‘&I/&you’ An Innovative Research Instrument for Youngsters to Explore Their Life Orientation

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Abstract: In this contribution, we explore youngsters’ positionality regarding religion and present an example to facilitate them to ‘research’ their own beliefs and their affective commitments to their faith. We start with a short general introduction in Fowler’s theory of faith development. This is followed by findings from research in England, Estonia, Ghana, the Netherlands, and Malawi. From these findings, we conclude that youngsters need to be guided in their exploration of religious and secular worldview traditions. For this, we developed an instrument in particular for Muslim youngsters ‘at risk’ for radicalization: ‘&I/&you’. It is along the lines of religious tradition(s), citizenship, discrimination, and environmental concerns that students explore their convictions, broaden their horizons, and further develop their own (religious or secular) life orientation. Our innovative and explorative instrument (‘&I/&you’)—part of the PIREd (PIRed: Playful Islamic Religious Education) module of seven lessons—is described in detail. Preliminary results of pilot studies are promising. Students see this instrument as a ‘space’ for dialogue and love to share their ideas and sharpen their mind ‘in the presence of the other’.

Keywords: faith development; radicalization; religious positioning; international research; self-analysis; dialogical self theory (DST); self confrontation method (SCM)

1. Introduction

It goes without saying that in an age of secularization faith development is a changeling. The disappearance of a context of ‘normality’ regarding religion(s) in different parts of the world has resulted in, on the one hand, an increase of religious and spiritual movements, among which mindfulness is but one of the stars in heaven’s sky (see for example Ergas 2013). On the other hand, a decrease of visits to churches sheltering under the sacred canopy, as Peter Berger described it in his much-read book The Sacred Canopy published in (Berger 1967), is signalled.

Young people these days have to position themselves amidst a diversity of religious and secular worldview traditions and life orientations. They develop their own life orientation in dialogue with others: believers and so called ‘nones’—people who do not have faith in God. Fowler’s theory on faith development (Section 2) offers a view on possible lines of religious development of this age group. Students in different countries (the UK, Estonia, Ghana, and Malawi; Section 3) inform the reader about their actual positioning, their struggle, their doubts, their vulnerability, and their arguments concerning the preliminary outcome of their search for an authentic positioning amidst their peers’ and significant others’ diverse secular, religious, and spiritual positions.

To guide students in this positioning process, we, a group of researchers and practitioners in theology and education, developed a learning module of seven lessons (PIRed) including a game (‘MirrorMind’) rooted in the theoretical framework of the valuation theory and the multivoiced theory (Hermans and Hermans-Jansen 1995). This framework was further developed in the dialogical self theory (Hermans and Hermans-Konopka 2010). Included
in this module is an instrument for students’ self-analysis, based on the self confrontation method that initially was developed as an instrument to research students’ motive-based actions. These tasks are described in detail in Section 4, as well as the preliminary impressions of its implementation and its possible contribution to students’ faith development and their positioning in a post-secular world. Section 5 is dedicated to conclusions and discussion. At the end, in Section 6, we present some recommendations.

2. Faith Development

Despite critics of Fowler’s stages of faith development, its broad contours are still applicable as a frame of reference studying religious identity development (Parker 2010). In ‘Stages of Faith’, James Fowler (1981) makes a clear distinction between faith, religion and belief. Fowler, following Wilfred Cantwell Smith, understands religions as ‘cumulative traditions’ that are constituted of ‘various expressions of the faith of people of the past’. Living cumulative traditions ‘awakens present faith’. Following that line of thought, faith is ‘the person’s or group’s way of responding to transcendent value and power as perceived and grasped through the forms of the cumulative tradition’ (Fowler 1981, p. 9). Faith and religion mutually need each other. Beliefs, according to Fowler, ‘try to bring to expression what faith sees as it images an ultimate environment’ (ibid., p. 27). Imagination is a conditio sine qua non in the development of a person’s faith. To describe faith development in detail Fowler builds on the interaction of lines of thought of Erikson (psycho-social development), Piaget (cognitive development) and Kohlberg (moral development). Fowler distinguishes five stages of faith. This framework of stages should be interpreted as a spiralling process: each stage building on each other, at the same time each stage being more or less prominently active in following stages. In DST terminology, ‘voices’ of the past are more or less prominent active in the present.

Fowler distinguishes five stages: infancy with its undifferentiated faith, early childhood with its intuitive-projective faith; childhood with its mythic-literal faith, puberty and adolescence with its reflectively and synthetic-conventional faith, adulthood with its individuative-conjunctive faith, and old age with its universalizing faith. Within the scope of this article, we focus on puberty and adolescence.

