Teaching in diversity: teachers and pupils about tense situations in ethnically heterogeneous classes
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Chapter 5
Guiding discussions in the class about sensitive issues related to ethnic diversity

This article reports on a small-scale study on five teachers guiding class discussions in ethnically diverse classes on sensitive issues concerning living in an ethnically diverse society. On the basis of the literature we differentiated five demands that such discussions make on teachers. With the help of interviews, we mapped the objectives and approaches that the teachers considered to be desirable and attainable. Observations gave an impression of what teachers actually did and said. The results show that, with one exception, the teachers experienced deficiencies in their professionalism. In interviews afterwards, teachers considered the research method, whereby each teacher discussed the video recording of the lesson with the researcher, to be supportive of their professional development in this field.

5.1. Introduction
In 2003/2004 we conducted a survey on tense situations in ethnically diverse classes in secondary schools in the Netherlands. This provided insight into the experience of 87 teachers and almost 2,000 pupils. It showed that teachers mostly chose to discuss tense situations with their pupils. The teachers, questioned about their experiences with tensions that occurred during class discussions, evaluated them as some of the most difficult types of situations to deal with (Radstake & Leeman, 2007). The survey did not provide information on how teachers guided those discussions, nor how the discussions progressed. To gain insight into this we conducted a qualitative study on teachers who held a class discussion in their ethnically diverse classes about sensitive issues related to living in an ethnically diverse society. This article reports on that study.

Shocking events like the murder of the Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh in 2004 and the attacks by political Islam in New York (2001), Madrid (2004) and London (2005) reinforced dichotomous thinking on religious, cultural and ethnic differences in the Netherlands. Ethnic diversity acquired a negative connotation. National and local politicians increasingly emphasized the task of schools to promote social cohesion in society. A quick scan of secondary schools in Amsterdam showed that teachers felt that it was urgent to do something about preparing pupils for living in an ethnically diverse society. However, they did not really know what would work best (Stichting Voorbeeld, 2005). They were not alone. One of the conclusions of a study in which a

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1 This chapter is published in Dutch as: Radstake, H., Leeman, Y.A.M., & Meijnen, G.W. (2008). Begeleiden van gesprekken in de klas over problemen met etnisch gemengd samenleven [Guiding discussions in the class on sensitive issues related ethnic diversity]. Pedagogiek, 28(3), 171-189. The chapter has also been submitted for publication in Intercultural Education.
broader group of teachers was interviewed, all with experience of teaching ethnically heterogeneous classes, was that their professionalism regarding discussions was insufficient (Leeman, 2003, 2006).

In this article we aim to identify the possible demands made on teachers for guiding discussions about sensitive issues related to living in an ethnically diverse society. We therefore mapped the objectives and approaches that teachers considered to be desirable and attainable. In addition, we looked at the way teachers actually guided such discussions. On the basis of the literature we constructed a framework of five quality demands, which we will elucidate in the next paragraph.

5.2. Class discussions and demands on teachers’ professionalism

In an ethnically diverse class, pupils and teachers are in fact already practising how to live in an ethnically diverse society and how to deal with the associated sensitive issues that may arise. Pupils can also learn about this in a purposeful way during class discussions. They can get to know about and understand, for example, different perspectives towards living in an ethnically diverse society; they can empathize with perspectives they are not familiar with; they can learn how discrimination and exclusion are intertwined with the development of ethnic identity; learn about the influence of prejudice and stereotyping on inter-ethnic relations; and they can further develop general and intercultural communication skills (Banks et al., 2001; Burbules & Bruce, 2001; Parker, 2003b). Ideally, there is an exchange of ideas, different perspectives and experiences of, for instance, living in an ethnically diverse society. Solutions to problems that may occur in daily interactions should be discussed together. A precondition is that everyone must realize that living in an ethnically diverse society requires communal effort.

Guiding such discussions in ethnically diverse classes makes demands on teachers. With the help of the literature we have differentiated five demands. A first demand, that is indeed essential to all teaching, is to establish order (Stichting Beroepskwaliteit Leraren, 2005). This is a prerequisite for realizing a discussion. Applying general rules on the interaction and on how discussions should progress and on the interaction between pupils lays the foundation for a discussion.

