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*Published in:*  
Curriculum Inquiry

*DOI:*  
[10.1111/1467-873X.00254](https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-873X.00254)

[Link to publication](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
ten Dam, G. T. M., & Volman, M. L. L. (2003). Life jacket and art of living. Social competency and the reproduction of inequality in education. *Curriculum Inquiry*, (33)2, 117-137. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-873X.00254>

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Download date: 17 Sep 2019

# Articles

## A Life Jacket or an Art of Living: Inequality in Social Competence Education

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### ABSTRACT

After a period in which the emphasis in education was on “the basics,” increasing attention has been paid at the turn of the century to the “moral task of education” in the Netherlands. Schools are not only expected to prepare students for further education and/or the labour market but also for participating in society in the broadest sense, for example, in politics, care, and culture. In this article we will focus on one aspect of students’ development as a task of the school, namely, the furthering of students’ social competence. Six case studies were conducted in which projects aimed at social competence were analysed in general secondary education and prevocational education. The results show that in the general secondary education projects the emphasis was on the meaning of changes in society for students and the contribution they can make to such changes (social competence in education as an “art of living”). The prevocational education projects focused on improving the chances of students at school and in society by developing aspects of social competence that they have not acquired at home or earlier in their school careers, such as self-confidence and social and communicative skills (social competence as a “life jacket”). We interpret these different focuses in terms of the production and reproduction of social inequality and discuss how such reproduction processes can be countered in the context of educating for social competence.

### INTRODUCTION

*The Pascal College in Zaandam, a small town not far from Amsterdam, the capital city of the Netherlands, is a school for prevocational and general secondary*

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Curriculum Inquiry 33:2 (2003)

Published by Blackwell Publishing, 350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148, USA, and 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK.

*education. In recent years the school has grown rapidly and it now fulfills a regional rather than a neighbourhood function. An unforeseen and undesirable side-effect of this change has been an increase in problems associated with a large urban area. The influx of students from the nearby city has gone hand in hand with drug problems and violence. The atmosphere at the school changed and many students and teachers no longer felt safe at school. Under the heading of "The Safe School," many activities were developed in the prevocational education section of Pascal College. For example, a series of "game/drama" lessons is taught, and students in the first two years of prevocational education work on a project about "bullying." These lessons aim to develop social and social-emotional competences in students, which are essential for a good social climate at school and are attributes students also need in their everyday lives away from school.*

*The Gerrit van der Veen School for general secondary education has a mixed student population from all over Amsterdam. About 35 percent of students come from Surinamese, Turkish, Moroccan, and Antillean families. For a long time the school has been very active in the field of art and in recent years has linked intercultural education with education in the arts. According to the school, education in the arts is an excellent medium for dealing with cultural differences in an open and non-normative fashion. The equality of peoples and cultures is the general starting point of intercultural education. The school looks for ways of doing justice to diversity while not denying the problems of social differences. An example is the "Young and Old" series of lessons, which is about the meaning of "culture" in students' own lives.*

Both these schools are examples of educational institutions that have put a lot of effort into the "moral task of education." Since the beginning of the 1990s the "moral task of education" has been a frequently discussed theme in educational circles. Although the term "moral task" may suggest otherwise, the discussion is not only about moral development in the strictest sense (values education); it is also about the pro-social development of students and citizenship in modern society (see, e.g., Wardekker, 2001).

The discussion concentrates on two main aspects. First, there is the concern about the quality of society. The increasing individualization of society, the disappearance of traditional norms and values, and the change in attitude toward traditional institutions like the church and the family (Giddens, 1991; Beck, Giddens, & Lash, 1994) have prompted the question: How can education contribute to restoring social cohesion? (see, e.g., Klaassen, 1996). In the discussion it is immediately obvious that most people do not see improving the way of conveying traditional norms and values at school as the answer to this question. Society has changed and will continue changing much faster than ever before; the more or less stable society of many years ago has disappeared. Most people regard the fact that rigid social structures have been superseded by a highly mobile

society as positive. This equally applies to the disappearance of a uniform culture in favour of a multicultural and pluralistic society in which different groups of people can make their views known (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1988). The problem of such changeability and diversity, however, is expressed in the question: What can hold together such a society? And, following on from that, the question: What is good citizenship? Answers to these questions focus on citizens who are able to cope with cultural differences and opposing interests between people, on citizens who are able to contribute and want to contribute to a society that is constantly changing, and on bringing up children to become such citizens (e.g., Lynch, 1992; ten Dam & Volman, 1998).

Second, in recent years there has been a renewed interest in the personal development and welfare of students. During the “back-to-basics” period, according to current criticism (see, e.g., Quicke, 1999), educational policy and the educational sciences paid too much attention to stimulating the cognitive development of students. Education must also endeavour to guide students toward adulthood and a position in society. Ultimately, this is also about preparing students for citizenship, not so much from the point of view of society but more from the point of view of the development of students’ own identity. Both sides of the “moral task of education” are closely linked, even though an analytical differentiation can be made.

