Article

The Appropriation of Symbolic Language in Worldview Education through Bibliodrama

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Abstract: One of the main questions regarding Dutch primary education in our secularised and religiously diverse society—both with regards to public and religiously-affiliated schools—is how to get students acquainted with the symbolic language of religious and worldview-affiliated life narratives. Teaching literacy in symbolic language has become less important in the education programmes of modern-day primary schools. The dominance of scientific descriptive language is evident in the majority of contemporary curricula. This language may be highly important for teaching mathematics and science, but for religious and cultural education, and for teaching art and history, symbolic language is the vehicle for acquiring knowledge, insight, and wisdom. Our aim in this article is to reflect on the idea that stimulating symbolic speech in primary school education through role playing, will bring out the sensitivity of current-day students to confer meaning to life questions and life themes.

Keywords: symbolic language; philosophy of life; religious sources of meaning; metaphoric sensitivity; inventive imagination; role playing/bibliodrama

1. Introduction

How can we teach children the skills to develop their own life orientation in a society where the cultural climate is dominantly secular and, in some ways, hostile and biased towards religion and religiosity? Besides this dominance, the language that is used on a daily basis in education is particularly the language of information, description, argumentation, and facts. The language of experience, dreams and ideas, which is at the heart of religious, cultural, or psychological speech, will be heard in personal and private communication, but not in public interactions. In order to improve the use of symbolic speech in religious education offered by primary schools in our secular age, we will advocate for a prominence to be placed on symbolic language acquisition in contemporary curricula for primary school education. Two questions require answering: (1) How can we improve the learning and appropriation of symbolic language by students of primary schools? (2) How can we support teachers in primary schools in coaching students in metaphoric literacy in the context of worldview education?

Our goal in this article is to explore the following statement: When primary school pupils learn to read and interpret the symbolic language of religious or cultural resources in an interactive way—and with the help of role-playing/bibliodrama—they will be able to confer meaning to life questions and life themes. This process of making meaning will have a deep impact on the journey they make in developing their own worldview and personal lifestyle (also socially). The text is structured as follows: Section 1 introduces the playful approach to religious stories called 'bibliodrama', in which insight can be gained into the way young people use symbolic language. In the section that follows, we construe a theoretical framework to describe exactly how symbolic language works and how new generations become acquainted with it. By proceeding in this manner, we acquire insight into the concepts of

metaphoric sensitivity and inventive imagination. This is followed by an intermezzo, in which we present an example of working with bibliodrama to make the readers more conscious of what is at stake. In Section 3 we present some materials and methods for working with bibliodrama in relation to religious texts, and we introduce the religious text used in this article, the Book of Esther (a part of the Hebrew Bible). The Esther story is one of many narrative and poetic texts of the Bible, which are useful in bibliodrama. For more information about the Esther narrative, see Section 3. In Section 4 we give some examples of how to work with the characters of this religious text through the use of role-play/bibliodrama. Finally, in the last Section, we reflect on the process through which young people appropriate symbolic language, and consider the ways in which this process is stimulated and facilitated by coaches.

In what follows, we will clarify and verify the above statement with some examples of a creative dialogical learning process undertaken by primary school pupils, through interaction with the symbolic language of religious stories and their teachers. Bibliodrama is a perfect tool for triggering and enhancing the process by which pupils confer meaning on religious or cultural resources [1]. Bibliodrama is a way to experience the dynamics of a religious or cultural narrative by taking on the roles of characters from such a narrative [2]. By assessing the interaction of certain roles around certain chosen events (role playing), the process of meaning-making and discovery of meaning is expected to start. At the same time, role playing covers a wider and more open domain than bibliodrama. Every form of bibliodrama is based on the interactions between roles taken from a religious story that participants play, and constitutes a search for the meaning of life themes and life questions, embedded in such a story. In the process of a bibliodrama, the participants deliberately look for the meaning and sense between roles in the framework that a moral and spiritual loaded narrative will evoke. A bibliodrama allows students to discover the symbolic language of cultural source-narratives, such as the Bible, next to bibliodans, creative writing and making music.

First, we will elaborate on an example from our practice as leaders of bibliodrama sessions to make it clear that teachers themselves need to develop a renewed sensitivity for symbolic language. Without such a revitalised awareness, teachers cannot coach the learning process of students on their journey to a personal worldview. We indicate how pupils practiced the appropriation of the symbolic language of the Book of Esther by means of role playing. To coach the process of role playing in the classroom, teachers familiarised themselves with some forms of role playing from the repertoire of bibliodrama, as it has been practiced in the Netherlands over the past thirty years [3,4]. For the majority of students, role playing is an open and inviting way to come into dialogue with an example of cultural artefacts out of a tradition. In that sense, role playing does have a broader scope than bibliodrama. This form is specifically developed for learners to find out their own stance on examples of cultural/religious source-narratives from different traditions.