A second demand is a relationship based on trust and proximity between teachers and pupils (Hadjoanna 2007; Stichting Beroepskwaliteit Leraren, 2005; Wubbels & Brekelmans, 2005). This demand is important for teaching in all classes but it does make specific demands in an ethnically diverse class. In diverse classes with a teacher from the dominant group in front of the class, it cannot automatically be assumed that there is mutual trust between the teacher and all the pupils (Hermans, 2004; Ogbu, 1992). This is indeed the experience of secondary school teachers in the Netherlands (e.g. Leeman & Ledoux, 2003; Stichting Voorbeeld, 2005).
A third demand is that teachers must be well informed on the subject of the lesson (Stichting Beroepskwaliteit Leraren, 2005). For teaching about living in an ethnically diverse society this implies not only knowledge of different viewpoints but also insight into the diversity of experiences and perceptions of pupils (Banks, 2004).

Intercultural sensitivity is the fourth demand. This means that a teacher has a positive view of diversity, that he can imagine himself in the position of pupils from different backgrounds and attune to their perception of the world (Chen & Starosta, 2000; Westrick & Yuen, 2007). Interculturally sensitive teachers are aware of social issues that can have an impact on their pupils (Cochran-Smith, 1995; Villegas & Lucas, 2002; Wubbels, Den Brok, Veldman & Van Tartwijk, 2006). They are then able to interpret their pupils’ attitudes and contributions to the discussion (Schultz, 2003) and are prepared for pupils to, for example, react emotionally, or refuse to join in the discussion because they are not prepared to discuss their personal opinions in a school context (Burbules, 2003). To guide a discussion in a diverse class, it is important to be able to empathize with the world as experienced by pupils from differing backgrounds. We know from our survey (Radstake, Leeman & Meijnen, 2007), for example, that pupils’ experiences with tense situations do differ along ethnic lines. Teachers should be able to create a safe environment for a class discussion so that pupils are not afraid of being challenged, laughed at or pestered when they give their opinion or share their experiences in a class discussion.

A last demand on teachers’ professionalism is that they are aware of patterns of domination and take them into account while guiding a discussion (Burbules & Bruce, 2001; Gewirtz & Cribb, 2008; Parker, 2003b), because these patterns may suppress the expression of a diversity of opinions and perspectives.

Very few empirical studies have been done on discussions in ethnically diverse classes. A small-scale study by Huber, Murphy and Clandinin (2003) in which time was reserved in the curriculum for pupils from a variety of ethnic backgrounds to have a whole-class discussion, or so-called ‘peace candle gathering’ about tense situations they experience at school, showed that both teachers and pupils experienced feelings of stress, uncertainty and unease during these discussions. As mentioned, our survey showed that teachers experience tensions during discussions in their ethnically diverse classes. No empirical studies were available about discussions in the class on the subject that we are interested in. The aim of the study presented is to identify demands made on teachers for guiding discussions about sensitive issues related to ethnic diversity and to contribute to the empirical knowledge in this field.

5.3. Methodology
5.3.1. Design of the study
To gain insight into problems teachers may face in guiding class discussions about sensitive issues related to ethnic diversity in society, we chose intensive data collection by means of interviews and observations. Given the intensity of
the data collection, we restricted ourselves to a small number of teachers. We chose to focus on teachers of ethnically diverse classes in the theoretical track of pre-vocational secondary education (vmbo-t), because it represents the intermediate level in the Dutch education system. Five teachers in five different schools in Amsterdam were selected, who were both the teacher and mentor of a class in the second year. The second year was chosen because this is the last year in the Dutch school system that pupils follow a general curriculum and attend the same lessons together.

We asked the teachers to have a discussion in their class about sensitive issues related to living in an ethnically diverse society. As a means of stimulating discussion and to facilitate comparability, we asked them to choose from a number of video clips. We looked for clips with actors of about the same age as the pupils in our sample (13-14 years old) and with situations that were recognizable to them. In consultation with various media collections of universities, colleges of higher professional education and other services, we chose three excerpts from a Dutch TV series about the daily ups and downs of pupils in an ethnically diverse class for pre-vocational secondary education. The clips presented topics that are frequently the cause of sensitive differences of opinion in an ethnically diverse context.

