Teaching in diversity : teachers and pupils about tense situations in ethnically heterogeneous classes
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Chapter 2  
Tense situations in ethnically diverse classrooms: Teachers’ experiences \(^1\)

This chapter gives an overview of the incidence of tense situations in ethnically diverse classrooms in secondary schools and to what extent teachers relate these situations to the ethnically diverse teaching context. In total 87 teachers at 34 schools in the Netherlands responded to a questionnaire. Being interested in tense situations as occasions for citizenship education on living in an ethnically diverse society, this chapter also gives an overview of the strategies used by the teachers when reacting to these situations. The results show that teachers experienced tensions in the contact between themselves and their pupils, but they hardly related these situations to the ethnic diversity of the class. The teachers were willing to take action when tense situations occur and reacted in particular by discussing the situations with pupils. These are encouraging findings in the context of citizenship education.

2.1. Introduction
Dutch schools show increasing ethnic diversity, especially in the major cities. The changing ethnic demographics of schools all over the country are the result of labour migration (mainly from Turkey and Morocco), immigration by citizens from former Dutch colonies (Surinam and the Dutch Antilles), and the arrival of political and economic refugees (mainly from Africa and the Middle East).

In reaction to the increased heterogeneity of the pupil population attention has been paid to intercultural education. It has intrinsically changed under the influence of the hardening political climate on immigration and the multicultural society. Whereas the emphasis was previously on interpersonal relationships between pupils and respect for diversity, in the last few years the aim of assimilating immigrant pupils has become more important (Leeman & Pels, 2006). Nowadays a problem-oriented approach dominates educational policy in the field of ethnic diversity. The emphasis is on the problems of immigrant youth regarding their behaviour and cultural perspectives. A corrective, restrictive policy to stimulate assimilation of the problematic ethnic youth has been launched (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2004). There is anxiety about the incompatability of norms and values and about radical Islam. While immigrants’ experiences of tensions at school, for example discrimination and exclusion, have generally not been taken seriously, much

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attention has recently been paid to conflicts in ethnically diverse schools. Incidental reports about conflicts, based on the experiences of teachers and school heads often prompt the suggestion that safety is at risk and that the tensions are closely connected with the composition of the school population and the problematic behaviour of the immigrant youth. Whether teachers of ethnically diverse classes see it like this is not known. Systematic large-scale studies on their experiences of tense situations do not exist in the Netherlands. Research on teachers in general shows that the tensions they experience during teaching generally threaten values like justice, concern for others and sincerity (Maslovaty, 2000; Oser, 1991; Tirri, 1999).

In their reactions (or non-reactions) to tense situations, teachers pass on moral messages (cf. Hansen, 2001). These indicate what is important in the way people deal with each other or, in the broader sense, important for good citizenship. As such, how teachers react or do not react to intercultural tensions is meaningful in the framework of intercultural education about living in an ethnically diverse society.

As knowledge based on systematic research on tensions experienced by teachers in ethnically diverse classes is not available, we undertook a nationwide survey. We will present the results here. This survey is the first part of a larger research project on tense situations in ethnically diverse classes. The second part of the research consists of an interview and observation study into teaching practices in these classes.

2.2. Tense situations and teachers’ experiences

Noticing tense situations, assessing their significance, understanding their context, and choosing how to react to them are important teaching competencies in ethnically diverse classrooms (Leeman, 2003, 2006). Henze, Katz and Norte (2000) showed that school heads who were involved in the quality of ethnic relations between pupils at their schools had a more complex understanding of intercultural conflicts than the usual interpretation of ‘overt hostility’. They were more aware, for example, of tensions under the surface and of the underlying causes of open conflicts. To develop a commitment to intercultural issues and diversity, life experiences with ethnic diversity are important, for example, in the context of family, friendships, education or work (Paccione, 2000). Theoretically, intercultural sensitivity is regarded as a requisite basis for developing the required competencies for teaching in ethnically diverse classes (Cochran-Smith, 1995; Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

Leeman (2003, 2006) carried out an interview study in 2002 on eleven secondary-school teachers and the intercultural dilemmas they experienced in their diverse classrooms. She interviewed experienced teachers who were interested in intercultural issues. These teachers mentioned tense situations in which values like justice, respect for the school and the teacher, democracy, personal autonomy, diversity and communality were threatened. They pointed out new value dilemmas, such as balancing communality and diversity, and gave
a special ethnic-cultural dimension to values already known to be the possible cause of conflict in the classroom. Justice is, for example, an issue when teachers are confronted with what they see as unfair accusations of discrimination by pupils, for example, when marking a test. It is also at stake when pupils make discriminatory remarks about someone's appearance or cultural background. Respect for the school and the teacher is particularly at risk when pupils break school rules on cultural grounds or do not want to accept the authority of the teacher. The teachers, placing a great deal of value on personal autonomy, experience tensions between a personal critical stance and group loyalty, for example, in lessons dealing with politically sensitive topics like the situation in the Middle East. The teachers are generally concerned about the balance between communality and diversity in their classes. They want to solve problems in a democratic way with the active participation of all pupils. However, the teachers' experience is that not all pupils are prepared to search for a solution together.