The practicing of symbolic language in schools gives students the opportunity to express their response to a life event in a narrative, and to enter into a dialogue with each other, with the teacher, and with the story. Their different responses support them in the articulation of their own dreams, ideals, and desires in symbolic language—in relation to the story role they have taken on. Acting in this way, they learn to share their experiences, dreams, and desires in their life with other students and with their teachers in order to give meaning to these experiences. Schools need to provide more space for the articulation and sharing of the playful, poetic, and creative practice of symbolic language, through which students discover their own worldview and their own lifestyle. Teachers, in turn, become competent by coaching and accompanying this process of emerging symbolic awareness and literacy on the part of their students.

The authors of this article are experienced in, and draw inspiration from, the practice of role playing/bibliodrama. Bibliodrama forms a special way of conducting an intense dialogue with a biblical narrative—or a narrative from another religious tradition—through the technique of taking on one of the story roles, in order to explore the living dynamics of the narrative [5]. By exploring the role in interaction with other role players, the participant possibly experiences something new

in the trialogical interaction with others, his/her inner world, and a spiritual question or life theme that is addressed in the narrative. From the life philosopher Martin Buber we learn that you never approach a 'resource of wisdom' as an object, but as a subject that addresses you and invites you to respond with a personal, articulated answer [6]. Following this idea, we see a range of possibilities for working with rich 'resources of sense' [7]—from different religious and cultural traditions—in role playing/bibliodrama in the classroom.

When students—and also their teachers, who undergo their own development—get better acquainted with symbolic language, they will find more creative ways to discover the rich and layered meanings of cultural, historical, and religious resources [8]. The symbolic language embedded in a creative artefact evokes a world of images, associations, and allusions, and learners can develop the sensitivity required to connect with the power of figurative language through their emotions, imagination, intuition, and cognition. All pupils in primary schools in the 21th century should learn two kinds of languages: The language of information, which is the language of the dominant culture of economy, business, science, ecology, and politics, and the language of experience, practiced in the subculture of education, which is the language of care, arts, worldviews and religion. Schools, colleges, and universities have the public task of creating a special learning environment in which students practice the appropriation of both languages to understand the rich physical and cultural world outside of them, as well as the world of experiences, emotions, dreams, desires, and beliefs within them [9]. These two worlds meet in the in-between world—the world that education creates every day in the dialogue space between learners, resources, and their inner worlds. This encounter of three worlds can challenge students, their peers, and their teachers in their development process to become wise and social human beings who can find their place in life, and take the responsibility of others and the shared world.

2. A Conceptual Framework

For the development of this article we describe two important concepts that are further explored in a publication of one of the authors [10]: Metaphoric sensitivity and inventive imagination.

2.1. Metaphoric Sensitivity

Narratives have their own distinct language. In narrative theory, the language is called metaphoric language [11,12]. Metaphoric language plays with the space that can be found between the literal and figurative meanings of words, such as 'source' and 'tree'. In a narrative, language is used in such a way that the actual reality is described, while an imaginative reality is evoked, forming a meaningful coherence. According to Ricoeur, a metaphor has the power to rewrite the visible and imaginable reality [13]. Metaphors, in his view, are an expression of a working imagination. The figurative language of a narrative invites readers or listeners to respond authentically within their own environment, evoking their imagination.

As Ricoeur puts it, listeners and readers of religious narratives move, in their associative interpretations, unconsciously 'from the work of imagination in the text to the work of imagination about the text' [14]. Primary school pupils who engage in a dialogue with a religious narrative, must learn how to read, understand, and interpret the specific figurative language of this narrative. This requires the development of sensitivity to metaphoric language. Based on the assertions made about the figurative language of religious narratives, we can determine that the activation of sensitivity to metaphoric language is an important condition of familiarising children with a traditional, religious narrative. In 1997, the philosopher and educationalist, Kieran Egan stated that young children are in fact capable of thinking and speaking metaphorically, the latter being defined as 'metaphorising' [15]. Egan believes that our current ways of learning and teaching—more than is the case today—need to challenge students to activate their imagination in their exploration of the rich reality.

According to Egan [16], children aged nine to ten, in their encounter with religious narratives, are capable of becoming sensitive to various aspects of religious narratives, as described in the introduction.

They can learn to identify characters through their actions and speech, learn to identify the selection of actions and events involved in the plot, and also the specific stylistic characteristics of religious narratives, such as key words and existential themes that turn a religious narrative into a 'proposal for meaning' [13].