The development of the personal identity of students in modern society makes demands on education. In general terms, learning is about the development of one’s own identity, or at least it should be. Learning can be seen as being able to participate with increasing competence in the social and cultural practices that society deems important (Lave & Wenger, 1991). At the beginning of the 21st century education must equip students with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that will enable them to function meaningfully, both for themselves and the community, in a society exhibiting the tensions and changes described above. In the process of acquiring these cognitive, social, and moral competences, students develop their own identity and become social individuals. Whereas citizenship education used to be mainly interpreted as preparing students for political participation, the emphasis is now on educating students to be members of society who are able to participate in an active, responsible, and critical way in a rapidly changing, pluralistic society.

The discussion on how education can contribute to the development of students’ identities and to preparing them for citizenship has until now primarily been on a theoretical level. This resulted, for example, in the formulation of objectives like “schools must prepare students for participation in a pluralistic society,” or “schools must equip students to form their own view of the world and of their position in it.” In this article we will present a study of schools that place great emphasis on promoting the social competence of their students, within the framework of different

kinds of projects. The research question was: How did the schools in the project tackle the idea that the school must contribute to the social competence of its students, on which aspects of social competence did they focus and why? In the first section of the article we will discuss the concept of “social competence” in the context of the “moral task of education,” introducing the most important concepts that were involved in analysing the projects. We explain which research methods were used and why in the following section. An analysis is then given of how the schools participating in the study worked on the development of the social competence of their students. We conclude the article with a summary of our most important findings and a discussion on the differing goals for social competence education we encountered in different types of schools.

### **SOCIAL COMPETENCE AND THE MORAL TASK OF EDUCATION**

At this point in time the social and moral development of students is considered to be an explicit task of all schools for all students in all subjects. In this article we use the term social *competence* to denote the intended outcome of this task of education at the student level. The concept of competence has become extremely popular in recent years in the thinking on learning processes, particularly in work situations (see, e.g., Eraut, 1994). Unlike understanding, learning results in terms of “isolated” knowledge, skills, and attitudes, the concept of competence emphasizes the capability of a person to act and respond. “Competence” can be defined as the totality of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that enable a person to perform tasks and solve problems in a particular field. It has a longer tradition in relation to *social* competence and crops up many times in the discussion on youth at risk. We will first pay attention to the way the concept of social competence functions in that discussion, with a view to carefully defining our concepts. Then we will explain how we define social competence in the context of the “moral task of education.”

In relation to youth at risk, social competence mostly refers to social behaviour and to the skills necessary to function adequately in daily life. Bakker, Pannebakker, and Snijders (1999, p. 31) state in a review study that someone is socially competent if he or she has the following four skills: the ability to recognize and interpret social signals and to assess social situations; the ability to react responsively and adaptively and to anticipate and reflect on one’s own and other people’s behaviour; the ability to think of strategies for agency and convert these into effective social behaviour (verbal and nonverbal); and the ability to demonstrate self-confidence in social interactions. Social competence is mainly interpreted from a developmental psychological perspective in the discussion on youth at risk. Someone is considered to be socially competent if he or she has the necessary skills to cope successfully with the development tasks that crop up

in daily life (e.g., Elias & Weisberg, 1994; White, 1989). Hence adolescents in most Western countries must become less dependent on their parents and determine their own place in the changing relations of the immediate and extended family. They must acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to be able to take up a profession and make a choice about work. With regard to social contacts and friendships, adolescents must learn how to make contact with other people and develop and maintain that contact; they must learn to perceive what contact with others can mean for them, how to be receptive to friendship, develop reciprocal trust and confidence, mutual acceptance, and so on. A last example concerns dealing with the authorities and organizations: young people must learn to accept that there are institutions and people that have authority over them and they must learn to assert themselves within the bounds of the relevant rules and social codes (De Wit, Van der Veer, & Slot, 1995). In developmental psychological theories young people who cannot cope adequately with this type of development task are considered to be less competent. The balance between demand and capacity, between risk factors (unfavourable circumstances at an individual, social, or community level) and protective factors (also at an individual, social, or community level) has been disturbed (e.g., Decovic, 1999). Hence in this kind of model the promotion of social competence of young people is understood as the strengthening of the protective factors at an individual level, thereby enabling young people to react more “adaptively” to problem situations. The accent is primarily on social skills. A review study on social competence carried out by Ladd (1999) reveals a similar focus on social skills. Determinants of social skills, like social-cognitive constructs (e.g., aims, expectations, attributes), relationships between friends, the way children process social information, the role of the family (in particular parents’ behaviour), are the most important research themes.