The interview study gave insight into the range of tensions teachers may relate to teaching in ethnically diverse classes. The teachers interviewed do see ethnic-cultural differences between pupils but emphasize similarities. They distance themselves from the negative image forming in society about immigrants. They are very careful about labelling a particular group of pupils as a problem group. Their solutions do not follow the current trend of stricter rules and transfer of desired norms and values, but focus on dialogue. Given their interest in intercultural issues and their sensitivity to intercultural tensions, the teachers interviewed might be special. In the survey study we wanted to identify which tensions the average teacher of ethnically diverse classrooms experiences and whether they relate these tensions to the composition of their class.

Deciding how to react to tensions is not easy. Husu (2002) pointed out that many of the value dilemmas experienced by teachers remained unsolved. The willingness of teachers to react to tense situations and how they react says something about the professionalism of teachers and about how they perceive their role as a moral agent (cf. Walker & Snarey, 2004). When they notice a tense situation, teachers must first decide whether to react or not. If they decide to react, their next decision is how to react, for example by expressing their own point of view, by acting in a punitive way or by merely explaining their opinion about an incident without entering into discussion with pupils. From the perspective of intercultural education, a dialogue is preferable when reacting to intercultural tensions (cf. Burbules & Bruce, 2001; Parker, 2003b). A genuine dialogue in the context of diversity is characterized by deliberation, based on the principles of social justice, inclusion and actual exchange (Parker, 2003b).

The aim of the survey study was not only to find out what tense situations teachers in ethnically diverse classes say they have experienced and whether they relate these to ethnic diversity, but also how they react to these situations. Moreover, we wanted to analyse whether personal characteristics such as age, sex, ethnic background, experience of teaching in ethnically
heterogeneous classes, and intercultural sensitivity are related to the tensions teachers experience. Context characteristics, such as type of education, ethnic composition of the class and level of urbanization may also have an influence on teachers’ experiences of tense situations. Leeman’s study showed, for example, that tensions that undermine respect for the teacher and the school were mainly experienced by teachers in pre-vocational secondary education. According to the teachers this was partly due to the lack of prospects for pupils in the lower vocational streams, the demotivating practice of transfer to a lower level of education and the lack of facilities for schools and teachers to build up a personal relationship with pupils. Pre-vocational secondary education has to cope with the stigma of being a ‘reservoir for problems’ (Kleijer, Van Reekum & Tillekens, 2004). This is often related to the relatively high percentage of immigrant pupils in this type of education. Lastly, the type of tensions that teachers experience can differ according to the environment of where the school is located. For example, the problems in the Netherlands with pupils who wore Lonsdale clothes as an expression of their racial convictions mainly occurred in smaller cities and towns (Homan, 2006). A possible explanation for this is that pupils in those towns are not used to living in an ethnically diverse environment.

2.3. Research design
In search of the average teacher of ethnically diverse classes, our aim was to select half of the schools from the four big Dutch cities and the other half from middle-sized cities and towns. We tried to involve 34 schools and three teachers per school and wanted the sample to reflect the national composition of the pupil population. Hence 60% would be classes providing pre-vocational secondary education and 40% providing general secondary education. We selected a stratified sample so that the proportion of immigrant pupils was evenly distributed between the different types of education. This made it possible to analyse the influence of the types of education and ethnic class-composition separately. On the whole we were successful in realizing these selection criteria. In the end, 87 teachers returned the questionnaire (response 85%). The number of teachers varies in the results presented here, as not everyone answered all the questions.

2.4. Characteristics of the teachers
55% of the teachers were male and 45% female (N=87). 31% were younger than 35 years old; 22% were between 35 and 40 years old, and 47% were over 45 years of age. 80% of the teachers were of Dutch descent, based on the country of birth of both parents. The parents of the other teachers were born outside the Netherlands: 6% of them in Western countries and 14% in non-Western countries, like Morocco and Surinam. 71% of the teachers had more than five years’ teaching experience and only 7% had two years or less. A large majority (66%) reported that they had considerable or a great deal of experience with
teaching ethnically diverse classes, whereas 23% reported that they had little experience, and 10% of the teachers said they had no earlier experience (N=87).