2.2. Inventive Imagination

In his hermeneutic philosophy, Ricoeur was particularly interested in the open spaces between the world of the narrative and the world of the reader or listener: 'The world which can be revealed through text will be deployed before the text' [17]. Each narrative contains these open spaces, which can be filled in [18]. Moreover, each narrative also contains signals that can serve as road markings for the reader. The 'inventive imagination' in a narrative, which is a trait of the story itself, is *what brings potential meanings* to light. 'Interpretative imagination', on the other hand, is the means through which the reader/listener is able to turn this meaning into a 'source of meaning'. To understand and comprehend the narrative, these open spaces between the world of the narrative and the world of the reader/listener need to be filled in step-by-step, by deploying interpretative imagination. Imagination as an *imagination productrice,* thus plays an important role in the *configuration* of a (religious) narrative [13]. More specifically, imagination as interpretative imagination, plays an important role in the *refiguration* carried out by the readers/listeners, because as an audience, they can only acquaint themselves with the narrative through a *creative interpretation* of the actions performed by the characters in the world of the narrative, and by transferring this interpretation to their own life world.

Following in Ricoeur's footsteps, the philosopher Richard Kearney [19] seeks to conceptualise the effect of imagination in relation to (religious) narratives. He describes his outlook as 'a model of poetical-ethical imagination' [19]. By means of this model, Kearney aims to transcend the two extremes of the pre-modern paradigm (prevalent until the Renaissance) and the modern paradigm (prevalent between the Renaissance and the First World War). The one-sidedness of the pre-modern paradigm lies in the fact that there is no room for human creativity, because of the predominance of a higher power. The one-sidedness of the modern paradigm, according to Kearney, is the tendency to solely recognise the autonomous individual as a source of meaning-making, and to deny any kind of external authority. With his poetical-ethical model, Kearney wants to do justice to the autonomy of human individuals (subjects), who develop themselves by making personal choices in the interaction with sources of meaning, or with other individuals in a concrete context.

2.3. Imagination as an Exploration of Possibilities

Based on her analysis of the work of such authors as John Dewey and Iris Murdoch, Hans Alma concludes that imagination cannot be properly described as an intrapsychic capability, but rather as a mental dynamic that allows humans to see reality as a field of possibilities. Alma believes that imagination can therefore best described as a 'process of perceiving, remembering, experimenting and anticipating unprecedented possibilities'. After exploring the literature of philosophy and developmental psychology, Alma coins the following provisional working definition of imagination: 'A personal and emotionally involved exploration of possibilities that exceeds the boundaries of the strictly factual' [7].

2.4. An Imaginative Approach to Learning

In the 1980s and 1990s, Kieran Egan developed a theory about narrative and imaginative learning and teaching, which he called the 'imaginative approach'. He affirmed this theory in the research that led to his publication *The Educated Mind* in 1997—research, which he further refined in the following years, through numerous studies on the development of a narrative and imaginative curriculum. This innovation of both theory and practice led to new initiatives across the globe, in which the student as a subject of investigative, dialogical, and creative learning is centralised [16].

According to Egan, children think metaphorically. The perception and interpretation of reality, and the dialogue that is conducted as a part of it, are realised through the use of cognitive skills that are formed in the 'spoken language phase'. These skills, such as 'mentally picturing' and 'emotionally understanding a metaphor', emerge out of the hearing process and the process of learning to express oneself in everyday spoken language. In this 'mythical' phase, according to Egan, the cognitive skills of the next 'romantic' phase are already in place. These second-order skills are developed as a result of learning how to read and write symbolic signs. By deploying these skills, children gain access the symbolic world of writing, visual, sound, and movement. Egan believes that, in Western civilisations, children become 'culturally literate' between the ages of eight and fifteen. During this time, they learn to use a system of symbolic signs more or less fluently in a variety of situations. The cognitive skills and capacities of the previous phase remain intact and active during this phase of 'increasing symbolic literacy'.

2.5. Intermezzo: A Workshop for Principals of Primary Schools—Becoming Sensitive to Symbolic Language through Playing Bibliodrama

In November 2017, the authors of this article (Van den Berg and Fortuin-van der Spek) organised a bibliodrama workshop for principals of primary schools, with the goal of making these professionals sensitive to the power of symbolic language. The title of the workshop was: 'Bringing a valuable source of meaning to life'. The principals were invited to reflect on the question: Which cultural and religious narratives are important for the development of primary school pupils? In a bibliodrama session, an encounter with the characters from a religious text was put on stage. We approached the story as a subject, not as an object. With body and soul, the participants experienced the power of a living encounter with a 'source of wisdom'.

We started with an introduction to the Book of Esther (a narrative from the Hebrew Bible). The plight of the Jewish people, who were forced to live outside their own country in exile, was sketched. For the workshop we chose to focus on a critical moment in the lives of Mordecai and Esther, a situation where a religious life theme is at stake—to bow or not to bow down before another human being. This theme is linked to the worldview of the characters in the scene. We examined how Mordecai and Esther's perception of the act of bowing down could be explored by pupils in the twenty first century primary schools, in relation to the life situations that these children are themselves dealing with. What would you do in such a critical moment? We began the workshop by giving examples from our own lives or work at school. The instruction was: Tell us about a critical moment that arose during your work. What was the situation? What did you do, and why did you choose to act in that way at that time?