In our opinion, the focus on social skills results in a limited interpretation of social competence. First, skills are inextricably linked with knowledge and attitudes. Understanding why people react to one another in a particular way in certain situations (knowledge) makes it possible for someone to act in that way themselves in the same or a similar situation (i.e., apply the necessary skills). Being able to act in a particular way (have the necessary skills) does not mean that someone is always prepared or inclined to do so; that partly depends on his or her attitude. The strength of the concept of competence is the interblending of knowledge, skills, and attitudes as expressed in a person’s capacity for agency in social situations.

Second, a concept of “social competence” focusing on the mastering of social skills suggests that the central issue is the ability to follow social rules in certain social situations, for example, to be able to hold a telephone conversation or choose the appropriate form of address when talking to someone. Social skills are presented as “neutral” techniques, but what

seems to be involved is learning to conform to existing values, norms, and customs. From a developmental psychological perspective the accent is on the “ability to function adequately,” on “reacting adaptively,” and on “coping behaviour,” disguising the inherently normative character of the concept. What is considered to be desirable or undesirable behaviour is dependent on the sociocultural group to which a person belongs, on the context where that behaviour occurs (at home, on the street, at school, etc.), and on that person’s perspective on society. Thus, linking social competence exclusively to social skills not only disregards the connection between knowledge, skills, and attitudes, it could also easily lead to a definition that equates social competence with “conformity,” leaving insufficient room for reflection and hence for *critical* citizenship. Moreover, the educational goal of identity formation is underexposed.

We define social competence as the ability to function meaningfully and critically in a particular society. The changes in society outlined above demand other competences than previously. For example, nowadays people are not expected to “know their place” but to “determine their own position.” One is no longer expected to be “brave” when something emotionally upsetting happens but to “be able to understand and express one’s feelings.” Sacrificing yourself is no longer a merit, pointing out what you are not prepared to accept from others is. A critical approach is frequently appreciated more than subservient accommodation. It is a question of making choices and knowing why you are making that choice, respecting the choices of others, communicating about these, and making your own opinion known. In modern society, choosing is an essential activity in identity formation. Moreover, given our profile of present-day society, social competence pertains to the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that equip a student to function in a society that is constantly changing and one that has little uniformity. Citizenship in our opinion not only means functioning in a given society but also being able to make one’s own critical contribution to that society.

With this definition in mind, contributing to the social competence of students should be aspired to in *all* the learning processes that occur at school; there are no nonsocial competences. Every development and all learning contribute, at least ideally, to the functioning of students in society and are thus *social* development and *social* learning. In the study discussed in this article, however, we used the term social competence in the specific sense of the learning outcomes aspired to in what we call the “social domain” (Volman & ten Dam, 2000). This refers to the totality of knowledge, skills, and attitudes in relation to a person’s social and affective functioning, the interactions between people and the influence on these of the structure and organization of society, and the values that play a role in this that are necessary to participate adequately in society. In this article we present the results of six case studies on projects in secondary schools that explicitly endeavour to stimulate the social competence of their students.



We concentrate on the schools' objectives in these projects.<sup>1</sup> What aspects of social competence do schools focus on and why? The concepts we have discussed above structure the analysis of the case studies. Do the schools define social competence in terms of skills or have they chosen a broader interpretation? What role do social cohesion and the personal development of students play in the different projects? How is identity formation approached? What place does critical citizenship have?

## CONTEXT AND METHODS

We used case studies to answer these questions. In total, six case studies were carried out in secondary schools. Dutch students enter secondary education at the age of 12 after eight years of primary education. Although there is a common curriculum in the first stage of secondary education, students are selected for different school types or tracks during or at the beginning of their first year in secondary education. There is a prevocational education track, which prepares students for further vocational training or the labour market, and a general track, which prepares students for higher education.

The moral task of education and, in particular, the furthering of students' social competence, has been included in the legislation and regulations on secondary education since the mid 1990s. This applies to both the prevocational education track and the general track. All schools are obliged to stimulate the social, moral, and communicative development of all their students. In spite of this statutory obligation, social competence has not been structurally integrated into the regular curriculum. In some schools, social competence is dealt with in separate, extracurricular projects. Integrating social competence into school subjects is still an uphill battle.

The organization Process Management Secondary Education (Procesmanagement Voortgezet Onderwijs),<sup>2</sup> which commissioned this research, selected the case studies on the basis of their learning potential for other schools (see Stake, 1994). All the selected schools have teachers and school heads who are prepared to talk about the reasons, specific objectives, structure, and implementation of their project in such a way that others can learn from their experience. In selecting the schools the aim was to choose a variety of types of projects with different subject themes. None of the projects are part of the regular curriculum; the schools chose to include the projects in their programme. The research included the following projects and types of school.

