

THEOLOGY IN THE CLASSROOM: HOW TENSIONS HELP TEACHERS REFORM THEIR IDEAS ON EDUCATION

Abraham de Muynck

Theological University of Apeldoorn

Korespondensi: ademuyneck@tua.nl

ABSTRACT: Christian teachers do not naturally connect theology with their professional practice. This article explores the reasons for this, which all have to do with how theory functions in teaching. Theory will mainly come into focus when practical problems arise, but theological concepts are not the first to come into view. The article states that tensions that teachers experience in practice are triggers for theological reflection. This is in coherence with the call for Christians to test and discern what is the will of God (Rom. 12:2). Teachers are supposed to be able to reflect on three dimensions where tensions can be recognized. The first is the response to general cultural ideas. The second is the call for a collective theological vision in school teams. Finally, existential tensions find solutions in theological language. Prospective Christian teachers should have training in to reflect on those three levels.

KEYWORDS: *pedagogy; worldview; classroom practices; reflection.*

ABSTRAK: Guru-guru kristen biasanya tidak mengaitkan teologi dengan praktek profesional mereka. Artikel ini mengeksplorasi alasan-alasannya, dimana semuanya terkait dengan bagaimana teori berfungsi di dalam kegiatan mengajar. Teori biasanya mulai diperhatikan ketika persoalan-persoalan praktis timbul, tetapi konsep-konsep teologi bukanlah hal pertama yang diperhatikan. Artikel ini menyatakan bahwa ketegangan-ketegangan yang dialami para guru di praktek merupakan pemicu-pemicu untuk refleksi teologis. Hal ini sejalan dengan panggilan bagi orang kristen untuk menguji dan mengetahui kehendak Allah (Rom. 12:2). Para guru sudah seharusnya mampu merefleksikan akan tiga dimensi dimana ketegangan-ketegangan dapat dikenali. Pertama, respons terhadap ide-ide kebudayaan umum.

Kedua, panggilan untuk visi teologis bersama di dalam tim sekolah. Terakhir, ketegangan-ketegangan eksistensial mencari solusi-solusinya di dalam bahasa teologis. Rekrutan para guru kristen harus dilatih untuk merefleksikan tiga tingkatan tersebut.

KATA KUNCI: *pedagogi; wawasan dunia; praktek dalam kelas; refleksi.*

Introduction¹

Some time ago, I asked student teachers to conduct research on the place of forgiveness in elementary schools.² This topic is eminently theological in nature. Jesus exhorts people to forgive infinitely—seventy times seven times (Matt. 18:22). When the Lord appears after the resurrection and breathes the Spirit into his followers, Christ gives them the authority to forgive. It is a core moment of discipleship. In Reformed theology, forgiveness of sins through the work of Christ is central. Forgiveness is also a pedagogical issue. Children can have quarrels in which harm is done to peers. A teacher may unfairly lash out at a child. In those situations, something must be resolved. The urgent question appears: Is there such a thing as a practice of forgiveness in schools? What reveals the relationship between theology and pedagogy on this topic?

When the students conducted interviews with teachers in several Christian schools, the teachers initially expressed surprise that the students were researching forgiveness. They thought it was an important subject but did not know how to relate it to everyday practice. After further questioning, the teachers were able to formulate fairly clear conceptions of how forgiveness should function. They mainly spoke about this in the form of wishful thinking, however, and they could give few practical examples from their teaching practice. Only on further questioning about conflict situations did it appear that there were practices for resolving disagreements in the classroom that could be described with the word “forgiveness.”

Two things can be deduced from the research outcomes that are important for understanding the relationship between theology and pedagogy. First, classroom professionals do not naturally make a connection between

¹ A Dutch version of this article can be found in *Mens worden. Over de relatie tussen theologie en pedagogiek* [Becoming a human being. About the relationship between theology and pedagogy], ed. Wolter Huttinga and Roel Kuiper (Amsterdam: Buijten en Schipperheijn, 2021).