Before starting to read chapter 4 from the Book of Esther, we explained the social, cultural, and religious situation that the characters find themselves in [20]. Esther is the young queen of King Ahasuerus, but because she is not allowed to present herself to the king unsummoned, arriving without an invitation could mean death. Mordecai, Esther's cousin, is a critical man and has previously refused to obey the law, by not bowing down before the king's prime minister, Haman. With the group we read the text of Esther 4: 1–17 out loud, asking the participants which part of the text touched them during the reading.

In the next step, everyone read Esther 4: 1–8 slowly. Following this, the participants were asked to close their eyes, imagine the situation, and after a few minutes, to make their mood impression of the situation Mordecai finds himself in, by drawing lines and colours. After a few minutes, the participants shared their mood impressions in pairs, and spoke about Mordecai's situation. In a third step, we asked them to read Esther 4: 9–14 in a special way, using the so-called 'I-reading' technique, where wherever you read 'Esther', you read 'me'/'I' instead. For example 4:9: '*And Hatach went and told* (Esther) *me what Mordecai had said*'. 4:10: '*Then* (Esther) *I spoke to Hatach and commanded him to go to Mordecai*'. Subsequently, the participants were asked to imagine Esther writing about this situation in her diary, and to write a diary fragment from her perspective. Using this form, we prepared the

participants to take on the role of Esther. Taking on the role of a character from the story is elementary for bibliodrama. After writing a diary fragment from Esther's perspective, the participants shared their writings in small groups. In a fifth step, an open chair was used that was placed in front of the group. By providing a few clarifying examples, the participants were instructed to ask questions to Mordecai, Esther, or Hatach (for each person a different chair was used). Questions could be put freely and everyone was invited to come up with an answer, including the person who initially asked the question.

The dialogue between Mordecai and Esther can be played out in a more dramatic way. It is a very special dialogue, because the characters do not speak with each other directly. It is always the servant Hatach who transmits the message. The first step is to choose a moment from the dialogue. One option is to perform this fragment in small groups, using improvisational theatre: Esther in the palace, Mordecai outside and Hatach in the space in between. One person starts the dialogue. Esther and Mordecai can only speak with Hatach, while Hatach can move between them. After the performance of this micro drama, the participants step out of their role. They can speak about their experiences as people with their own identity and biography. In the sharing of, and reflecting on these experiences, they can talk about the manner in which a life theme from the narrative has touched their lives. This form of bibliodrama can just as well be used for texts from other religious traditions. If teachers develop their own experiences with religious stories in this way, they may unlock a world of wisdom packaged in the stories' symbolic language. By means of this example, we have demonstrated real forms of intense dialogue in symbolic language, and revealed a playground for improvisation—bodily, socially, and religiously. Bibliodrama represents an educational form of learning or for religion.

3. Materials and Methods

To conduct a bibliodrama, a bibliodrama leader must become familiar with the tools and instruments available. In this paragraph we present some of these materials and instruments, which were developed in workshops. Some of these instruments we used in sessions held with principals and teachers, to deepen their sensitivity for the 'language of experience'. This sensitivity is important for teachers who coach their students to improve themselves in the appropriation of symbolic language. Principals, in turn, need to understand why poetic or figurative literacy is a prerequisite for teaching, and for educating students to become good citizens in the world of tomorrow. Once again, the story used here, which challenges and touches all participants who practice symbolic language in a playful and creative way, is the Book of Esther from the Hebrew Bible [20]. Of course, other stories out of The Hebrew Bible or of other cultural source-narratives could have functioned in the same way.

3.1. The Book of Esther

The book of Esther is an example of a well-created novella from the 4th century BC that is a part of the Old Testament (Christian perspective) or Tenakh/Hebrew Bible (Jewish perspective). The story of the Book of Esther revolves around saving the Jewish people from persecution by the Persian Prime Minister Haman. The main characters are the young Jewish Queen Esther and her cousin Mordecai on one hand, and King Ahasuerus and his prime minister—and opponent—Haman on the other. The novella is composed as a story with lots of suspense, following a rhythm of steadily changing perspectives. It is a beautiful narrative full of symbolic language and life themes that students, teachers, and principals can discover, provided they become curious about, and sensitive to, the language of existential and spiritual life experiences. One of the themes in this cultural-religious story is the question: Will this young queen, helped by her nephew who doesn't live in the palace, succeed in exposing the opponent Haman, who plans to destroy the Jewish community?