- *Young and Old* (general secondary education). The aim of this project is to discuss multiculturalism. However, the starting point for these lessons is not ethnic cultural differences but the diversity of youth



cultures in which ethnic aspects may play a role. Information on this subject is offered to students through learning packages and a video. Students are encouraged to interpret and make sense of this information through class discussion and individual assignments, which challenge students to contribute their own experiences and opinions. Interviews also play an important role; students interview, for example, their parents and each other.

- *Working Together, Caring Together* (general secondary education). This equal opportunities project aims to show students that there are alternatives to the traditional division of labour and hence to contribute to the choices open to boys and girls when planning their future. In this project, information on the phenomenon of “care” in society is presented to students in different ways (written material, videos, exhibitions, a visit to a nursing home, a “househusband” or a nurse as a guest speaker). The objective is that students actively construct knowledge in this field through research-like activities (e.g., listing the division of labour at home and in teachers’ homes, interviewing grandparents).
- *The Poet* (prevocational education). This project combines environmental education and poetry writing. Students explore nature in the school environment, for example, by observing plants and insects. The so-called Storyline approach to education is used; students learn through educational activities organized around a storyline (McEwan & Egan, 1995; Vos et al., 1999). As the story in this particular case is about a boy who finds a notebook with poems written by his grandfather (“the poet”), the project pays a lot of attention to writing poetry as a means of expression. The storyline approach is considered particularly suitable for students with an educational history of failure, as it includes a lot of practical activities and addresses the prior knowledge of students and a broad range of talents.
- *The Safe School* (prevocational education). The aim of this project is to contribute to a safer school environment. Several activities are undertaken in this context in the school we visited. In our case study, however, we confine ourselves to an analysis of two types of activities. (1) Drama lessons. These are mainly aimed at improving students’ self-confidence. By means of games and drama, students experiment with expressing their own opinions and feelings, with empathy with others, and with conflict. (2) Lessons about bullying. Students reflect on their own feelings and on the consequences and impact of their own behaviour. They practise communicative skills and draw up guidelines for dealing with bullying.
- *Working with the City* (prevocational education). This project aims at developing an understanding in students of the environment they live in, and how they themselves can influence it, by carrying out small research projects in their own city. These research projects are

prepared during the first phase of the project. Attention is paid to the requisite social skills for working together on the one hand and to research skills such as observation and interviewing on the other. Reflection on the group process remains important during the whole programme.

- *General Preparation for Work and Adult Life* (prevocational education). This last project aims at preparing students in prevocational education for simple jobs in the service sector by carrying out authentic service tasks in their own school and reflecting on this. A lot of attention is paid to social and communicative skills as these are important elements in every job. The project is based on a participatory and transfer-oriented pedagogy, which takes the experiences of the students as its focal point.

The case studies serve a dual purpose. On the one hand they can be seen as independent studies with the objective of acquiring insight into the way the furthering of social competence was approached in that specific project (intrinsic case study, see Stake, 1994, p. 237). On the other hand, collectively they constitute a study of how social competence is or can be approached in different ways in secondary schools. Together the different case studies provide a better understanding of the possibilities for working effectively on social competence (collective case study, see Stake, 1994, p. 237). The emphasis in this article is on the latter.

### **Research Activities**

The following research activities were undertaken in each case study.

- To begin with we held an *orientation meeting* with a teacher or a member of the school management team closely involved in the project at each of the schools. During this discussion we gained a global impression of the project, agreed how the research would progress, and collected material on the school and the project.
- With help of the *written material* we then made an analysis of the projects and, if the documentation was detailed enough, of the background and precise details of each project in the schools participating in the research.
- The *first round of interviews* was then held with teachers involved in the project and with a member of the school management team. In the interviews with teachers the emphasis was on the objectives, the specific approach, and the effects observed in students. The interviews with the members of the school management team focused on the school's decision to choose the project in question and the factors, both favourable and unfavourable, at the level of the

organization influencing the implementation and results of the projects.

- We interviewed the *developers of the project material* in two of the case studies.<sup>3</sup> In the other case studies, one of the teachers had been closely involved in the development of the material so that a separate interview was unnecessary.
- In three of the six case studies *lessons were observed* during which parts of the projects were implemented.<sup>4</sup> This was not possible in the other three case studies as the projects had already been completed.
- We analysed the information obtained from each case study. Using the reports on each of the individual cases as a basis, we formulated supplementary questions for teachers in a *second round of interviews*. During this second round, teachers were asked to comment on our interpretation of their project. They also suggested changes and amendments to the reports (which they had received earlier).
- The revised case reports were then distributed to the teachers, members of the school management teams, and developers and were amended where necessary on the basis of their comments (*authorized on the basis of consensus*). As a result, the schools agreed that the research data were published under their name.

