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The alleged absence of attention to existential questions in citizenship education programs: Towards a better understanding of the possible relation between existential needs of youngsters and staff, worldview diversity and citizenship education

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The alleged absence of attention to existential questions in citizenship education programs: Towards a better understanding of the possible relation between existential needs of youngsters and staff, worldview diversity and citizenship education

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Abstract

In nowadays schools, we find a range of worldviews and/or religions amongst students, staff and parents. The accompanying presence of value differences appears to cultivate uncertainty. Societal tendencies, like polarization and tribalization show that we live in a society under pressure. At the same time, there are indications (like the high number of loneliness and depression) that youngsters have difficulty answering existential questions. Many teachers either feel incapable or are reluctant to explicitly address the existential questions of students. As a result, existential questions may be too easily neglected in educational programs, that aim for democratic citizenship.

This paper offers thorough reflections on whether and how attention to the existential dimension of human being, including worldview and/or religion, can be adequately integrated in citizenship education. The reflections serve as a starting point to develop interventions, which can be used in helping schools to adequately address existential needs of students and staff of diverse (non)religious backgrounds and, in doing so, stimulate youngsters from diverse (non)religious background to be willing and able to contribute to a peaceable and resilient democratic society.

Key words: secondary education, existential questions, worldview diversity, citizenship education

1. Introduction

The school population as a whole is increasingly vulnerable to all kinds of social stressors, that impact on the well-being of individuals, communities, and institutions. Societal tendencies, like polarization and tribalization (Debeuf, 2019), show that we live in a society under pressure. Confronted with this new reality, many schools

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experience difficulties in taking up their role as laboratories for democracy (Nordbruch & Sieckelinck, 2019). Especially in secondary education, *Civic Sense*, as the will to contribute to a better society for all, appears to be limited (Inspectie van het onderwijs, 2019).

Similar to other countries, there have been concerns about the functioning of democracy in the Netherlands for quite some time. These concerns led, in part, to the 2006 Citizenship Education Act, according to which schools were required to actively contribute to the knowledge and skills of children and young people in the area of democracy, in order to actively promote social cohesion. However, the effects of this law lag behind expectations (e.g., Dijkstra, Ten Dam & Munninksma, 2021). Not all schools appear to be fulfilling their duty to contribute to civic education. That is why the Dutch minister of education prepared a revision of the law on citizenship education[1]. By the time these proposals were discussed in the Dutch Parliament (Second Chamber), everyone had the images of the murder of Samuel Paty[2] and the moving incidents that followed in the latter days, also in Dutch schools, still fresh in their minds. As a result, a great deal of the political debate focused on the question to what extent both pupils and staff are really safe at school, even if they hold opinions which differ from the majority in their (school) community.

In this contribution, I will elaborate on this debate from a pedagogical perspective, by adding reflections on whether and how attention to the existential dimension of human being, including worldview and/or religion, can be adequately integrated in citizenship education, in order to enhance peaceful coexistence. I will focus on the possible role of attention to existential questions of pupils and staff, in particular. In doing so, I aim to contribute to the broader discussion on the desired aims and content of education in our present world. Although examples are drawn from the Dutch context, the issues at stake here have a far wider reach. They link to a wider academic and societal debate on whether religion stimulates or hinders peaceful co-existence in general and what this means for the extent to which religion should be addressed in (citizenship) education and how this could be done (e.g., Gearon, 2002, 2014; Jackson, 2014). Although school systems and curricula differ from country to country, a reflection on a more abstract level on the (possible) integration of attention to the existential dimension of human being, including worldview and/or religion and (citizenship) education, has broad relevance for many educational settings in different national and cultural settings.

2. Too much or too little diversity in classrooms?

In the aftermath of the murder of Paty, some teachers had to go into hiding temporarily,

1 As the focus in this article is not so much on the Dutch situation as such, only very limited specific attention is paid to the history and current Dutch situation in relation to (laws on) citizenship education. More can be found in e.g., Miedema and Bertram-Troost (2008) and De Jong (2020) and Dijkstra, Ten Dam & Munniksma (2021).