A short description of the clips:

Clip 1: pupils have an argument about freedom of expression after reading a pamphlet that states that foreigners should leave the district.

Clip 2: two good friends, both Muslims, disagree whether your husband should have the same religion as you.

Clip 3: a boy makes a pass at a girl. Bad and sexist language is used, which other pupils encourage or disapprove of.

Apart from using these video clips, the teachers were free to conduct the discussions as they wished.

To interpret the class discussions it was necessary to gain an impression of the daily routine in the class during the lessons of the teacher in question. We specifically paid attention to two characteristics of the learning environment: an orderly, structured environment and a friendly, co-operative atmosphere in the class. Two researchers observed four lessons by each teacher in the weeks preceding the class discussion. In addition the researchers spent two days with each class to acquire a more thorough picture of the class atmosphere. A definition of the learning environment was based on this material (see table 1).

We classified the learning environment as positive if both characteristics were predominantly positive when observing the lessons, and as negative if both characteristics were predominantly negative. None of the classes had one positive characteristic and one negative. The quality of the learning environment varied strongly in two classes. In those cases we classified the learning environment as variable (for a more detailed explanation of the classification of the learning environment, see Radstake, 2005).
Each of the teachers was interviewed two weeks before the class discussion to gain insight into their objectives and intended approach. We asked them to choose a video clip and to state what their objectives were for the discussion. In addition we asked them which pedagogical approach they were planning to use and to explain why. The interviews were semi-structured.

The class discussion was recorded with a small home-video camera, which was directed at the teacher. A researcher was present during the class discussion to observe pupils’ alertness and participation.

Two weeks after the class discussion we interviewed the teachers again. The objective of this interview was to reflect on the class discussion with the teacher. The teacher and researcher looked at the recording of the discussion together and analysed whether the discussion had progressed as expected. The teachers were also asked whether they were satisfied with their own actions and behaviour and which qualitative demands they had applied to themselves.

5.3.2. Analysis
A short report was made on the objectives of each of the teachers, their ideas on the approach they had chosen, the approach they actually took and their reflection on the discussion afterwards. The reports were taken from literal transcriptions of the interviews and of what was said during the class discussion. These reports were submitted to the teachers, who all agreed with them.

The research material acquired was then analysed in relation to the five professional demands formulated. Were the professional demands reflected in the teachers’ thinking, actions and behaviour when guiding the discussion? Two researchers first analysed the material independently of each other. They then discussed the points that they had interpreted differently with a third researcher, who had also studied the reports. This resulted in a formulation with which all three could agree.

5.3.3. Sample
All five teachers (Andrew, Carol, Diane, Iris and Marion\(^2\)) are mentors of a class in the second year of the theoretical track of pre-vocational secondary education.

In one class, Andrew’s, half of the pupils are of Dutch origin and half are from a non-Dutch background. Besides 1 or 2 pupils of Dutch origin, the pupils in the other classes have parents from a non-Dutch background, such as Moroccan, Turkish and Surinamese. In the classes of Marion, Carol and Iris, one third to a half of the pupils is Moroccan. The origin of the pupils from a non-Dutch background is the most varied in Diane’s class.

The learning environment of the classes, characterized in terms of order and atmosphere, differed (see Table 5.1). There was a general lack of order in Marion’s class.

\(^2\) The names of the teachers are fictitious.
Table 5.1: Characteristics of teachers and the learning environment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Diane</th>
<th>Carol</th>
<th>Andrew</th>
<th>Iris</th>
<th>Marion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
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<td>Dutch</td>
<td>Dutch</td>
<td>Dutch</td>
<td>Dutch</td>
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<tr>
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<td>&gt; 10 yrs</td>
<td>&gt; 10 yrs</td>
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<td>5 yrs</td>
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<td>Visual arts</td>
<td>Biology</td>
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<tr>
<td>Experience with:</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Some</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.class discussions</td>
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<td>Some</td>
<td>No</td>
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<td>about living in a</td>
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<td>diverse society</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learning environment</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Variable</td>
<td>Variable</td>
<td>Negative</td>
</tr>
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</table>

