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A rich palette of Bible use: A theoretical and empirical contribution from the context of Protestant Christian primary schools in the Netherlands

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to gain empirical knowledge about how the Bible functions in the context of Protestant Christian primary schools in the Netherlands. It presents the results of an empirical explorative and qualitative study on the perceptions of teachers and school administrators (directors and internal supervisors) on the goals of Bible use in Protestant primary education, as well as the roles of teachers and pupils, and how these can be understood in terms of religious pedagogical models and theories. Five small focus group interviews with teachers and six interviews with school administrators revealed a variety of goals teachers hold regarding Bible use in education and a variety of divisions of teacher–learner roles in this regard. The findings also show some particular characteristics when compared with secondary schools.

KEYWORDS

Bible, Bible didactics, Bible use, Biblical texts, religious education, school identity, teacher identity

1 | INTRODUCTION

In many European countries, for example, United Kingdom, Belgium, or The Netherlands, a graduated but major shift could be seen from denominational religious education to non-denominational philosophical education (Loobuyk et al., 2011, pp. 9–16). Despite this shift, the Bible remains in Christian teachings important as a source for

philosophical reflection and as a source from which values and norms are derived (Bertram-Troost et al., 2015). However, this shift also affects the use of the Bible in the class.

Bible use in the context of educational settings is an object of reflection, particularly in the discipline of Bible didactics. However, how the Bible functions in (Christian) education practices, in the international discourse on religious education in general, and in the Dutch context in particular has rarely been empirically investigated (see Valstar, 2008, pp. 74–99). Within the religious education literature, three religious pedagogical models can be distinguished. These models use the Bible in different ways (Valstar, 2008): (a) A model of explaining and applying Scripture and tradition in the here and now; (b) a model of explaining current life and existence, in which the Bible is a source; and (c) a model of reciprocal disclosure in which the aforementioned hermeneutical pathways of the models (a) and (b) are brought into conversation with each other. Here, the text and tradition confront the interpreting community. This confrontation is at the core of a meaning-making process in which there is both the possibility of rewriting one's own position in light of the tradition and of rereading the Biblical tradition from the perspective of one's own biography and actual experiences. This third model is often the prescriptive hermeneutical-pedagogical model in the recent theories of Bible didactics (cf. Roebben, 2016).

The purpose of our article is to gain empirical knowledge about how the Bible is functioning in the context of Protestant Christian primary schools in the Netherlands. Does this correspond with the models and what else could be said? The central research question in the current article is as follows: *Which goals and roles do teachers and school directors mention regarding Bible use in Protestant Christian primary education, and how can these be understood in terms of religious pedagogical theories?*

The educational system in the Netherlands is a dual system that, for a century, has had a system of government funding and monitoring for public and private (religious) education. This dual educational system is often also called a “pillarised system.” This means that “within each ‘pillar’ every school has its own culture, related to its ‘well-considered convictions’ such as implicit or explicit opinions about ‘the good life’, the ideal person, the ideal child, the good society, and what the transcendental or God is like” (Ter Avest et al., 2007, p. 209). There are many Christian schools, but there is also a lot of diversity within them. We focus on a variety of state-funded Protestant primary schools and how the Bible is functioning in these schools.

This research clarifies how teachers at primary schools in the Netherlands use the Bible and by this contributes to academic research on the educational reality of Bible use. Furthermore, the contribution lays in the fact that the present study is a diptych with our previous study on Bible use in secondary schools (De Kock et al., 2021). In the discussion section, we will describe some of the differences and similarities.

In our theoretical framework, we discuss some relevant religious pedagogical models. These are linked with designing religious educational learning environments in primary schools in terms of the goals of Bible use and role divisions among teachers and pupils in dealing with the Bible in education. The focus on the goals (e.g., cognitive and affective goals or goals in terms of skills) and roles of teacher and pupils in the teaching learning process (e.g., teachers being transmitters or facilitators and pupils being participants in practices), as elaborated on by De Kock (2014, pp. 264–286; 2015), are key factors of the learning environment.