Our analysis of the goals of the projects is based on the information found in both the written material and the interviews. Sometimes, goals concerning social competence are explicitly stated, but more often goals had to be reconstructed on the basis of the written material and the information obtained during the interviews on the specific educational activities carried out within the framework of the project. Therefore, our analysis not only includes descriptions of learning goals but also of learning activities.

### **Reliability and Validity**

The most important “instrument” in qualitative research is the researchers themselves. After all, they are the ones who interpret the situation and the agency of people in that situation; this is by definition subjective. This has consequences for the quality demands that can be made on research. The pursuance of objectivity as a regulatory ideal in qualitative research means that the researcher must not add or change anything at all in the essence of the reasoning and interpretation of the participants in the research.

We took a number of measures to guarantee the quality of the research. The use of the principle of *triangulation* can increase the reliability and internal validity of case studies (Yin, 1984; Stake, 1994). Different lines of approach can be used. We collected the material at different points in time

(two rounds of interviews) and made use of different types of data collection (document analysis; interviews with educational developers,<sup>5</sup> teachers, and members of the school management team; and observations).<sup>6</sup>

In relation to the reliability and external validity, it is important, moreover, that the approach of the research is clear to others (transparency), that is, it must be possible for outsiders to ascertain how the research was structured, how material has been collected, what interpretations have been made by the researchers, etc. (Janesick, 1994; Kelchtermans, 1994). To make the research process transparent, we have endeavoured to describe the steps undertaken as carefully as possible, and to structure the material of each case in the same way so that it is clear to the reader on which data we have based our interpretations. By placing the case studies in an explicit theoretical framework before commencing the research, we have endeavoured to make the guiding factors in the collection and interpretation of material transparent.

Validity is also related to the extent to which the material collected and insights based on that material actually reflect “reality” (Denzin, 1970; Janesick, 1994). In other words, has the researcher done sufficient justice to the research participants and their perception of reality? In addition to triangulation, the validity of the research is supported by the fact that our interpretations were submitted to the participants for “authorization” after both rounds of interviews. By coming to a consensus on the interpretations in this way and by making the research and its results as transparent as possible to the reader, we have endeavoured to fulfil the requirement of *authenticity*.

## **SOCIAL COMPETENCE IN THE SIX PROJECTS**

How is social competence interpreted in the six schools that participated in the research? First we will discuss the aspects of social competence on which the projects concentrate. Then we consider how the projects react to individualization and the dissipation of social cohesion. Lastly, we examine how the projects endeavour to contribute to the development of a student’s identity and ascertain the place assigned to “critical citizenship” in the project.

### **Aspects of Social Competence**

Society and the student population have become more multicultural, a phenomenon that in the *Young and Old* series of lessons was the reason for paying attention to the attitudes that are needed to be able to function in a “socially competent” way in a pluralistic society. Living alongside people from a different cultural background makes it necessary to recognize and

respect differences. The first steps toward fostering this recognition and respect are to show students that they themselves are members of different cultures, for example, by thinking about questions such as how do advertisers make use of youth cultures, what music do you like, how do you like to dress? By listing and discussing answers to this type of question in the classroom, teachers endeavour to make students aware of the different subcultures in the class and the students' positions within them. Ethnicity and social class are gradually discussed as factors that co-determine choices. Students begin to understand that people are influenced by culture in the choices that they make. They interview their parents about this subject and process the results together in the class. Finally, students interview each other in pairs. The aim is that students will start to consider the diversity in the class as self-evident and as something positive, and that they will become more interested in each other because they know more about each other's background, family, and culture. To sum up, social competence is interpreted in this series of lessons as learning to approach each other openly, with interest and without prejudice.

The *Working Together, Caring Together* project is a reaction to the changing relationships between the sexes regarding the division of care and paid employment. These changes require students to choose what place they want work and care to have in their future lives. The project aims to introduce students to the existing range of choices in this respect. It encompasses a more specific and more normative objective regarding attitudes. Given that most students are familiar with the traditional choices, the project attempts to open students' minds to other possibilities. For boys in particular this involves a greater appreciation and respect for the value of care and convincing them that the care professions and caring tasks in the personal domain are real options. Alternative options are made apparent in a number of ways: by listing the division of care tasks in students' and teachers' families, by a video showing young people of the same generation in care situations, by visiting a nursing home or other care institution, and a meeting with someone who has made a conscious decision about care and working. In this project, social competence acquires the meaning of being able to make a carefully considered choice that is not by definition a traditional choice.

