



Article

Revitalizing the Mission: The Challenge for Christian Education to Discover Contextual Vocation and Ethos

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Abstract: In a rapidly changing world, due to globalization, individualization, economization, and secularization, the need for revitalizing the mission of Christian schools is inevitable. The authors relate the concept of mission to the often-used concept of school identity. The latter concept is distinguished as intended identity, lived identity, and perceived identity. The mission is defined as equal to the intended identity and must be understood as a contextual vocation. Revitalizing the mission means following a process in which stakeholders can once again relate prospect to retrospect. This process includes discerning about a vocation by exploring meanings in the past and the present (sense-giving and sense-making) and focusing on ethos (action formation and institutionalization). The outcome of the revitalization will differ according to the preferences in the context of the school. The authors propose a seven-step model through which the school's vocation can be determined in any context. Although this roadmap is mainly meant to be used in an already existing school, it can also be applied to a new school to be started. In both cases, staff members need to be involved in the process of revitalization and inception.

Keywords: school identity; institutional mission; institutional change; revitalization; Christian education



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1. Introduction

For their survival, educational institutions depend on a certain degree of continuity. This provides a connection between the past and the future, as well as allowing stakeholders to commit to the institution (Rust 2019). However, this continuity is relative because it can change under the influence of the users of education (parents and students), societal demands (government measures), and changes in views among the staff (teachers and managers) (Bertram-Troost et al. 2018; Bunnell et al. 2020; Karakaş and Kılıç 2021; Walt 2007; Wardekker and Miedema 2001). This potential change also applies to Christian educational institutions. Once Christian educational institutions have a recognized place in society, they run the risk of secularization (Edlin 2014; Flatt 2020). The famous universities of Harvard and Yale are often cited as examples. Over the course of time, the religious motives within the institutions were replaced by commitments to public service, training for democracy, and the promotion of character (Marsden 1994). In this article, we argue that a change in an educational institution's identity is not a fateful development that evades influence. Instead, we contend that because of inevitable changes within and outside these institutions, consciously led revitalization should be promoted. According to Pazmiño (2008, p. 14), the “preparadigmatic stage of Christian education requires that each new generation of Christian educators reconsider the foundational questions. Without raising these questions, Christian educators are likely to perpetuate antiquated conceptions and practices that are not faithful to the gospel”. Thus, in Pazmiño's view, the relevance of revitalizing a school's identity lies in the desired consistency between the ideal of the gospel and its practice. Beyond the importance of the organization is the value of job satisfaction

and the spiritual commitment of teachers and leaders, which will increase in proportion to their perceived relevance of the mission articulated by the organization.

Christians who want to justify how Christian education has to be realized can do this most easily when a new school is founded. However, in other situations, the progression in time requires a renewed reflection on the design of education. Regarding this progression in time, we consider two concerns about the ideals and practice of Christian education. First, the relation between the school's mission and what should be done in concrete action is not a matter of logically translating a vision into 'smart' goals. There is always a creative process in which an educator looks for available opportunities. This article is meant to clarify this process. If one pretends to set smart goals, there is the tempting thought of social engineering, while reality can only be influenced to a limited extent. As long as we talk about ideals, that is, the larger and more distant representations, most people in education know that they will not fully achieve such ideals, even if they derive well-thought goals from them. With an ideal, people strive for excellence but will not achieve it fully (De Ruyter 2007). Thus, on the one hand, stakeholders in education do need an ideal to know their goal; on the other hand, it is important to realize that it is not attainable just like that. Second, when translating the mission into concrete terms, a misleading idea is at risk: what cannot be made concrete and is not measurable is not meaningful in the eyes of stakeholders. This idea suggests that only behavior that can be checked is meaningful. From the perspective of Christian spirituality, it is precisely the other way around—what is not noticed or grows unnoticed takes root invisibly. The things that cannot be measured are important.

We begin this article by explaining theory about the unique character of a school, often referred to as the school's identity. We distinguish three types of identity: intended, lived, and perceived. They may be in tension with one another, for example, because what is intended as an ideal conflicts with the ethos of the school. The tensions that a stakeholder perceives may be a beginning for rethinking the mission. Other triggers are the changing context of the school, such as less money available, demanding legislation changes of the government, and changes in the student population. In the following sections, we envision the revitalization process in three stages. In the first stage, we explain our view that the mission of a school can be seen as a unique calling. Based on earlier research (De Muijnck et al. 2017), we present four exemplary approaches that are observed in school missions. The second stage shows that the desired dynamics of revitalization can be summarized as a circular process of sense-making, sense-giving, action formation, and institutionalization. In the third stage, we propose a seven-step model through which one can determine the vocation of the school in any context.