2 | USE OF THE BIBLE IN PROTESTANT CHRISTIAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

For this theoretical framework, we reworked the theoretical paragraph of our article on secondary schools, in which we present the findings of our literature review on Bible use at schools. To find this theoretical background, we searched for relevant research articles published from 1995 on via searches in different databases, for example, Atla Religion Database, PsychInfo (psychological literature database), and Eric (Educational Resources Information Centre). Examples of keywords we used were the following English words in several combinations (as well as the German equivalents): Bible OR biblical text OR theologizing AND pedagogy OR didactics OR education. Because the research

was executed in a Dutch context, we also searched with Dutch keywords in some Dutch academic journals. For the present article, we filtered the articles that are specifically about primary schools and Bible.

Bertram-Troost et al. (2012) explained in an extensive study on protestant primary schools how “worldview, cultural and ethnic diversity”¹ is one of the four topics that matter for schools when they discuss what influences their school education these days. For most school leaders it “is not about memorizing Bible books or memorizing a song, but rather singing together and talking together about faith, and about what concerns you, and about trust. And how you shape a Bible story in today’s practice” (p. 20).² They distinguished in their survey list for school leaders what pupils have to learn from and about the Bible, and why. They distinguish two perspectives: “Bible and church are central,” and “meaning making” and “spiritual consciousness are central.” At what they call tradition schools, worldview education has more a Biblical character than at “diversity schools” and “meaning schools” (p. 36, 70). The heuristic classification of the three school models as well as overlapping models is complex to describe. One of the elements is the place of religious or faith formation as education goal at the schools. At the traditions schools this is more explicit and prominent than at the diversity schools, and at meaning schools “meaning making” is a central formative aim of worldview education (pp. 24, 26–27, 36). So, roughly said, worldview education in general has a more or less central place at the schools, and the Religious and Bible education is a central aim (a), or it is more about Christian values (b) (p. 37). Combinations are also made.

The educational potential or pedagogic characteristics of Biblical texts are discussed in the literature. An illustration here is the study by Shkedi (1997, pp. 65–76). Shkedi conducted in-depth interviews with Bible teachers in elementary, middle and high schools in Israel and in Jewish schools outside Israel. Teachers’ responses yielded six pedagogic characteristics of Biblical text (pp. 71–73): (1) The text as a carrier of a message about values/ethics; (2) the text as reinforcing the link between the Bible and the Jewish people, their past and culture; (3) the text as a means for developing thinking skills and general knowledge; (4) the text as the carrier of a message of faith and religious commandments; (5) the text as a means for developing Hebrew language skills; and (6) the text as a means for esthetic/artistic education. This shows a variety of educational aims in relation to the Bible. Shkedi concludes in this article that the teachers believe that the biblical text has significant potential for education. This is tense because the teachers simultaneously see a large gap between students and text—this ranges from lack of interest to not understanding the content. So the Bible has potential and at the same time there is a gap.

Using a case study approach, Keränen-Pantsu and Ubani (2018, pp. 136–151) studied the relevance Bible stories have for 10-year-old pupils in Finnish primary schools; this relevance was found in the areas of emotional, moral and religious relevance and partly depended on the kind of Bible story. This is relevant knowledge in light of the formative aspect of education. This formative aspect has been called personhood formation (see De Muijnck & Visser-Vogel, 2020, pp. 105–125) or character formation (see Sanderse, 2012).

Papen (2017, pp. 119–134) underlined one of the characteristics that Shkedi mentioned, namely that the Bible can also have relevance for children’s literacy learning. Papen studied the function of the Bible in worship, singing and Bible listening practices of 5- and 6-year-olds in a Catholic primary school and concludes that religious literacy practices contributed to children’s literacy learning by focusing on (emotional) meaning-making and by learning through participation (p. 119). Given the educational potential of the Bible and particular Biblical texts, teachers are faced with a variety of choices regarding designing learning environments in which the Bible plays a role and that can guide the teaching–learning processes in these learning environments. These choices can go, for example, in the direction of learning through arts (see Birch, 2005; Reingold, 2015), giving attention to the psychodynamic aspects of Biblical texts (see Schimmel, 1997, pp. 24–37) or the proclamation dimension of a text (see Ipgrave, 2013, pp. 264–281).