In puberty and adolescence, youngsters reflect on their position in life and in society with the help of ‘the other’. Peers are important ‘mirrors’ through which they observe themselves—their external positions in society as well as their internal positions in their inner life, their ‘society of mind’ (Hermans and Hermans-Jansen 1995). Increasing reflective competences enable youngsters to entangle different stories that are told about them and that they tell about themselves and construct a personal connecting thread. This connecting thread not only connects stories from the past but extends into narratives about the future (Fowler 1981, p. 152). People of this age long for recognition, no longer exclusively found in their parents, but even more so in peers and in teachers and different adults that coach them, for example, in sports and other leisure activities. Fowler speaks of a ‘hunger’ for ‘a God who knows, accepts and confirms the self deeply’ (ibid., p. 153). The ‘hunger’ for recognition of their peers shows in a need to belong and subsequently the strong tendency to rely on peers’ behaviour-known as ‘the tyranny of the they’. At the same time youngsters become more and more aware of and committed to their own tacit system of values and will vehemently defend its resulting norms. At this stage, symbol and symbolized coincide or are at the verge of being separated—a process that, according to Fowler, signals the transition to the stage of adulthood (ibid., p. 163). Fowler points to the risk of ‘trivialization’ of symbols with the result that the ‘sacred itself is emptied’ (ibid., p. 163).

In puberty and young adolescence, youngsters’ faith is ‘conventional’ in the sense of being the faith system of others, of the community young people wish to belong to; it is synthetic in the sense of perceived in its global wholeness, not yet reflected upon values and stories that are brought together in their biographical narrative (ibid., p. 167).

In the dialogical self theory (Hermans and Hermans-Konopka 2010), the metaphor of the polyphonic novel is central, allowing for ‘a multiplicity of positions [in the self] among
which dialogical relationships may emerge’. In Hermans’ view, the self is a ‘dynamic multiplicity of I-positions’ (Hermans 2001). The psychologist of religion, Hetty Zock (2013) states that in this theoretical framework religion is seen as one of the ‘voices’ positioned in the dialogical self. Dialogues–internal and external–stimulate a person to ‘allow new voices from outside to come in and open up hitherto marginalized and hidden positions in the self’ (ibid., p. 21). Fowler’s faith development theory and the theory of the dialogical self open our mind to understand young people’s positionality in a plural world.

In the next paragraph we present an overview of research amongst youngsters, not pretending that this is a comprehensive overview of students’ faith development in societies characterized by plurality and secularization.

3. Youngsters’ Religious Positionality

Below we do not put together a general and complete survey of research on youngsters’ religious positioning, but present a bird’s-eye-view based on what students wrote and told about their view on religion(s). In the United Kingdom, the focus is on the actual worldview positioning of students as they expressed it in personal and group interviews (3.1). In Estonia, students’ expectations of religion in the future is described, based on students’ essays (3.2). In sub-Saharan Africa, students’ experiences with inclusion/misclusion of worldview diversity, voiced in group interviews, are at stake (3.3).

3.1. Youngsters’ Religious Positioning in the UK

In a reflection on three qualitative research projects (in-depth interviews between 2006–2016) with students 13–17 years of age, coming of age in a Christian country through the ages, Julia Ipgrave reports about what youngsters had to say about the role of religion in their lives, now and in the future. Ipgrave investigates the seemingly paradoxical situation of the decline in church attendance, the increase of secularity and the revival of religiosity in the public debate (Ipgrave 2020, p. 75). The purpose of her research is “to hear the young people’s views on what of traditional religion has been lost, what retained, what regained over time” (ibid., p. 79). The religious background of the students was diverse, as was the school context of the group interviews with participating youngsters regarding location, as well as school ethos and funding. Hundreds of young people participated in Ipgrave’s research projects. In her presentation of the findings, Ipgrave follows David Foas who ‘draws attention to “age”, “period” and “cohort” effects which may be at work’ (ibid., p. 77).

The students all were born in the first decade of the 21st century, the cohort named the Z-generation (e.g., Seemiller and Grace 2017) (cohort effect). A pattern of ‘generation-to-generation’ (non-)transmission is observed in the students’ sayings (ibid., p. 80):

People are losing—it’s not like they’re losing their faith in God, it’s just maybe as generations pass they’re—I don’t know—just losing interest.

and

There’s all the 60s, cos like when they were younger they did everything religious based . . . like everyone’s not so fussed about religion anymore.