5.4. Results

5.4.1. Discussion objectives

All the teachers viewed the discussions as an opportunity to prepare their pupils further for living in an ethnically diverse society. They have different ideas about what this means. In the discussion about choice of partner (clip 2), Marion wanted her pupils, all from a non-Dutch background, to understand that they will have to adapt to the ideas and thinking that are dominant in the Netherlands, for example you are free to choose your partner, regardless of religion or origin. In contrast, the other teachers accept diversity. Their main objective was to broaden the horizons of pupils. They wanted them to encounter a wide range of perspectives on living in an ethnically diverse society. Iris and Diane emphasized that for them this is also about stimulating the ability to empathize. They wanted pupils to realize that sensitive issues related to ethnic diversity in society can be experienced in different ways by those involved.

Carol, Diane and Iris also wanted their pupils to start to reflect on their ‘often ill-considered and simplistic’ opinions about ethnic diversity. They hoped to do this by realizing an exchange of ideas in which pupils can carefully weigh up and consider opinions.

Andrew, Diane and Iris wanted the discussion also to offer pupils opportunities to take action regarding sensitive issues related to ethnic diversity. Iris wanted pupils to start thinking about this themselves and made no further
suggestions on how this could be realized. For Andrew and Diane it was about pupils learning to be able to live on together in an acceptable manner. They did not think consensus was necessary to achieve this. On the other hand, they emphasized that this does not mean that every opinion is equally valuable; they certainly did not want to accept everything. This is a sensitive point in the current public debate. For Andrew and Diane it was about pupils learning to be able to live on together. According to Andrew it is sufficient that pupils base everything they do and do not do on respect for diversity. Diane went a step further. She wanted pupils to realize that they themselves have a role to play in solving the problems they experience related to ethnic diversity and encouraged them to take on this role.

5.4.2. Pedagogical approaches
There was such a lack of discipline in Marion’s class that it was not possible to have a class discussion. As a result we did not involve her further in the analysis. The teachers proved to have different approaches: Iris and Diane conducted a whole-class discussion, whereas Andrew and Carol chose to prepare a whole-class discussion by first working in small groups. We will discuss the approaches of these teachers two by two.

5.4.2.1. Whole-class discussions
Iris
Beforehand: Iris was concerned whether it would be possible to have a discussion with her class. She was worried that pupils would start fooling around and challenge each other’s opinions. Talking about living in an ethnically diverse society is an emotional issue for her pupils, almost all of them from a non-Dutch background. Iris: ‘They have the feeling that they are of less value in society, that what they think is immaterial, that they themselves are not important.’ In previous situations, for example when pupils expressed their support for terrorist attacks, her experience was that her pupils maintained a huge distance from her. ‘As if we (in the sense of the Dutch) are not able to understand them. They have the attitude, “you don’t understand me”.’

She decided to stay as close as possible to the everyday world of her pupils, by letting them talk about their own experiences. This had several advantages for her: the discussion would be interesting to the pupils and hence they would not drop out of the discussion so quickly; it would give them the feeling that they are being taken seriously. Besides, she felt not adequately informed herself on the topics of the discussion. She did not want to link the discussion with subjects as discrimination and exclusion because she presumed that it would evoke vehement reactions in pupils.

Iris did not think it necessary to prepare thoroughly because the discussion would be interesting to the pupils and hence they would not drop out of the discussion so quickly; it would give them the feeling that they are being taken seriously. Besides, she felt not adequately informed herself on the topics of the discussion. She did not want to link the discussion with subjects as discrimination and exclusion because she presumed that it would evoke vehement reactions in pupils.

Iris did not think it necessary to prepare thoroughly because the discussion would be completely dependent on pupils’ contributions. She could not guess in advance what these would be. She therefore did not choose one of the video clips but kept all three as possibilities. She did not decide beforehand
whether the discussion would be with the whole class or in small groups. According to her, it is easier to get everyone involved in a whole-class discussion, but it is more difficult to keep order.