2. Theory on Identity and Mission

Before explaining the theory, we make a few remarks about the terminology used in this article. We relate the words *vocation* and *mission* to the concept of *identity*. When we refer to the school's mission, the meanings of 'special task' and 'being sent' are included. Therefore, we define a mission as a vocation. Similar to the calling of an individual teacher, a school's mission involves the awareness that it must pursue a particular ideal at this very moment. When a school reflects on its mission from a Christian perspective, it is therefore a question of establishing Christian-inspired ideas in *this* school and in *this* place. It is not uncommon to use the word 'foundation,' which includes claims about leading convictions, specifically the desired point of departure ("where from") (Wardekker and Miedema 2001), or in more popular language, "Why is this school on earth?". For founders of Christian schools, "where from" (the foundation) is sometimes clearer than "where to go", often called "the vision". A vision then stands for long-term ideals. In the short term, concrete goals can be derived from this vision, which can result in a school's lived and perceived identities, also referred to as the school ethos in this article.

2.1. Concept of Identity

From the perspective of educational history, the concept of identity can directly be linked to a sociological group that founded a school. The group's ideals envisioned the character of the school. De Wolff (2000, p. 52) describes a school's identity as "that which makes the school this school, in other words, what the school's characteristic features are and what has a certain degree of continuity". Thus, the difference of this from the word 'mission' (which we also use in this article) is that it is not only about a direction of an aim but also how the school becomes 'empirically' visible in the here and now. Mission pertains to the future; identity concerns the present.

When orienting a school's identity toward school practice, three dimensions can be distinguished: worldview identity, pedagogical identity, and educational–organizational identity (Miedema 1994; De Wolff 2000, p. 67). If identity concentrates on the worldview dimension, one can speak of a narrow identity. If identity also involves the other two dimensions, it is called a broad or a multidimensional identity (De Wolff 2000, pp. 68–69). The question that is answered differently is the extent to which the ideological dimension is dominant over the others. We consider an articulated influence of the ideological dimension on both the pedagogical and the educational–organizational ones as legitimate. In other words, inspiration taken from the gospel can be legitimized in a similar way as those taken from other worldviews, such as the ones adopted in public schools, in free schools or Islam schools (Bertram-Troost et al. 2018; Walt 2007; Williams et al. 2023).

In philosophical terms, identity can be understood in various ways. It can relate to persons, objects, and institutions (Rust 2019). In his influential book on the identity of persons, Paul Ricoeur (1992) distinguishes between three types of identity. He relates these to how people talk about themselves. First, the so-called *idem identity* refers to people's need for stability, and the sense in which people experience themselves as the same, which is stable and unchanging. Second, the *ipse identity* is about what can change under the influence of circumstances. Third, between the two poles of sameness and changeability, people develop a set of characteristics with which they distinguish themselves from others. Ricoeur (1992) calls this process of identity formation *narrative identity*. These distinctions can also be applied to the institutional identity of a school. One can assume a school's sustainable identity elements that are visible at present, as we stated in the beginning of this article. They indicate continuity and are related to ideals that are further afield. However, there are also elements that are subject to changes over time. These elements are important to notice for revitalizing a mission because a mission is about what must be accomplished over time. Lastly, the identity formation of the school is a narrative story—as it is in the identity formation of the individual.

2.2. Intended, Lived, and Perceived Identities

In the remainder of this article, we use distinctions of the concept of identity that can be related to Ricoeur's tripartite division but also have their own character. We distinguish intended identity from lived and perceived identity; see Figure 1. The intended identity can be related to Ricoeur's *idem identity*. The other two are both an expression of the *ipse identity* and the *narrative identity*.

First, we call the ideal image of the school's founders its *intended identity*, sometimes also referred to as its mission statement. It describes the school's intended sustainable elements and can refer to an articulated worldview. A mission statement expresses the 'why' of the school. What does this school want to accomplish, and what story does it experience as the supporting ground? The institutional identity of denominational Christian schools can be recognized in the interpretation of their claim on religious truth, for example, when referring to the Reformed confession. The intended identity can also be regarded in the conception of the nature of education, for instance, how much freedom can be offered to students. And lastly, in the view of cultural differences as part of the content of education, for example, how strongly a vision on evolution and gender is emphasized in contrast to mainstream views (Wardekker and Miedema 2001). Second, from the perspective of the

school's current stakeholders, next to the intended identity, they may speak of the *lived identity*, which is expressed and experienced by students, teachers, and leaders in their practices. Third, the outsiders' perspective means that the people who view the school from the outside have a perception of its identity, which we call the *perceived identity*. The perspectives of the school's founders, its current stakeholders, and outsiders are also referred to as self-referential identity, shared identity, and relational identity (Faber 2012, pp. 39–43).