Regarding this generation-effect, young people’s grand-parents are viewed as the link in the ‘chain of religion’; grandparents ‘being the holders of religious knowledge and memory within families’ (ibid., p. 81), as we read in the following statement:

I used to go to church with my granddad but then he died so I just learn about [religion] in school, that’s it.

The reason that young people rely on their grand-parents for religious knowledge is attributed to a lack of knowledge of their parents, as is stated below (ibid., p. 82):

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1 Ipgrave’s research is based on various projects she was involved in over the decade 2006–2016. The participants are seen as members of the collective, UK Youth at a particular period of history. Each quotation is illustrative of a position held by a number of young people.
Like our parents don’t necessarily know—or my parents don’t necessarily know . . . the reason for which we’re doing it, but we just do it because we’ve been taught to do it. Like anyway how you pray and what you say.

Also, youngsters refer to the generation of their parents as the rebellious generation, for whom religion was no option anyway. For their parents, religion was ‘not done’, students are of the opinion that they need educators in the chain of tradition to develop a life orientation, as the student below states (ibid., p. 83):

I think we need more guidance like from parents and stuff because you don’t really know. I think it’s just the parents becoming more relaxed with things and then we get brought up like that and we bring our children up and it goes on like it.

A disturbing event for the students was the wide spread news of examples of sexual abuse and the covering-up thereof by the churches (period-effect). Also for the students in the UK, ‘Dawkinsmania’ played a role in their sayings about the role of religion(s). Period-effect and age-effect come together in the following saying (ibid., p. 90):

We’re at the stage when as teenagers we’re wanting to question everything, and Dawkins is providing a foundation for us to be able to do that.

Modern times, in the sense of a loss of credibility of religion and the distractions of living in the 21st century are prominent in two students’ reflections, as we read below (ibid., p. 86):

The stories in the Bible, it’s just got no proof, no proof—things coming up on the news and it’s like proven theories with science and you realise that it’s got more to reinforce the science than the religion.

I think because it’s modern times now. Our generation have computers and they’re interested in the different stuff and they would—like the older generation didn’t have computers and they didn’t have that many equipment that they could play with.

Another student refers to the language of religion that is not understood by young people living in the 21st century. This student adds to the ‘modern times’ argument (ibid., p. 88):

But I think the only thing with following like rules, what’s right and what’s wrong, and with a religion, is that was thousands of years ago—and, like, time’s gone and things get more and more modern and with innovations it’s not realistic to stick by [an] old set [of] rules.

Interesting are the students’ responses about the relation between a loss of religion and a decline in moral behaviour. Students are of the opinion that unstable family life and plurality of religions and value systems contribute to relativisation of morality. Other students think that age-old religious traditions do not respond to the complexity of modern life (ibid., p. 88).

For young people, it seems clear that the position of religion in their life will change over years (age effect). Religion is seen as childish as this student says (ibid., p. 89):

Becoming older I sort of think that miracles and stuff, that just sounds like rubbish, I just completely don’t believe in that now.

Becoming a ‘none’, a non-believer, for young people seems not a matter of choice but of ‘just’ happening. According to one of the students (ibid., p. 90):

I just kind of stopped going [to church]. I don’t know, I think I started tennis lessons which were on at the same time and then after I finished that I never really went back.
Students, however, presume that their disbelief might change over the years. The way to become a believer is open, and related to knowledge construction, as the two students below state (ibid., pp. 91, 94):

I really don’t know, what it is, I’m just losing interest quite quickly . . . I know I’ll go back to it later but right now I’m not that [bothered].

I’m more interested [in religion] because over the years we’ve learnt about the religion and everything and now I’ve got time to put it into practice—to put my views into practice—on my own now without my parents’ help.

Young people have their own solutions to their lack of interest for religion(s). For example, they think churches and RE teachers should adjust their style of worship and other activities to the needs of young people and should give them responsibility in innovative offers. Religious communities, like churches, mosques and temples, are seen by the students as a kind of religious ‘market place’ which they like to explore on their own. In a way, Ipgrave concludes the young people ‘seek to advance their own religious education’ in ‘conversation with ancient wisdom, past tradition and community memory’ (ibid., p. 98).

