Summary

This study covers a historic research into the genesis of Reformed (Liberated) education as a recognised, independent orientation within the Dutch educational system. The Reformed (Liberated) quest for new concepts sheds light on the possibilities and limitations of an ecclesiastic-theological orientation, but also of the shaping of its uniqueness within the Dutch educational system and its demanded requirements of the schooling. This history of the Liberated education as an orientation offers also insights into the relation between church/theology and Christian education, between church/theology and pedagogical and didactical values and in the position, task and limitations of Protestant-Christian education in a pluralistic society.

After 1800, education didn’t focus anymore on moulding pupils into believing Christians – in reading the Bible and learning the Catechism. The popular school had improved in quality and was used to raise pupils to citizens of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, according to new, illuminated views. In these was no place for orthodoxy and exclusivism, due to their potential to sow discord. This transformation led to resistance from the Orthodox-Protestant side. Seceded Protestants wanted freedom of education in order to establish schools in their own beliefs. G. Groen van Prinsterer wanted to hold on to the old Protestant ideal of the state, that the school’s task was to keep children in, or return them to the positive, Christian life, and there were orthodox-Reformed who missed a ‘pure’ reformed school society.

In 1857, Groen’s Christian-national alternative lost out because the dogmatic religion disappeared from the public people’s education as a result of the Constitutional change in 1848. Others, like D. Chantepie de la Saussaye and N. Beets, remained proponents of the public Christian education. A. Kuyper broke with the single mind-set by propagating a pluralistic society in which not the state, but rather the citizens would define the ideological educational direction. From the bulwarks he wanted to lead in the fight against unbelief and fight for a new, Christian, society. Besides, citizenship received a supernatural dimension in the Christian patriotism. The relationship between church and state about the school’s task regarding society and family life turned into a key theme in the shaping of Christian education, in which the roads in Protestant-Christian education began to diverge in response to these questions.

In 1860, the Christelijk Nationaal Schoolonderwijs (CNS: Christian-National School Education) stuck to its principles of the school’s broad training mission. However, the Gereformeerd Schoolverband (GSV: Reformed School Association) wished for a defined and restricted foundation of the school. Following the Seceded, the Reformed school was considered an extension of the religious

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1 In Dutch: gereformeerd-vrijgemaakt onderwijs
upbringing within family and church. The Christelijk Volksonderwijs (CVO: Christian People’s Education) thought that the CNS foundation was too narrow and wanted Christian education for all the people by way of the public school and the Christian school. Hence, the Protestant-Christian education became the means par excellence to pass on its own ideology, in as much as it was for the later Liberated Reformed.

Under the influence of H. Bavinck, the reformed education wanted to pick up the schools’ professionalisation. For this aim and more than before, cooperation was needed in order to be able to apply the upcoming pedagogical and didactical educational modernisation in a responsible way. Concern grew within GSV, and among members of the Vereeniging van Christelijke Onderwijzers (VCO: the Union of Christian Teachers) about – in their view – the modern direction the association headed for. They were concerned about the pleas that sounded during the union debate about responsible applications of the new educational views in the Reformed school. They held the idea that the education modernisers endangered the Reformed religious upbringing. In the eyes of these conscious-stricken, J. Waterink was at the forefront in the new scientific applications in the Reformed education. Among the conscious-stricken were the radical Liberated after 1945. In reality this was different, and even though Waterink, in line with H. Bavinck, criticised the existing Reformed education, he didn’t introduce specific, renewing, Reformed pedagogics. To the radical Liberated, his clash with K. Schilder in the 1930s also played a part and so his role in the shaping of Reformed education became history. This, too, was part of the choice of Liberated education for the Biblical, principal line by A. Janse.

Besides, the threat of issues concerning the Doorbraak (the Doorbraak, meaning the Breakthrough, was an attempt to renew the politics of the Netherlands after World War II) in the incompatible membership, and in the Hardegarijp case with G.C. van Niftrik, fed the idea among the conscious-stricken that the defined foundation of the Reformed school offered insufficient guarantees. This covered matters such as glossing over the antithesis, the call for apostolate and interdenominational cooperation, and was accompanied by the plea for putting more effort into the church membership and for cashing in the Liberation fruit. According to these conscious-stricken, the link between the religious upbringing in the family and the religious climate at school was breaking. The resistance of the conscious-stricken against educational renewal was backed up by the Liberation. This schism in 1944 triggered radical Reformed Liberated to search for church-bound schools in order to guarantee the Reformed family upbringing. In their view, the catechetical teaching of those baptised was no longer safe in the Reformed churches, as their teachings in the biblical doctrine had become blurred. These radical Liberated joined the present dissatisfaction about the educational renewal aimed to get Reformed education in tune with the time. This concern, in which the schism in 1944 can be viewed as catalyst, about GSV’s solving direction to safeguard future
Reformed education, led to a breach that the radical Liberated with the conscious-stricken in their midst on the one side chose, at the cost of the GSV on the other. With the backing of Liberated ministers and their own press they knew to phrase their objections sharply. Thus, the resistance obtained ecclesiastical legitimisation and an increased organised association. Besides, Reformed Liberated were sometimes excluded, but by using the Liberated churches as a leverage, they more often excluded themselves. However, this strengthened the radical position.

