TOWARDS A TYPOLOGY OF GENERAL AIMS OF CHRISTIAN ADULT EDUCATION

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Abstract
This article deals with the variety of general aims of Christian adult education in a pluralist society. The authors propose a theoretical framework of possible aims to Christian adult education. This framework consists of two dimensions: a formal dimension consisting of the goals or orientations of Christian adult education, and a material dimension that concerns the content of the (religious) identity formed by the education process. Based on these two dimensions a typology of aims to Christian adult education is presented. This typology proved to be very helpful in describing the mindset of Christian adult educators within the Catholic Church in the Netherlands. The empirical research shows that these educators have a positive attitude with regard to educational orientations of self-direction and transformation. Educational aims focussing on the supra-personal aspect of religious identity are largely rejected. This may give rise to tensions considering the institutional context in which Christian adult educators carry out their work.

Key Words: Christian adult education, pluralism, educational orientations, identity development

1. INTRODUCTION

What are the aims of Christian adult education in a pluralist society? Is the goal to hand down Christian religious teachings as established by the church authorities? Is it to impart to the participants an awareness of their own religiosity by means of experiential clarification? Or is it to provide an introduction to a variety of religions and worldviews? What choices must Christian adult educators make? Are they able to make these choices in the context of the church in which they are active? Is one type of goal more important than the others?

We begin this article by proposing a theoretical framework of possible aims to Christian adult education. This framework consists of two dimensions: a formal dimension consisting of the goals or orientations of Christian adult education, and a material dimension that concerns the content of the religious identity formed by the education process. We begin by examining the differences between conformity, self-direction and transformity as educational orientations (section 2). We then look at three aspects of identity,
namely intra-personal, inter-personal and supra-personal (section 3). On the basis of the formal and material dimensions, we go on to develop a typology of general aims to Christian adult education and to formulate a number of research questions with regard to these aims (section 4). The results of empirical research among Christian adult educators in the Netherlands are presented (section 5), followed by a conclusion and discussion (section 6).

2. GENERAL EDUCATIONAL ORIENATIONS

How can religious identity be developed by educational processes? To answer this question, we begin by introducing a well-known distinction in educational theory, between ‘conformity’, ‘self-direction’ and ‘transformation’. The difference between these orientations will be clarified by analysing the distinct normative concepts underlying each one. We will show that behind each of these orientations lie different narrative concepts of the self: a closed, an open and a transformative narrative concept. Identity is conceived of as a narrative through which the self expresses itself.

We begin with the difference between the orientations of conformity and self-direction:

*The essential difference between the terms, as we use them, is that self-direction focuses on internal standards for behaviour; conformity focuses on externally imposed rules (Kohn 1969, 35).*

When conformity is the goal, the learner or participant is expected to adapt to the standards of her social environment. Authority, in this case, is located outside the person. Self-direction, on the other hand, requires the learner to develop internal standards of behaviour (norm internalisation), with the goal of establishing authority inside the person. In the latter, independence and responsibility of the individual is the goal of education (Kohn 1969).

Bruner (1996) shows that developing the potential of the individual is undeniably a goal of education, but that this development always takes place within a cultural framework. In Bruner’s culturalism, ‘reality’ is represented by a symbolic system that is shared, manipulated and continuously adapted to changing circumstances by the members of the society. The learner is not merely a ‘passive recipient’ being initiated into the ways in which a cultural community creates meaning, but also takes an active