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Gerdien Bertram-Troost, Simone A. de Roos, Siebren Miedema

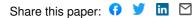**Institutions:** VU University Amsterdam

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Bertram-Troost, G.D.; de Roos, S.A.; Miedema, S.

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Religious identity development of adolescents in religious affiliated schools. A theoretical foundation for empirical research

Gerdien D. Bertram-Troost[a]; Simone de Roos[a]; Siebren Miedema[a]
[a] Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, The Netherlands

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Religious identity development of adolescents in religious affiliated schools. A theoretical foundation for empirical research

Gerdien D. Bertram-Troost*, Simone de Roos and Siebren Miedema
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, The Netherlands

The question, how religious affiliated schools for secondary education shape religious education and what effects this education has on the religious identity development of pupils, is relevant in a time when the position of religious affiliated schools is highly disputable. In earlier empirical research on religious identity development of adolescence, hardly any attention was paid to the theoretical framework of this question. Therefore, connections are sought with the identity theory of Erikson and with operationalizations of his theory by Marcia and others. The key concepts are 'exploration' and 'commitment'. Religious identity development is seen from a pragmatic perspective in which the transactional relation of individuals and environment is stressed.

Introduction

In The Netherlands, more than 50% of the schools for secondary education are Christian. However, the interpretation schools give to this religious identity is very diverse. Therefore it is impossible to speak about Christian education in general (de Wolff *et al.*, 2003). Until now hardly any attention has been paid in research to the effects of religious education in schools on the religious identity development of adolescents. Before empirical research can be carried out, it is important that suitable measuring instruments are found or developed. These instruments should attune to the theoretical interpretation which is given to the most important concepts of the research. Especially this last aspect, a good theoretical embedding, is

*Corresponding author. Department of Theory and Research in Education, Faculty of Psychology and Education, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Van der Boechorststraat 1, Amsterdam, 1081 BT, The Netherlands. Email: gd.troost@psy.vu.nl

missing in the occasional empirical research in this domain (see Alma, 1993; Braster & Zwanenburg, 1998).

One of the goals of the research which is described in this article, is to acquire knowledge of how one could gain more insight into the role of worldviews in the lives of youth and which (school) factors possibly influence these worldviews. We built up a theoretical framework in which the concepts 'identity', 'development' and 'worldview' are used in such a way that justice is done to more recent insights in, for instance, developmental psychology (as for example with the concepts 'development' and 'identity') and in sociology (as for example with the concept 'society'). With respect to this last aspect: in a plural and secularized society the function of a worldview is different from the role it once had in a segregated society which dominated social arrangements in The Netherlands until the sixties of the twentieth century (Rietveld-van Wingerden *et al.*, 2003).

In this article attention is paid to the following questions: 'What can be understood by 'identity'?', 'When can we speak about development?' and 'What is an adequate connotation of the concept "worldview" (religiosity)?' After these central research questions have been discussed, we will go further into the question of how a theoretically well-founded interpretation of the concept 'religious identity development' can be related to empirical research into religious identity development of adolescents and the role school plays or can play in relation to this development. The main focus of this article is, however, to lay a theoretical foundation for research on religious identity development of adolescents.

Identity

Since Erik Erikson's work *Identity, youth and crisis* (Erikson, 1968), identity development has been one of the main issues in the psychology of adolescence. Erikson defined identity as the most important developmental task of adolescence. However, this does not mean that he formulated a clear definition of 'identity' himself. Erikson used the concept in many different ways and highlighted different aspects, so distorting the internal consistency of the term. Bosma and Graafsma (1982, p. 8) claim that in their view the shortest definition of identity by Erikson runs as follow: 'Identity is the experience of self-sameness and continuity of one's existence in time and space and the perception of the fact that others recognize one's sameness and continuity'. We will come back to this definition later.

The main premises of Erikson's theory are grounded in the psychoanalytic paradigm. In comparison to Freud, Erikson puts much less emphasis on urges. He expands Freud's theory with attention to inter-psychological processes and considers development from a broader social perspective. Erikson focuses mainly on psychosocial identity. Consequently, he starts from a holistic-organic view (Verhofstadt-Deneve *et al.*, 1995), and pays a good deal of attention to the context in which development takes place. In Erikson's theory eight phases can be distinguished. Every life phase sets men before a certain 'conflict'. The way the individual solves this conflict ('crisis') influences the way one considers the next set of life tasks. In adolescence (the fifth phase

in Erikson's model) identity formation is the most important developmental task. A successful identity development results in commitments or bonds. It is not only the fact of whether young people bind themselves or not, that should be taken into account, but also the way in which the bonds come about (with or without exploration) is important. As in every phase of Erikson's model, there are two possible outcomes of the 'conflict': a positive outcome and a negative outcome. The outcome of the identity conflict is either identity or identity diffusion.