2.5. Characteristics of the classes
The ethnic background of the pupils in the sample was representative of the different ethnic groups living in the Netherlands. The percentage of immigrant pupils was divided equally over the different educational tracks, taking into account the 61-39% division of the types of education.

Regarding the level of urbanization, 41% of the teachers taught classes in the four big cities and 59% in smaller cities and towns. The percentage of immigrant pupils was higher in the classes in the four large cities (Cramer’s V= 0.75; p<0.01), which reflects the picture nationwide.

2.6. Operationalization
2.6.1. Tense situations
From Leeman’s interview study we selected 20 situations that teachers experienced in the classroom and that represent the whole range of dilemmas they mentioned. The situations concern either the contact between the teacher and pupils or between pupils themselves. They included general contact situations and situations that arise during class discussions. The situations reflect different positions on the dimension of underlying or open tensions and differed in intensity (Henze, Katz & Norte, 2000). An open situation is for example ‘pupils refuse to co-operate with other pupil(s) when they should’. There are underlying tensions in a situation such as when: ‘during a class discussion one or more pupils who have a different opinion on the subject than the majority, do not dare to open their mouths’. We formulated the situations in such a way that they may be experienced in any class. Some situations feature cultural or religious issues. However, what the conflict is actually about is not specifically stated in these cases, for example, the situation: ‘pupil(s) did not respect each other when talking about political or religious subjects’. We asked teachers how often they had experienced the situations (1= never; 2= sometimes; 3= often) and how stressful they found the situations (1= not; 2= slightly; 3= extremely). We also asked if they thought a situation was connected with the ethnically heterogeneous pupil population of the class (1= not, 2= slightly, 3= extremely) and how difficult they found it to decide how to react to the situation (1= not, 2= slightly, 3= extremely). The teachers were also asked to describe a situation themselves that they had experienced but was not included in the questionnaire.

We based the operationalization of teachers’ actions in tense situations on the earlier research of Oser and Althof (1993), Veugelers and De Kat (1998), Klaassen and Leeferink (1998) and Maslovaty (2000). For each situation teachers had experienced we asked them whether they had reacted to the situation, when and their reasons for their reactions. The answers possible were: I did not say/do anything, because I did not think it was necessary; I did not say/do anything, because I did not know how to react; I came back to it later,
because I did not immediately know how to react; I came back to it later, because I thought that would be better; I reacted to the situation immediately and took no further action; I reacted to the situation immediately and came back to it again later.

When teachers did react to the situation, we asked them to describe how they had reacted. They could choose from several options: I had a talk about the situation with the pupils involved, in which I expressed my own point of view; I had a talk about the situation with the pupils involved, without expressing my own point of view; I had a class discussion, in which I expressed my own point of view; I had a class discussion, without expressing my own point of view; I punished the pupil(s) and/or sent them out of the class; I merely gave my point of view on the situation.

Fifteen teachers completed a draft questionnaire to ascertain whether they could sufficiently recognize the tense situations. This was the case. We asked teachers to base their answers on their experiences in the current school year (2003/2004). They reported over a period of five to six months. Virtually nobody reported having experienced one particular situation so we excluded this from the analyses.

2.6.2. Intercultural sensitivity
Intercultural sensitivity has many aspects and we could not include all of these in the questionnaire. We used the scale developed by Chen and Starosta (2000) which focuses on the extent to which an ethnically heterogeneous context is valued. This scale consists of 24 items, that are indicative of respect for cultural differences, interaction confidence, interaction engagement, interaction enjoyment and interaction attentiveness. The original scale was developed for college students studying communication. We translated the original items into Dutch and reformulated them slightly, so that they fitted the school context in the Netherlands and would be understandable to teachers. Based on factor analysis on our data, 22 of the 24 items scored sufficiently highly (>0.3) on the first factor (unrotated solution). These 22 items were therefore combined into one scale (Cronbachs alpha is 0.90).