3.2. Youngsters’ Religious Positioning in Estonia

In the Spring Term of 2017, Olga Schihalejev asked her students (ages 16–18) to write an essay on the future of religion in Estonia, as a classroom exercise. The aim of her study was to ‘examine how young people in a secular country structure their thoughts and what they use in thinking about the future of religion’ (Schihalejev 2020, p. 101). These young people were growing up in a country that to start with was imbued with Christianity since the ages, however was forced to abandon its beliefs due to ‘the ideological state-driven anti-religious policies and practices of the Soviet era’, then regained its trust in religion and after all faces a ‘steady decline in organised religion’ (ibid., p. 102). By consequence, the participating students in this research were educated by parents who lived under the Soviet regime and lacked any form religious education themselves. These youngsters learn about religion in municipal schools, either in mandatory or elective classes RE.

In sum, 113 students participated on a voluntary basis in Schihalejev’s research; all students from an upper secondary school. The background of the students regarding religious affiliation is diverse. Students were asked to write an essay on the future of religion in Estonia in 50 years’ time. Forty-five minutes were allocated for this assignment—more than enough for most of the students. The essays’ length varied between 82 and 521 words. They were analysed following Farclough’s critical discourse analysis.

From Schihalejev’s research, we learn in general that students who were religiously educated are more positive about the future of religion than students whose parents did not adhere to a religious worldview or did not attend RE classes. Students with a religious background write about changes they expect in the role of religion, notwithstanding the effect of processes of secularization.

Schihalejev’s analysis shows four different argumentation strategies students practice in their essays: discourse of religion as ‘rigid conservatism’, as a ‘gap in knowledge’, of ‘Estonians as being naturally non-religious’ and of ‘religion in the midst of growing tolerance’. Some of the students see religion as ‘inflexible, in contradiction to quickly changing societies’. Schihalejev speaks of a discourse of ‘Rigid Conservatism’ as exemplified in the statements of two students, as illustrated below (ibid., p. 106):

I am pretty sure that religion will be immutable. If we take for example Christianity, then Christian customs have not changed at all since the Reformation and most customs have remained to this day.

In 50 years we may have flying cars and relatives living on Mars, but I do not think that religion will have changed a lot.

One group of students are of the opinion that religion(s) filled the gap between what was known and what was unknown. They expect that the moment science can fill the
gap, religion will disappear. This line of thought is closely related to the level of education of people: more education goes together with less religion. This metaphor points to the phenomenon of communicating vessels—a phenomenon from natural science! Schihalejev speaks of a discourse of ‘Religion as a Gap in Knowledge’. These ideas are presented below the statement of one student (ibid., p. 107):

People will not understand how anybody could create the world from nothing, if one lacks scientific explanation. Probably there will be new information about the provenance of our world. I think that society will understand religious people less and less and the share of atheists will grow.

That non-religiosity is part and parcel of Estonian identity Schihalejev concludes from statements like the one below (ibid., p. 108):

The majority of Estonians are not believers and I think that this will not change in 50 years. Estonians have never been very religious people, this is why I doubt that in the near future we will see any major changes.

The discourse of young people that reason along this line is named ‘Discourse of Estonians as being Naturally Non-Religious’.

The last line of reasoning that emerges from Estonia’s young people’s essays is named the ‘Discourse of Religion in the Midst of Growing Tolerance’ (ibid., p. 109). These students, rather than speaking of a decline of religion, mention the diversification of Estonia’s religious landscape. A belief in diversity as enriching, paired with a belief in open-mindedness and tolerance, dominates in the respective essays. The statement below is an illustration of this discourse (ibid., p. 109):

The world will be a better place—both for religious and nonreligious people. Better education results in a world with wider horizons. The consciousness about other people, their cultures and religions becomes more important. We will see more religious people who dare to be themselves and nonreligious people who respect them.

It is interesting that this position of youngsters is not related to their religious commitment or lack thereof. The development of new technologies is supposed to facilitate more openness, since by way of new media, people can be reached that otherwise never would participate in religious meetings. One of the statements (ibid., p. 110) underlines this line of thought, and is worth mentioning, in particular in these pandemic days:

Religious behaviour will change as technology develops. I think that several religious rites will be held via the internet. For example prayers will be podcast and people can take part from their homes. Certainly there will be people who go to church as well. But sick and very old believers could take part by video broadcast.

For some of the youngsters, religion is meaningful in a unique way for individual persons, detached from religious institutions. This group by Schihalejev is named ‘Religion as Individual Enterprise’. More than being detached from institutions, religious institutions are seen as ‘obstacles’ or at least ‘superfluous’, as illustrated by the quote from one of the students (ibid., p. 111):

I hope that in spite of the fact that religions in society are in decline there will still be some faith in people’s hearts. Life is too difficult without faith. But it should remain self-oriented. One should not impose one’s faith on others, proclaim it or take lives by conflict.