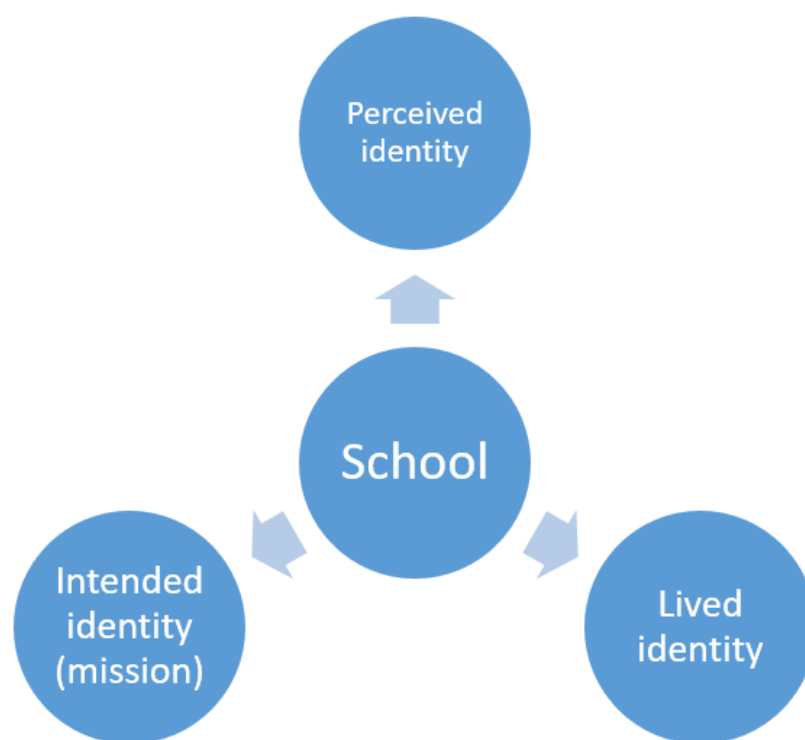


Figure 1. Intended, lived, and perceived identities.

3. Development of Schools

One of the changing elements is that the successive generations involved in the school will each tell a different story about the institution over time. After their establishment, schools undergo a development process that cannot be predicted in advance. Edlin (2010) distinguishes three phases or stages in the development of Christian schools. In the *aspirational stage*, the school is in its initial phase. Some schools put a lot of work into the biblical foundation of their intentions. In the *dynamic stage*, the school becomes known, and the organization is consolidated. In the *gentrified stage*, the school reaches a state in which the original intentions are less recognizable. A new generation considers the school's existence important but no longer keeps the founders' inspiration in mind. The school's operations are more or less managed smoothly, and there is no need to be constantly preoccupied with ideals. For the schools that initially turned against the mainstream culture with their faith-based programs, Edlin (2010, p. 100) recognizes the danger of dilution, referring to "schools which may retain a Christian linkage in their name but which operationally demonstrate few of the biblically authentic goals that motivated their founders". In this article, however, we claim that the sequence of the three stages is not an ever-valid and inescapable fate. In any stage, schools have the opportunity to rediscover their aspirations. To avoid the loss of the schools' Christian identity, it is wise—quoting Pazmiño again—"to reconsider the foundational questions" from time to time (Pazmiño 2008, p. 14). One of the entry points for doing so is to zoom in on the potential discrepancy between the intended and the lived identities. Bringing to light these differences opens perspectives for the renewal of existing practices (Edlin 2010; Smith 2018). What is lived out reveals what

is really thought and felt below the surface. “It is the operational which is a much more accurate reflection of the true life and vision of the place” (Edlin 2014, p. 93). Unfolding the contradictions can be challenging because even a school is usually reluctant to experience itself as incongruent. However, the process is also beneficial because the inconsistency is a reason for reconsidering the school’s mission. The same applies when one compares the perceived identity with the described and lived identity. Every comparison can lead to rethinking the mission.

3.1. Stage 1: Mission Understood as a Unique Calling

3.1.1. Four Approaches

In the previous section, we approached the school’s mission in a formal way. In this section, we consider the same theme in a substantive way. Whether in the case of starting a new school or reconsidering the mission, substantive choices are decisive. Depending on the context, the mission will have different faces. To make the school’s mission explicit, we first discuss four exemplary approaches—socializing, person-centered, transformational, and charity-based—through which the school’s call can be shaped in different ways in the concrete context. The emphasis of each approach is on the Christian community, the individual believer, the influence on society, and the aim to solve the problems in society, respectively. In all four approaches, the claims on truth identified by Wardekker and Miedema (2001) can be recognized: claims on religious truth, the nature of education, and the cultural difference. The approaches are not mutually exclusive but overlap. Although several approaches can be used in a school, one of the images is often dominant. Regarding the following subsections, it is important to note that a Christian school is not necessarily private and unsubsidized. This is self-evident in some countries, where the law prescribes that under certain conditions, the state should fully or partly fund religious schools.