**Course of the discussion:** Iris decided at the last moment to have the discussion with the whole class because a couple of ‘trouble makers’ were absent and she therefore expected less problems keeping order. The pupils sat in pairs in rows. She introduced the lesson by saying that she was going to show some video clips and was interested to know what the pupils thought of them. All three clips were shown during the lesson. Nearly all of the pupils paid attention during the discussion. Iris asked them about their experiences with the situations in the video clips. She reacted to pupils’ comments with a follow-up question (‘and what can be done about that?’) or asked another pupil a question (‘and you, what would you do?’). Pupils clearly enjoyed talking about this subject and hearing each other’s stories. They enthusiastically began to talk at the same time. Iris then intervened and gave them each a turn. At one point Iris explicitly made use of the diversity in the class. This was after video clip 3 was shown about the use of bad language when a boy tries to chat up a girl. She asked the boys to wait until after the girls had reacted.

*Iris:* ‘Girls, have you ever experienced that a boy talks to you like this and wants something from you?’

*A number of girls talk about their experiences. The pupils are as quiet as mice and everyone listens attentively. After the story of one of the girls about being followed from school, Iris asks:* ‘and what do you think about this, that this happened?’

*Pupil (1):* ‘You just want to walk away but it’s really scary.’

*Iris:* ‘Yes, it’s scary sometimes, I think so too. The feeling that you daren’t go out on your own in the evening.’

*Pupil (1):* ‘That’s right. I don’t think those boys know how frightening this can be.’

*Iris:* ‘Now we’ve heard nearly all the girls talk and heard about many really quite unpleasant experiences. Boys, did you know that this happens, have you seen it happening?’

*The boys laugh and act tough, putting an end to the discussion.*

In the interview afterwards Iris said that she had deliberately let the girls speak first as they often do not dare to talk because the boys can behave meanly, not take them seriously or laugh at them. By structuring the interaction she attempted to break through the dominant position of the boys in the class.

Afterwards Iris felt that she had not reacted adequately to what the pupils had actually said in the discussion and as a result there was not an exchange of ideas. She also remarked that her concerns about order and pupils’ interaction proved to be unfounded; pupils paid attention to each other’s contribution, were interested in what other pupils said, and treated each other with respect. This made her enthusiastic about guiding a class discussion more often and then to stimulate an exchange of ideas on pupils’ contributions.
Diane

Beforehand: Diane regularly has discussions with her class about living in an ethnically diverse society. At the beginning of the school year she drew up rules with her pupils on how these discussions should be conducted. She chose to discuss clip 1 (limits to freedom of expression) because she thought that pupils can learn the most from this clip.

She knew that her pupils find the subject sensitive. They are angry about the negative image of foreigners and Muslims that dominates the media and public opinion and feel stigmatized. She thinks it is extremely important that pupils can say anything, and unlike the other teachers, she does not shun extreme opinions. She thinks they must be able to express these feelings, so that they then can be motivated to do something about the problems they experience. She thinks her non-Dutch background helps her to give her pupils the feeling that she understands them.

In an earlier discussion about freedom of expression she discovered that her pupils were in agreement with each other. Therefore, she decided to put forward other perspectives herself. Pupils would then have the opportunity to broaden their horizons and be prompted to reflect on different ideas. She thinks it is extremely important that everyone was involved in the discussion and hears what is said. Therefore she chose a whole-class discussion.

Course of the discussion: After Diane had shown the class the video clip she asked the pupils what freedom of expression makes them think about. She wrote what they said on the board. Pupils mentioned the names of controversial figures like Theo van Gogh, Hirsi Ali, Pim Fortuyn3, and subjects like ‘say what you want’, ‘don’t offend others’, ‘racism’, ‘black and white’, ‘opinion’ and ‘respect’. During the discussion Diane referred to these subjects several times. The following issues were discussed: right to freedom of expression in relation to the ban on discrimination, the question whether freedom of expression should or should not be restricted, whether someone may be murdered because of what he says, the negative image of people from a non-Dutch background and the responsibility of pupils themselves to rectify this image. The interaction was via Diane: she asked questions, gave turns and enforced the rules (listen to each other, let others finish what they are saying). The pupils all paid attention to the discussion and reacted enthusiastically to Diane’s questions. Virtually all of the pupils spontaneously said something. As the discussion progressed Diane gave pupils turns who had not yet spoken. In the course of the discussion, a number of pupils expressed support for Mohammed B., the boy who killed Theo van Gogh. The discussion that followed showed that Diane took the pupils’ contribution seriously. Pupils were free to express their opinions and Diane used