Orientations in teaching the Bible partly stem from teachers’ individual and collective ideologies. In their study on the teaching of culturally valued texts, Shkedi and Horenczyk (1995, pp. 107–117) focused on this concept of teacher ideology. Part of the teacher ideology is “teachers’ presuppositions regarding the importance and normative

¹Worldview is the translation of the Dutch word “levensbeschouwelijk.”

²English translation by authors.

value of culturally valued texts, as well as the way that these views should influence instructional practice ...” (p. 107). Shkedi and Horenczyk stated that in many instructional situations, teachers are confronted with dilemmas or conflicts within their ideological views on various levels (p. 108): conflicts and dilemmas “(a) within the teachers’ ideology in a given area (e.g., a specific subject matter), ...; (b) between aspects of the teacher’s ideologies from different areas (e.g., subject matter vs. perceptions of students) ...; (c) between the teacher’s ideology and the ideologies held by other participants in the educational setting (principals, parents, etc.); (d) between the teacher’s ideology and realistic constraints.” The authors concluded, “... it appears that the central conflict for the teachers is related to the tension between their perceptions of the text and their pedagogic conceptions of how it should be taught” (p. 116). Here, the tension between indoctrination (too much intervention of the teacher’s ideology), on the one hand, and objectivity (too little or no intervention), on the other hand, seems to be at stake. Shkedi and Nisan (2006) concluded, “It seems that when teachers display conflicting attitudes towards expressing their personal cultural ideologies, they give voice mainly to their pedagogical ideologies (...) and less to their personal cultural ideologies” (p. 719).

As far as we know, there is no explicit literature on teacher roles in relation to Bible use at (primary) schools. To a certain extent, they could be deduced from the aims of Bible use or educational roles. So, when transmitting Bible knowledge is an aim, the role of transmitting knowledge could be distinguished for teachers. Or when the focus is on the hermeneutical process, the role of hermeneut or translator might be taken by teachers. In our article on Bible use at secondary schools (De Kock et al., 2021), we discussed how Bible use also relates to the particular role of religious educators in school classrooms, such as Pollefeyt (2005, pp. 39–68), who distinguished between the religious educator roles of being a witness, being a specialist, and being a moderator. This is relevant theory when we analyze the roles of professional when it comes to Bible use.

3 | RESEARCH DESIGN OF THE EMPIRICAL STUDY

In our empirical study, we wanted to clarify how teachers in Dutch Protestant Christian primary education perceive the goals and roles regarding Bible use in their schools. We chose an explorative and qualitative research design. The ideas, convictions and choices of the teachers and school directors were central to the research. Focus group interviews with the teachers and school directors formed the basis for our data collection and analysis.

The empirical research was conducted in 2016 and was part of the research project in which data were collected in both primary and secondary schools in the Netherlands. For answering the current study’s central research question, we used data from this “The Use of Bible” study that were collected in primary schools.

3.1 | Participants

Six primary schools in the Netherlands were selected with the greatest possible diversity in Bible use. Therefore a number of characteristics were considered that could influence the Bible use: (1) The degree of urbanization of the area in which the school is located; and (2) the type of Christian school. For the type of Christian school, the research results of Bertram-Troost et al. (2012) were used. Schools were chosen for this research with the aid of a school list from Verus [the association for Catholic and Christian Education in the Netherlands], with the addition of some schools from the network of the research team. Lack of time was the reason given by schools that chose not to participate. The selection of the schools concerns thus a purposeful, stratified sample, where all strata are represented (Boeije, 2005; Creswell, 2008). Representative representation of the different types of schools was not a goal within this research. The different types of school do not exist in equal frequencies (Bertram-Troost et al., 2012).

Within each school, a focus group interview with the teachers was planned, as well as an interview with the school administrator. At three schools, the interview with the school management was only with the director(s), at the three other schools with the director and internal supervisor. We did not split this into two categories, and in the text we simply use “directors” for readability. We conducted a total of five small focus groups with three teachers. There was a spread of teachers from the lower, middle and higher grades. They were selected by the school director.