3.1.2. Socializing Approach

The first approach can be observed in a school founded by a specific Christian denomination. Often, this is a church congregation or group. The governing idea is that the church, family, and school are in a triangular relationship, where the same goal is pursued. The children who belong to the congregation are considered part of the covenant established by God. According to their (baptismal) promise, parents then have the task of initiating their children into the Christian doctrine. The school is supportive of this pedagogical task. Here, the initiation into the Christian faith takes place, just like it does in the family. Many schools have been founded on the idea that children in the family, church, and school should grow up in the same atmosphere (Markus et al. 2018). A Christian parent of educator values unity in what is taught to children at home and in school. It is therefore not surprising that after a church splits into several denominations, it sometimes causes the establishment of a new school. The newly formed denomination feels the calling to found a school because it is believed that children cannot be entrusted to teachers who were not pure in their teaching (for an example, see Spoelstra 2017, p. 118). A possible consequence of this approach is that only the children who belong to the school’s own denomination are admitted as students, but this is not necessarily the case. Many Christian schools are maintained by members of different churches with a related spirituality. This is not due to an equal community in the sense of a formal church but of a community of mentality: a sociological group of Christians who share similar truth claims and a similar life-style. In the socializing approach, the priority lies in the interests of one’s own community, not of society. If the interests in relation to society have to be articulated, the responsible body will defend the right to consolidate one’s own place in it and the preparation of students for a place in this society.

The formation of a school based on the socializing approach sometimes arouses aversion. In an interview, an opponent of Christian education says the following:

Schools are not an instrument for transmitting a certain group identity. Education is not meant to be an extension of parents and to propagate their values. At

school, children should learn things that conflict with what they belong to. So that they can form their own opinions. (Van der Zee 2019)

This quotation strongly conveys the idea from the Enlightenment that the school is an institution that distances the youth from the parental environment.

3.1.3. Person-Centered Approach

The second approach focuses on the student's individual relationship with God. The school's primary calling is the spiritual formation of children to help them develop their personal faith in Christ. The theological reasoning for this is stressed by the need for regeneration and conversion. It is the task of a school to do everything to make this possible. Articulations can vary widely, depending on the church denomination or the group of denominations on which the schools are founded. Sometimes, a broader objective is indicated, such as the glorification of God (in accordance with the abridged Westminster Catechism Q/A 1, which states that each person is meant "to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever"). There are also examples where imitation and discipleship are at the forefront. The website of the American organization that developed the all-Christian curriculum, *Accelerated Christian Education*, states that staff at the schools "help students grow closer to the Lord Jesus Christ and demonstrate their achievements in a wide range of categories from chess to Bible, basketball to art".¹

3.1.4. Transformational Approach

The third approach takes neither the covenant nor the growth of individual faith as its starting point but the function of a school in relation to culture. According to Edlin (2014, p. 245), Christians are in danger of retreating to an island; they try to secure the church through schools. In his view, this is against God's intention for this world; God has given people the mandate to build up and preserve the earth. Moreover, Christ is the ruler of the whole world. Salvation is not only about humanity and the church, but about every square inch of the world. Schools must educate Christian students to be the salt of the earth and shining lights.

Christian cultural engagement (...) is a proactive and winsome calling for all Christians that delight in the majesty of God over his creation and the creative and stewardly lordship that he has given to humankind over the world. And it places the cross of Christ at the centre of all of life. Christian schools ought to prepare students for this type of cultural engagement. (Edlin 2014, p. 52)

The transformative ideal, in which the transformation of the world is central, implies, even more than the previous approaches, an antithetical attitude toward the prevailing (secular) culture (Edlin 2014, p. 239). Edlin emphasizes that a Christ-centered approach does not mean a concentration on the relationship with Christ but on the *world* of Christ: "Christian education does not spend all its time looking at the Son; instead, it looks at the world and our places and tasks in it in the light that the Son provides" (pp. 41, 53). Elsewhere, Edlin (2010, p. 98) states that "the nation-building goal of these Christian schools is to equip children to discern what is best (Philippians 1: 9–11), including a peaceful and robust cultural critique and transformation in the name of Christ".

3.1.5. Charity-Oriented Approach

Many public schools around the world, founded by Christians, started from the ideal of solving social problems, for example, by providing education where there was no school. This happened, for instance, in developing countries, often with the support of aid organizations. From the school founders' perspective, the social interest in establishing a school was the priority. Sometimes, they had not yet got around to thinking about the Christian content of education. In contexts where education is common, Christians also establish schools from charitable reasons, for example, when education pays little attention to children with learning difficulties or to students' moral development. We call this the

charity-oriented approach, referring to the charitable drive of Christians because they perceive the school's mission as serving vulnerable groups in society.