² Within a research project at Driestar Christian University and the Theological University of Apeldoorn. Results of this project are summarized in H. van der Walt, A. de Muijnck, N. Broer, C. Wolluter, and F. Potgieter, “The Need for and Possibility of a Christian Forgiveness Education in Schools,” *Journal of Research on Christian Education* 27 (2018): 101–108; and A. de Muijnck, “Vergeving: een kwestie van opvoeding?” [Forgiveness: A matter of education?], in *Vergeving. Verkenningen van een delicaat thema* [Forgiveness: Explorations of a delicate theme], ed. E. Peels (Apeldoorn: Theologische Universiteit, 2020), 109–120.

theological visions and pedagogical action. Second, theological images do appear to be present in professional practice, but tend to remain dormant. They are, however, actualized the moment critical professional situations are questioned.

In this article, I examine how the relationship between theology and pedagogy functions in the workplace. How does theology appear to the pedagogical practitioner in the classroom? Are theology and pedagogy two domains that are arguably related in the experience of professionals? If so, how? Or, if not or only partially, what is the reason for that? And do these questions have anything to do with Reformed theology? I begin with some reflections on the relationship between theory and practice. From there, I analyze the subject matter using different theoretical perspectives. Next, I address different types of tensions that teaching professionals experience. Finally, I will indicate that the relationship between theology and pedagogy needs reflection on three levels. When teachers are more aware of this relationship they will be able to give spirituality a natural place in their daily work. In addition to better work satisfaction, it will make them more able to have the conversation with believing colleagues.

The Relationship between Conceptual Insights and Action

A first clarification can be made by conceiving the issue as a question of the relationship between theory and a professional practice. It is appropriate to distinguish between different types of theories, of which there are three primary examples: everyday, reflexive, and object. *Everyday theories* are “unelaborated, more or less implicit theories that offer the practitioner an orientation during his or her daily actions.”³ Using the example of forgiveness, teachers have everyday theories of how to deal with conflict. For example, a conflict is not resolved until “sorry” has been said and hands have been shaken. *Reflected theories* consist of “an explicitly formulated set of rules that are constitutive of the professional practitioner’s actions.”⁴ On the subject of forgiveness, one might imagine a manual for forgiveness education in which findings from research are translated into a coherent set of guidelines.⁵ *Object theories* are partial theories that one can use in making one’s own judgments, for example, theories about the developmental stages of children. Theological object theories also come into play here, such as a

³ E. T. Alii, *Godsdienstpedagogiek. Dimensies en spanningsvelden* [Religious education: Dimensions and fields of tension] (Zoetermeer, 2009), 24, my translation.

⁴ Alii, *Godsdienstpedagogiek*, 24.

⁵ R. D. Enright and R. P. Fitzgibbons, *Helping Clients Forgive: An Empirical Guide for Resolving Anger and Restoring Hope* (Washington: APA Books, 2000).

biblically-theologically anchored doctrine regarding guilt and reconciliation.

What is discussed in this chapter, then, concerns the everyday theological theories used by teachers, also called “operant theology” within the discipline of practical theology.⁶ Such a theory is embodied in the actions of the professional. The other types of theories can be used within these everyday theories. In the forgiveness example, a set of rules about learning forgiveness (reflected theory) could be applied to conflict management. And thinking about guilt and reconciliation (object theory) plays a role in the background of the religious frame of reference of teachers, who may have internalized this framework during their religious upbringing or catechesis hours in church. Teachers may not be aware of this background when dealing with pupils’ quarrels, but it nevertheless determines their way of thinking. If they are asked why they acted as they did, they will be able to disclose the hidden framework.

Currently, an extensive research tradition about teachers’ everyday theories is being established, which provides yet another view of the relationship between theory and practice.⁷ In that research, Donald Schön’s work on the reflective practitioner is often referred to.⁸ Those who practice a profession are not so much appliers of manuals, but rather creative craftspeople who conduct new experiments in difficult situations.⁹ When they do so, they as professionals relate their own acquired experiential knowledge to the rules valid in the profession and then search for new information that can help them carry out an experiment. Pedagogical practitioners can also use theological knowledge in everyday experimentation. If there is conflict in the classroom, the teacher might bring to mind his theological ideas about guilt and reconciliation. The personal theory about this is part of the so-called *subjective theory of education*, the body of thought in which commonly held cultural images come together with educational science and

⁶ H. Cameron et al., *Talking about God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2010). Hannes van der Walt distinguishes three relationships that can be made between pedagogy and theology: (a) Theology as an independent discipline; (b) a Christian or biblical theoretical pedagogy; and (c) a “personal ‘theology’, an informal, pre-scientific and pre-theoretical aspect of every person’s personal and social life and world view.” H. Van der Walt, “The Possible Impact of Reformed Theology on Education as a Science, with Special Reference to the Situation in South Africa (1940–),” *In die Skriflig* 54 (2020), 4.