Unfortunately, the focus group at one school was interrupted by a fire alarm and could not be restarted during the research time. All respondents participated on a voluntary basis. We chose for focus groups with teacher to obtain in a reasonable time a variety of people within the school. Furthermore, focus conversations stimulate through interaction with colleagues the reflection of respondents, resulting in thoughts, which they otherwise would not get (Creswell, 2008).

3.2 | Procedure and research instruments

In the period April–December 2016, the respondents returned a short questionnaire in which they answered questions in preparation for the focus group interview, and an informed consent form. The respondents returned a short questionnaire.

The focus discussions lasted 1–1.5 h and were recorded using both video and audio. The video recording was necessary for the transcription of the conversations. A semistructured interview guide was developed for the focus interviews with the teachers and for the interviews with the school directors. Both variants dealt with the same topics, but the questions were adapted to the specific context and responsibilities of both groups of respondents. Central topics in the interview guide were (a) the way(s) the Bible is used by a teacher, (b) what goals exist regarding the use of the Bible, and (c) what challenges are observed when using the Bible in school/class. These topics corresponded with the short questionnaire each respondent filled out as a preparation beforehand.

Within the three topics, open questions were chosen in the interview guide, leaving a lot of room for the input and ideas of the respondents and focus on exploration (Boeije, 2005). Therefore, the respondents had ample opportunity to discuss their own perceptions of Biblical use. At the same time, the researchers were aware of all kinds of aspects regarding Bible use in educational contexts that derived from theories. During the focus group interviews, the researchers brought aspects into the discussion if they felt particular angles were unconsciously overlooked.

The atmosphere during the focus discussions was open and pleasant in all cases, and both positive and negative experiences regarding Bible use were discussed, and within a group, there was a variety of convictions. At the end of the focus groups, the respondents indicated that they appreciated the focus conversation because Bible use is a subject that is normally not explicitly discussed.

3.3 | Data analysis

At the end of the focus group interviews, the conversations were transcribed using the recordings. Atlas.TI software was used for the data analysis. All transcripts of the interviews and focus group interviews were entered into Atlas.TI. The data analysis for the current research took place in two steps. In the first step, the data were segmented into meaningful data units in which the following aspects were thematized: (a) The aspect of goals regarding the use of the Bible and (b) the aspect of roles of teacher and learners in the teaching learning process.

These data units were then descriptively coded and categorized (Miles et al., 2014). We followed Braun and Clarke's phases of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87). First, we open coded all data units in terms of goals or roles. This resulted in two extensive lists of descriptive codes concerning the participants' conceptions of goals and visions of role divisions among teachers and pupils (teacher/student roles) in the teaching learning process regarding Bible use. Second, we merged these codes into larger categories that described the meaning of the related data units. Third, we formulated several central meanings. We did not analyze the findings in relation to the school type because of our limited sample.

During the different steps in the data analysis process, the first and second authors worked together in the coding process (peer check) to enhance the validity of the coding and interpretation process.

4 | RESULTS

If we look at the whole dataset, we can observe a variety of aims and teacher/student roles as explained by the teachers and school directors. After the two steps of open coding and categorizing the codes, we ended up with nine categories of goals and nine categories of teacher/student roles, of which two are explicitly about the role of pupils. First, we will present our findings of the goals. Second, we will present our findings regarding the teacher/student roles. We will highlight if anything special was observed among school directors compared with teachers.

4.1 | Findings on goals

We found eight goals in the empirical data. To this, we added the category of tensions about goals. This category does not refer to a particular goal but is narrowly related to the goals of Bible use. Furthermore, we added two goals that were only mentioned once.

The sequence of the way we present the goals does not have a particular meaning; it could be listed in another sequence. We start with the goal of *reading the Bible as a skill* (a). A goal is that children know (how to read) the bible. As a school director (school E) argued: “The Bible is supposed to be used in the fifth grade for regular use, and that’s something we need to be aware of that this will happen. The reason for this is to make the children very familiar with the content and structure of the Bible.” This goal includes the skill of knowing the psalms by heart. Two schools framed this explicitly.