3.1.6. Evaluating the Four Approaches

As stated, the approaches are not mutually exclusive but overlap. Many Christian schools have something of all four approaches. The socializing approach honors the place of the covenant and the baptismal promise. The person-centered approach has an eye for the awkwardness and the subtlety of faith and salvation appropriation. The positive aspects of the transformational approach are its intention to eliminate dualism and its mandate to make Christian faith relevant to everyday life. The charity-oriented approach shows the Christians' sensitivity to the needs of the world, which is very important with regard to civic duty.

However, all approaches have their limitations as well. The socializing approach can be very inward-looking, limited to a small community, with no regard for society. The person-centered approach may focus too much on the inner self, without paying attention to concrete action. The transformational approach may suggest social engineering and optimism. For this reason, it runs the risk of insufficiently acknowledging sin and brokenness and may suggest that serving God is simply a given instead of a learning journey that finds security in divine providence. Finally, the charity-oriented approach might run the risk of eliminating religious education or not paying attention to the Christian meaning in school subjects. If all approaches' merits and limitations are taken seriously, they can be helpful in the reflection on the school's mission.

3.2. Stage 2: Keeping the Fire Burning

In this section, we discuss the dynamics at stake when the school's mission is revitalized. Nonetheless, stakeholders will have a connection to the existing or intended identity in the making (Boele-de Bruin and De Muynck 2018; Markus et al. 2018), but this is not obvious for all teachers (Bertram-Troost et al. 2018; Bunnell et al. 2020) and in all stages of school development (Edlin 2014). Revitalization will occur effectively only when the interactions of the participants are taken seriously.

3.2.1. Four Mechanisms

To clarify the abovementioned point, we use a line of thought from Faber (2012). In her study of school identity, she distinguishes among four mechanisms: *sense-giving*, *action formation*, *sense-making*, and *institutionalization*. *Sense-giving* is about the identity claims when a school is founded. They give "advance meaning to what is, or should be, important at this school in terms of religious orientation" (Faber 2012, p. 201). *Sense-giving* does not concern what is laid down in paper or on the internet, which is the scope of the fourth mechanism. What counts here is what is initially perceived as meaningful. *Sense-giving* involves the 'triggers' that direct a group of people to establish a school. From a religious perspective, this process entails receiving meaning from God's transcendent call. The search for the mission can be a collective spiritual process, in which what is needed for the near future is weighed. This may include reflecting about the past, deciding to stop any current action and stating the intentions about what points to use to make a new start. *Action formation* shows that identity claims direct behavior. Meanings guide behavior; beliefs influence professional practice (Penthin et al. 2023). *Sense-making* is about how professionals experience the school culture. Based on their experiences in teaching, teachers can start to understand things differently. They learn profoundly from their daily contact with students and thus become more aware of what matters to the children. This daily contact is inspiring. They also develop meaningful stories that they like to share with others. Sharing of stories can lead to rewriting the collective story of the school, which is the core of revitalization. Finally, in the mechanism of *institutionalization*, the initial meanings are anchored institutionally—in the statutes of the school, in the school plan, and on its website. Here, the intended identity, as felt in the stage of sense-giving, is formalized in a mission

statement, a common ground with which the stakeholders can identify. The Christian school has a reference point now to envision the direction of its future development.

3.2.2. Keeping Meanings Active

The four mechanisms can all function to consciously revitalize Christian-inspired education, as shown in Figure 2. A stakeholder can update the mission (sense-giving); another can initiate projects in which teachers explicitly connect their actions to the mission (action formation). A reorientation using religious sources can also be chosen as an entry point (sense-making). Finally, one can examine how meanings can be institutionalized in new routines and practices (institutionalization). Revitalization assumes that a stakeholder wants to cope with an existing situation. The situation of the current leaders is different from the circumstances encountered by the school's founders. When a new school is instituted, the founders play dominant roles in sense-giving and institutionalization. When a school is established, the staff members will dominate the action formation and the sense-making. Consequently, if one wants to revise the mission, the incumbent leaders and teachers should play a key role. A responsible leader should listen to them precisely. After all, they are the ones who observe in daily practice what is at stake and what matters. Moreover, they sense deeply if the personal and the professional identities are at odds with the intended and described identity, because this has to do with the personal biography (Claeys and Vanspeybroeck 2011, pp. 17–19; Bakker and Rigg 2004). The existential tensions should be dealt with carefully.