2 Samual Paty, history teacher in France, was murdered by a radical Jihadist who acted on the rumours that Paty had been disrespectful towards Muslims by showing a caricature of prophet Muhammed.

because they were, on the basis of the presence of cartoons in their classrooms, accused of blasphemy by Muslim students (NRC, 2020). One can hardly escape the impression that teaching has become a precarious business. Working in (secondary) education seems to imply that you have to be very careful in what you say and what you do not mention, because otherwise your life is not safe. However, anyone, who listens carefully and investigates more broadly what goes on in classrooms, will discover that many pupils and teachers do manage to talk to each other about difficult and controversial subjects. Many teachers, as Nieuwelink (2018) observed, feel capable of dealing with the diverse opinions of their pupils and feel that they possess the necessary pedagogical qualities and content-related expertise to do so. This should be recognised more in the social debate. So not all teachers feel as powerless and anxious as media reports would have us believe.

A close look at reality also makes clear that it is by no means the case that all classroom pupils have widely divergent opinions or clashing visions. In a recent newspaper article, the aforementioned Nieuwelink (2020) states that sometimes there are too few contrasts in classes rather than too many (see also Nieuwelink, 2016). In a class setting where pupils are often of the same opinion, it is more difficult to practise democratic conversation. And yet, with a view to society, this is extremely important, all the more so, because young people do not automatically learn the democratic perspective on their own. Research shows that pupils in pre-university education in particular (and especially boys) tend to emphasise one aspect of democracy, when discussing democratic issues. It seems that they reduce democratic decision-making to "the will of the majority" (Nieuwelink, ten Dam, Geijsel & Dekker, 2018). According to Nieuwelink (2020), such studies show that "young people do not naturally develop democratic views". All the more reason, therefore, to keep practising talking to each other, even in classes where opinions do not differ so much. Talking about subjects that can evoke strong emotions, can only succeed if pupils and teachers are already used to talking to each other. Therefore, it is my contention that more attention is needed to "ordinary conversations" and class room settings, which are inviting to share thoughts and experiences.

3. Emotional security

A valuable starting point for having personal conversations is having insights in what is on each other's mind. What keeps pupils busy? What do they worry about? What are their passions and dreams? If both teacher and pupils feel seen and acknowledged in these things, this contributes to mutual involvement and experienced safety. And that is a gain. First of all, because research shows that a democratic school climate, which stimulates open dialogue and critical debate, has a positive impact on interpersonal relations, offers opportunities to practice democracy and, in doing so, contributes to citizenship (Isac, Maslowski, Creemers & Van der Werf, 2014; Nieuwelink, Boogaard, Dijkstra, Kuiper & Ledoux, 2016). And secondly, because it is precisely this perceived security of both teacher and students that is sometimes under considerable pressure.

In view of guiding children and young people towards adulthood, it is very important

that schools can be places of emotional security. This security and mutual trust create the space in which pupils can further develop themselves. However, in our diverse society, it is inevitable that this development will also be accompanied by experiences of being challenged, stimulated and perhaps also hurt. If there is a basis of security, this need not necessarily be harmful. Arao and Clemens (2013), as well as Cook-Sather (2016), distinguish safe spaces from brave spaces. Safe spaces stand for spaces in which pupils are safe, a space in which they do not run the risk of being hurt or damaged. Brave spaces stand for spaces in which pupils are challenged to be "brave", because there is a definite risk of being hurt or damaged by what others say and think. Ideally, safe space and brave space are kept together[3]. Pupils dare to enter the safe space and expose themselves to points of view and opinions with which they do not agree and which may also touch and hurt them, if at the same time they know that this space is also a safe space, where they feel seen and acknowledged. Skeie rightly states that "'Safe' is not suggested to provide a haven from controversy." (Skeie, 2018, p. 396). The combination of safety and bravery offers a powerful basis for learning more about and practising being a citizen in a democratic society, in the context of education. Also, Jackson (2014) points out that "safe space" is not without risks. Therefore, the role of the teacher is very important: "All classroom interaction involves some degree of risk, especially when controversial issues are discussed and different claims to truth are made. This can be minimized by increased teacher awareness of power relations within classes, knowledge of the background of students (...)." (Jackson, 2014, p. 57). As stated above, in my view, it can be helpful to start "risky classroom interaction" rather small, by exchanging what concerns you in everyday life. From that exchange, the more existential layer can be tapped into.