Most of the students argue along the lines of secularization. Discourses including pluralisation mostly were present in writings of young people who in some way or another
were religiously educated. The student’s remark above for Schihalejev is the reason to name this group alternatively as the ‘Discourse of Hope’ (ibid., p. 112). This hope gets a practical touch in Schihalejev’s recommendation to balance through education the problematisation of religious life orientations with an equally critical stance to secular and atheistic worldviews.

3.3. Youngsters’ Religious Positioning in Sub-Saharan Africa

In a comparative research study on (mis)representation of religion in RE in Ghana and Malawi, it showed that Christianity, Islam, and African Indigenous Religions (AIR) are included in the formal curricula, excluding any other religious or secular tradition. In Ghana and Malawi, the responsibility for the way these religious traditions are represented in RE classes is left to each individual school. According to its school ethos, individual schools decide which forms of representation of religion(s) they do or do not allow in their RE classes. In their comparative research on RE in Ghana and Malawi, Matemba and Addai-Mununkum interviewed both teachers (individually) and students (focus group discussion) to gain insight in the (mis)interpretation of religion(s) and the (mis)inclusion thereof in RE classes, and the effect on students’ views on religion(s) (Matemba and Addai-Mununkum 2021).

In this article, we focus on this study’s findings of students and their views on the representation of religion(s) in RE classes and to what extent this was a fair representation. Criteria for a fair representation of religion(s) were ‘factual accuracy and non-bias’. Teachers who made ‘factually accurate statement about another religion devoid of bias, we considered them to have represented that religion fairly’, according to the researchers (Matemba and Addai-Mununkum 2021, p. 64). For a ‘fair’ representation, knowledge about religion(s) seems to be a precondition—a precondition that is not always met, as is illustrated by the following statements of students:

Islam and Rastafarianism are just good but having bad principles. How can one be punished for a cloth covering her head for the whole life in our hottest continent?

... When God came to this earth, he brought only one religion [Christianity] ... Muhammed brought Islam and for AIR, somebody just worships an object until it is engulfed with some spirits. God created the human being and all the objects so why should they worship it?

Talking about the Islamic head scarf and the Rastafarian headdress as mere head covering, not aware of the religious meaning of it, shows that both Islam and Rastafarianism are misinterpreted and misrepresented in classes. These students lack information about Islam. Although the head covering for women in different religious traditions and cultures was an issue in RE classes—whether this is seen as ‘punishment’ or not—from the responses of the Ghanaian and Malawi students, we learn that they have a ‘simplistic understanding of such a polarising issue’ (ibid., p. 66). According to the criteria of ‘fair representation’, these statements point to a misrepresentation by the teacher or misunderstanding by the students. The information given by the student about AIR is not ‘fair’ in the sense that it points to a non-existent characteristic: AIR’s faithful believers do worship God, since ‘all African peoples believe in God’ (ibid., p. 66).

Students’ lack of information in some cases is the result of the school’s rationale behind teaching RE. One head of school in Malawi states (ibid., p. 70),

RE should help a child in his spiritual journey knowing God and His goodness.

... Teaching different religious traditions in our schools cannot be supported because we cannot teach religions that oppose what we teach.

For this principal, religious plurality is not seen as enriching, but as a great challenge.

Regarding the role of parents in religious education, teachers report that Muslim parents kept their children at home. These parents were afraid their children would not get the right religious education (instruction) to become a good Muslim. As one Malawi teacher states (ibid, p. 67),
After school, many parents hire sheikhs to teach their children the truth about Islam because the state system has failed to do that. We are happy that the Muslim association is providing such services and encouraging parents to send their children to the Madrasah.

Church leaders' attitudes in Malawi are in line with these parents’ anxiety; they support RE in the sense of ‘evangelism’ to safeguard young people’s commitment to Christianity.

One of the findings of the analysis of students’ group interviews is, that Christian and Muslim students demonstrate a respectful attitude towards each other. According to them Christianity and Islam are ‘like children of the same mother’. Students adhering to these two traditions seem to distance themselves from AIR’s, which they see as ‘an expired religion’ and ‘it belongs to the bush’. Notwithstanding these statements, the young people are convinced of the need to include AIR in the official curriculum, demonstrating simultaneously to be ‘attracted to and repulsed’ by AIR (ibid., p. 72).