Due to the fact that Erikson used the concept 'identity' in many different ways, it is very difficult to get a good grip on his work and to come to an operationalization of 'identity'. Many researchers in the field of 'identity' are inspired by Marcia's identity status paradigm (Marcia, 1980). This paradigm formed the foundation on which operational definitions of the concept 'identity' could be constructed (Berzonsky & Adams, 1999). Marcia distinguishes in his definition of identity three aspects: structural, phenomenological and behavioural aspects (Marcia *et al.*, 1993). Because the behavioural aspect refers to the observable components of the identity formation process, this aspect is most important in Marcia's further elaborations. According to Marcis—in imitation of Erikson—on the behavioural level 'identity' refers to the exploration of alternative possibilities and the final choices made. In Marcia's paradigm, commitment and exploration are very important. On the basis of these criteria Marcia describes an identity model which he first uses to reflect on vocational and ideological identity (policy and religion). In this, exploration represents a period in which an adolescent is choosing between meaningful alternatives. Commitment represents the connection to a specific combination of goals, values and ideas (Marcia, 1988, in Schwartz, 2001). The four identity statuses described by Marcia are:

- *Identity achievement* (after exploration a choice has been achieved).
- *Foreclosure* (a choice has been made without clear exploration).
- *Moratorium* (no choice has been made but there is exploration).
- *Diffusion* (no choices, no exploration).

Marcia has developed the identity statuses as a methodological instrument with which Erikson's theoretical notions on identity development could become subject of empirical study (Marcia, 1980).

Over time Marcia's identity statuses have been severely criticized. A central aspect in the discussion is the question of the extent to which the identity statuses sufficiently represent Erikson's identity construct. Aside from this, there has been discussion of the extent to which the statuses are actually useful in describing development (see for instance *Developmental Review*, 19, 1999, which completely focused on discussions about identity and identity development). We will go further into the discussion about the identity statuses in relation to the concept of development in the next section of this article. Now we will briefly illustrate some aspects of the discussions on the relation between Marcia's identity statuses and Erikson's identity theory.

Different authors have argued that Marcia's identity statuses under-represent Erikson's identity theory: the identity statuses are too narrowly defined to include fully the concept of identity as Erikson uses it. van Hoof (1997, 1999) suggests that

Marcia seeks to make a connection with the psychoanalytic perspective in his defini-tion of identity, whereas in the identity statuses the relation between individual and society is stressed. Moreover, Marcia does not elaborate on the structural and phenomenological aspects (like selfsameness and continuity), which are prominent in the definition which Bosma and Graafsma consider to be the most concise definition of identity of Erikson. By focusing on the identity statuses, Marcia stresses the behav-ioural aspects. Emphasis is put on the question if, and if yes, in which way (with or without exploration) the adolescent has made social commitments in relation to several domains. van Hoof states that the crucial aspect of identity, namely the intra-psychic processes, finds insufficient support if identity is measured solely with the help of the identity statuses. In her own research van Hoof (1997) focuses on the structural integration of identity. This means that she stresses continuity in time and space. In this way van Hoof tries to link up (more strongly than the identity statuses of Marcia could do) with Erikson's notions on continuity.

It is Bosma's (1985) contention that Marcia's statuses model approaches the main line of reasoning of Erikon's theory quite well. In his research Bosma elaborates on Marcia's descriptions of exploration and commitment. But in contrast to Marcia who focuses on the question of whether there has been exploration before commitments are made, Bosma points to actual commitments and explorations. Bosma expands Marcia's research domains by focusing on actual commitments and explorations of adolescents in the field of religion (politics, religion, values), parents, friendships, school/(future) vocation/leisure time, personal qualities (appearance, sex, personal-ity) and close relations. In contrast to Marcia, Bosma does not use a division of four scales on the basis of commitments and exploration. With the help of factor-analysis Bosma uses two scales for commitment: a scale which represents feelings of comfort, support and direction that a bond provides, and a scale which represents an identifi-cation with this bond. In addition, he uses two scales for exploration: a scale which measures the orientation towards other people in the process of exploration and a scale which measures the attempts to form another bond. Bosma favours the use of these scales over the use of identity statuses, because the identity scales are more attuned to intra-individual changes than the original identity statuses model. This way of measuring is also more helpful to research on identity development. By scru-tinizing several domains and examining for each domain what is important to the adolescent, Bosma pays more attention to the content of commitments and explora-tions than Marcia does.