4. (Lack of) meaning making

Generally speaking, in our time, it is not easy, especially for young people, to learn to relate to "life". Modern man himself has the task of giving meaning to his existence (Taylor, 1989). The source of meaning must increasingly be sought in one's own inner self. This places great emphasis on authenticity and "being true to yourself". In many areas (education, work, relationships, hobbies, etc.) young people not only have the space, but also the duty to make authentic choices (see also Van Deursen-Vreeburg, 2019). Referring to this notion of living in a world with multiple options, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) introduced the powerful term *Homo optionis*. More and more people realise that there is a downside to this emphasis on authenticity. The freedom to fully shape one's own life and set one's own course in all domains of life, turns out to be less attractive than it seems. There are serious indications (like the high number of loneliness and depression amongst youngsters) that youngsters have

3 Iversen (2019) points out that there are three arguments against using the term "safe space": It is ambiguous, politicised and promises more than it can deliver. On the basis of his PhD study, he coined the term "community of disagreement", which he defines as "a group with identity claims, consisting of people with different opinions, who find themselves engaged in a common process, in order to solve shared problems of challenges." (p. 324) In doing so, he as well underlines, although using different wordings, the importance of keeping together both safety and bravery in education.

difficulty answering existential questions and find it difficult to positively contribute to the world around them (Stevens et al, 2018).

For the Dutch context, the disadvantages of being a *homo optionis* are clearly depicted in the reports on mental health of youngsters by the Dutch institute for public health and environment (RIVM) published in 2018 and 2019; these reports show, on the basis of several studies, that the mental pressure on young people (both secondary school pupils and students in vocational and higher education) is increasing. Young people experience a lot of pressure to perform and meet the expectations of society. Increasingly, they experience stress and symptoms of burn out. Among the factors impacting mental health depicted in the 2019 report, are "performance pressure" and "choice stress".

The RIVM 2020 report in this series on public health shows that, as a result of Covid-19 and all the measurements needed to overcome this virus, put an additional pressure on the mental health of youngsters and young adults, in particular. One striking finding is that more youngsters indicate to suffer from loneliness. The long-term effects of the Covid-19 crisis are still unknown, but from what is known we can conclude that there are serious reasons to pay particular attention to the question of how the mental health situation of youngsters can be stimulated. This urgency is underlined by, among others, Poppo (2020). In a recent volume on the rich heritage of the life and work of Janusz Korczak, she indicates that she, speaking from a US perspective, sees a lot of anguish in today's youth. Among the threats that youngsters nowadays experience, are mass shootings, terrorist threats, climate change, economic volatility and superbugs. As a result of both the national and global vulnerability, "for many children and young adults there is a profound hopelessness relative to the future" (p. 218). Poppa relates this hopelessness to lack of meaning: "At a time when there are few answers and much angst, we are faced with a generation looking for meaning" (p. 224). In line with Tillich (1957) and more recent findings as described by e.g., Mascaro and Rosen (2005), Poppa stresses the role of existential meaning in the enhancement of hope and prevention of depressive symptoms. With reference to the live and work of Janusz Korczak, who worked with orphanage children who were also full of anguish and despair, Poppa stresses the transformative power of agency and compassion, as these can raise hope. Korczak helped youth gain meaning through service, relationship and community. However, the most important thing he gave to youngsters was "longing for a better life'". When the orphans were old enough, as young adults, to leave the orphanage, Korczak gave them a letter in which he expressed his deepest wishes for the them. I quote from his letter at length here, because it is so powerful and really gives us something to reflect on, regarding the needs of nowadays youngsters as well:

"I cannot give you God, for you must find Him in quiet contemplation. In your soul. I cannot give you a Homeland, for you must find it in your own heart. I cannot give you love of Man, for there is no love without forgiveness, and forgiving is something everyone must learn to do on his own. I can give you but one thing only – A longing for a better life, a life of truth and justice; even though it may not exist now, it may come tomorrow. Perhaps this longing will lead you to God, Homeland and Love." (Korczak, 1999, p. 144).

As Poppa explains, Korczak maintains the opportunity for faith, or more broadly "worldview", whilst the meaning he emphasizes the most is the longing for a better life, a life of truth and justice. Poppa rightly underlines that Korczak's message to the youngsters encourages agency: "It speaks primarily to how we are called to act in the world. It provides meaning that guides action." (Poppa, 2020, p. 224). Generally speaking, a sense of agency is very important, when it comes to dealing with difficult situations amongst which stress and negative thoughts. On the basis of several studies, amongst which Stevens et al. (2018), the 2019 RIVM report gives a short overview of protective factors, which can reduce the negative effects of pressure and stress. A distinction is made between individual and environmental factors. Among the individual factors are "high self-esteem", the ability to generate positive emotions and social-emotional skills. Among the environmental factors are not only a positive, caring family situation, but also a positive school climate and good quality of social relationships (RIVM, 2019). As a positive school climate doesn't only contribute to citizenship education (as explained above), but also to mental well-being of youngsters, it's "double important" to take school climate into account, when focussing on the role of education, regarding existential questions of youngsters. While keeping that in mind, I will now delve further into the role of education, when it comes to existential questions and its relation to worldviews (both religious and non-religious).

5. Existential questions, worldviews and education

In order to elaborate on the possible contribution of education to existential questions of youngsters, first of all a further clarification of "existential questions" is needed. I, therefore, turn to the conceptual analysis of Van der Kooij, De Ruyter and Miedema (2016) on worldview[4] and its relation to existential questions. Existential questions are essential elements of worldview. Van der Kooij et al argue that "existential questions have a special status in people's lives. They reach a profound level, the essence of someone's life, and move beyond situations and actions in the here and now." (2016, p. 82). On the basis of their conceptual analysis of international academic literature about "worldview", Van der Kooij, De Ruyter and Miedema (2013) found that "existential questions" are part of almost all of the descriptions of "worldviews". They were also able to compile a list of existential questions a worldview deals with (2016, p. 82): ontological questions, cosmological questions, theological questions, teleological questions, eschatological questions and ethical questions. Regarding the different "types" of existential questions, they explain that it is not necessary for a worldview to pay attention to all of these questions. A worldview can have answers

4 In line with, amongst others, Van der Kooij et al (2016) and Vroom (2006), I understand worldview as a broader term than religion. Religions are a subclass of the concept "worldview". Religions acknowledge the presence of transcendence while this is not necessary a characteristic of "worldview" (Van der Kooij et al, 2016, p. 212). Elsewhere (e.g., Bertram-Troost, De Roos & Miedema, 2006), I used a stipulative definition of worldview as "the way one looks at life". The starting point is that everyone has a worldview. The importance of using a broad definition in a pluralistic world, especially when it comes to educating the "increasing group of people who define themselves as 'non-religious' ('nones') [...]" is recently stressed by, amongst others, Bråten (2021, p. 2).