A look at classroom conversations gives insight in youngsters’ positioning of religion in the diverse contexts of Ghana and Malawi. The classroom mirrors societal processes of power and of inclusion and exclusion. Teachers are aware of the power of language and they do their utmost to avoid polarization in the classroom. Despite teachers’ attempt to concretize inclusive RE—for example, by using objective scientific language (teaching about) or inclusive language (‘we all believe that . . .’) to create a feeling of belonging—everyday practices show that only Christianity, Islam, and AIR are included, at the expense of Hinduism, Buddhism, Shintoism, Sikhism, Baha’ism, Rastafarianism, Judaism, Eckankar, Hare Krishna, etc. Students support this exclusion, as we learn from the words of two students from Ghana (ibid., p. 92):

I don’t think so [that we have to learn about other religions]. What we are learning is about the religions we have. The ones you mentioned, we don’t have them here so why should we study about them?

Those [other] religions, even if people attend, they are shy to say it, I don’t think we need to learn about them because their own people are not proud of the religions.

In classes where the ‘other’ religions are included, this may lead to wrong and stereotyped images, due to the teacher’s lack of information or to the teacher’s lack of experiences with meeting ‘the other’. One Malawi student says (ibid., p. 92),

What Rastafarians do is smoke chamba [marijuana/Indian Hemp]. It will be chaos if government allowed each and every one to practice their faith in such bizarre way.

Exclusion or misinformation is not only about ‘other’ religions but also affects different denominations within one worldview tradition. Here again, the teacher’s own knowledge and experiences are of pivotal importance, as shows this teacher from Ghana (ibid., p. 93):

Let me tell you, even for us Muslims sometimes it is difficult to identify who is Shia. One of my good friends was a Shia but I didn’t know for a long time. We were attending radio programs and teaching Islam and there was no problem. It was later that that someone told me he was one of them. From that time, I ceased walking with him.

This statement, according to the researchers, ‘speaks volumes of how he will treat a Muslim student who identifies as such’.

Regarding the diversity in Christianity, students make the observation that RE about Christianity deep down is RE about Catholic Christianity, as the student from Ghana below observes (ibid., p. 94):

We are not offended by that because those do not turn argumentative. It is only when we get to Sabbath part that we debate. The teacher brushes over it and we bring it back and engage in debates. Sometimes other teachers walking by would stop and join in the debate.
However tolerant this student’s statement is, other students might be confused in case a teacher offers different, conflicting or paradoxical passages from Holy Scriptures. This shows clearly the different layers that are at stake in teachers’ RE practices: the school’s formal positioning regarding worldviews concretised in the school’s curriculum, the school’s hidden curriculum, the teacher’s personal religious identity concretised in her/his interpretation and subsequently implementation of the curriculum, and last but not least the diversity in the student population—this in the wider context of the society.

Responding to the confusion of plurality—intrareligious as well as interreligious—is the subject of the next session, in which we first describe the power of ‘disturbing’ moments in religious identity development followed by a self-analysis instrument for students to explore the vitality of the confrontation with disruptive moments.

4. Plurality and Disruptive Moments

From the statements of students in three different contexts, as described above, we learn that in each situation students are confronted with ‘the other’—be it their uninformed parents, the faithful classmate occupying a different religious position or the teacher’s exclusion/misclusion. Presuming that ‘the other’ can or should not be neglected, educators’ (parents and teachers) challenge is to invite students to leave their comfort zone, open their mind, and start a dialogue with ‘the other’. To facilitate dialogues a module of seven lessons is developed, including the game ‘MirrorMind’. To become informed about the change brought about in the affective relation with religion(s) and/in society, a research instrument is developed. The findings of pilot studies with this instrument in six groups are promising. Students show a strong positive relation with their faith and its practicalities, and with living in the Netherlands; as Turkish-Dutch Muslims, they hardly experience negative feelings in relation to their position in Dutch society (Ter Avest et al. 2020, in press). Below, we describe this self-analysis instrument creating ‘disruptive moments’ together with guidelines to turn conflicting differences into new and enriching positions regarding religion(s).

‘&I/&you’—Self-Analysis

The theoretical framework of the module of seven lessons, including a game, and the self-analysis instrument for young people in secondary education consists of the valuation theory (VT) and its research instrument the self confrontation method (SCM; Hermans and Hermans-Jansen 1995), further developed in the dialogical self theory (DST; Hermans and Hermans-Konopka 2010). The lessons subsequently are dedicated to ‘Diversity—in Dutch society and in Islam’, the concept of ‘Jihad’ in Islam, Islamophobia, ‘Identity—a given’, Sustainability and Responsibility, the game ‘MirrorMind’, and a concluding lesson on ‘Identity–work in progress’. Each lesson includes sections on exploration (what do students know about the issue at stake), information (contextual readings from Qur’an and Hadith), examples in literature and film, dialogue, and integration. One lesson is dedicated to playing the game ‘MirrorMind’, a playful way for students to dialogically explore further the meaning of concepts dealt with in the lessons.