2.7. Analyses
To find out which situations teachers experience, we checked the percentage of teachers who said they had experienced a situation at some time. Given that the incidence (in teachers’ perception) of each situation was measured with a three-point scale on an ordinal level, non-parametrical tests were the most suitable for analysing differences between teachers. We analysed the relationship between personal and context characteristics on the one hand and situations teachers experience on the other with a Mann-Whitney test when comparing two groups (concerning ethnic background, type of education, level of urbanization). When comparing several groups (concerning teaching experience and experience of teaching ethnically heterogeneous classes) we used a Kruskal-Wallis test. We
used the Spearman rank correlation to analyse the relationship between situations teachers experience on the one hand and intercultural sensitivity and the percentage of immigrant pupils in the class on the other. With regard to the total number of situations teachers experienced, we used the t-test to compare two groups and the ANOVA to compare more groups. With the help of teachers’ mean scores we analysed per situation how tense they found the situations, to what extent they related them to the ethnically heterogeneous class and how difficult they were to deal with. We also calculated the percentage of teachers that chose each reaction (specified in the questionnaire) to the situation in question.

2.8. Results

Which tense situations do teachers experience in ethnically heterogeneous classes?

The percentage of teachers that indicate they have experienced a situation at some time varies from situation to situation, ranging from 13% to 73% (N=87). In total, teachers reported having experienced on average over one third (seven of the nineteen) of the situations sometimes or often during the first five to six months of the school year (2003/2004). Open situations, such as when pupil(s) do something that is not allowed by the school (73%; N=85) or refuse to tell the truth to the teacher (for example, about a fight or when something had been stolen at school) because they do not want to betray the culprit (71%; N=85), were mentioned most frequently. In most of the situations experienced by many teachers, respect for the school or the teacher was threatened. Open and intense conflicts, for example when pupil(s) threatened the teacher or pupil(s) drew a swastika, were reported by the lowest percentage of teachers (13%, N=82 respectively 13%, N=84).

Relatively few teachers (less than half) experienced tense situations referring to political, religious or cultural issues during class discussions. Examples of such situations include: ‘pupil(s) exclude classmates from a class discussion, because, according to them, they have nothing to say about the subject, for example because they belong to another group or are not religious’ (13%; N=82) and ‘pupil(s) do not respect each other when talking about political or religious subjects’ (24%, N=83).

Twenty-eight teachers made use of the opportunity to describe a situation themselves that they had experienced. They did not mention new types of tensions that were not included in the questionnaire.

Relationship between the occurrence of tense situations and personal and context characteristics

In none of the situations did we find differences between teachers on the basis of experience in teaching or experience in teaching ethnically heterogeneous classes. Immigrant teachers only differed significantly from Dutch teachers in two situations concerning justice, namely ‘pupil(s) make discriminatory
comments about someone’s appearance or cultural background during a class discussion’ \((z=-2.154; p<.05)\) and ‘pupil(s) make a contemptuous remark about someone’s personal property because it is old fashioned’ \((z=-2.932; p<.05)\). Fewer immigrant teachers had experienced these situations.

Teachers with a high level of intercultural sensitivity experienced fewer situations in total \((r=-.33; p<.05)\). They experienced five situations less frequently (Spearman correlation varies from -.21 to -.28; \(p<.05\)). These reflected the whole range of situations that were presented to them.

Regarding the relation between teachers’ experiences of tense situations and context characteristics, no significant results were found for the ethnic composition of the class. Nor were differences found between teachers of pre-vocational secondary education and teachers of general secondary education regarding the total number of situations they experienced. Looking at all situations individually, we found that pre-vocational-education teachers experienced only one situation more often than their colleagues in general secondary education did. This was the situation: ‘pupil(s) refuse to tell the truth to the teacher (for example about a fight or when something had been stolen at school) because they do not want to betray the culprit’ \((z=-2.214; p<.05)\).

**Which situations cause teachers stress?**

The degree of stress experienced by teachers differed from situation to situation, ranging from 1.31 to 2.09 \((N\) varies from 11 to 61; three-point scale). The percentage of teachers that experienced tension in relation to the situations presented varied from 28 to 82% of the teachers. The situations experienced by the least teachers were generally found to be the most stressful. As mentioned above, these were mainly open and intense tensions in the contact between teachers and pupils and tensions between pupils referring to religious or cultural issues, mainly during a class discussion.

**Which situations do teachers relate to the ethnically diverse class?**

The mean score for the question on whether teachers thought a situation was connected with the ethnically heterogeneous pupil population of the class ranged from 1.17 to 2.4 \((N\) varies from 10 to 60; three point scale). The percentage of teachers that related the situations presented to the ethnic mix of the class varied from 16 to 70%. The situations many teachers experienced were the ones they related least to the ethnically heterogeneous composition of the class. Situations that arise during a class discussion and refer to cultural or religious issues were most strongly related to the ethnically heterogeneous class. 13 to 46% of the teachers experienced these situations \((N=87)\).