Although the main aim of these two projects discussed above is to change students' attitudes, the objectives of the other projects focus on both attitudes and skills. *The Poet* project, in so far as it is aimed at social competence, has a two-fold objective on attitudes. First and foremost it is about developing respect and concern for the natural environment. It also aims to teach students to take responsibility for their own learning. Here the attitude aspect involves stimulating the self-confidence of students and boosting their self-image. This is achieved by making the learning activities easily accessible and incorporating lots of possibilities for successful experiences into the project. According to the teachers, the students are

proud of the collections of poems written in class and like to take them home. The learning process is made visible by displaying students' work on a wall frieze. Skills in this project are mainly skills for self-directed learning, especially investigative skills and skills to direct their own learning process with a clear emphasis on cooperative learning. This is based on the idea that only education that is meaningful to students and relevant to their self-image and view of the world can teach them to take responsibility for the way they participate in school and in society.

*The Safe School* series of lessons endeavours to develop social and social-emotional competences in students, which are important for a good atmosphere at school and are attributes students need in their functioning out of school. The game/drama lessons are directed at furthering the communicative skills of students and respect for others. Students practise via games, for example, how to achieve something by negotiation or learn how to explain why they particularly want to do something (instead of less productive solutions such as shouting, moaning, or simply doing it without permission). The lessons also aim to stimulate a more realistic self-image of students and in this way improve their self-confidence. This is achieved, for example, by encouraging students to express their feelings and thoughts, including those on the lessons: What did you think of the lesson? What have you learned? Why did your team lose that game? What did you feel like then? The lessons about bullying aim to give students insight into human behaviour, including their own, and with the help of this insight to learn to adjust their own behaviour.

*Working with the City* focuses on the social and social-emotional skills of students and, in particular, "learning to work together." The reasoning behind this is the observation that students do not adequately apply their social and social-emotional skills of their own accord in certain situations and as a result are vulnerable in social interactions. Guided assignments put students in situations in which they have to work together. One example, working in small groups, is to design packaging that would make it possible to drop an egg from a height of six metres without it breaking. The objective is that students will develop cooperative skills while working in these groups. Students' insight into the environment they live in and improving their own view of their ability to act within it also feature in this programme. Having learnt the necessary cooperative skills, working in small groups they then list and describe everything they can see on the street—the types of buildings, colours, materials, trees, plants, and cars—and interview passers-by to obtain an impression of the neighbourhood.

Aspects of social competence that are necessary to functioning well in paid employment feature in the *General Preparation for Work and Adult Life* programme. These include social-communicative skills (consultation, cooperation, offering and asking for help), self-knowledge, independence, responsibility, self-confidence, and awareness of mutual dependence. An

integrated approach is applied to these aspects, that is, they are linked to the students' experiences during the assignments in class or the work experience placement. Topics such as standing up for yourself, working together, or holding a telephone conversation are discussed and practised in relation to events in the classroom or the placement.

Earlier in this article we argued strongly for a broad understanding of social competence that embraces knowledge and attitudes as well as skills. None of the projects explicitly cover this whole spectrum. The general secondary education projects mainly focus on attitudes by means of accumulating knowledge and insight. In the prevocational education projects, learning specific social skills and the acquisition of attitudes such as self-confidence are the key issues.

### **Individualization and Social Cohesion**

We have pointed out that interest in the social competence of students partly stems from a concern about increasing individualization and the dissipation of social cohesion. How are these themes dealt with in the projects?

Whereas the two projects *Young and Old* and *Working Together, Caring Together* react to changes in society and want to contribute to critical agency in relation to such changes, the four other projects are more oriented on the problematic characteristics of the group of students addressed. All four of these projects take the approach that the school must offer students "something extra" on the issue of social competence. The feeling in *The Poet* project is that many students in prevocational education lack self-confidence and that their self-image is far too negative. The approach in the game/drama lessons is that the students must improve their communicative skills and build up a positive self-image if they are to function adequately at school and in society. A comparable approach applies to *Working with the City*. The skills and attitudes that are worked on are aimed at improving the chances of students in society and at the same time are a condition for learning at school. In connection with the latter, it is argued that working together stimulates the cognitive development and achievements of students. Whereas these three projects are about the general preparation of students to function in widely differing segments of society, *General Preparation for Work and Adult Life* is specifically aimed at preparing students for working life.

The differentiation outlined above between the projects that base their rationale on developments in society and those that base their rationale on the personal make-up of students (which is considered to be lacking) coincides with a difference in target groups. The first group of projects was carried out in schools for general secondary education, the second group was aimed at students in prevocational education, a group with a compar-



actively strong representation of “youth at risk.” Even though those involved in the projects frequently pointed out that the scope of the projects was not limited to their target groups, this differentiation is not a coincidence. The changes that prompted the schools to instigate the projects, namely, increasing individualization and diminishing social cohesion, seem to have a different meaning for different groups of students. Students in the general secondary education projects are addressed as individuals who can make an active contribution in their own lives to the desired developments in society (emancipation, multiculturalism). Students in the prevocational education projects are mainly helped to survive in a society that expects its members to adhere to social conventions as well as cope with uncertainty and change. Self-confidence, a positive self-image, and communicative skills are considered crucial for participation in the labour market and in society as a whole.