The very heart of the theoretical framework of the module and the game is self (S) and other (O), positive (P) or negative (N) directed motivation, in relation to the (implicit) affective relation to (expressed) key situations or persons in a person’s biographical narrative. In the title ‘&I/&you’ the context in which religious identity development takes place is represented by ‘&’, the other as mirror is represented by ‘&you’. Referring to the positivity and negativity related to persons and/or situation, in ‘&I/&you’ we make use of a list of validated positive and negative affects (Centrum voor Religieuze Communicatie 1999).

The aim of ‘&I/&you’ is to facilitate students to explore their own thoughts, feelings and experiences regarding the plurality of religion(s) in their classroom and in society. With this instrument students clarify and nuance their own religious positionality amidst cultural and worldview diversity. This self-analysis instrument contributes to the religious
and moral identity development of students, it stimulates the mutual exchange of religious positions and widens their horizon.

The procedure in the method ‘&I/&you’ is as follows:

Step 1:

The teacher presents to the students one or a variety of religious statements that represent correct characteristics and/or societal interpretations/prejudices of a religion or religious denomination. For example: ‘Jihad justifies violence against other believers’, ‘Christians must give away half of their possessions to poor and needy people’, or with the core sentence of a presented case about bullying, like ‘Mirjam hit Omer in his face’.

Step 2:

The teacher invites the students to connect the presented statement(s) with a list of validated feelings: ‘When you read this sentence, what kind of feeling do you experience? Note behind each feeling on the list to what degree this feeling is experienced. Score the respective feeling between 0 (zero, in case that feeling is not experienced at all) and 5 (five, if you experience that feeling very strong)’.

The validated list of positive and negative feelings consists of ten emotions, like joy, angry, inspired, disappointed, powerless. Filling in the list alone already stimulates awareness of one’s own positionality and the diversity in her/his group of peers.

Below we present in Table 1 (‘When I read the sentence, I feel . . . ’) an example of statements and imaginary scoring of one student, and questions a teacher can ask to stimulate the internal dialogue.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jihad Justifies Violence Against Other Believers</th>
<th>Christians Must Give Away Half of Their Possessions to Poor and Needy People</th>
<th>From the Presented Case: ‘Mirjam Hit Omer in His Face’.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>joy</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>afraid</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>angry</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>inspired</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>disappointed</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>confident</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>happy</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>anxious</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>powerless</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>strong</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Step 3:

After the students fill in the list, the teacher explains to them that the affect list consists of positive and negative feelings—joy being a positive feeling and powerless a negative feeling—and shows the full list of affects and their positive and negative direction, respectively (see Table 2 List of Affects P/N):
Table 2. List of Affects P/N.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Affects</th>
<th>P/N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>joy</td>
<td>P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>afraid</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>angry</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>inspired</td>
<td>P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>disappointed</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>confident</td>
<td>P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>happy</td>
<td>P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>anxious</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>powerless</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>strong</td>
<td>P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sum scores</td>
<td>P=N</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As a next step in this self-analysis instrument ‘&I/&you’, the teacher asks the students to reflect upon their own scores, to respond for example to the following questions for themselves:

‘What is it that makes me feel anxious so strongly?’ or ‘How come that I do not feel any joy?’ or ‘How do I interpret the dominance of negative/positive scores?’ These questions invite students to tentatively look around in their own ‘society of mind’.

Step 4:

The next step in ‘&I/&you’ is that the teacher invites the students to compare their affect list with the list of one of their classmates. Comparison of the scores with a classmate widens students’ horizon. The teachers ask the pairs of students questions like, ‘Clarify to each other the underlying motivation for scores you have in common, and for scores that differ considerably’. In addition, the teacher brings the students to mind the structure of this mutual conversation: listen to the other, summarize what the other said (to check if you understood correctly her/his saying) and continue asking questions until you both agree that what is said is understood correctly. Such given directions for a constructive dialogue encourage the exchange of experienced feelings, in pairs and in plenary classroom conversations, and stimulates students’ religious identity development and religious literacy.

Step 5:

The very last step of ‘&I/&you’ is a plenary inventory about discovered new insights. New insights that widen students’ horizon, including new perspectives in their ‘society of mind’.