Cognitive knowledge about the Bible (b) is frequently mentioned. As a school director of another school (F) said: “That is of course also a goal: to have knowledge of those stories in the Bible and how people deal with them. And then you are not even talking about what children do with it. Then you are only talking about offering.” Some of the quotations about gaining knowledge of the Bible connect this with understanding the culture. Hence, a goal is *Bible knowledge for understanding our culture* (c).

Furthermore, the goal of *gaining affective knowledge of God and the gospel* (d) is mentioned. This focuses on a relationship with God and appropriation of the gospels. Sometimes, this is contrasted with the goal of cognitive knowledge. These codes are about children getting to know that God/Jesus loves them, that children find consolation in the Bible or know that doubting is allowed.

Teachers and directors explicitly mention goals regarding investing in *social and civic relations* (e), which is also sometimes contrasted with gaining cognitive knowledge. It is about having respect for others or good behavior toward creation and civic society. Or as a teacher (school B) said it is about norms and values:

Well, you do have a social-emotional method, so about bullying and things like that, but I also try to emphasise that if you believe, you also want to do the right thing, not only for yourself but also really for the other. So looking after each other, but it is also discussed in the half hour. What did we hear in this conversation or in this story, and how do you think you can do something with that yourself? That is not always behaviour, but I think it is norms and values.

Development of own personality (f), in other words, a mental growth of self-acceptance or self-knowledge, is mentioned only a few times. If and how the Bible is used with regard to this self-growth differs as become clear in a quotation of a school director (school E):

So, those are very concrete things in which that is reflected. But also, for example, children who have very little self-confidence. Of course, as a teacher, you have to estimate: with a Muslim student who has little self-confidence, you, of course, are not going to say: “Jesus gives you that.” So it is, of course, a bit of a sensitive search. But with children of whom you know that it is relevant, you may

respond in such a way, to help the child in their faith experience in relation to things that a child encounters.

The goal of using the Bible is also to set criteria for the pedagogical climate of the school in general; for example, Christian norms and values are considered to be the basis of acting in and from the school. This is said to be a more general conviction or in relation to a particular situation. We call this goal *inspiration for the pedagogical climate of the school* (g); this was mainly referred to by directors, for example:

At my previous school, he would have been referred to another school long ago. One of the strengths, and I also think that you can link that to identity, is that actually, it was ballast; in terms of the results, it was only bad for the school. But I am very glad we kept him. He was great. He still sits here regularly; he sits there, he just comes to meet for a moment. (Director school A)

Frequently, the goal to *interact between then (text) and now (actual situations/experiences) or vice versa* has been mentioned (h). It can be debated whether this is a goal or a means, but it was framed as a goal. The teachers argued that Bible stories are relevant for now and can be connected with actual topics. The following quotation gives an example of this.

I think it is also important that they also see that it is also something of this time. We are talking, for example, about missions, and I have a friend who has emigrated, and then, you are talking about that: God is still calling people, or how does that go? I think that is very important that children also see: it is really not only that Moses was called, or it is really not only that a miracle happened at the wedding in Cana or (Teacher school B)

Finally, we add to these goals that there are *tensions and dilemmas regarding the goals of Bible use* (i), for example, whether evangelizing is a task of teachers or not or how to balance between offering content without prescribing. As a school D. the director said: "So, the challenge is mainly that you have a diversity of students, and how do you convey your message without wanting to convince people and without prescribing a message?" We mention this as a tension because of one's own normativity and a pluralistic school context. It is mainly a tension between on the one hand, a "objective" about the Bible approach and on the other hand, words as evangelization, prescribing or indoctrination are mentioned.

In addition to those nine categories, two goals were mentioned only once in the interviews: "stimulating critical reflection" and "a moment of reflection, rest and meditation."

4.2 | Findings on roles

Our second analysis focuses on roles. We found seven teacher roles in the empirical data and two roles of pupils.

The dominant role that is present in the data is the role of the teacher as (*story*)teller (a). In some cases, this role was specified, like telling well-known Bible stories or telling comparative stories. Others spoke of telling the Bible faithfully or the importance of telling by heart. All these codes have the central role of telling Bible stories as the focus. There are different opinions about the goals of Bible use, but the role of the storyteller seems to be present as a dominant role everywhere. The following quote illustrates this role. The teacher (school D) answered on a question about her role in the Bible use: "Well, big, I think. Yes, if you tell it enthusiastically and fascinatingly, it will stick or speak to them [more than - authors] if you just read it as it is written."

