

# THE ART OF LIVING IN DUTCH PUBLIC SCHOOLS EL ARTE DE VIVIR EN LAS ESCUELAS PÚBLICAS DE DUTCH

---

**Tom SCHOEMAKER**

## Resumen

Se suponía que las escuelas públicas holandesas eran neutrales. Pero, ¿cómo puedes ser neutral en una sociedad plural religiosa? En la década de 1980 se tomaron dos decisiones importantes. A todos los niños se les debe enseñar sobre las diferentes religiones del mundo y deben ser “pluriformes activos”. Los programas : VOS / ABB quiere llevar esto un paso más allá con el concepto de “el arte de vivir”. Siguiendo esta visión, hay dos conceptos que se están explorando en este momento: “Contar historias y hacer preguntas” y “Escuela de diálogo”.

## Palabras clave

Escuelas públicas, didáctica, filosofía de vida, religión.

## Abstract

The Dutch public schools were supposed to be neutral. But how can you be neutral in a religiously diverse society? In the 1980's two important decisions were made. All children should be taught about the different world religions and should be “actively pluriform”. VOS/ABB wants to take this a step further with the concept of “the art of living”. Following this vision, there are two concepts that are being explored at this moment: “Telling stories and Asking questions” and “Dialogue School”.

## Keywords

Public schools, didactics, philosophy of life, religion.

**Tom SCHOEMAKER.** Teacher and researcher in religion and philosophy of life at the faculty of primary school education of HAN University of Applied Sciences, Arnhem, the Netherlands, and coordinator of the project “Dialogue School”.

**Recepción:** 28/XI/2018

**Revisión:** 06/II/2019

**Aceptación:** 13/II/2019

**Publicación:** 31/III/2019

# THE ART OF LIVING IN DUTCH PUBLIC SCHOOLS

## EL ARTE DE VIVIR EN LAS ESCUELAS PÚBLICAS DE DUTCH

### 1. A SHORT HISTORY

**A**s in almost all European countries, education and church were closely linked in the Netherlands up till the end of the eighteenth century. This was the time of the French Revolution and the founding of the United States of America. It was the time of separation between church and state, the time of the enlightenment and the time of the building of nations.

The Netherlands were a little bit slow, but in 1806 the Dutch government created the state schools where the church did not have anything to say anymore. Still every school had to teach civil and Christian virtues, but the teacher could no longer take a position in religious dogmas in the classroom (Bos & Huigsloot, 2008).

In 1848 the Netherlands received a new constitution where people (namely parents, not churches) were allowed to start their own schools. This was heavily fought for, because on the one hand liberals were having problems

with the obligation to teach Christian morals, and Christians were having problems with the liberal character of the schools and with the principle that the government could decide with which morals and ideas the children were being raised in school (ter Avest, Bakker, Bertram-Troost, & Miedema, 2007). This was the prerogative of the parents, they argued (Bos & Huigsloot, 2008).

A new law, in 1878, stated for the first time that teachers could be prosecuted if they were not neutral. On the other hand, it stated that it was important for children to also get a religious education. This was supposed to be given by the churches and every school had the obligation to provide for a classroom, heated and illuminated if necessary, during school hours for a maximum of 120 hours a year. It still exists and is called H/GVO (humanist or religious education. The government wanted to state, by this law, that school was to be "outside of the church, but not opposed to the church" (Bos & Huigsloot, 2008).

Even though parents were now allowed to start their own schools (ter Avest et al., 2007), not many schools were actually opened, because it was far too expensive for parents to start their

own schools. This eventually led to the situation in 1917, that religiously based schools were funded in the same way as the public schools (ter Avest et al., 2007). Religiously based schools in the Netherlands are called “non-government schools” (Renkema, Mulder, & Barnard, 2016).

At this moment, approximately 70 % of all primary schools are religiously based “non-government schools”, and 30 % are public schools (Renkema et al., 2016).

## 2. PUBLIC SCHOOLS

To establish their own identity, public schools formulated, together with VOS/ABB, their umbrella organization, 6 core values.

1. All children are welcome, regardless of their religious, social-economic or cultural background.
2. Everybody with the proper degree can be appointed as teacher, regardless of their religious, social-economic, sexual or cultural background.
3. Mutual respect for different worldviews of children, teachers and parents.
4. Values and morals; public schools try to teach children the basic rules of (Dutch) democracy and the shared values in (Dutch) society.
5. Education is of and for the society and stimulates to participate in the democratic society.
6. Philosophy of life and religion are important; public schools are not neutral but “actively pluriform”. They also have to offer an oppor-

tunity to humanist and/or religious education by external partners (H/GVO) (Bos & Huigsloot, 2008).