**Which situations do teachers find difficult to decide how to deal with?**

The mean score to this question ranged from 1.14 to 2.00 \((N\) varies from 10 to 56; three point scale). The most difficulties were experienced in the situations with a high tension intensity that were experienced less frequently, such as when
Section II - Survey study

pupils intimidate teachers or accuse them of discrimination, followed by tensions during class discussions.

How do teachers react when confronted with tense situations?

Nearly all teachers decided to react to a situation. In only four of the situations, more than 10% of them said that they had not reacted because they believed it was unnecessary (ranging from 11 to 21%; N varies from 15 to 52). Tensions in these situations lay in the contact between pupils. In the majority of the situations teachers reacted immediately. Sometimes they also came back to the situation later. Teachers mainly decided to do this when respect for the school or the teacher was at stake, or when cultural or religious issues play a role in the contact between pupils, for example, when ‘pupils make discriminatory comments about someone’s appearance or cultural background during a class discussion’.

Most teachers reacted to the situations by having a talk with the pupils involved in combination with a discussion with the class (61% to 95%; N varies from 9 to 56), during which most of the teachers expressed their own opinion. Few teachers punished the pupils (0% to 22%; N varies from 9 to 56), for example by sending them out of the classroom, or felt that giving their own opinion was sufficient (0% to 25%; N varies from 9 to 56).

2.9. Conclusions and discussion

The media and educational policy relate incidental reports about tensions in classes with an ethnically heterogeneous pupil population predominantly to safety issues and the problems of immigrant youth. With the help of a survey we asked teachers of ethnically diverse classes about their experiences and perceptions. Like the teachers in Leeman’s interview study, they present a different picture. The teachers do state that they have experienced tensions in the contact between themselves and their pupils but scarcely relate these situations to the ethnic diversity of the class. This is an interesting outcome that gives an indication of the incompatibility in the Netherlands between the debate on education and teachers’ actual experiences.

The teachers in the survey did relate the tensions to the ethnic mix when they experienced them in class discussions referring to cultural and religious issues. However, less than half of the teachers have experienced such situations. When teachers do experience this type of situation, they are among the most stressful and the most difficult to decide how to react to. We selected 20 situations in which teachers could possibly experience a diversity of value dilemmas that could be related to ethnic diversity. Nineteen situations proved to be relevant. None of the 87 teachers added a new type of situation. The experiences of teachers with tense situations scarcely differed by personal and context characteristics. However, teachers who are more interculturally sensitive (in this study operationalized as the extent to which they value the ethnically heterogeneous class) experienced fewer situations in total and five situations
(that reflected the whole range of diversity we presented to them) less frequently. These teachers might be good at creating a pleasant social climate in the class and because of their positive attitude towards ethnic-cultural diversity may experience fewer tensions. This is in line with an observation made by a teacher from a Moluccan background interviewed by Leeman (2006, p. 352):

“Many of my colleagues generalize and have difficulty in seeing the pupil as an individual. They don’t make enough effort to create a relationship of trust with pupils. They feel a distance between them and their Moroccan pupils and make fools of them. Those teachers experience such things as being spat at in the face, pupils not accepting the authority of women teachers, and pupils putting themselves at a distance. They exaggerate incidents out of all proportion.”

Another possibility is that they regard an ethnically diverse context as an educational resource and perceive these situations as normal in the teaching context; they do not associate them with the questions we asked, in which we relate them to tension and difficulties (cf. Henze, Katze & Norte, 2000).

At the beginning of this chapter we stated that noticing tense situations and reacting to them are important teaching competencies in ethnically heterogeneous classes. After noticing the situations, teachers can assess them in many different ways, for example, as an expression of problem behaviour by the pupils or as an indication of inadequate inclusion of diversity in the class, school and society. Broader social issues frequently intersect with classroom issues. Teachers of ethnically heterogeneous classes should be aware of the cultural and moral dimensions of teaching and should be alert to their own role regarding social justice and cultural diversity (Leeman & Reid, 2006; Mason, 2002; Moore, 2004). Professionalism is at stake here.

The teachers in this study proved to be willing to take action and to react in particular by discussing the situations with pupils. These teachers seem to prefer a democratic way of dealing with tensions. Dialogue is also preferable from the perspective of social justice and intercultural education. However, the survey does not give insight into whether teachers are focusing on intercultural education during class discussions, nor how their actions and behaviour work in practice in the classroom. Moreover, it was the tensions that teachers experienced during class discussions that they found relatively difficult to react to. The ability of teachers to guide class discussions on cultural and religious issues should be the theme of further research and the professionalization of teachers.