A second role is that teachers continuously choose what content to offer, which stories to tell, what topics they discuss and so forth. Teachers have a certain ideological or normative approach toward the Bible and to pedagogical

instructions and conversations. As such the role of the teachers is being a *hermeneut* (b), as becomes visible in the following quote:

Also, such a story of Ananias and Safira, but the other one of that blood on those doorposts, which is even very difficult for adults to understand; in fact, you cannot. Imagine telling this to a child, but on the other hand, yes, I think if you tell it very simply that God goes ways, eh, just like what you say, which we don't understand, then you can calmly and confidently say that nevertheless, God does have a plan and a purpose and that we must trust that God aims for the best for us. (Teacher school A)

Being an example (c) of living Christian faith, both in schools and outside, was considered as an important role. Although some nuanced this or prefer not to speak about the role of example. These quotations we labeled with the word *inspirator* (d). This is related to being an example, but in their opinion it has more space for the contributions of pupils. A teacher (school F) said about this nuance: "Well on the one hand, as an example, but as an example with -again- those multiple options; this is how I do it or practice it or whatever you want to call it. And what I believe, and that doesn't necessarily mean they have to believe it too."

The role of the *evangelist* (e) was debated by the teachers. Some considered themselves to be evangelists because in many cases, they were the first to bring pupils into contact with the Bible. Others emphasized that they were not evangelists because their role as teachers was not to convince pupils about the truth of the Bible.

Teachers also have a role as *moderators* (f), where teachers are the moderators of the discussion and aid in the learning process of a pupils.

Finally, there is a role regarding parents. We connected this role to *informing, inspiring and advising parents* (g). This role was primarily mentioned by the school directors. They were in particular aware of their role regarding parents.

Related to the role of teachers appeared the role of pupils. For example, when someone would tell a story, someone else was supposed to listen. There are, however, two main roles of pupils that can be constructed in the data: Performing and giving input.

First, pupils participated in the class, listened to Bible stories, read the Bible, prayed, communicated about related topics, expressed in a creative way their appropriation of a Biblical topic, sung Christian songs and acted respectfully toward each other. We consider these roles in the class to be the role of *performing*.

Second, the pupils would also give input themselves. Most performing roles were prepared or chosen by the teacher. The teachers, however, also emphasized that pupils were contributing themselves. They asked questions, took initiative, inspired, criticized, witnessed and gave input for prayers. A teacher at school B spoke about the input of the children and calls them evangelists:

Some children really are evangelists. I also let them speak. For real. Yes, but they still tell that, without hesitation or something, they do not yet realise that someone else might think that is crazy. I can imagine that in the older groups at a given moment, yes, they do not always speak out so freely, but there are also children who are just really convinced and can tell it so beautifully. So in that sense, children also have a role.

4.3 | Central meanings given to bible use

We considered the whole set of goals and roles that teacher and school directors mention, and we considered their interrelationships as well as their groundedness in the data, and could distinguish five central meanings that we will further develop. We will describe these, and in the conclusion and discussion section, we further reflect on them in relation to religious pedagogical theories.

First, there is the relevance of a hermeneutical process, in which both goals and roles are important. The role of the hermeneut, of course, relates to this, but also the goal of interaction between the text and now, or the goal of the Bible as inspiration for the attitude of the school. Some teachers started with the text and connected it with nowadays practices; others started with practices and linked them with Bible texts. An example of this last one is when a school director (school B) linked current things, or social-emotional behavior with the Bible: “Well, we often talk when something happens, when you discuss current things you could, for example, refer to the Ten Commandments. That is, of course, a very well-known example and also, for example, in social-emotional lessons about your uniqueness and talents; well, then, you can also refer to the Bible.”

Second, we noticed the importance of the person of the teacher in relation to the Bible. Several words address this: Being example, inspirator, witness, evangelist. These roles differ, but in the formulation of these roles, the teachers as a person or as Christian person, as well as professional, are becoming a witness by doing and living (Biblical) values important to the individual.