### **Identity Formation and Critical Citizenship**

We have described the role of education in relation to the development of students’ identity as the provision of opportunities for acquiring the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that equip students to participate actively, responsibly, and critically in a changing and pluralistic society. The six projects in our research are all aimed at contributing to the development of students’ identities, which on the whole the regular curriculum is not. A detailed profile of this contribution also shows a general secondary education interpretation and a prevocational education interpretation. In *Young and Old*, a student is expected to learn to understand himself or herself as an individual who is partly the product of a specific cultural background and who as an individual makes his or her own cultural choices. *Working Together, Caring Together* aims to make students aware of the different choices open to them about the place care and work can have in their lives and identities, choices that in our society are linked with gender. Formulated in more general terms, identity formation in these projects is about the development of a reflexive and changeable identity.

In the other projects—*The Poet*, *Working with the City*, *The Safe School*, and *General Preparation for Work and Adult Life*—identity formation principally has the meaning of making the link between the subject matter and the student as a person, and of working on a positive self-image. It is a question of making learning meaningful and significant to students. *The Poet* aims to create a learning context in which students can identify with the subject matter whereby their self-awareness and their confidence in their own learning ability grows. In *Working with the City*, the approach is taken, on the one hand, that by teaching students to work together and to deal with the conflicts that may arise, their self-confidence and self-image will be improved. On the other hand, students acquire a better grasp of their

social environment whereby they learn to see themselves as persons who also can influence the environment they live in. By working on the functional assignments in *General Preparation for Work and Adult Life* the aim is that students will learn to recognize and deal with their own potential and limitations. In *The Safe School* projects, the furthering of self-confidence and social manners is a direct objective. The development of a positive image of one's own place in the world is central to these projects. By giving students the feeling that they have the right to be here (to begin with at school), the aim is that this will strengthen their sense of identity.

Developing social competence is not restricted to learning social rules and skills in any of the projects. In so far as such rules and skills are taught, the aim is not that students will adopt them without thinking but that they understand the background to these rules. The place of "critical citizenship" in the projects, however, varies greatly.

*Young and Old* and *Working Together, Caring Together* have the most explicit aim of all the projects as far as contributing to the social changes that prompted the projects—the increasing multiculturalism and emancipation in society, respectively. Students must not only learn to function in a multicultural and emancipated society, they must be able to make an active contribution to that society. With their emphasis on critical citizenship, the projects have an explicitly normative starting point. In *Working with the City* this mainly involves finding a balance between the ability to participate in a socially acceptable way in society on the one hand and, on the other hand, to function critically in that society by teaching students to be aware of and accept the consequences of their own actions. *General Preparation for Work and Adult Life* is not only geared toward specific occupational skills but also to more general knowledge, attitudes, and skills that are important for employees. Students learn to think about their position within an organization, about employee participation, and so forth. *The Poet*, the game/drama lessons, and the lessons about bullying are less geared to the participation of students in society now or in the future but concentrate instead on the active and responsible participation of students in the school as part of the environment in which they live.

To sum up, two interpretations of social competence can be identified in the projects. In the general secondary education interpretation, social competence appears to be an "art of living," whereas in the prevocational education interpretation it is more of a "life jacket." The conscious making of choices on the course and direction of one's own life, and wanting to and being able to contribute critically to society does seem to be an aspect of socially competent functioning at the present time that lies more in the line of the projects in general secondary education schools. The prevocational education projects focus on improving the chances of students at school and in society by developing aspects of social competence that they have not acquired at home or in prior stages of their school careers, such as self-confidence and social and communicative skills.

## CONCLUSIONS

The discussion on the “moral task of education” poses the question: How can schools contribute to social cohesion in a society that is characterized by individualization, multiculturalism, rapid change, and a lack of self-evident values? How can students be prepared to function in such a society? Despite all the attention that has been paid to the moral task of education, research on its practical realization in secondary education is virtually non-existent. In this article we have concentrated on learning objectives in the so-called social domain and have looked at projects that give a special place to social competence. We understand “social competence” in the context of the “moral task of education” to be the totality of knowledge, skills, and attitudes in the social domain that equip a person for agency in society. By focusing on the social domain and social competence we are not implying that the “moral task of education” can be placed in a separate domain concerning norms, values, and social competence completely detached from cognitive learning at school (Wardekker, 1998). What we do think is that in situations where teachers, schools, and developers explicitly ask themselves what social competence is and how it can be worked on, a start is being made to formulate didactical guidelines for the “moral task of education” (see also ten Dam, 1999).