⁷ The Dutch scholar Fred J. Korthagen has done significant work on this subject. See, for example, F. A. J. Korthagen (ed.), *Linking Practice and Theory: The Pedagogy of Realistic Teacher Education* (Mahwah NJ/London: Routledge, 2001).

⁸ D. A. Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner. How Professionals Think in Action* (New York: Basic Books, 1983); D. A. Schön, *Educating the Reflective Practitioner: Toward a New Design for Teaching and Learning in the Professions* (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, 1987).

⁹ For more about craftsmanship, see Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

personal biography.¹⁰ For such a subjective theory to function in everyday work, it is obvious that one must have an arsenal of theological sources at one's disposal. This can be assumed in teachers who profess to be Christians. For them, the subjective theory overlaps strongly with the operant theology mentioned above. They are inspired by theological sources. Other, non-Christian teachers will be influenced by other ideological sources. No matter how one is socialized, one always carries notions about humanity and the world, even if they are not explicitly theologically or philosophically rooted. Yet, it is not at all obvious that Christian teachers consciously use theological sources in their professional practice. There are at least two reasons for this.

Professionals Are Stowaways

First, there is not a rich tradition in which the usefulness of theology is recognized in this way. For example, theology can speak about God and humankind without directly linking these to a reflection on professional practice. It is sometimes easier and safer to talk about God and humankind in abstract terms and remain at a more or less artificial distance than to talk about the concrete human being one encounters or the person one's self is in flesh and blood. Perhaps this has to do with the relative inscrutability of human beings themselves. "Man is for himself an obscure text," says Heschel,¹¹ and this also applies to teachers. The attempt to unravel the actually experienced images of the human person and the tensions therein is perilous. "Man," says the Dutch Reformed theologian Noordmans, "can be found in zoology and morality textbooks. But the sinner does not show himself so openly in the field. He conceals himself...in the folds of the field."¹² It may therefore be that one thinks theologically about humanity without allowing for an encounter with concrete being itself. A strong separation between theological doctrine and concrete pedagogical practice could be a defense mechanism to remain unnoticed in the folds of the field. Thus, establishing a great separation between object and subject, between theory

¹⁰ G. Kelchtermans, "Who I Am in How I Teach Is the Message: Self-understanding, Vulnerability and Reflection," *Teachers and Teaching* 15, no. 2 (2009): 257–272, DOI: 10.1080/13540600902875332.

¹¹ A. J. Heschel, *Wie is de mens?* [Who is the human being?] (Baarn: Ten Have, 1992), 20.

¹² O. Noordmans, *Herschepping* [Recreation] (Amsterdam: Holland, 1956), 51. He refers to an otherwise undeclared French thinker: "As a famous French preacher expressed it...," with the editor of the *Collected Works* (Kampen: Kok, 1979, p. 235) noting, "Bossuet?" Elsewhere, too, Noordmans is critical of anthropology. According to Noordmans, no separate doctrine is needed in what he calls pastoral dogmatics: "We need not invite it to feel its worth." Noordmans, *Herschepping*, 63. Fragments of the doctrine of man, according to Noordmans, should always be related to the doctrine of God. Therefore, preferably, as with Calvin, humankind is spoken of in the doctrine of the Father, the doctrine of the Son, and the doctrine of the Holy Spirit.

and practice, has a self-protective function. Human beings are apparently capable of creating a split between their ideals and the practice in which they stand. I will return to this later in the article because in this observation lies not only the problem but also the solution.