The instruments we used in conducting bibliodrama-processes, as a role play around a scène of the narrative or an improvisation around an episode between two main characters (Mordechai and Haman for example) also helped us gather data for the analysis of the responses of students to utterances of actions of the characters in their interaction. So we made film fragments of the improvisations, made

descriptions of the dialogues and interactions of students taking up their roles, and analysed them as researchers afterwards. See for example the two written scripts of the two short improvisations in Section 4.

3.2. A Creative and Playful Learning Environment in which Teachers Coach Students in Discovering the Symbolic Language of the Book of Esther

In this sub-paragraph, we show how teachers have become aware of the voices of their students, in the process of appropriation of symbolic language. Primary school pupils develop their life view by immersing themselves in a valuable resource together, or by jointly exploring an important life question. Partly due to their training, and also out of love for their subject, teachers tend to be the ones speaking during class. Precisely in the case of a subject like worldview education however, the key is to invite the pupils to think for themselves and to invite them to articulate in their own words what they think or how they feel, for example, about the actions of a character in the Book of Esther. The transition from passing on subject matter to challenging one's pupils to explore a 'source of meaning' together, is a complex one. It is a complex transition in the sense that teachers need a lot of time and practice to become aware of their pupils' voices, needs, and questions in the domain of worldview education [21].

Teaching practice: Teachers feel fulfilled when they can pass on the subject matter to pupils. You can walk into a random classroom and notice that the teacher is busy giving voice to a subject. The space allotted to pupils to get to know a story from the Qur'an together, or to jointly reflect on a question like, why would people trust each other? is rather limited. When taking the time and space to allow pupils to give their opinions, teacher can make surprising discoveries about what pupils think or come up with.

Also, in relation to the process of guiding a bibliodrama, we have used descriptions of dialogues with questions and instructions of the accompanying teachers of the two classes in order to collect signals of emergent metaphoric sensitivity. For this aim, we also made films of the interactions between teacher and pupils around a salient topic in the story of Esther. A written dialogue about a question of a teacher and the different responses of the pupils is given in paragraph four. The responses and remarks of the teachers in their process of initiating and guiding a bibliodrama have produced a reservoir of different reactions and gave us as researchers a lot of materials to think about.

3.3. Playful Activities of Pupils in Grade Four to Practice the Use of Symbolic Language

We organised a two-week project with two primary schools, in which we invited pupils to engage in dialogue with scenes from the Book of Esther. Several instruments were used to generate data, containing expressions of symbolic language, by 9 to 10 year old pupils. Among these instruments were verbal 'provocations', based on the Book of Esther, which led to conversations held by the pupils, both amongst themselves and with the participation of the teacher, and written assignments that invited the pupils to produce visual and literary *creations* (drawings, symbols moulded from clay). In addition to these two instruments, we used forms of drama or role playing. These drama forms were taken from our repertoire that we developed, by conducting past bibliodrama sessions, both with young people and adults.

During the preparatory sessions, we developed in collaboration with the teachers a script for every day of the week, with attention for a special pedagogical form to invite pupils to access the dynamics and symbolic language of a scene from the Book of Esther. On the day that the teachers used the playful entrance to the Book of Esther, they practiced forms of drama, which they were familiar with, through their daily practice of teaching. In the example that follows, Miss Janine was familiar with the method of question-asking combined with including the pupils in role playing.

The pupils worked in teams of four—two boys and two girls—and sometimes also in pairs—a boy with a boy, or a girl with girl. In this publication, we limit ourselves to analysing a few playful

creations from the pupils' journey to discover the Book of Esther. For us as researchers, points of interest for the analysis of playful creations are:

- Pupils' own words and actions when taking on roles, versus the words and actions of characters in the scene.
- Pupils' own expressed ideas and emotions when taking on roles.
- The meaning pupils discover while interpreting the words or actions of a character.
- The meaning pupils discover in the interspace between a character's actions and the life world and inner world of a pupil.

Next to the playful creations, we have used different tools to gather relevant data, in order to find answers to our research question. For example, we have used every day we worked with the group 'comics', with a double row of drawings with text balloons. In the upper row figures and balloons of one of the main characters—in the case of the Ester story Esther and Mordechai—and in the lower row, the development of the personal view and interpretation of an action of one of the characters in relation to the life-theme.

These 'comics' have given us a lot of materials to reflect on in the process of analysing the data of the students.

4. Interpretation and Meaning Giving

Regarding our research results, we focus on our analysis of the interactions between teachers and pupils in the coaching process—looking for an entrance in the world of the Book of Esther—and of the activities of the pupils who engage in a dialogue with the characters from the Book of Esther through role playing [10].