Meeus (1996) and Meeus *et al*. (1999) have elaborated Bosma's measurement instrument. They have used the most robust items of Gids and developed a short ques-tionnaire (*U*-Gids) to be able to measure actual commitments and explorations rela-tively easily with the help of items on a 5-point scale. An important difference with Marcia's identity statuses is that by means of the measurement instrument of Meeus *et al*. one can speak about the degree of commitment and exploration instead of the presence or absence of commitment and/or exploration. With the help of the *U*-Gids of Meeus *et al*. it is therefore easier to trace intra-individual development through repeated measurement. With this approach, we arrive at the concept of 'development'.

Therefore, we will now pay attention to the relation between Marcia's identity statuses and development, and to the question of what should be understood by 'development'.

Development

It is important to mention first that Marcia has changed his opinion on the relationship between identity statuses and development over time. Originally, Marcia considered the identity achievement status as the final stage of development. It was his contention that the statuses could be placed on a developmental continuum. However, in his later work he has added more nuances to his account. Already in 1976 Marcia concluded from a follow-up study: 'The theoretical anomaly of Identity Achievement and Moratorium subjects moving into the Foreclosure status has led to the suggestion of a process, as opposed to a typological, approach to identity' (Marcia, 1976, p. 145). He also found that one can experience several phases of crisis and that choices need to be made on several domains (Marcia, 1980; Marcia, *et al.*, 1993). Where Marcia originally interpreted the identity statuses to be static, in his later work he places the statuses more in a lifespan perspective. The identity process could be interpreted more adequately as a spiral than as a linear development (Marcia, 1980; Stephen *et al.*, 1992). Stephen *et al.* show that a well developed identity structure is flexible. From a stage perspective on development, which claims that there is a universal developmental pattern, it is hard to understand that people, for instance, fall back after a period of identity achievement into the status of foreclosure. In their article, Stephen *et al.* go further into the question of how a certain developmental course can be explained. They show that a reformulation of the identity statuses in terms of a lifespan perspective can provide an explanation. In their contribution they see development as a process with, on the one hand, exploration and openness to change and on the other hand commitment and the need to maintain structure. An identity process which they call Mama-cycle takes place: moratorium and achievement take turns. It is constantly about finding a balance between the maintenance of identity and an openness toward changes of identity in reaction to the (changing) world around the individual. Individual and context are therefore strongly related in such processes. Further, identity development is placed in a dynamic perspective. In comparison to the classical perspective on development, an open dynamic perspective on development can be combined much better with a vision of identity whereby more attention is paid to the interaction between context and individual.

Although Marcia has changed his view on identity statuses over time, many researchers in the research domain of identity development mainly rely on the earlier view of Marcia. At this point we will reflect briefly upon aspects of this discussion. van Hoof (1999) argues that in the research field contradictory claims have been made as far as the relation between identity statuses and identity development is concerned. It is her contention that if the statuses are no developmental stages, and researchers of identity statuses continue to believe the statuses to be useful in describing development, the statuses should at least be described as phases of development. It is van Hoof's view that in order to be a 'phase of development' the statuses must

describe different modi of identity in which one follows from the other. Moreover, there must be more or less fixed shifts in relation to the order in which the phases appear. Her own review study shows that for the identity statuses the level of stability is not high. Further, van Hoof shows that changes in identity statuses when growing older or when moving to a higher grade only appear to a small degree. Because there is no desired direction of identity development from a functional point of view, and therefore also no orientation point as a *telos* for development, it is difficult to compile a coherent developmental theory. van Hoof considers the approach of Kunnen and Bosma (2000), in which the degree of commitment and exploration is situated in a dynamic, mathematical model that might tackle these problems, very promising. We will come back to this approach of Kunnen and Bosma later.