But that is far from saying everything. There is something else at play. According to Clandinin and Connelly, teachers are bearers of three kinds of stories: *sacred*, *secret*, and *cover*.¹³ *Sacred stories* are about things that are precious and sacred to people. They provide an embodied theology. For example, a teacher may have a deep desire in his heart that all the children in the classroom should come personally to confess Christ as Lord. A second teacher may go through fire for a student because she has a deep conviction that she must be merciful to this individual child. Another applies very strict rules based on the conviction that children simply do not do the right thing by themselves. A *secret story* is known only to the person. The individual may be aware of it but will not openly discuss it in a professional context. It may be about fear, pride, or shame, things that the individual has to deal with but which are usually shared only with intimate friends. Contrarily, a *cover story* is public; it is the story that a person wants to show to the outside world. People need such stories to survive. A cover story allows individuals to emerge in an acceptable and appropriate way in a given context.

The three types of stories are closely related. In the classroom, theology will be expressed through sacred story. However, the story told about it is always a variation based on what is important in the context. Teachers do not reveal all of what is going on inside them (the secret story), and what they do reveal, they make appropriate for the context (the cover story). Thus, the idea that theological notions do not actively correspond one-to-one with teachers' actions exists not only because they are trying to guarantee their own security, as we saw in the previous section, but because the notions are also situationally determined. The context determines which theological notions are articulated outwardly and which are not.

The Content Attracts Most Attention

The second reason that theology and pedagogy are not easily linked in the classroom is that Christian education is mostly thought of as transferring educational content. Education is often understood in terms of a teacher and pupils working their way together through textbooks. Theology in education, then, has to do with the content of the teaching material, but not so

¹³ D. J. Clandinin and F.M. Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*, ed. F. M. Connelly (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000).

much with the pedagogy. In one study with Christian teachers using an open questionnaire (N=107), teachers did indicate relationships between faith and ideal aims and between faith and content ideals, but not with respect to working ideals.¹⁴ *Ideal aims* involve what one intends to do with education. *Content ideals* relate to what one wants to convey. The difference between aims and content did not seem to be relevant in the eyes of teachers. They tended not to differentiate the aim ideal (e.g., I would like the students to become loving Christians) from the content ideal (e.g., I would like to teach them something about the God of the Bible). Ideals that concerned their way of working (*working ideals*) were related to pedagogical actions in which the teacher appeared as a human being (think, for example, how one tells a Bible story or how one corrects a pupil) but were not then related to faith.

A similar pattern was revealed in a survey of teachers in American Christian higher education (N=2,309). Seventy-nine percent of the teachers felt that their theological tradition influenced their foundations, worldview, or the larger story they conveyed. Forty-eight percent felt that their aims were also influenced by their theological tradition (with 43 percent indicating that they saw no relationship there at all). Forty percent of those surveyed saw the influence of theology on their way of working.¹⁵ Thus, the pattern from these studies indicates that teachers, in their thinking about education, attribute influence to theology in one particular direction, namely, toward the content of the subject. To a lesser extent, this happens with respect to the aims of their subject. And even significantly less acknowledgement is given to the relationship between theology and the pedagogical action itself. Thus, there is no natural tendency among Christian teachers, at least as far as was revealed in these studies, to relate theological convictions to their own pedagogical actions.

Convictions and Direct Actions

We have seen so far that there are several potential connections between theological images and pedagogical practice. We noted that both object theories and reflexive theories can be used in practice. Next, we saw that there are reasons why theological beliefs are often not operational: there is a need for self-protection, and people think of theology in terms of curriculum content and not in terms of pedagogical action. To understand these mechanisms a little further, we can look at the operative power of beliefs. A group of

¹⁴ L. Boele-de Bruin and A. de Muynck, "Exploring the Professional Ideals of Christian Teachers from Conservative Christian Schools in the Netherlands," *Journal of Christianity & Education* 22 (2018): 8–22.

¹⁵ N. F. Alleman, P. L. Glazer, and D. S. Guthrie, "The Integration of Christian Theological Traditions into the Classroom: A Survey of CCCU Faculty," *Christian Scholars Review* 45 (2016): 103–124.

