic influence of the Christian commitment. Other authors only emphasise that religious education of Christian schools should not be restricted to lessons in 'Religious Education'. In their view the religious development of pupils should be fostered across the whole curriculum, as well as by the ethos and the organisational arrangements of the school. For this reason, Christian schools should reflect on the moral and normative dimensions of their curriculum, ethos and organisation. However, it is possible that Christian schools will aim at similar goals as non-Christian schools and are no different in any of their practices, since both Christian schools and non-Christian schools primarily have to meet educational and pedagogical criteria (cf. Nipkow, 1990; see also Astley & Francis, 1994; Francis & Lankshear, 1993; Scheilke & Schreiner, 1999). Additionally, these authors argue that aims and practices that are based on religious principles are not necessarily any different from those based on religious as well as pedagogical/educational principles. Aims and ideals that are considered to be worthwhile because of the Christian commitment can be in harmony with aims and ideals based on pedagogical/educational grounds.

Discussion

Our analysis of literature about Christian schools has shown that there are six different conceptions of 'identity of a Christian school' or 'a Christian school'. Interestingly, these differing conceptions seemingly do not impact differently on the pedagogical, the didactical/curricular and the organisational domain, because all the authors have similar ideas about the aims and practices within these domains. However, it is important to note that this may only be true at the more abstract and general level, because authors do take different positions with regard to the role of the Christian commitment in a Christian school and we expect this to have a bearing on the interpretation of the aims and practices in all domains. The positions with regard to the role of the Christian commitment are dependent on the way in which the relationship between pedagogy/education and a worldview is conceptualised. This position, as we have shown in the second section, is different for the one-dimensional conceptions on the one hand, and the multidimensional conceptions on the other.

The one-dimensional or purely religious conceptions of a Christian school (partly Dutch 1 and Anglo-American 1) are based on the idea that views on, and aims of, education are *necessarily* dependent on a worldview or a religious conception of the good. In this view all education, for instance, moral, social, intellectual and aesthetic education, is ultimately religious education. In the case of a Christian school, pedagogical and educational aims and practices are, and should be, determined by the Christian commitment. We have found two versions of this position. The more strict position claims that all pedagogical/educational aims and practices should be derived from the Christian commitment along deductive lines. The more moderate position holds that all aims and practices of the school should be dedicated to a specific Christian aim, i.e. to stimulate pupils to become Christian believers, shaping their lives according to a strong and authentic Christian commitment.

The multidimensional conceptions of a Christian school (Dutch 2 and 3, Anglo-American 2 and the German conception) are based on the idea that views on, and

aims of, education are influenced by but *not necessarily* dependent on a worldview. In this view pedagogical and educational aims and ideals are part of relatively autonomous domains, each with their own, domain-specific rules and criteria. This does not imply that there is no connection at all between a worldview and ideas about the aims of education. According to the multidimensional conceptions, pedagogical and educational aims and practices are necessarily bound up with normative and moral dimensions, which might be religious. Normative and moral viewpoints always have implications for, although they do not completely determine, educational and pedagogical aims and practices. Hence, in the case of a Christian school, the Christian commitment should be directive for the pedagogical and educational dimensions of the school. Ideally, the school's Christian commitment is an integrated part of its education and pedagogy, without making pedagogical and educational aims and practices subordinate to the Christian commitment or a specific Christian aim.

Finally, although the discussion about the relationship between pedagogy/education and a worldview is theoretical, we have already stated that we assume that the preferred position will have an impact on the perception of aims, curriculum, ethos and organisation of Christian schools. This is an issue that needs further exploration: Which interpretations of this relationship are possible theoretically and what is their impact on the aims and practices of schools? Additionally, it is important to investigate whether or not an emphasis on a holistic influence of the Christian commitment within Christian schools is compatible with the belief that views on, and aims of, education are *not necessarily* dependent on a worldview. The plea that the Christian commitment must play a part in *all* educational and pedagogical practices in the school presupposes the view that a worldview does exert an influence in all educational and pedagogical practices. The question is whether or not this position is indeed different from the position that education and pedagogy are necessarily dependent on a worldview.

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