In 1950, the radical Liberated deliberately chose to stimulate the process top-down, because they knew about the division within the Liberated Churches concerning the choice for Liberated schooling. In retrospect, this choice turned out well. In a common approach, with the support of the magazines Gereformeerd Gezinsblad, De Reformatie and the Bond van Gereformeerde Mannenverenigingen (Men’s Union), parents could be gained for the Liberated schooling. In his recognition of Liberated education, next to the other recognised orientations, the judge based his decision on its exclusive binding to the Reformed Churches Liberated. The ground for this was formed by the constructed case law in the 1920 Act on Primary Education. Government offered maximal educational freedom. This meant that resistance from within had to be parried. The ecclesiastical legitimisation in all fields of society, in what was considered a continuing reformation and ethical conflict, caused increasing tensions within churches, causing a split.

This approach of establishing Liberated schools triggered criticism because everything was to centre around the local Liberated Church with a wrong application of the 1920 Act on Education on the radical Liberated claim. The proponents, however, managed in their scheme, despite the external and internal criticism and the lack of managerial experience and the mutual division. In the end, the national organisation knew to tackle all humps, disagreements, divisions and splits, or to conquer them and cash in unending consultations. This eventually made its beginning successful and fragile at the same time, because the isolation attracted more Liberated people, but others – both inside and outside the church – were bounced off.

Earlier, the radical Liberated had strategically chosen to establish nationwide organisations, such as the LVGS (National Association of Reformed Schools) and the VGOL (Union of Reformed [Liberated] Schoolmasters & Teachers) in order to support and stimulate local Liberated school initiatives. The proponents chose deliberately to continue the old line, as this was considered as such. It concerned the thought of the seceded church of 1834 with their church schools that the Reformed religious upbringing in the shape of Biblical training had to be safeguarded by an exclusive binding to the church. They didn’t want any educational experiments or renewals. There was talk of
so-called covenant schooling, in which was attempted to find handles for tangible school life, in A. Janse’s line.²

The old Reformed schools of which almost all parents had become Liberated, still had to make a clear choice for Liberated schooling. Yet, the majority – despite the remarkable efforts of local ministers towards the LVGS – opted for an individual route in order to keep the close-knit local community together. They needed more time. With new Liberated schools, the LVGS was more successful. In the period 1950-70, Liberated primary education grew towards 68 school societies with 62 schools, 2 teacher training academies, and 12 ULOs (schools for extended primary education). The support among Liberated Reformed increased to almost sixty per cent of the total. In the light of the abundant fragmentation of the churches spread over the country with respect to the past and the resistance that was felt both from outside and within the circle. The radical Liberated moved on and opened regional schools with an intra-local feeding ground where concentration was insufficient.

The Liberated education still remained a precarious enterprise as long as the own house was divided. The church breach of 1968-1969 had, therefore, to result into more clarity. The Liberated radicals experienced a lot of resistance from a group that had difficulties with the Liberated norm and the implicit citizenship with a strong supernatural dimension that was fixed on a heavenly citizenship. After this group stepped out from this denomination in the late sixties, it might just be easier to convince those who stayed of the importance of Liberated schooling. Pains were taken to form a close-knit community of Liberated, based on a common identity and a strong morality. It concerned the mission to set the standard: Liberated Reformed attend Liberated Education.

In the period 1970-85, the ambition to extend the Liberated schooling substantively resulted not only in successes, but also in a sense of disappointment and growing discomfort. The efforts failed to come to a specific educational and pedagogical vision. The GPC (Reformed Pedagogic Centre) had to navigate a tricky path between the proposed religious identity of the school and the requirements which the subsidising government demanded. On top of that, there was no unanimous view among the Liberated how this education was to be extended in substance. The discomfort was boosted by the explicit government ambition to reform the education. At the onset of the seventies, government put more emphasis on using education for its own political ideals by promoting the pupils’ emancipation and self-development to emancipated citizens. The Liberated education experienced this ambition as a threat because the state citizenship was to be shared and to this the GPC was activated which had to function as a sort of defending line against the intrusive government.

² This strongly and only advocated the Reformed Liberated view on the covenant teaching – note by translator.
After 1970, the Liberated education increased in number to a hundred schools for primary education and four large comprehensive schools, serving almost 27,000 pupils in 1985. There was abundance in growth, in participation and extension, but an internal discomfort came into being, too, about the lack of fundamental decisiveness and moulding capacities within its own circle in order to extend the education substantially in a distinctive vision on pedagogics and didactics.

The Liberated Reformed education wasn’t able to get any further than a theological fundamental approach of its education in terms of Covenant Education and the development of its own materials.

Moreover, the growing secondary education experienced the contemporary society as less threatening by talking about assisted confrontation. The school’s windows opened up.

The choice for own materials and methods in line with A. Janse cannot be regarded as a successful attempt to extend its own colours educationally, but rather to upgrade its religious identity.

In the late eighties, eyes were opened for the individual child on the basis of developing talents and broadening of additional teaching (e.g., special needs), and with such the Liberated education did become more up-to-date. Moreover, the focus was more on the child’s experience, but no such thing as specific pedagogics. In content, the Liberated education in this phase joined the track of the – by then outdated – pedagogics by J. Waterink. De facto, they left Janse’s fundamental course. Hence, the question of the specific characteristics of the Liberated education remains largely unanswered.