to some questions, reflect on others, without paying attention to others. “However, to be able to say that someone has a worldview, (s)he should at least have (tentative) answers to the first, fourth and sixth question” (p. 82). So, to say that someone has a worldview, tentative answers to at least ontological questions, teleological questions and ethical questions are needed. Van der Kooij and others (2016) found, on the basis of their extensive literature study, two types of ontological questions: “The first focuses on the nature of existence: Why is there something rather than nothing?” (p. 82). “The second type of ontological questions focuses on the nature of human being: What is a human being? Is human nature good or bad?” (p. 82). Teleological questions can also be distinguished in two types. “The first focuses on the meaning and purpose of the universe and human beings. [...] The second focuses on the meaning in life.” (p. 82). And, lastly, ethical questions have to do with good and bad, right and wrong, for example “What makes a life a good life to live?” (p. 82).

In his relevant contribution “Why should Religious Education include exploration of existential questions”, Skeie (2018) also elaborates on what existential questions are and how they can be described. Skeie uses a bottom-up approach to develop a working definition of existential questions, that can be operationalized across school subjects (p. 393). He elaborates on the work of Zetterqvist (2009a, 2009b in Skeie, 2018), who states that both a functional and a substantial definition of “existential questions” are insufficient if left alone. She proposes that both the person asking questions, which (s)he finds to be urgent and the context in which this is done, should be considered. So, for “a question to be understood as a ‘life-question’, you need somebody who asks about something she/he finds to be urgent, a distinct question has to be formulated, and this question has to be directed towards a phenomenon in the world.” (Skeie, 2018, p. 394). In line with Zetterqvist, Skeie takes “life question” – seen as equivalent of existential question – as “a question about life that is of importance to a particular person in a particular situation”. Skeie sees this definition as a way of justifying that there should be place for exploration of life-questions in religious education and possibly in other school subjects as well (p. 394). This leads us back directly to our key theme: the room for existential questions in citizenship education.

Possible answers to existential questions can be found in a variety of worldviews. In our present society people adhere to a variety of worldviews. In general, the importance of organized worldview is diminishing (CBS, 2020). More and more people, both adults and youngsters, are – as *homo optionii* – left to themselves regarding existential questions. Nowadays, both in public and denominational schools we find a range of organized and personal worldviews[5] (amongst which religious ones) amongst students, staff and parents (e.g., Bertram-Troost, 2006 and Miedema, Bertram-Troost and Veugelers, 2013). The accompanying presence of value differences – between teacher and pupils, pupils amongst each other and teachers amongst each other – appears to

5 This distinction is made by Van der Kooij et al (2016). In short: Organized worldviews are more or less established systems with a group of believers, which prescribe answers to existential questions. Personal worldviews are individuals’ views on life and humanity, consisting of (sometimes tentative) answers to existential questions. Personal worldviews can be based on organized worldviews (amongst which religions), but this is not necessary.

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cultivate uncertainty and tensions (e.g., Bertram-Troost, Versteegt, Van der Kooij, Van Nes & Miedema, 2015, 2018; Verkuyten & Thijs, 2009).