4.1. The Emerging Sensitivity for Symbolic Language on Behalf of Teachers while Coaching Pupils in the Appropriation of Symbolic Language

Miss Janine is telling a story: 'Esther first lived with Mordecai, now at the palace. Mordecai misses her very much and makes the trip to the gate every day. Every day, he asks how Esther is doing. He hears two servants of the king exchanging gossip, whispering to each other. This happens another day, and what did he hear? The two servants are angry with the king, but hey, is he hearing this well? They want to kill the king!' Miss Janine asks the pupils: 'What would you do?'

Joanne: 'Tell the king'.

Mawjoed: 'Get help'.

Elize: 'Tell the king and fire them'.

Joram: 'Tell the king and sentence them to death'.

Janine: 'Is that punishment not too heavy?'

Joram: 'But don't they want to kill the king, too?'

Joanne: 'I would approach them and arrest them'.

Marjan: 'I would tell it to a chambermaid so that she can tell the king'.

Michiel: 'The palace has a front and a backside. Go in at the backside and tell the king. And call the police'.

Together, the pupils explore the story's character's range of possible actions. Seven possibilities are examined. In this way their perspective on the story is broadened: They discover meaning and sense while thinking and speaking about Mordecai's situation. In addition, they become a little bit more ethically sensitive through the questions asked by the teacher. The pupils start their own reflection because of two actions performed by Miss Janine: She presents the story in an interactive manner and asks a clear question at the right moment. Miss Janine offers the students all the space they need to

find answers together. Those answers are allowed to coexist peacefully. In addition, the dialogue example given above illustrates that Janine has been studying the symbolic language of the narrative. She knows well how the plot progresses, as demonstrated for example by her ability to portray the essence of a scene through her performance and questions. She converts her personal relationship with the dynamics of the story in her pedagogical actions, in this case by means of visual storytelling and by asking a good question at the right moment, like: 'What would you do?' Thirdly, she raises questions about a response of pupil Joram, with the effect that Joram and the other pupils become curious about the actions and statements of the character.

4.2. Students' Playful Responses to the Symbolic Language-Filled Scene from the Book of Esther

We witness two role playing sessions at a primary school, relating to the unmasking of Prime Minister Haman. Setting: Three pupils perform improvisation theatre in the classroom. The other pupils are sitting in a half circle around the scene. The theme of the improvisation is Esther who exposes Haman in the presence of King Ahasuerus.

Role playing session 1:

Setting: Esther is sitting in the middle with a beautiful robe and shawl. Haman sits at the right side, Ahasuerus at the left.

Roles: Haman: Jeremy; Ahasuerus: Nania; Esther: Shannon.

E: Starts crying and says: 'I'm Jewish'.

A: Walks away.

H: Falls before the feet of queen and says: 'I don't want to die'.

A: Comes back: 'You're the traitor!'

A: Leads Haman away and has him hanged.

Role playing session 2:

Setting: Ester and Ahasuerus are sitting together.

Roles: Ester: Zara; Ahasuerus: Tanja; Haman: Rachman.

E: 'Shall we invite Haman at our table?'

A: Nods. Queen Esther invites Haman to join them.

E: Haman comes over and she says: 'You're looking so handsome tonight'.

H: 'Thank you my lady'.

E: 'Will you have dinner with us?'

H: Nods. They eat in silence.

A: 'Do you want to tell me something?' (to Esther)

E: (Speaks softly): 'Yes,... I'm Jewish... and Haman would like to kill all the Jews'.

A: Walks away.

H. Falls on his knees and says: 'I didn't knew you were Jewish'.

A: 'Uhm . . . come with me'.

4.3. Reflection on the Role Playing Sessions, the Emotions and the Process of Meaning and Sense Making on Behalf of the Pupils

Role playing: in the first role playing session, the event of Esther bursting into tears gives the impulse for actions. Ahasuerus walks away. Haman falls on his knees before Queen Esther and begs for his life. Ahasuerus takes notice of this event and orders to have Haman hanged. In the second playing session, it is Esther's invitation to Haman to join her and the king for dinner that gives the impulse for actions. They eat and there is a long silence. In the middle of that silence, King Ahasuerus puts a question to Queen Esther. When Esther reveals who she is, Haman falls on his knees to beg for his life. King Ahasuerus leads him away when he returns to the scene.

Identifying emotions: In the first role playing session, Esther expresses emotion that she is Jewish (she cries). Haman expresses his fear to die, and King Ahasuerus gives voice to the unmasking of Haman: 'You're the traitor!' In the second role playing session, Queen Esther surprises Haman and the king by her statement: 'You're looking so handsome tonight'. Next, in a double step, she reveals that she is Jewish and that Haman is the villain. Remarkable in this scene is Haman's statement that he didn't knew that Esther was Jewish. King Ahasuerus' remark is special in the sense that he only says: 'Uhm... come with me'.