Practicing what you belief in who you are and how you act that is important for a teacher at school A: No, you are and will remain that person and you are that person in the class and you have an exemplary role so eh, what you said about your own conviction, you also have to radiate and propagate that. And that is also in your attitude to the children, also in your reaction to the children and how you deal with parents, well, that is reflected in all facets.

As said, the role of evangelist is both mentioned and criticized. The question is raised whether this is or could be a role of a teacher or not. Convictions between teachers vary, and for some it is a personal quest. A teacher (school B) explained her development with regard to this goal: “When I just started, then I really clearly had some kind of evangelistic goal for myself, secretly. That I thought: I hope they will all become believers. I still hope so, but that's less, it's less (...) well, if I'm just doing a good job and ..., well then they've got it in any case, and then ... yes, then you hope that it will also become important for them.”

Third, *gaining cognitive knowledge about the Bible* is frequently present in the data though this is also the most discussed category. Some emphasized the need of Bible knowledge, others emphasized that the goals that address formation are more relevant and important and they contrast these aims with the cognitive knowledge dimension.

Furthermore, this *formation* of pupils as a goal has two orientations. The first one relates to the formation of moral convictions and behavior. This focuses on behavior both at schools (pedagogical climate) and in society (investing in social and civic relations) and the formation of personality, such as gaining self-value. The other orientation is on spiritual formation as gaining affective knowledge about God.

Finally, we have the *performing*. Not only could the roles of pupils be considered performing roles, but also storytelling by teachers was a type of performing. The use of the Bible results in performances in the classroom, like reading, meditation, telling, and singing. A teacher (school D) expresses his performing as follows: “If you tell it enthusiastically and fascinatingly, it will stick or speak to them [more than - authors] if you just read it as it is written” Pupils have a performing role, not only doing what is said by the teacher, but performing in their own way with agency. The teachers highly appreciated when pupils were giving input when regarding Bible use: “... but there are also children who are just really convinced and can tell it so beautifully. So in that sense, children also have a role,” says a teacher of school B.

5 | CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The central research question in this article is as follows: *Which goals and roles do teachers and school directors mention regarding the use of the Bible in Protestant Christian primary education, and how can these be understood in terms of religious pedagogical models and theories?*

The focus groups with teachers and school directors showed a rich variety of goals and role divisions when it comes to Bible use in education. Some goals were frequently mentioned, such as “cognitive knowledge about the Bible,” “gaining affective knowledge of God and the gospel,” or “investing in social skills and civic relations.” Others were mentioned only a few times, such as “reading the Bible as skill” or “development of personality.” We also separated the goals: Bible knowledge for understanding our culture, inspiring the attitude of the school and the hermeneutic goal to interact between then (text) and now or vice versa. In addition to these eight goals, we have the category of tensions about goals. This category does not refer to a particular goal but is narrowly related to the goals of Bible use. Part of the quotations labeled with this code reflect a variety of ideological approaches among teachers regarding goals in relationship to Bible use; other quotations address tension or a quest within the teachers themselves. In the interviews, goals were often combined; for example, a teacher might emphasize the importance of a certain knowledge and of affective goals.

We also investigated roles, both of teachers and pupils. The role of the teacher as a “(story)teller” appeared to be dominant in the data. Interestingly, storyteller was the role, no matter what the other convictions about Bible use were. The distinction made is in the way the stories are told or should be told, for example, by heart, faithfully, or with the use of comparison stories. The role of “hermeneut” was also dominant. The role of “informing, inspiring and advising parents” was only mentioned by school directors. This category was the only visible distinction in the data between teachers and directors. Furthermore, we found the following roles: being an example, inspirator, evangelist and moderator. The explicitly mentioned roles of pupils were categorized into two main roles: performing and giving input. These two are related but the latter focus more on the explicit agency of a child.

The goals and roles that teachers and school directors gave to the use of the Bible were clustered in five central meanings: (a) Hermeneutical process, (b) the teacher as a Christian person, (c) cognitive Bible knowledge, (d) formation, and (e) performing. Now, we will discuss them in light of religious pedagogical theories that are mentioned in the theoretical framework.