One of the main issues in public schools has always been the question; what is meant by the term “neutral”. For many teachers in public schools, being neutral meant that any subject related to religions was taboo. This changed in 1985 when a new law on primary education was passed (ter Avest et al., 2007). Of course, a lot had changed in Dutch society since 1917. Mainly because the Netherlands have a high population rate of immigrants from countries with other cultures and religions, mainly Muslims. Often these immigrants were more serious about their religion than Dutch, secularized Christians. But they often chose for public schools because these schools were not Christians. So, for the first time, there were seriously religious children in public schools. This was something new, but it was also something that offered a potential for conflicts.

For all schools, public and non-government, the new law meant that all children had to learn about the different religions and worldviews (Bos & Huigsloot, 2008). This was the first time that religion entered the curriculum of public schools. Not only did the pupils have to learn facts about religions, they also had to learn how to have respect for other religions and worldviews.

For public schools, the new law had even more consequences. From now on, every school had to “contribute to the development of children with

# THE ART OF LIVING IN DUTCH PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Tom **SCHOEMAKER**

special attention to religious, philosophical and civil values as they occur in Dutch society, and to identifying the meaning and value of the diversity of these values" (Bos & Huigsloot, 2008, p.24). In short, public schools started to use the term "actively pluriform". This not only meant that children had to learn about the different religions and sets of values in the society, but also that they had to learn that these differences were not as much potential conflicts, but a rich learning environment. This opened the door for active attention for religion and worldview in public schools. The difference between public and special schools now being that special schools could have a preference for a certain religion and public schools could and would not.

### 3. THINKING ABOUT RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Where religious schools had always been thinking about religion in school, this was quite new to the professionals who worked in public schools. So, they had to develop a whole new set of concepts on how to talk about or teach subject matters related to religions and worldviews. An important concept on talking about religious education was the difference between teaching into religion, teaching about religion and teaching from religion (Seligman, 2014).

Teaching into religion means socialization into Christianity, Islam or other belief. This is, of course, something that nobody wants in public schools. - At the same time there is this strange

anomaly that the public school has to make room for churches and other organizations to give religious education during the normal school day. Churches had the opportunity to use this religious education in public schools for "teaching into religion". This was originally organized to show that there is a separation between church and state, but that the state was not opposed to the church (Bos & Huigsloot, 2008). This religious education is not funded by the government, but it can be subsidized if wanted.

Teaching about religion means that you teach children what others believe. This is what is now mandatory in all schools by the law of 1985. The question is what to do with teaching from religion.

Teaching from religion means that you help children to develop their own ideas and values, but that you use stories, symbols and rites from (different) religions to help them find their own path. Their own philosophy of life. But is this a task for public schools? And even if it is the task for public schools to help children to develop their own ideas and values, can you use elements from religions to do so?

To deal with these and other questions, VOS-ABB, the national umbrella and lobby organization for public schools, has been developing a vision for their education. This is also necessary because of the strange situation that less than half of the Dutch population is a member of a church and less than 10 % is active in a church, while on the other hand, 60 % of the Dutch

parents send their children to religious special schools. As a point on the horizon (as opposed to a specific goal) they would like to end the difference between public and non-government schools. To do so, they introduced the concept of "School!" (Jongewaard & Bogaerdt, 2014).

## 4. RESEARCH QUESTION

*When public schools choose to help children to develop their own ideas and values, can they use elements from religions to do so?*

## 5. SCHOOL! AND THE ART OF LIVING

In 2014 VOS/ABB (together with VOO) published the brochure "School!gids" (i.e. School!guide). In this brochure different authors give their impression on what education in the Netherlands could, and maybe should, look like. Renkema wrote an article on religion and philosophy of life and introduced a new concept called "the art of living".

The new school subject should be a subject for all pupils and they should not be split up into different religious groups (as currently in H/GVO) (Renkema, 2014). This subject should be a combination of all kinds of different subjects that are (more or less) taught in schools at this moment: knowledge of the different religions, citizenship education, ethics, philosophizing with children, social emotional education, sexual diversity, yoga, peace education and religious education

(Renkema, 2014). In the art of living, there will not be any exclusive value or preference of any religious source or tradition (Renkema, 2014).

Starting point for the art of living will be the existential values and the life philosophical biography of the pupils and the teachers on the one hand, and the religious and life philosophical convictions and ideas from a wide variety of old and new traditions, of religious and of social or other sources on the other. The main purpose is to create hermeneutical connections and links between these two; personal lives on the one hand and traditions or ideas on the other hand (Renkema, 2014).