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3 They have featured extensively in the media because of their statements about Islam, which set the tone for the hardening in intercultural relations in the Netherlands. Two of them were murdered.
these to encourage them to do something about the negative image of Muslims in the Netherlands:

Diane: ‘Ok, you say that Mohammed B wanted to silence Theo van Gogh and therefore murdered him. And that was Theo’s own fault, he shouldn’t have been so offensive... But isn’t there anything else to say about it?’

Nobody says anything for a while.

Pupil (1) (hesitatingly): ‘He’s now got even more power.’

Pupil (2): ‘I think Mohammed B. has really made things worse for us. Now perhaps we’ll never get a job or anything. He’s really mucked things up for us, he really shouldn’t have done it.’

(…)

Pupil (1): ‘Now he’s been murdered, what he thought is even more popular.’

Diane: ‘That’s a fact. Many, many people are now frightened of Islam and of Muslims. What do you think about that?’

Pupil (3): ‘In the media so many negative things are written about Moroccans, for example. That’s really awful. It effects how the Dutch think and thus our future here.’

Diane agrees and asks the pupils what they can do about this. The pupils splutter that the Dutch should take more effort to understand them and their religion, but that the Dutch are not interested. Diane suggests that the pupils should take a more active stance, instead of waiting for others to do something about their problems. Nobody says anything for a while but then a mood of excitement develops and pupils think of ways to give the Dutch a more positive image of them.

Reflecting on the class discussion Diane was pleased with how it had gone and with the involvement of the pupils. She said that she had achieved her objectives. She found it particularly useful that pupils had realized that they themselves can do something about the negative image of diversity in the Netherlands.

5.4.2.2. Discussions in small groups

Carol

Beforehand: As a mentor Carol often conducts class discussions, but only when pupils indicate that they want to talk about something. She felt inexperienced in this situation, in which the initiative came from her. She chose to discuss the first clip (limits to freedom of expression) because she felt that this was the most suitable for broadening pupils’ horizons. The second clip, about partner choice, she did not want to discuss because for her personally this theme is not open to discussion.

Carol was particularly interested in how pupils could be stimulated to have discussions and how to confront them with different perspectives in a discussion and exchange ideas about these. She indicated that she would keep the discussion out of the realm of pupils’ personal experience because she thinks
personal matters do not belong in a school context. She wanted pupils to do an assignment in small groups, which would stimulate them to think about different perspectives. She thinks it is important that everyone has the opportunity to participate and thinks that pupils feel it is safer to say something in a small group.

Course of the discussion: Carol began the lesson by explaining the subject and objective of the discussion to the whole class. She formed ethnically diverse groups of boys and girls by numbering the pupils. After showing the video clip, she asked pupils what they thought it was about. She emphasized that many different answers were possible, depending on which perspective you take. After a short brainstorming session, pupils went into discussion in small groups. They first had to choose from the following topics: provocation, aggression, prejudices, freedom of expression and the Dutch/Foreigners. The first assignment was to determine what the role of the topic was in the video clip. The second was to think of three reasons why people behave in such a way. Lastly, Carol asked the pupils to discuss what is the best thing to do if they experience this themselves.

During the lesson Carol went round the groups, asking pupils questions like: ‘and what do you think?’ and ‘do you think that too?’. All the groups took the assignment seriously. After more than half an hour Carol asked for the attention of the whole class and said that the pupils could then tell each other what had been discussed in the groups. An illustration of how this went:

Carol: ‘And group 2, you chose the theme ‘freedom of expression’, what was your solution to this?’

Pupil (2): ‘That you must try and understand each other.’
Carol: ‘Yes, that’s very important, isn’t it, that’s the heart of it. But there was aggression here. Can you explain what was aggressive in the video?’