German researchers has explained the relationship between religious and professional beliefs as a relatively inextricable dialogue between different beliefs in which levels of reflection can be identified.¹⁶ Theological beliefs, like all other types of beliefs, can be seen as *filters*.¹⁷ A teacher standing in front of the classroom has to filter the multitude of information in a certain way. Beliefs help to choose between what one considers relevant and what one does not. If beliefs prescribe in a certain way that something is important, one will also perceive it more easily and will act accordingly. If attention is paid in teacher training to the concept of children's rights using Janus Korczak's thinking, teachers may well use this concept to look at students in their classrooms, assuming that the concept fits with their preexisting beliefs (after all, if it does not, they can filter out that belief as well). Thus, events and information are interpreted on the basis of beliefs. Subsequently, the beliefs will also function as a *framework of interpretation* for solving problems. With the aid of convictions, one can give words to new problems or tasks one encounters and, from there, think toward a certain solution. Think here of what was indicated above about the craft of responding to the problems one encounters. Because of their frame of interpretation, teachers have preferences for certain types of actions. Finally, the beliefs have a *guiding* function. This concerns the immediate behavior that is guided by the beliefs without one's being aware of it. Beliefs, therefore, without a teacher reflecting on them, affect the goals a teacher sets, the energy a teacher gives to pursuing them, and the feelings a teacher has about them.

If the three functions of filtering, interpreting, and guiding are also related to religious beliefs, we can draw a few consequences. First, with regard to the filtering function, it becomes clear that theological beliefs guide the views of students. Teachers with a Reformed theological background can stress that "these children are unique persons created by God" or "these children are sinners." Thus, when theological concepts are vague, not thought through, or when there is no theological vocabulary to make theological sense of practice, little will be filtered through theology. Educators will then, in other words, be theologizing in the classroom in a shabby way.

Second, as explained in the introduction, theological jargon is not prioritized among teachers for problem solving. This undoubtedly has to

¹⁶ N. Häusler, M. L. Pirner, A. Scheunpflug, and S. Kröner, "Religious and Professional Beliefs of Schoolteachers. A Literature Review of Empirical Research," *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research* 18 (2019), 24–41.

¹⁷ In this section, I follow H. Fives and M. Buehl, "Spring Cleaning for the Messy Construct of Teachers' Beliefs: What Are They? Which Have Been Examined? What Can They Tell Us?" in *APA Educational Psychology Handbook: Vol. 2. Individual Differences and Cultural and Contextual Factors*, ed. K. R. Harris, S. Graham, and T. Urdan (Washington DC: American Psychological Association, 2012), 471–499.

do with professional socialization in teacher training and teaching practice. One needs to go through a learning process in which interpreting from theological concepts is practiced. Finally, regarding the guiding function, it was noted that theological baggage can also steer unintentionally. Biographically, Christian teachers have received all sorts of things that work between the lines but are not reflected upon. With this last observation, I am beginning to elaborate on tensions within the sets of beliefs of teachers.

To Be Human Means Living with Tensions

Beliefs are sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit, and sometimes unconscious. They are simply part of how one stands in life, the *Sitz im Leben*. One lives life but is often unaware of tensions within different domains. At the same time, it is precisely the tensions between the domains that professionals have to deal with. Conflicts in the classroom do happen. And it would be strange if a believing teacher were content to handle them according to an educational protocol without listening to the theological voice. That this is possible, or that the theological voice even contradicts a certain way of acting, has to do with the ability of people to live in the same situation with different and even contrasting perspectives. In psychology, we speak of a coping mechanism, usually understood as a conscious process of overcoming, minimizing, or enduring stress or conflict. People are capable of dealing with extremely stressful situations. This is true for children and adolescents. Consider, for example, children who grow up with violent parents. They manage to combine a negative image of their parents with a strong loyalty: "They did that to me, but they are still my father and mother." This also applies to educators. Think of the sexual abuse in Roman Catholic boarding schools. Apparently, clergymen were able to link a positive ambition (namely, to raise children and help them grow up) to abuse. The initially religiously motivated idea "I have a calling to raise this child" merges with a practice in which a child is used as an object. People are, to quote one of Kurzban's expressions, *consistently inconsistent*.¹⁸ Inconsistencies simultaneously contain a reason for why people tend to hide in the folds of the terrain. We are involved in mechanisms of violence for which we as humans are ashamed. They become part of the secret story. A coping mechanism has the character of—to stay close to the language of Noordmans—a "hiding mechanism." In the process, we discover that