To make this specific for the actual education, Renkema suggests starting lessons with rich stories that are of value or which are given value. It is also possible to start with recognizable stories that stimulate the imagination. Children learn to give these stories meaning, using symbols, language and other forms of expression. The children can also participate in rituals and other celebrations that mark important moments in their personal life, the life of the class, the school or society (Renkema, 2014).

Notice this is a vision by VOS/ABB. But VOS/ABB is an umbrella organization and has no place in any hierarchy. It can advise, it can coach but it cannot tell the schools how to act or what to do. In public schools, the way they teach the art of living or the philosophy of life is very divers. Some schools still do not want anything to

# THE ART OF LIVING IN DUTCH PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Tom **SCHOEMAKER**

do with religion or philosophy of life whatsoever. They leave everything up to the teacher of religious education by external organizations in H/GVO. Often even the factual knowledge of different religions, as demanded by the government. Others only address matters of the philosophy of life when the subject comes up like when someone has died, when religion is a subject on the news or when there is a nationwide celebration like Christmas. There are schools who limit the subject to citizenship education and there are also schools who try to stimulate the dialogue between the children of different religions or even try to celebrate as many different religious feasts from at least the religions that are present in the classroom. So how can VOS/ABB stimulate public schools to teach the art of living?

## 6. TELLING STORIES AND ASKING QUESTIONS

In 2016 Tamar Kopmels published a didactic concept called *Verhalen vertellen en vragen stellen* (i.e. Telling stories and asking questions) (Kopmels, 2016). In this book she introduces some new practical insights of which two are now relevant for this article.

First of all, Kopmels introduces a new terminology to talk about our subject. In the Netherlands we have a lot of different words to describe this topic. All these words overlap but are also used continually in different ways (ter Avest et al., 2007)<sup>1</sup>. This makes the discussion about the whole subject very difficult because everyone uses different terms or interprets the terms in

a different way. And not only that, they are also allergic to some terms because of bad experiences in the past.

Kopmels suggests that, from now on, we use only one term: *levensbeschouwing*. If you try to translate this word, it comes closest to “philosophy of life” or worldview. But it also has connotations of religion, faith, spirituality, traditions, etcetera. She proposes to use the word with a capital letter for all religious and cultural traditions, for instance Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, but also Humanism or Feminism. The word spelled in lowercase is used for everything where an individual think about its personal life, transcendence, identity, ethics etcetera (Kopmels, 2016).

The strength of using only one term is that it is clear that we are actually talking about the same thing. Everybody is thinking about his life and the way he or she wants to see the world. Some find answers in converting to a certain set of beliefs, some look for different beliefs from different traditions and some just come up with their own answers. But there is not a fundamental difference between these choices. This helps very much to show teachers why it is important to pay attention to this subject in class. Especially because children are very active in searching for the meaning of everything that surrounds them.

It is important to state that the fact that one is written with a capital letter and the other is written in lowercase does not mean that the one is more important or better than the other. It only means that it is formalized and institutionalized.

The second thing Kopmels introduces is the program for teaching “levensbeschouwing”; telling stories and asking questions. At first glance it seems that she introduces the teaching from religion. It seems this way because, in the second part of her book, she introduces a lot of stories from different religious traditions and worldviews and she suggests questions you can ask, related to these stories. But it would not do her just to reduce her work to only teaching from religion. First of all, she also uses stories that are taken from children’s modern literature and fairy tales. But the importance of her work is mainly that the teacher’s role is not to tell the children how things work, to explain or to teach, but to ask questions. The role of the teacher is to start a process for each child and stimulating them to find their own answers.

Within the almost three years this book is on the market, the term “levensbeschouwing” with a capital or lowercase, is heard everywhere and the program of telling stories and asking questions has become very popular. Not only in public schools but also in religious special schools.

## 7. DIALOGUE SCHOOL

Another new development are the didactics of Dialogue School from HAN University of Applied Sciences, by the author of this article. Schoemaker radically chooses for a new paradigm for teaching “levensbeschouwing”. He does not start with the question what to teach (and how to teach it), but with the question; how does a child develop its philosophy of life? (Schoe-

maker, 2014) Doing his preliminary research, Schoemaker discovers that a child does not mainly develop its philosophy of life from being taught different ideas or stories. But “the child, making use of all that he finds around him, shapes himself for the future” (Montessori). It is not so much the dogma’s or ideas that shape its philosophy, it is the material things, the images, the advertisements, the things he sees on the internet or television and the people he meets (Schoemaker and de Beer, 2016). Meyer calls this “the material approach towards religion” (Meyer, 2012).