Bosma (1985) is also critical of the statuses model as developmental model. This is not regarded as a reason to stop using Marcia's elaboration on Erikson's theory. On the basis of Marcia's theory, Bosma also tries to develop a model for describing identity development. In doing so he focuses on three aspects: the content of commitments, the degree of commitments and the degree of exploration. In identity development as Marcia defines it, these three components are seen to have an essential place: 'Identity development can be defined as the totality of changes in the content and strength of commitments and the amount of exploration in the achievement and change of these commitments' (Bosma, 1992, p. 99). Where it was originally Bosma's contention that longitudinal research with help of the Gids could give important data on the course of identity development in adolescence, he later states that the Gids is principally a measuring instrument just like the identity statuses model of Marcia. The processes which lead to changes of commitments are not clearly grasped with the use of the Gids (Bosma, in Adams *et al.*, 1992). In his later work, Bosma has focused mainly on the question on ways in which insight can be given into the factors and/or mechanisms which play a part in development. Kunnen and Bosma (2000) prefer a quantitative dynamic system model to be able to describe the outcome of the process of meaning making which is dependent on many variables and which can be seen as part of (religious) identity development. They stress that their model of meaning making is speculative, but at the same time it is much more specific and more detailed than pure descriptive theories, because the model gives better insight into the strength of the connections between different factors in the model.

All in all there seems to be a broad consensus about the conclusion that the identity statuses are not specific enough to be used as a developmental theory. The opinion that there would be an unidirectional and teleological course in identity statuses is criticized. There is agreement on the conclusion that the statuses cannot be interpreted as stages or phases. There also seems to be agreement on the fact that more attention needs to be paid to the connection with environmental factors. Because an open, dynamic developmental perspective is more in line with the view in which importance is attached to the transaction between context and individual, in the present research a lifespan perspective on development is chosen. In the following section we pay attention to the starting points and backgrounds of a comparable lifespan perspective on development.

Starting-points and backgrounds of a lifespan perspective on development

Breeuwsma (1993) has described the differences between developmental psychology and lifespan psychology in great detail. In practice there is not always a clear distinction between a developmental theory and a lifespan theory, yet the theoretical starting points of both perspectives differ greatly. These starting points make clear that one can describe development in different ways. In comparison to developmental psychology, lifespan psychology is more concerned with specific influences on development (social and cultural) and pays more attention to the specific, idiographic development of the individual. These basic premises of lifespan psychology relate strongly to John Dewey's pragmatist view. Two of his central ideas are that human beings form a full part of the natural world and that the world is a world in development (Biesta & Miedema, 1999, p. 12)

On the basis of a number of issues, Breeuwsma (1994) provides insight into the differences between the notions of development and lifespan. One of these issues has to do with the dichotomy between open and closed models. In a closed model of development, all factors which could influence development are considered to be known. The assumption is that these factors have a uniform effect on development. That is the reason why development in a closed developmental model is in principle predictable. In an open model, however, development is defined by the interaction between contexts:

> An open model of development supposes that under influence of personal and/or environmental factors, new developmental conditions … can arise which cannot be predicted by the starting situation beforehand. … In a closed model the individual development mostly forms an unilinear and/or unidirectional process, whereby the interaction between the different contexts the organism is part of can't bring changes in the structure and direction of development. (Breeuwsma, 1994, p. 335)

A similarly open view on development in which chance—in the sense that causes of development are not always discoverable—plays a function, is in line with the views on (identity)development described by Stephen *et al.* (1992) and Kunnen and Bosma (2000). In the present research Marcia's theory is related to open, dynamic models of development in which the degree of commitment and the degree of exploration are used to describe the actual attitude of adolescents in relation to worldviews. Explorations and commitments can and will change over time. It differs from person to person in the extent to which, and at what time, these changes will take place.

Before we go further into what we understand by worldview and what can be understood by religious identity development, we will first elaborate the way a pragmatist perspective on development can be connected to a view on identity which has its origin in Erikson's identity theory. We also pay attention to what is understood by identity development in the present research.