¹⁸ Häusler et al., "Religious and Professional Beliefs," 27; An explanation about the often observed inconsistencies between convictions and behavior is given in: Fives and Buehl, "Spring Cleaning," 481. The expression is found in R. Kurzban, *Why Everyone (Else) is a Hypocrite: Evolution and the Modular Mind* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 4.

biblical anthropological notions such as human beings as the image bearers of God can be perverted just like that. This can happen individually, but also collectively. Jeremiah's expression "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" (Jer. 17:9) also applies to Christian professionals. Believers are not too good to live with distorted images of humankind. This implies a warning against the pretense of purely applying biblical theology to concrete action.

Tensions at Three Levels

It belongs to the core business of teachers to be able to deal with all kinds of contradictions and tensions. There are not only inner tensions in everyone's subjective educational theory. Consider, for example, the tension between directing and guiding, two pedagogical modes between which one must navigate. Or, to mention something completely different, the tension between one's own views and those of colleagues. There may also be tensions between successive events. Teaching can be fraught with contradictions. Within an hour, the same child may have empathically retold a Bible story and bullied a classmate. Teachers have their own coping mechanisms for dealing with all these types of tensions. Sometimes this occurs without much mental concern. But sometimes teachers are on edge. Depending on their personality, teachers then choose to flee, fight, or endure. That choice usually has to be made quickly. After all, teachers are constantly faced with the task of handling situations. They must do so immediately; there is little reflection time. In other words, teachers do not have time to hide in the folds of the field. In handling situations, their operant theology is revealed, and the contradictions therein are too. In this, individuals are fed by what they feel and think at the moment, the ideal images they have, and the style of solving they have learned. In this complexity, there is much more at play than theory. In the practical-pedagogical situation, however, teachers must be assigned the competence to theologize; that is, they should be able to interpret situations according to a theological filter. This is not a matter of linearly translating formal theology, but much more about enlarging the quick mental move that one accomplishes in the turbulence of the moment. Referring back to what has been said about the craftsman's process of problem solving, we can state that it is precisely the questions one is confronted with that offer the starting points for theologizing. Herein also lies the explanation for the phenomenon that teachers do not immediately know the answers when they are asked theological questions about a pedagogical issue (as in the research on forgiveness), but only gradually

construct a picture of that relationship during the conversations.¹⁹ When one connects theological concepts to practical issues, theology, Manfred Pirner believes, has a productive function: it enriches the way one looks at things. In addition, it has a preventive function. Theological vocabulary makes one resilient against naively accepting what is preached in the educational environment.²⁰ This means that theologizing will have to be promoted in the training and continuing education of Christian teachers. With a view to practice in Christian schools and teacher training programs, I will identify three types of tensions, each of which I will explain with a few examples.

Cultural Tensions

The first type concerns tensions between teachers' theological convictions and the social imaginaries in the prevailing culture.²¹ Theological and pedagogical motives interact and also develop in tandem with the dynamics of mainstream professional culture. Teachers of faith cannot act outside the major frameworks that are present in the surrounding culture. This is challenging. The human images that are currently communicated are strongly defined by deterministic jargon. Think of curriculum planning and action planning tools that suggest that students are predestined for a particular pathway and that the teacher can predictably and malleably work toward certain goals. Even if one is not convinced that a person is identical with his brain, within Christian education an expression such as "brain-friendly education" is used. Teachers, moreover, sometimes have no choice but to follow the protocols for learning and behavior that pose the least risk of derailment. Programmatic thinking, however, is in tension with a theological notion of vulnerability. Another example concerns the general feeling in our culture that children and young people should develop their ability to make autonomous choices. The image of human beings as those who must realize themselves (self-directed) is in tension with the love commandment that human beings are meant to love God and neighbor (other-directed). The tension is on edge when teachers explicitly refer to assumed human qualities, as in positive psychology, in which the core qualities or gifts of human beings are cultivated for the benefit of human well-being.