The child is born into a material world and sees all the different influences that surround him. He inhales all these influences, knowingly and not knowingly. When the child becomes aware, he makes choices which influences he wants to take seriously and which he can discard. The child then makes valuable connections between these different objects, influences, stories, ideas or questions and thus creates its own philosophy of life and starts talking about this and act upon this. Thus, creating new influences upon the other children as they, at the same time, create new influences for this child.

If this is how a child develop its philosophy of life, Schoemaker states, it is not the role of teachers to keep adding stories, ideas, knowledge or traditions to the child’s potential influences. The main task for a teacher is to make the child aware of this process and to help the child to take control over its own process. For this task, Schoemaker formulated five tasks for the teacher:

# THE ART OF LIVING IN DUTCH PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Tom **SCHOEMAKER**

1. A teacher must show the children what influences the child receives.
2. A teacher has the possibility to add his own influences, but he does not have to do this. When he does, it is important that he only states that this is inspiring to him. He can (of should) never state that this is the truth or that the children should think the same things.
3. A teacher must stimulate children to actually make choices.
4. A teacher must stimulate children to make meaningful connections or links between the influences that the child has chosen to be important to him. Thus, the child will create its own philosophy of life.
5. A teacher must help children to find a language for their philosophy of life. This is important because when a society loses its common religion it also loses its common language. You can state that modern man is (religiously) illiterate (Schoemaker, Hoogenberg and de Beer, 2016). The teacher must also help children to find a way to act upon their own philosophy of life.

## 8. CONCLUSION

As long as religion and worldview were completely linked to religious organizations and most citizens were a member of one of these organizations, it was pretty clear that public schools only had to pay attention to morals, whether they were called Christian or not. In a pluriform society where most people claim they do not belong to a certain religion, the area of teach-

ing religion and life philosophy asks for a new approach. In the Netherlands VOS/ABB, the national umbrella and lobby organization for public schools, had developed a few concepts ("School!", "Telling stories and asking questions" and "Dialogue School") to meet the needs of children and of society which look promising for the future. These concepts are being tested at this moment. We hope, in the near future, to take you, the Dutch public schools and the children to School!

## REFERENCES

- Avest, I., Bakker, C., Bertram-Troost, G., Miedema, S. (2007). Religion and Education in the Dutch Pillarized Educational System: Historical Background and Current Debates. In R. Jackson, *Religion and Education in Europe*. Volume 3. Münster: Waxmann Verlag GmbH.
- Bos, K. Te, & Huigslot, M. (2008). *Over Openbaar Onderwijs*. Woerden; VOS/ABB.
- Jongewaard, M. & Bogaerd, M. v.d., (ed.). (2014). *School!gids, een toekomstvisie op ons onderwijsbestel*. Woerden: VOS/ABB and VOO.
- Kopmels, T. (2016). *Verhalen vertellen en vragen stellen, vakdidactiek levensbeschouwing & geestelijke stromingen*. Groningen/Houten: Noordhoff Uitgevers.
- Meyer, B. (2012). *Mediation and the Genesis of presence, Towards a material approach of religion*, Utrecht: Universiteit Utrecht, Faculteit Geesteswetenschappen.
- Renkema, E. (2014), *Levenskunst op School!*. In M. Jongewaard and M. V. d. Bogaerd

# THE ART OF LIVING IN DUTCH PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Tom SCHOEMAKER

(ed.), *School!gids, een toekomstvisie op ons onderwijsbestel*. Woerden: VOS/ABB and VOO.

Renkema, E., Mulder, A., & Barnard, M. (2016).

Merging identities: experiments in Dutch primary education. *Religious Education*, 111(1), 75-94.

Schoemaker, T. (2014). "Here the snowman

could live, but he missed everyone" Recognizing the life-philosophical dimension in a child's creative writing and aiding the child to develop. *JETEN*, 9, 22-32.

Schoemaker, T., & Beer, F. de. (2016). The Swimming Pool. The Teachers Role in the Didactics of Dialogue School, Using Godly Play. *JETEN*, 11, 30-39.

Schoemaker, T., Hoogenberg, N., & Beer, F. de. (2016). Beyond the Observable. Design research for a conversation guideline. *JETEN*, 11, 40-51.

Seligman, A.B. (2014). *Religious Education and the Challenge of Pluralism*. Oxford University Press.

## NOTES \_\_\_\_\_

1, Ina ter Avest et al. (2007) presented an extensive background of the Dutch situation. She also uses the terms "informal religion", "wild devotion", "spirituality", and "sense-making process" (p. 216).