First, many of those goals and roles relate to the hermeneutical process in which text and actual practices are more or less successfully connected. Whether it is a moment of reciprocal disclosure—as mentioned in the third and preferred model in the recent Biblical didactic discourse—is hard to distinguish in the current research. In their references, the teachers started on one side and bridged to the other; they did not explicitly speak about combining the two directions, even though in practice they might do so. It could be concluded that reciprocal disclosure is a relevant model in theory but less obvious in the teachers' reflections on their practice. Second, the importance of a Christian teacher of being an example, inspirer and witness in the formulation of the roles with regard to Bible use at schools corresponds with existing theories of roles in religious education. Witness (Pollefeyt, 2005) and exemplar (Sanderse, 2012) are relevant roles. Boele (2021) argues that Christian education in a secular culture depends on the person of the teacher rather than the curriculum. Third, gaining cognitive knowledge about the Bible is a central notion for several teachers and school directors, although it is also the notion mostly discussed. Sometimes other emphases are given as a juxtaposition to gaining knowledge; sometimes they function as a better alternative. These results resonate with broader discussions about faith education and the emphasis on cognitive knowledge transfer or formation (e.g., Roebben, 2016). Fourth, some goals addressed the *formation* of pupils, both ethically and spiritually. In our article on secondary schools, we spoke of the Bible as a source for personal values (De Kock et al., 2021). The result at primary schools is that some of the teachers and school directors want the Bible to function as a source for formation of pupils. The area of formation could relate to the specific Bible story (like in the study of Keränen-Pantsu and Ubani) but also relate to the normativity expressed in the aims of Bible use. Development of own personality, in other words, a mental growth of self-acceptance or self-knowledge is mentioned as aim, as well as investing in social and civic relations or gaining affective knowledge of God and the gospel. Fifth, we found the theme of *performing*. It is remarkable that the role of performing by pupils is much more dominant in the data on primary schools than on secondary schools, along with the teachers' role of storytelling. This brings forward performative learning as a salient category in primary schools. The role of performing includes space for the child's agency. This agency is an important perspective in religious educational literature (e.g., Roebben, 2016).

Bertram et al. distinguished in the survey when examining the character of worldview activities two categories, namely (a) religious and biblical, and (b) Christian values. In the present research, the use of the Bible is often interpreted as thematizing (Christian) values. This raises the question whether the survey distinction between Bible and Christian values is subtle enough to describe the use of the Bible at schools. Connecting with Christian values is considered part of Bible use in the responses of the teachers and school directors. Although our study is a small study and in a particular Dutch context, and although we could not split the findings toward school types, we conclude that all school leaders and teachers that took part in the study consider educational potential of the Bible for their education. This could be explained by the fact that the Bible use was an open concept in this study that teachers could interpret and discuss in the way they preferred.

Some of the nuances in the meaning given on both the goals and roles can be understood as a variety in teachers' attempts to pedagogically and theologically act within tension they experience personally or as a team. This tension mostly relates to the question whether school is also a context of evangelization. Shkedi and Horenczyk (1995) mentioned the tension between indoctrination, on the one hand, and too little or no intervention of the teacher's ideology on the other hand. For example, inspirator is mentioned by someone as a correction to an emphasis on being an example, because it gave more openness to the pupils' own contributions. Some explained their roles as evangelists, while others emphasized not being an evangelist. These tensions also have to be understood in light of the changing school landscape. We started this article by mentioning the shift from denominational religious education to non-denominational philosophical education. This shift changes the aims of religious education at schools (cf. also Worsley, 2018), and for some teachers, this challenged their normative professionalism (Alii, 2009, 123ff).

In the current study, we did not analyze the connection in the data between goals and roles. Future research could also focus on particular connections between goal setting and the choice for particular role divisions or within goal settings or role settings. It is remarkable that the role of developing critical reflection (one of the pedagogical characteristics mentioned by Shkedi) was mentioned only once, though it was a dominant code in our data on secondary schools. The perceived different cognitive capacities between children and teenagers might explain this difference. Further in-depth research is needed to relate Bible use at schools with the development of children.

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