Gustavson (2018) indicates that, on the basis of several studies, there are reasons to believe that it is not altogether easy for young people to present their own standpoint in public, especially not in relation to existential questions or worldviews. The classroom is not always the "safe space", where teachers and students show each other interest and respect (p. 223). Teachers either feel incapable or are reluctant to explicitly address the existential questions of students. In our qualitative study on teachers working in Dutch Christian schools for education (Bertram-Troost et al, 2015), most of the teachers have a Christian background, but now relate to Christianity in different ways (from self-declared "atheist", to liberal or strict believer). Among the given reasons to express aspects of their worldview in school are: "Establishing a personal relationship with pupils", "Giving pupils examples on how to think and act as Christian", "Sharing religious values by being an example", "Giving pupils the opportunity to familiarize themselves with religious people". We distinguished two important reasons why teachers decide not to express one's own worldview at school. First of all, teachers think it is too private to share this with pupils. They don't see it as part of their profession to share their thoughts about life with pupils. They don't want to get too personal with pupils, sometimes also because of self-protection. Another reason is that teachers don't want to burden their pupils with their own doubts and questions. In our study, we noticed that quite some teachers had difficulties deciding on what to discuss with pupils and what to keep private, especially if their views differ from the formal identity, vision and mission of the school. The same study also revealed that quite some teachers experience dilemma's, when it comes to the way they personally relate to the formal (religious) identity of the school and the expectations of school leaders, colleagues and parents which might come with that. In general, we concluded that many teachers find it very difficult to have an open conversation with colleagues (and/or school board) on sensitive issues, like views on religion and/or sexuality and how to perceive and deal with (religious) diversity. As a result, at many of the participating schools there is a so-called "culture of silence". Although more research is needed, to investigate whether this culture of silence can also be found at public schools and school of other (religious) denominations, we do have indications that the challenge to openly talk about each other's views and professional and personal commitments in a non-judgmental way seems to be widely experienced. As a result, existential questions may be too easily neglected in educational programs that aim for democratic citizenship. In my view, this is a missed opportunity. Both with an eye on individual youngsters and society as a whole.

In line with others, amongst which Biesta (e.g., 2010, 2017), Iam convinced that schools can and should play a valuable role, when it comes to helping pupils finding their ways in life. In the Dutch Education Council's report Onderwijs Vormt (*Education Forms*) (2011), two ways in which schools can contribute are distinguished, both in terms of content and process: content-wise, by offering pupils knowledge about various (worldview) traditions and the moral and existential insights that exist in these traditions as traditions, history and community are needed to help young people shape their own moral identity. Secondly, process-wise, by inviting young people, in an open dialogue, to

discover for themselves what can be meaningful for them and how they want to relate to the traditions offered. Conversations in the classroom, about what students are essentially concerned with and how they themselves want to (learn to) relate to various traditions, can then be personally formative for the students and at the same time contribute to their citizenship skills. This benefits both the individual pupil and society.

Poppa (2020), inspired by the examples described by Korczak, is convinced of the impact teachers can have in classrooms: "As teachers, we can work to create classrooms where students discover the power they have to live in functional communities and reach beyond those communities to impact the greater good. Acting for the good is meaningful. Meaning pushes back despair. The retreat of despair makes room for light. Our youth deserve to be in the light so they can work to build a better tomorrow." (p. 226). Also, Gustavson (2018) points to the role of teachers in creating a positive, safe classroom climate. In her view, one way to create this climate is to use different types of stories in education. This could move the focus away from the young people themselves and instead focus on questions related to their lives. For example, one can use music and lyrics, fiction, TV-series or movies." (p. 223). Also, fictive stories can be used, as they have the potential to "create spaces wherein students are given the possibility to express their own life-questions in the shape of fictive characters." (p. 223).

As teachers are, on the one hand, very important in creating safe and brave classroom climates and play a double role (content wise and process wise) in helping pupils finding their ways in life, but, on the other hand, experience challenges here as well (possibly also in relation to their own existential needs), itis my contention that teachers need to be offered more support. Even experienced teachers are now facing challenges in society and the classroom, that they have never faced before. Therefore, it is very important that sources (time and money) are made available for training and support of teachers. In the final section I will, before coming to a conclusion, explicitly relate the religious dimension (including a focus on existential questions) of living (and learning to live) in a diverse society to citizenship education.