5. Conclusions and Discussion

What can we conclude from the findings in the three different contexts—different from the point of view of context (secularization, post-communism and plurality), and focus (state of the art, future expectations, (mis)representation and (mis)inclusion). What these researches have in common is ‘the voice of the student’. The following comes to the fore from their statements.

First of all, they speak of a lack of knowledge from their educators—parents (in the UK) and educators (in sub-Saharan Africa). This lack of knowledge might result in the extinction of religion, as the Estonian students suppose, but also to the innovative ways to respond to the need of being connected to the other, a religious community or God. Preconditional for a (re)new(ed) interest in religion, according to the UK students, is that students should be approached according to their interests and needs.

What then are the needs of students age 13–16? Fowler’s ideas regarding this age group revolve around the following key concepts ‘reflection’, ‘peers as mirrors’, and ‘hunger for recognition’; they are about to construct a connecting thread in their biographical narrative. To help this latter process along, they need the loving guidance of a well-informed teacher.
Loving because the teacher is well aware of the vulnerability of these young people that are on their way to leave home—literally and metaphorically—and in this specific period in their life, in no-man’s-land in search for their own life orientation. Well informed—to pass on to them the information they need as a stepping-stone on their way to a flexible balanced religious identity.

A flexible balance is what is aimed at in the method ‘&I/&you’. The self-analysis instrument of ‘&I/&you’, with its focus on (internal and external) dialogue, responds to what Hans Joas points to as the enormous potential for innovation (in RE) that lies in the sphere of dialogue. In opposing Peter Berger’s claim on secularization, and the subsequently anxiety regarding other than religious movements, Joas turns anxiety into a challenge to learn from and with each other. He speaks of processes of ‘learning and controlled change’ resulting in a flexible internalization of others’ values and norms that ends in ‘a heightened sensitivity towards others and “the Other” within and thus leads to a dynamic (instead of static) stability’ (Joas 2006, p. 58)—what is called a flexible balance in the students’ ‘society of mind’ in DST terminology. Following his line of thought, and based on the interviews in the three research projects, we formulate three recommendations below.

6. Recommendations

Students make a plea for an approach on the part of religious institutions, and that goes for educators (parents and teachers alike) as well, to be addressed in a way that suits their life world and their expectations of future life. Combining this with students’ need for recognition that means that in RE, teachers should start with ‘translating’ ‘old set rules’ and recognize the value orientation(s) that are (re)presented in actual narratives, movies, theatre plays and songs and confront this with what is transmitted in religious traditions—high appreciated values as well as the ways these cultural expressions signal ways to cope with contingency in life. However, beware of confusing tradition and culture with entertainment; beware of trivialization (Arendt [1954] 1968, p. 202).

Students are in need of knowledge about religion(s). Without knowledge transmission, it is impossible to learn from the accumulated knowledge that is stored in Holy Scriptures, rituals, and narratives. This knowledge, according to Matemba and Addai-Mununkum (2021), is open for doubt concerning a just representation of religion(s) and the inclusion of all what is experienced as a life structuring (life) orientation—be it religious or not. Matemba and Addai-Mununkum warn about ignorance due to teachers’ lack of information—for which they coin the concept of ‘misrepresentation’—and/or their biased position regarding other religions than their own—referred to as ‘misclusion’. This warning is more than justified in each of the research contexts, taking into account the comments of students.

The lessons of the PIREd module are attuned to the needs of the students to know more about religion(s). Their parents, as we have read above, either are not interested (anymore) in religion, or are literate in ‘living tradition’ but not in transmitting knowledge about religion. Second, young people enjoy sharing their ideas and sharpen their mind ‘in the presence of the other’. The playfulness of the lessons, the game ‘MirrorMind’ being the high point, creates a challenging climate in a safe classroom to broaden their religious horizon. We recommend to monitor the possible change that is brought about by PIREd and ‘MirrorMind’ with the help of the research instrument ‘&I/&You’. More research is needed to explore the suitability of the PIREd module, the game ‘MirrorMind’ and the self-analysis instrument ‘&I/&you’ in other contexts than the Dutch context.

‘Each new generation grows into an old world’, Hannah Arendt states in her essay ‘The crisis in education’ and she continues, ‘so that to prepare a new generation for a new world can only mean that one wishes to strike from the newcomers’ hands their own chance at the new’ (Arendt [1954] 1968, p. 174). Educators must introduce newcomers into the world, transmit existing knowledge about culture(s) and religion(s), as a stepping stone for the creation of a new world—work-in-progress for ‘&I/&you’.
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References