With the help of six case studies we have tried to gain insight into the way schools work on stimulating the social competence of their students. These six case studies are not representative. We have studied “special” schools in the sense that they pay explicit attention to social competence. Conclusions can therefore not be drawn on *the* way schools develop and define learning objectives in this domain. We chose the case studies method because we wanted to study how schools work on social competence within their specific context in relation to the meaning and significance given to social competence by teachers and others involved. In this way our aim was to give examples of social competence as an educational objective that prompt people to think and to demonstrate new possibilities for agency. Using the concepts of knowledge-attitudes-skills, the contribution to social cohesion, identity formation, and critical citizenship as criteria, we compared the different case studies, which then enabled us to describe and analyse the differences and similarities between the individual cases.

The projects discussed in this article appear to focus on different aspects of social competence. In the general secondary education projects the emphasis was on the meaning of changes in society for students and the contribution they themselves can make to this. The learning objective can be characterized as developing a reflexive and changeable identity, and being able to participate in society as a critical citizen. These projects are mainly concerned with objectives regarding attitudes by means of building up knowledge and insight.

The four projects in prevocational education are mainly geared to improving the chances of students at school and in society by working on aspects of social competence that they have not learned at home, such as self-confidence and social and communicative skills. Attitude objectives and also skills objectives in particular are important here. In these schools the reason for contemplating the “moral task of education” or working on the social competence of students is not so much that there are no self-evident values anymore but rather that students do not learn at home the values and social skills that are considered to be self-evident at school and in society. These students do not have difficulty in “making choices on the development of their own identity,” their problem is much more basic: they lack self-confidence and self-respect. In the prevocational education schools in our study, working on social competence has acquired the function of offering students a “life jacket,” a basis of self-respect and elementary rules for social interaction, rather than contributing to their “art of living.”

It could be concluded from this analysis that education that tries to enhance the social competence of students, even when this aims to increase the chances of students at risk, is once again in danger of reproducing social inequality. Education unintentionally contributes to social competence being about survival for one group and for the other about development, or even worse, about conformity versus privilege. The “life jacket” that is offered to students in the lower school types can easily become a “straight jacket”; students are taught how to behave in an appropriate manner.

The case studies, however, facilitate a less one-dimensional presentation of the situation. From the perspective of the sociology of education, several authors have pointed out that the social and moral influence of education primarily occurs in the hidden curriculum (e.g., Giroux & Purpel, 1983; Klaassen, 1996). Values and norms are transmitted and social disciplining occurs via implicit and unconscious learning processes, including those involving the resistance of students (Willis, 1977). It is virtually impossible for students to defend themselves against the “lessons” of the hidden curriculum. The strength of the projects is that they explicitly strive to achieve learning processes in social competence, all of them attempting to stimulate the awareness of students of what they had learned and why. At these schools the development of citizenship also occurs “between the lines” of course, but the projects can form the context in which students and teachers learn to exchange ideas on the “social text” of the hidden curriculum (Gordon, 1997).

If anything has been learned from the years of debate on education and social inequality, it is that there is a constant tension between reproduction and emancipation. In view of the dynamics of that tension it is not very helpful to view the dichotomy in the way social competence is approached in the different types of school as an irrevocable outcome.

It makes more sense to recognize that different groups of students relate to the objectives of social competence in different ways *without* drawing conclusions in advance on what can be achieved. Some educationalists are of the opinion that “functioning critically and reflexively” would be asking too much of prevocational education students. We think, however, that reflection has become a basic skill essential to everyone in today’s society. From the point of view of emancipation, the competences necessary for critical and active citizenship must be put in reach of all students. It is reflection, metacognition, and so forth that constitute the critical part of social competence. If this part is not addressed and the emphasis is exclusively on the acquisition of social skills, educating for conformity becomes a risk.

We are strongly in favour of a broad interpretation of social competence for *all* students. A broad interpretation is not only important for students in prevocational education but also for students in general secondary education. For many students at general secondary education schools, working on self-esteem and social skills may not be as crucial as for most students at prevocational education schools but it remains a relevant objective for them too. The same applies to “the ability to shift from one perspective to another,” an essential skill in our pluralistic and multi-cultural society.

The dichotomy between types of school observed in our study conflicts with the starting point that social competence and critical citizenship should be objectives of all types of secondary education. The question is thus not whether, but *how* these objectives can be achieved for all students, for example, by working in different ways with different groups of students. This requires further research on forms of instruction that can make a broad interpretation of social competence attainable for all students.

## NOTES

1. For an analysis of the teaching methods used in the projects, see Ten Dam and Volman (1999, 2000).
2. An organization set up by the Dutch government to supervise the implementation of reforms in secondary education.
3. These were *The Poet* and *Working Together, Caring Together* projects.
4. These were the *Safe School*, *Working with the City*, and *General Preparation for Work and Adult Life* projects.
5. In two of the cases.
6. In three of the cases.

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