Identity development in pragmatic perspective

The present research is based on aspects of Erikson's identity theory. In respect to the operationalizations of the concept of 'identity', we focus on Marcia's work. Marcia

emphasizes the relation between the individual and the environment. Commitment and exploration are very important from this point of view. Van Hoof (1997, 1999) pointed out that in Marcia's operationalizations less attention is paid to Erikson's notions of continuity of identity in time and space. With Berzonsky and Adams (1999) we think that there is no insuperable objection that the identity statuses stress certain aspects of Erikson's identity construct whilst leaving other aspects more or less out of consideration. In Erikson's work the concept of 'identity' is so extensive that it is impossible to arrive at one operationalization for all its aspects. As long as it is not claimed that this is the case, Marcia's operationalization of identity in terms of commitment and exploration is very useful. This is especially because the relation between individual and environment is stressed by focusing on the bonds with the environment or community which the individual experiences in several domains. However, with van Hoof (1997) it is our contention that the relationship between individual and environment gets attention from only one perspective. Commitment does refer to someone's relation with society, but does not say anything about society's recognition of this relation. So, Marcia does not speak about the transaction between individual and environment in the way a dynamic, pragmatic perspective on development does.

In the present research commitment and exploration are placed in a transactional perspective. Individual (here 'pupils') and context (here mainly 'the school') are fully interrelated through a constant transaction, they mutually influence each other. Erikson pays more attention to this transaction than Marcia does. He states that:

> … in discussing identity … we cannot separate personal growth and communal change, nor can we separate … the identity crisis in individual life and contemporary crisis in historical development because the two help to define each other and are truly relative to each other. (Erikson, 1968, p. 23)

These notions point to a constructivistic conception of identity which is comparable to a pragmatist view. The emphasis Erikson puts on sameness and continuity, however, points to an essentialistic conception of identity. Therefore, also ontologically speaking Erikson's theory is difficult to interpret.

In a constructivistic view of identity emphasis is put on the processes and the transaction between object and subject. Identity development is not seen as a process in which an already existing 'true self' is developed or actualized. From a constructivistic (pragmatist) point of view it is asserted that individuals construct both the image of who they think they are as well as of the 'reality' in which they act (see Berzonsky, 1990, p. 156). In the present research we make use of Bosma's definition of 'identity development' in terms of changing commitments and explorations. Accordingly we see 'identity' against the background of Berzonsky's description of identity: 'a self-constructed cognitive representation of oneself that is used to interpret self-relevant information and to cope with personal problems and life events' (Berzonsky, 1990, p. 156). Although no emphasis is put on continuity, a similar interpretation of the identity concept does not mean that the human experience of 'being one' is not taken into account: 'A consolidated sense of self-identity provides a subjective feeling of

inner wholeness and it offers an interpretive context within which questions about the "meaning", "purpose", "fit" and "direction" of one's life are answered' (Berzonzsky, 1990, p. 155–156). So, the perspective we take on identity does not ignore the experienced 'continuity in time and space', but remains ontologically speaking fully constructivistic.

Because the identity statuses did not appear to be useful in describing development, we give up—in line with, among others, Bosma—speaking about identity statuses. The actual commitments and explorations in relation to a worldview are central. Development is placed here in a lifespan perspective: Development is a lifelong multi-dimensional, multi-directional, multi-determined process. By changing commitments and explorations the individual de- and reconstructs his or her self-image. This image is subsequently used to process information and to deal with problems and situations.

Religious identity development and empirical research

Now that we have made clear what is understood by identity development and from which perspective this concept is approached, we will briefly explore the concept 'religious'. Religiosity can be seen as a very varied term, therefore we prefer to use the term 'worldview' here as its synonym. It is important (especially when using an open, dynamic perspective on development) to stress that one's worldview can change over time and is not always explicitly present. Therefore, the definition we use in our research runs as follows: 'A worldview is the system, which is always subjected to changes, of implicit and explicit views and feelings of an individual in relation to human life' (see also Andree, 1989; Leeferink & Klaassen, 2000; Miedema, 2003). 'Views and feelings in relation to human life' can refer to everything with which people can be occupied with and what can be important to them.

The starting point is that everyone has a worldview. This is stressed by using a broad definition. Because the definition is too long to integrate into a definition of religious identity development, we also make use of a 'stipulative definition' namely: 'A worldview is the way one looks at life'. Religious identity development can now be described as: 'The totality of the gradual change in the content and strength of commitments in relation to the way one looks at life and the amount of exploration in the achievement and change of these commitments'. In this definition, all the theoretical notions on identity, development and religion are combined. The definition and the theoretical framework on which it is founded form the starting point for an empirical research on religious identity development of adolescents and the way schools effect or may effect this development. In this last part of this article, we will pay attention to some main aspects of the empirical part of our research.