6. Religious citizenship education

If we relate the discussed themes (diversity, citizenship education, *homo optionis*, existential questions, worldviews), it is relevant to explore how these "ingredients" can come together in education. Earlier, the term "religious citizenship education" had been coined (Miedema & Bertram-Troost, 2008, see also Miedema & Ter Avest, 2011 for further elaborations). Miedema and myself argued that "democratic citizenship and religious education are going quite well together if an adequate pedagogical stance on religious education is combined with a fruitful political view in which religion could be an integral part of the intermediate and the public domain." (Miedema & Bertram-Troost, 2008, p. 131). In doing so, we take a maximal interpretation of citizenship education[6] (see McLaughlin, 1992) and a thick description of religious/worldview education (see also Miedema, 2013). Encounter and dialogue are very important in religious citizenship

6 This position, a "thick notion" of citizenship, was affirmed by others from different national contexts, amongst which Poulter (2016).

education, as means by which pupils "learn to live together while being different from a social, cultural, ethnic and religious or worldview background" (Miedema, 2013, p. 364). As explained above, it is my contention that explicit attention to existential questions of both students and teachers can and should be included in this encounter and dialogue. It is important, both with an eye on personal wellbeing and society as a whole, to include attention to existential questions in (religious) citizenship education.

I agree with Skeie (2018) that attention to existential questions should not necessarily be limited to one particular school subject, but that they also "need a place where they are explored in more depth" (p. 394). With Skeie, Iam of the opinion that the subject which we now mainly know as Religious Education can be such a place. RE teachers are experts in the area of existential questions and the way in which various traditions have formulated answers over time. From their background in theology and religious studies, they are also aware of the specific sensitivities that can be involved religious diversity. And (on the basis of their education and training) they can be expected to also have knowledge and experience about how to discuss this in a prudent way in the classroom.

"Religious citizenship education" should, of course, not be limited to denominational (religious) education (e.g., Miedema & Bertram-Troost, 2008; Bakker & Heijstek-Hofman, 2019). The need to be supported in developing one's own life orientation (Van der Zande, 2018, 2019) and learning how to relate to others applies to all pupils. From that perspective, it is promising that, in the Dutch context, various profile organisations from both public and denominational education in the Netherlands have been working together for some time now, within the Expertise Centre for Worldview and Religion in Secondary Education (*LERVO*) (see e.g., Davidsen, 2020). Over and above the interests of the profile organisations and (religious) traditions, a core curriculum for worldview/religion is being developed, that can be used at all secondary schools in the Netherlands[7]. An important goal of the curriculum is to have the current education fit in even better with the religious diverse society. Acquiring competences that allow pupils to take responsibility as citizens in a democratic society – including learning to enter into a respectful dialogue with those who think differently – is an explicit part of this. Initiatives like these have, in my view, all the ingredients to be of great significance in our religiously diverse society.

7. Conclusion

Both with an eye on mental wellbeing of pupils and their will and competence to contribute to a better society for all, it is my contention that attention to existential needs of youngsters, including the religious dimension, should be included in (religious) citizenship education. With a view to guiding children and young people towards

7 So far, a national curriculum for Religious Education is lacking in the Netherlands. There are no official national regulations for RE. There is not a commonly accepted view on RE as a subject in education and there is no consensus on the content of the subject (Bertram-Troost and Visser, 2019). RE isn't a compulsory exam subject. As a result, RE is, on a national level, a less well-developed school subject. Besides that, RE is currently hardly offered at public secondary schools. From that perspective *Lervo* is a promising initiative.

adulthood, it is very important that schools can be places of emotional security. This starts with “ordinary conversations” and class room settings which are inviting to share thoughts and experiences. A positive, safe school climate in which the variety of pupils’ voices can really be heard and in which pupils are stimulated to “find their own voice” (see Biesta, 2006) is of great importance. As teachers do have a substantial role here, there existential needs should also be taken into account.

The initial framework, as set out in this article, can serve as a background to further investigate the relations between “existential questions of youngsters”, “worldview diversity”, “citizenship education”, “the role of the teacher” and the “civic sense” of pupils. Concrete insights into how attention to the existential dimension of human being, including worldview and/or religion, can be adequately integrated in (citizenship) education, can offer fruitful perspectives and recommendations for concrete school practices, which in the long term hopefully contribute to enhance peaceful coexistence.

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