Meaning/sense making: Both in the first and the second role playing session, the pupils that take on the role of Esther discover that she is Jewish, and that in her position of queen she is very loyal to her people. Haman, on the other hand, has proclaimed a law that all the Jews in the country must be killed. The character of Haman becomes invested with meaning and sense for the pupils by giving expression to his fear of dying (role playing session 1), and his amazement about the fact that he did not know that Esther is Jewish (role playing session 2). King Ahasuerus acquires a double insight into the situation: He discovers simultaneously that Esther is Jewish and that Haman is harassing Queen Esther. The two pupils who play the character of the young queen, during their performance, get a sense of the courage it takes to come out for your loyalty to a certain minority group.

5. Reflection

We want to reflect on the insights we gained from the interpretation of the two descriptions analysed above—insights regarding the work of teachers, who accompany pupils in the process of becoming familiar with the symbolic language of religious and cultural resources, and regarding the playful expressions and responses of the pupils in their dialogue with the scenes and themes of the Book of Esther. We pay attention to signals of teachers, such as Miss Janine, during her interactions and improvisations with the pupils, and signals of familiarisation on behalf of the pupils, of both primary schools, while involved in their playful interactions and role playing. We interpret the findings concerning the pupils, in light of the two concepts 'metaphoric sensitivity' and 'inventive imagination', which helped us to become aware of, and sensitive to, the growth of symbolic literacy among primary school pupils. We pay attention to the relation between growth in symbolic literacy and increasing sense making abilities regarding religious narratives on behalf of the children.

5.1. Observations and Dilemmas Concerning the Sensitivity and Agency of Teachers

Observations: A teacher like Miss Janine who finds her way in the no-man's-land of pupil-orientated worldview education, sometimes experiences beautiful moments, for example, when a pupil gives an unexpected answer to a question. Teachers sometimes arrive at new actions, as demonstrated by Miss Janine in her interaction with her pupils (see page 9), by the way in which she draws attention to a story scene at exactly the right moment. And when teachers have a working knowledge of the cognitive and social capacities they call upon when interacting with their pupils, they are able to ask a correct question at the right moment, as Miss Janine demonstrates. This leads to powerful and beautiful learning for pupils and teachers. Further examples of situations can be found in a publication of one of the authors, about three projects, in which teachers did not know what to do, or did not understand why a class was not working [10]. On this occasion, the teachers discovered that they did not have

sufficient insight into the development of the pupils, particularly in moments when they were not able to perceive well what was happening in the group, and fell back on known and safe routines, due to uncertainty [22].

Dilemmas: In Miss Janine's teaching practice, different dilemmas can be recognised. The first can be described as whether or not to show guts or boldness in the no-man's-land of pupil-oriented worldview/religious education within a secular society. You enter that no-man's-land when, like Janine, you do not teach religious traditions, according to the book, but dare to go on an adventure with pupils. Where Janine succeeds in arousing the curiosity of the pupils, worldview learning starts. That space is fragile and valuable. Knowing how to create a space in which pupils can respond, which subsequently dominates the teacher's range of actions, requires modesty and insight. Is every teacher capable of facing this uncertainty, of not knowing beforehand how to act? What does a teacher primarily need to handle this? Sensitivity for the responses pupils want to give, making space for more silent pupils in the interaction process among them about the story involves and creating an atmosphere in the classroom that stimulates students to participate and to activate their imagination in order to make sense to an important episode of the story involved. It is this atmosphere that supports pupils to open their ears and eyes, not only for their own voice, but also for the voices of their peers. And that is the start of a shared process of co-operation, co-creation, dialoguing and co-reflection.

A second dilemma that can be seen in the example of Miss Janine concerns her knowledge of the worldview development of every pupil, which is noticeable in her style of question-asking. This knowledge seems to be of crucial importance in the decisions she makes in concrete teaching situations. When it comes to worldview/religious education, students develop themselves in the interplay between others and themselves, between cultural forms that are provided and their responses to them, and between their own perceptions and the imaginings they encounter in cultural and worldview/religious resources [23]. The condition for deep learning, which focuses on meaning-making, is the development of higher cognitive, creative, and social capacities, and abilities such as being able to project oneself mentally into someone or something, or the capacity to conduct a genuine dialogue with a (fictional) person or with a 'source of meaning' [7]. Miss Janine calls upon these capacities and abilities by her style of storytelling and question-asking. The educationalist and philosopher Kieran Egan [24,25] shows in his studies that the activation of the cognitive capacities to marvel, imagine, and think, and of higher cognitive, creative and social capacities such as dialogising, symbolising, philosophising, and role playing, is crucially important for the worldview development of students in both public and religiously-affiliated schools [22].