To get to know more about the way adolescents think about life and about the role worldviews play in their lives in term of commitment and exploration, a questionnaire was constructed. This questionnaire was distributed among pupils in the pre-exam classes of Havo (higher general secondary education) and VWO (pre-university education) of four Dutch Christian schools for secondary education. The four participating

schools vary in their location (urban *vs.* rural), pupil population (natives *vs.* non-natives, the proportion of pupils with a Christian background) and school size.

Categories of the questionnaire are: 'Thinking about life' (questions about the content of worldview), 'What do you think of it yourself?' (about the extent of commitment and exploration in relation to worldview); 'Activities dealing with the way you look at life' (including questions about prayer, church going, participating in other religious activities); 'parents/educators' (including questions about religious activities of the parents and the extent to which religion is important to them); 'time you were in primary school' (including questions about religious socialization during childhood); 'Worldview and second phase of secondary education' (with questions on how pupils evaluate religious education and to what degree they learn, according to themselves, certain things at school). The questionnaire is closed by some 'background questions' about age, gender etc.

By relating the religious commitments and explorations of pupils of the four schools to information which is derived from qualitative research in the form of interviews with school directors, teachers and pupils, we can detect (school) factors which are connected with religious identity development of adolescents. With the help of the information derived by the questionnaire, attention is also paid to the possible influence of the (religious) backgrounds of the pupils' parents and the way in which religion played a part during primary education. To gain more insight into the content of the worldviews of pupils, we make use of the research of Braster and Zwanenburg (1998). On the basis of this research several religious orientations can be distinguished (among others orthodox belief, belief in life after death and nihilistic world view). Next to this questions are asked in relation to commitments and explorations. These questions are derived from the *U*-Gids of Meeus *et al.* (1999). The *U*-Gids can be used to measure commitments and explorations in different life domains. In our research, questions are focused on 'the way I look at life'. The core of the statements is always the same and can be completed by filling in a specific domain. For instance: '*The way I look at life* gives me certainty for the future' (commitment) or 'I speak to others about *the way I look at life* regularly' (exploration). Apart from the items of the *U*-Gids, we also used items from the Gids of Bosma which are not used in the *U*-Gids. These items are presented in the same way as the items from the *U*-Gids (with a 5-point scale running from 'not right at all' to 'completely right') to get a more detailed view on the extent of commitments and explorations.

The theoretical interpretation which is given to the concept 'religious identity development' offers a fruitful perspective to go further into questions as: 'How do pupils in the second phase of secondary education relate to worldview in terms of commitment and exploration?' and 'What effects does religious education at school have on religious identity development of pupils?'. With the help of a questionnaire and qualitative research methods it is possible to gain more insight in the religious identity development of adolescents. Main question is whether differences in terms of religious commitment and exploration between pupils of the four participating schools can be explained by religious denominations of pupils and the importance the pupils' parents attach to worldview.

Although we can not elaborate extensively on the results of our empirical research here, because of the article's focus as mentioned in the introduction part, there are some remarkable findings to mention: We found for instance that in general (for the research group as a whole) the degree of religious exploration is lower than the degree of commitment. This difference is significant ($F(1) = 842,28$, $p<.001$). Besides we found significant differences between pupils of the four schools in relation to both the two scales for commitment and the two scales for exploration. These differences can, however, be explained by the religious denominations pupils count themselves to and by the importance their parents attach to worldview. Therefore it is concluded that school in general has no significant main effect on religious commitments and explorations of pupils. Religious backgrounds of pupils should be taken into account. Because pupils themselves do indicate that school has influence on the way they look at life, further research is needed in which specific school aspects (like the way pupils evaluate religious education) should also be taken into account.

In conclusion: firstly, the theoretical framework on religious identity formation of adolescents in a (denominational) school setting outlined in and forming the main focus of this article with the help of the core concepts 'identity', 'development' and 'worldview', offers in our opinion a fruitful foundation for empirical research. However, further (meta)theoretical discussion on this foundation is necessary due to the theoretical complexity of the issues at stake and is welcomed by the present authors. Secondly, some main aspects of the empirical part of our research presented here show that further research is needed too to be able and unravel the (inter)relationship between religious identity formation in terms of commitment and exploration in the family and at school.

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