FAMILY EDUCATION AND ADOLESCENTS’ APPROACHES TO RELIGION

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Abstract
A written inquiry in Flanders by 1224 pupils with an average age of 17 years shows that a positive attitude towards faith and/or a symbolic, interpretive capacity to think about questions of faith is related to significant parental involvement in a child’s faith and a generally supportive and engaged style of education. This research shows that young people most often experience support from the mother concerning general education and religious education. Fathers who are more involved in faith seem generally to be experienced by their children as more responsive and more engaged in religious education than fathers who are less involved in faith. A divorce of the parents seems to be most important in regards to the child’s perception of the education given by the father. This research shows that the experience of parental divorce has no direct influence on adolescents’ attitudes towards faith.

Key Words: Religious education, family education, adolescents.

1. INTRODUCTION
Education in families is a great concern for many people. Delinquent behaviour of young people and other worrisome phenomena are often attributed to a failing family education. Parents can be too permissive and many literature suggest that the father is often too frequently absent in families (Anatrella, 1998). More and more initiatives are taken in order to support parents in their educational task, from parental courses to various books and magazines about ‘good education’. Often, these pedagogical actions are legitimised on the basis of parents’ educational insecurity.

These rather pessimistic assumptions about family education are not shared by everyone. Some pedagogues state that the parental quest for more information shows that parents are more involved in the education of their children (Zwief, Ligtermoet & De Ruyter, 1996, p. 81). Although so called new fathers, highly engaged in family work and child care, are rather scarce, many fathers and mothers in our western society are very positive about the bigger investments of fathers in the education of their
children (Laga, 1999, p. 90). It does sometimes happen that things go wrong in the family education, but in general we can speak about a ‘happy and satisfied majority’ and only a small minority of families, parents and children with real educational problems, as it becomes clear in research of the Flemish children’s rights commissionership (Ackaert, Stevens, Van den Bergh, 2003).

In the literature about family education we remark about a tension between defeatism and hopeful trust. In Flanders, the more optimistic approach seems to be persuasive – which does not mean that problems do not exist. This optimism, however, is often notably absent concerning one aspect of family education, namely, in families’ religious education. In general pedagogical research this theme of family religious education is quasi absent, but it is a considerable concern for people working in the church or the field of religious education. Many teachers of religious education and catechists believe that in western society a lot of children do not get a proper religious education at home. Parents do not know themselves how to believe and how to educate their children in faith or they may think it would be better to give the child a free choice regarding what he or she believes.

In this contribution we want to investigate how young people of about 17 years old consider the religious education they got at home. Further, we want to find out how the perception of that religious education correlates with their experiences of education in general. The underlying research question is whether the family situation and the general education by the father and/or mother play a role in the religious education (or vice versa). Is it possible to be positive towards the religious education of young people today on the basis of a hopeful perspective concerning general education? Or should religious education of young people be seen as something problematic in contemporary western society?

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS, HYPOTHESIS AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Three concrete research questions are central in this contribution. In the first place we explore whether the opinions of young people about Christian faith correlate with their experiences of education in general and concerning religion. In the second place, we look to see if there is a correlation between the family situation in which young people grow up, their experienced education and their position concerning faith and religion. Thirdly, we focus on the differences and similarities between the experiences of education by the father and by the mother.