Emerging Sensitivity: First of all, it was noticeable that Miss Janine gradually became more sensitive to the pupils' own voices. The more experience she gained in letting the children play with the symbolic language of a religious story, the more sensitive she became to the pupils' own voices and the uniqueness in every pupil's contribution. She gained insight into the seven ways in which her pupils reacted to her questions about the Book of Esther. The more concrete her questions and instructions to the pupils became, the more powerful their voices resounded and the more their eyes started to shine.

Secondly, throughout the project, Miss Janine discovered and mastered new methods, which allowed them to give shape to student-oriented worldview education. They discovered that, as professionals, every creative method required them to draw on specific capacities, and to activate specific abilities. Miss Janine discovered the power of challenging students to come up with their own answers to a question. This required her to adopt a basic attitude characterised by open, flexible, and involved attention to what is taking place in the interaction between pupils and a life question, theme or source. This is an attitude, which prompted her to act more consciously and wisely in concrete teaching situations. Such an attitude required an openness, which led her to act inventively and assertively in such a way that pupils who hesitated, started to participate. Teachers who learn to act wisely, boldly, and inventively, in such situations dare to begin the search for meaning with students, and in that process learn to engage with students in a more flexible and natural manner. This process goes hand in hand with falling over and getting back up again, and every school deserves space and

time to let student-oriented worldview education emerge through teaching practice. In this playing room, teachers can develop into wise, bold, and inventive professionals by learning from their strong moments and moments of resistance.

5.2. Reflection on the Emerging Sensitivity of Pupils Regarding Use of Symbolic Language

We interpret the results of the analysis of the playful and dialogical expressions of the pupils (during two role playing sessions) from the perspective of the two concepts described in our conceptual framework: Metaphoric sensitivity and inventive imagination.

5.2.1. Discovering Sense and Meaning through Emerging Metaphoric Sensitivity

Sense and meaning were discovered and created by the pupils during moments when they felt invited to respond to the actions of the characters they were connected with, and when they were in a position to apply the narrative to their own reality. The more they familiarised themselves with existential themes from the Book of Esther after being invited to do so, and the more multilaterally they proceeded, the more concretely they were able to use the symbolic language of their character and were able to make sense of, and give meaning to, scenes of the Book of Esther on an individual an private level. This was particularly noticeable in the assignments, through which the narrative world came into direct contact with the topicalities of the everyday world that surrounds the students. In case of the Book of Esther, this occurred mainly in regard to three themes: The planned attack on the king, the courage shown by Queen Esther and her cousin Mordecai in their resistance of Haman, and the saving of the Jewish people from Persian aggression.

5.2.2. Discovering Sense and Meaning through Inventive Imagination

The characteristics of inventive imagination—the abilities to imagine, empathise and connect—are, looking back at the results of the data analysis, apparent in the interpretations made by pupils. The characteristics of inventive imagination become visible in the playful expressions of all the pupils, even if their personal interpretations of the symbolic language of the characters differ to varying degrees. We assume that these differences can be partly attributed, first of all, to different skill levels regarding the ability to express oneself in a dialogue with a scene from the Book of Esther. Secondly, we are probably dealing here with different levels of experience in the practicing of inventive imagination. Finally, these differences may possibly be attributed to the level of familiarity with symbolic language in general, both in its wielding and its interpretation. We expect that having more or less experience in the reading and interpretation of symbolic language—e.g., in films, television programs, games, and youth literature—plays a role in this. Accurate coaching of such a process is a matter of the utmost importance.

6. Conclusions

Our narrative research [26,27], enriched with analyses of the examples of role playing/bibliodrama cited above, shows that the pupils we accompanied are able to develop their own interpretations of a valuable narrative, and are able to familiarise themselves with the symbolic language contained in such a narrative by engaging in role playing/bibliodrama or another form of drama. The activation of their faculty of imagination appears to be a good catalyst for individual and collaborative sense and meaning-making. Varying degrees of experience and talent when it comes to visual, literary, or playful expressions, can account for the differing degrees to which students are able to make a personal sense of, or give personal meaning to, religious narratives.

We also gained insight into the religious/worldview development of each pupil at the primary schools in question. Few studies are available in which systematic research has been conducted into the development of the cognitive abilities of students in relation to religious/worldview education. Gaining more knowledge about the relation between the activation of the faculty of imagination and the process

of making sense of our culture's valuable resources, to make it possible for pupils and students of new generations to connect with the contents of these resources in an open and critical manner.

7. Further Research

We believe that further research, based on the following two questions, is desirable: How could the difference in familiarity with the symbolic language of religious narratives and its influence on students' sense and meaning-making of the Book of Esther—as an example of an existential and spiritual resource—be made more tangible? The same question we can put to other stories out of the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, or to cultural source-narratives in other religious and worldview traditions. How can the influence of sensitivity to symbolic language on the religious development of each individual student be made more tangible?

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