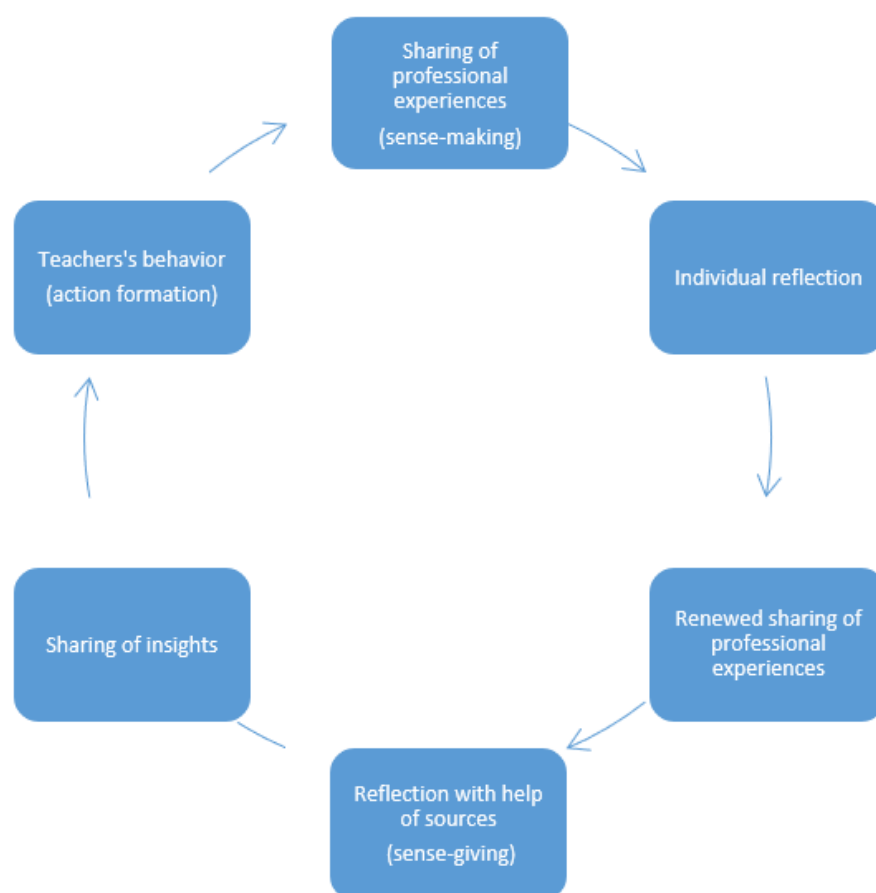


Figure 2. Collective sense-making.

3.2.3. A Two-Sided Process

Sense-giving and sense-making are triggered from the bottom up. However, the process must also be triggered by the sources that do not speak directly from practice but

feed the leaders and the teaching staff with ideological meanings. These may be Bible texts or source texts from historical pedagogues or from confessional documents (De Muynck and Kunz 2021). Because the routine of everyday life does not automatically make space for theological notions, these must be consciously sought. The quest for receiving meaning from sources can be initiated by all stakeholders—teaching staff and leaders in any position. Reflection on theological notions can happen at informal moments, such as when teachers collectively prepare lessons, discuss a course-of-action plan, or reflect on critical class situations. However, it can also occur at planned moments, for instance, during reflective sessions and study meetings. By listening to sources in the Christian tradition, teachers can clarify what they want to see in practice. At the same time, they test the validity of ideas in the existing practice. These deliberations will reveal what thoughts and images dominate. The encounter between sources and practice clarifies how the institutional ideal relates to existing practice. Work forms are preferably chosen in such a way that not only cognitive knowledge of the Christian sources is acquired but that the heart is touched with a view to the practice of education. We believe that it is possible to rekindle the original sense-giving of the school's founders in a new generation of teachers by listening again to what the founders intended. One can be inspired by the school's name, biblical sources, or exemplary figures in the school's tradition. In doing so, it is important to assure that both personal reflection and joint reflection (sharing experiences) take place. Personal and joint reflections should also lead to action formation so that the described identity can become a lived identity.

3.3. Stage 3: How to Contextually Revitalize the School Identity

Having described some exemplary approaches of a school mission (stage 1) and clarified the dynamics of revitalization (stage 2), we now propose the steps that can be followed on the road to a revitalized mission. These steps, pictured in Figure 3, are successively about the urgency, the starting point, the population, the law, the tradition of the school, the cultural issues that are observed, and the interests of the family, church, and society. The steps are based on the earlier research described by De Muynck et al. (2017). It is conceivable that a school board, a school team, and possibly other people involved follow the steps, but these do not necessarily happen in the presented sequence. The seven steps are about the content in the process of sense-giving, action formation, sense-making, and institutionalization. In meetings, one can choose different work formats, varying from reflecting individually to weighing thoughts together. In the process of jointly discerning what is important in the given circumstances, the stakeholders need to decide what needs to be changed and what the future actions in the school should look like. Does their calling take into account the interests of the future generation?