¹⁹ A. de Muynck, *Een goddelijk beroep. Spiritualiteit in de beroepspraktijk van leraren in het orthodox protestants christelijk basisonderwijs* [A godly vocation: Spirituality in the professional practice of orthodox protestant primary school teachers] (Heerenveen: Groen, 2008), 165.

²⁰ M. L. Pirner, "Religious Beliefs and Professional Beliefs of (Not Only Religious Education) Teachers: Research Findings on Their Relationship and Conclusions for Teacher Training," in *Religious and Values Education: Contextual Challenges*, ed. L. Francis and D. Lankshear (London: Peter Lang, 2019).

²¹ C. Taylor, *A Secular Age* (London: Harvard University Press, 2007). The concept "social imaginaries" is useful for describing the images that teachers unconsciously adhere to.

Work Theory Tensions

The second type concerns those tensions that relate directly to the work situation itself, in which both pedagogical and theological notions are intertwined. The tensions involved here determine the discussion of how education must be designed. They are not entirely separate from the above-mentioned tensions with culture, but the focus here is not so much on how one relates to the culture, but on what a team of educators considers good education. How do theology and pedagogy nurture each other when colleagues have to agree about the curriculum? The dynamics of the collective mix of theological and pedagogical images results in different cultures in Christian schools. For example, there may be discussion about the relationship between religious and non-religious educational goals (religious education versus teaching in science, languages, etc.). There is often a lack of clarity about how that relationship must be seen. For many Christian teachers, the religious goal is paramount, but a variety of other goals are also strived for: speaking foreign languages, knowledge, and understanding of economics, geography, and history. The conversation turns to the relationship between the two goals. Sometimes there is a tendency to fill in the other domains religiously as well, where there is a big difference in Christian teachers' convictions.²² However, it is also common to espouse a dualism between the different types of goals. The religious is articulated as a field that is entirely separate from the rest of education and formation. From a Reformed perspective, I prefer a holistic view in which every aspect of education is potentially seen in the light of the cross and resurrection of Christ. Tensions that occur not only regarding aims and content but also pedagogy have to be solved in the direction of His peace (Eph. 2:14).

Existential Tensions

Third, there are existential tensions. These are questions that are related to the profession, resulting from what one observes and experiences but which are not specifically focused on one's actions. They are therefore questions that play a role in the background and are raised in both the professional context and private life. For example, a teacher has concerns about evil and suffering. How does this interpret his own burnout? Or how does a teacher explain it when she sees that the atmosphere in the classroom is not improving? Why is she not able to stop the fights and agitation in the classroom? Another example concerns dealing with diversity. Teachers in

²² J. de Kock, "Educational Change and Christian Ideology: How Identity Shapes Educational Innovation," *Christian Higher Education* 8 (2009), 304–326.

Reformed education in the Dutch context differ in the degree to which they advocate openness to a diverse and plural society. The tension they try to resolve for themselves is how faith in Christ as the only way to life relates to being open to people with different beliefs.²³ These kinds of issues touch on professional identity. They show not only one's vocation and one's visions but also how one's ideals can come into conflict with practices in the course of one's career.

Levels of Reflection

What does all this say about the significance of theological views for educational practice? I agree with Manfred Pirner's idea that theologizing has a productive and preventive effect and should therefore be promoted on several fronts. Three levels can be thought of that parallel the levels in which tensions have been distinguished above: cultural-critical reflection, vision formation with colleagues, and individual reflection. The first level is primarily the task of administrators and opinion leaders and those who are engaged in educational philosophy. The second level is that of school colleagues and networks of teachers. They share similar practical experiences and with each other are able to bring the theological vocabulary into conversation with pedagogy in the classroom. They together have to follow Paul's admonition in Romans 12:2: "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing, and perfect will." The third is the level of the individual professional. Teachers of faith can be expected to consider their professional work theologically as well. This individual process may be influenced by what work is being done by others at the first level. It may also occur at the second level with colleagues. But because this level is existential in nature and has a direct impact on the classroom, this individual process, in particular, must be facilitated. The sacred story of the teacher is at stake in the reflection, but at the same time, the teacher is able to refine his or her views.

It is important to note here that convictions are resistant to change because they are shaped in the course of life, especially during training and internship experiences. Through training and practical experience, the individual worldview receives a powerful boost. But sometimes convictions have to change radically. Critical incidents can lead to seeing the whole educational scene anew. One becomes aware of what had been unconscious.