3.3.1. What Is the Urgency?

We can determine what is urgent by means of the four approaches, as described in stage 1. As we have seen, none of them are exclusive; however, they are valid as the first step in determining one's preferred position. One can focus on the Christian community, concentrate on faith appropriation or character development, have a school that aims to further the Christian influence on culture, or place a charitable motive in front. When the situation changes, the question of urgency must be raised again. The school may change its preferences due to the changes in its population. The types of students change, and the types of parents change, which in turn alters the whole pedagogical setting. Another influence constitutes the changing expectations from society (politically driven or resulting from cultural trends). For example, the government might ask schools to pay more attention to their public presentation. This requirement can be based on the idea that if the government finances a diversity of schools, the latter must also clarify how their profiles are translated into classroom activities. This requires maneuverability of both the management and the staff.

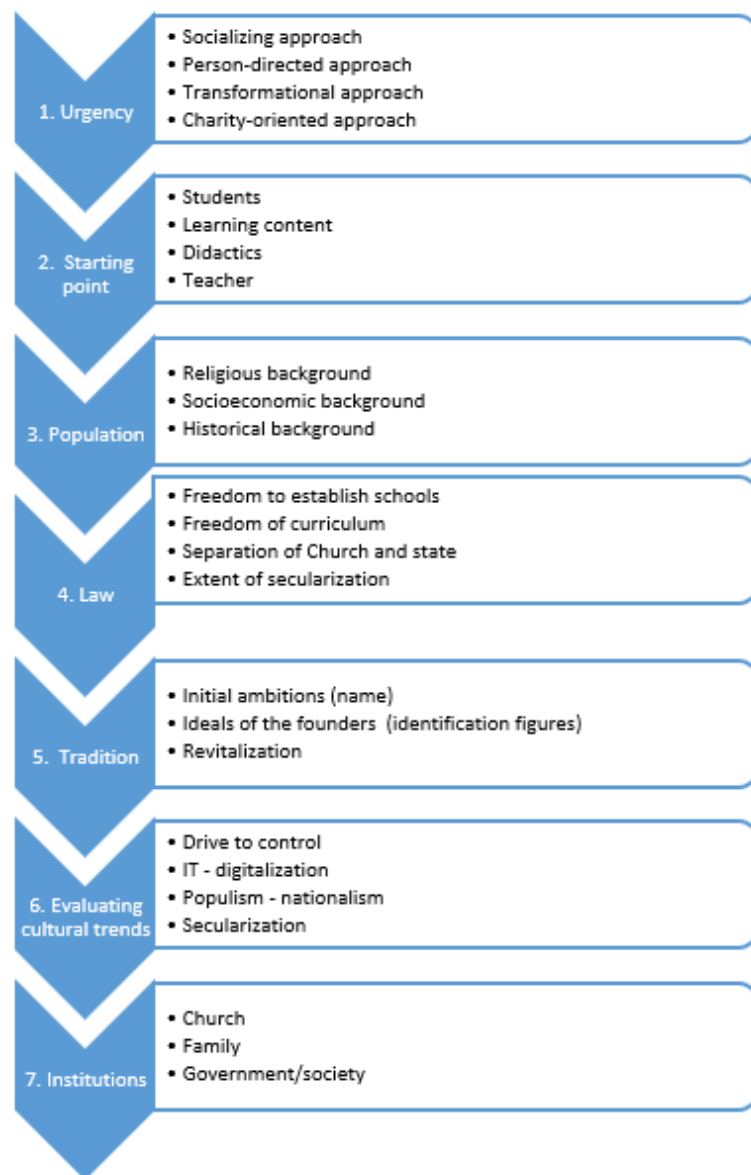


Figure 3. Steps to follow in defining the mission.

3.3.2. Which Entry?

The next question is about the point of entry that one chooses. First, one can select the entrance of the student. The question is then what kind of students one strives for at the end of their schooling. If this entrance is chosen, the school's policy is determined by the exit profiles of the students. A school will preferably choose this entrance in case of a person-oriented approach if prioritized in the urgency step. A school can work with a specific set of virtues, for example, responsibility, respect, and reliability. The second point of entry can be the curriculum: what does the school want to convey, and how much worldview should the content include? There are schools in disadvantaged situations that focus strongly on basic skills. Other schools, in more favorable circumstances, stress the use of Christian-designed methods. The third input can be a specific didactic approach. In this case, the school chooses a concept, sometimes an existing one, that is integrated into the Christian school. For example, there are Christian schools that consider development-oriented education, based on Vygotsky's philosophy, as compatible with their Christian principles. The fourth point of entry is the teacher. School boards can defend their position that the teachers' high level of knowledge determines the quality of education and the Christian character of the school. In this case, they will invest heavily in professionalization.

3.3.3. What Is the Population?

One of the decisive factors in the context in which the school operates is demographic development. Which students does the school serve or want to serve? After all, in primary education, goals differ by age and target group, and in higher education, they vary by subject area—types of professions and types of academic disciplines. The population may be prosperous but also marked by poverty. In a wealthy environment, it may be possible to start a public school, whereas in other environments, one is totally dependent on government funds or charities. Cultural characteristics are closely related to the population. The language levels with which children enter school are usually strongly correlated with the educational levels of their parents. The question is which need is observed in the population. For example, a school in a prosperous metropolitan area may observe that many children feel lonely and may consequently decide to focus on strong contacts with the parents. A school in a large Asian city's slum area can also focus on parent contacts but mainly with the intention of providing extra training for parents.

3.3.4. What Are the Possibilities and Limits in the Law?

The legislation of a country limits or opens possibilities. In many countries, there is a state curriculum, and it is not possible to teach religion in state-funded schools. For some Christian communities, this does not prevent them from establishing a school. They organize prayer meetings at teachers' homes, and religious education is taught in the families. As mentioned above, some countries have a great deal of freedom in setting up schools, organizing education, and shaping the curriculum. Legislation may impose qualification requirements on staff or requirements relating to the minimum number of students. However, schools must sometimes also take into account the requirements regarding content, such as attention to the prescribed democratic core values in citizenship education.

3.3.5. How Does One Use the Potential of One's Own Tradition?

When shaping Christian education, one cannot disregard the historically developed context. The community in which the target group is situated has its own tradition, with its own leaders and role models who have made the community flourish. Traditions have their own potentials, sometimes limiting choices; at other times opening possibilities. The school must take these into account because the target groups (parents and students) must feel safe in school. At the same time, a tradition offers sources to re-evaluate current school practice. When a school was founded, careful thought was given to its name. As a result, schools often have meaningful names. Where possible, a connection between the name and the teaching content or the school culture is a good entry point. In this way, the *Timothy School* can measure itself against what Paul says to Timothy in his pastoral letters when re-evaluating its tradition. A *Rehoboth school* can thematize getting the space given by God for the school culture (Genesis 26: 22).

3.3.6. To Which Cultural Issues Will the School Respond?

This brings us to cultural criticism. Besides internal cultural criticism (critical reflection on one's own Christian community), a culture-critical view is a basic competence of the Christian community. Whereas in the beginning of the 20th century, Christian education had to relate to the emerging reform pedagogy (e.g., see [Bavinck 1928](#), p. 123), and since the turn of the century, to the dominance of constructivism, there are now other dominant movements in which one has to choose one's position. First, one can think of the major influence of performative thinking that still leads to strong efficiency and performance drive ([Biesta 2010](#)). Second, the rapid advance of information and communication technology greatly increases the number of didactic tools available and necessitates a reassessment of the role of the teacher. Third, a lot of developments are going on internationally. Populism and nationalism are on the rise, and there is a great need to make students politically aware and resilient. Finally, one can think of the strong secularization of the whole society, which

makes the way of perceiving things in the dominant culture naturalistic, positivistic, and anti-metaphysical.

3.3.7. What Is the Right Balance between the Stakeholding Institutions?

The ideal of the Christian school can be pictured as an institution between the church, family, and government. The interests of the government must in some way be balanced with those of Christian families and church communities (Exalto 2012, pp. 173–87). In every context, the Christian school has to deal with the three stakeholders. Education aims to form students into Christian citizens (interest of the state), prepares them for responsibility in the private sphere (the interest of the family), and invites them to become faithful believers (interest of the church). The school cannot be given the role of a neutral institution that objectively allows the student to take up an autonomous position but has to count with values originating from the family socialization and with educational ideals in the religious sphere.

4. Conclusions

In this article, we have argued that Christian schools can revitalize their mission. We have conceptually clarified the mission by relating it to different expressions of a school identity. In three stages, we have offered arguments that can help in the process of revitalization. First, we have identified four approaches that reveal claims about theological issues, pedagogical convictions, and the cultural position of the school. Second, we have explained how the process of revitalizing the mission can work. Third, we have presented a model consisting of seven steps that can be followed in making new decisions about the mission. Summarizing what we have developed in our article, the revitalized mission can be described as the ideal of a school through which—given the context and the interests of children and young people at stake—it chooses a realistic but hopeful position amid the family, church, and society. Finding a revitalized mission is not easy because a range of interests must be pursued simultaneously. One has to determine one's position in the existing culture, strive for balance in one's own community, and at the same time, anticipate the interests of young people and what they will need in the future. The dynamics of revitalization cannot always be harmonious but can have abrasive moments due to differences in opinions and power. We have stressed that leadership is required to make the difference. After all, teachers have diverse professional preferences. Even if the connection with the mission is broadly the same, the teachers' actions are not automatically connected to it and are certainly inconsistent. Interests can also diverge. Nonetheless, the differences are precisely the entry points for a hopeful revitalization.

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Note

¹ <https://www.aceschooloftomorrow.com/> (accessed on 29 September 2023).

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