²³ H. Markus, G. Bertram-Troost, J. de Kock, A. de Muijnck, and M. Barnard, "Stimulating Inquisitiveness: Teachers at Orthodox Protestant Schools about Their Roles in Religious Socialization," *Religious Education* 114 (2019): 513–527.

One reflects on things that had not been seen before. Because dealing with existential tensions is an individual affair, every teacher has to find his or her own way in this. And that is not easy, given the high pressure to change that is being put on education and that has led to what Roel Kuiper calls “articulation deficit.”²⁴ There is very little time to “pick oneself up” and take time for reflection while the situation constantly calls for new decisions. In contrast to the fast speed of everyday teaching, theologizing can be interpreted as a slow spiritual process that requires attention and delay. Spirituality that transforms and leads to conversion and to the reformation of ideas previously adhered to, after all, is a slow search process in which individuals orient themselves to what is occurring and help them evaluate situations. This process, triggered by new choices to be made, requires moments of reflection. In addition to attention, delay, and introspection by oneself, an ongoing dialogue with others is needed. The reflection process takes place in an almost inextricable dynamic of one’s own biography, personality, experiences in the context in which one works, and the demands of the profession. In this dynamic, teachers of faith may involuntarily or consciously call upon theological sources with which they have already come to terms in their lives.²⁵

Conclusion

This contribution started with an example showing that teachers did not intuitively tend to tap into theological resources in quarrels between children. It has become clear in this article that this is not so much their fault. Instead, it is related to how professionals mentally try to hold different things together. Sometimes they have to operate with different perspectives that are maintained side by side. That people can deal with different perspectives at the same time is not only a threat but also an opportunity. Theological images are not always transparent, but often dormant. They work through the imagination into the teacher’s actions. They can then become operative. I would like to emphasize that theological language can be richer and more inspiring than educational and psychological language because it is holistic in nature and related to God’s story of creation and salvation. Theology, therefore, is a rich source for professional practice. The discipline, however, cannot easily be instrumentalized and therefore not easily translated into learning goals. Nonetheless, theological concepts are carriers of values that

²⁴ R. Kuiper, “Articulatietekort. Over de menselijke zin in de praktijk van het onderwijs” [Articulation deficit: About human meaning in educational practice], in *Waar is onderwijs goed voor*, ed. C. Hermans (Eindhoven: Damon, 2020), 185–201.

²⁵ De Muynck, *Een goddelijk beroep*, 74–86.

are crucial to a school culture.²⁶ Jesus' radical appeal to forgive seventy times seven does not immediately lead to a set of prescriptions on how to teach children to forgive. It makes teachers however, aware of the moral gravity of forgiveness and, at the same time, able to face the difficult reality teachers continue to face. Images, however dormant, need to be activated so that they can have an articulate place in the beliefs of teachers.

We should accept in gratitude that professionals are able to illuminate different aspects at different times. Contradictions and tensions can be used as sources of reflection. This requires engagement and agility. It is a pitfall to want to have all things said and understood at the same time, in the desire to be complete and pure.²⁷ If everything is always right, it can be the expression of a saltless theology from which all tension has been removed and which is no less inferior than a flat modern worldview of social engineering and predictability. In professional practice, we are never able to have all images active at the same time. In one situation, an appeal is made to the honor and glory attributed to human beings in Psalm 8, while in another, the deceitfulness of the heart is illuminated. This could be construed as cleavage, but it is psychologically the only way teachers can act professionally. Pedagogical situations do not benefit from judgments that are forever sealed but call for practical wisdom—for *chokmah*, as the Bible calls it. In every situation, a right judgment is needed anew.

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²⁶ Theological concepts therefore run the risk of being submerged. But this danger also exists if theology remains reserved for either higher-order thinking (in which what happens on Earth does not really matter) or assumes that it is of a lower order (and regards theology as primitive and pre-theoretical).

²⁷ P. Hanes, *Evangelical Theology and Philosophy: Improving a Difficult Relationship* (Wrocław: EWST Centrum Edukacyjne, 2020), 63.

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