Pupil (2): ‘Cursing, threatening, deliberately making people angry’.
Carol: ‘And why do you think people do that?’

Pupil (3): ‘Well, differences of opinion and here because of hate too.’
Carol: ‘And why would people hate each other?’

Pupil (2): ‘Another religion, background, that sort of thing.’
Carol: ‘And what can be done about it?’

Pupil (2): ‘Respect each other.’
Carol: ‘That’s right, but that doesn’t always work, but that’s what’s needed, yes.’

This class discussion remains superficial. Afterwards Carol remarked that the discussion had not progressed as she had foreseen. She had expected that different perspectives would automatically come up because of the mixed composition of the groups. However, pupils saw the discussion as a group assignment, which had to be answered correctly and did not discuss individual experiences and opinions. She reinforced this herself by asking the opinion of the groups rather than of individual pupils during the class discussion.
Andrew

Beforehand: Before the discussion, Andrew, the only teacher with a class of which half are of Dutch origin, was primarily concerned about how it would be possible to air different opinions without the discussion getting out of hand. He chose the clip about limits to freedom of expression because of its relevance but feared that it would provoke strong emotions. He was frightened that pupils from a Dutch and from a non-Dutch background would be against each other, a situation which could possibly escalate.

To be able to control the process, Andrew chose a strictly structured form of discussion in small groups. He formulated statements in advance, which pupils then had to discuss. Examples of these are: ‘everyone always has the right to say what he thinks’ and ‘foreigners must speak Dutch’. He used the existing set groups: two groups of Dutch pupils (one group of girls only and one mixed group of girls and boys) and four other groups mainly of pupils from a non-Dutch background (three groups of boys only and one of girls only). In this way he hoped to minimize the chance of escalation.

Course of the discussion: Andrew began the lesson by explaining the structure of the assignment. He did not say what the subject was. Then he showed the video clip. During the lesson Andrew went round the groups and kept an eye on how they were progressing. He did not comment on the content of the discussions. Two of the six groups worked seriously. In the other groups some of the pupils worked on the assignment intermittently. After half an hour Andrew asked the group representatives to present the opinion of their group.

Andrew: ‘First of all the representative of each group will speak, you cannot react yet. The first statement was, ‘If you’re not prepared to learn Dutch, you can clear off’. The first group?’

Pupil 1 (non-Dutch background): ‘We thought that this was rubbish, as it’s up to you which language you speak. Because that’s really no different to freedom of expression, saying what you want also means speaking which language you want.’

Andrew: ‘Is that the case in all circumstances, that you can speak your own language?’

Pupil 1: ‘Well yes, if you’re outside on the street or at home, then you can.’

Andrew: ‘And at school?’

Pupil 1: ‘In the break, yes.’

Andrew: ‘And during lessons, then too?’

Pupil 2 (from another group of pupils from a non-Dutch background): ‘No, that’s not polite, because we speak different languages.’

Andrew: ‘Don’t react now, we were only going to do that in the discussion after assignment six.’

After each statement Andrew summarized the opinion of the majority. The bell went before pupils had a chance to react to each other.
Afterwards Andrew said that he was surprised that he had adhered so strictly to the rigid structure when there was no sign of pupils reacting emotionally. He thinks that his approach prevented different opinions being discussed. By asking the opinion of each group instead of asking for different opinions, and by summarizing the majority opinion during the discussion afterwards, he unintentionally gave the impression that consensus is desirable. He found it useful to see himself in the video recording of the discussion. On the basis of this experience he definitely wants to conduct another discussion about this subject. He will then focus more on encouraging a diversity of perspectives and opinions.

5.4.3. Professional demands

We analysed the thinking, actions and behaviour of the participating teachers with the help of the professional demands for conducting class discussions on sensitive issues, which were derived from the literature. How had the teachers planned to act and behave, and how had they actually guided the discussion?

The first demand was to create an orderly environment in the classroom. When choosing their pedagogical approach, Carol, Andrew and Iris explicitly took the possibility of discipline problems and conflicts into account, even though discipline was not usually a problem in their regular lessons. They were not confident that this subject would automatically be dealt with in an orderly fashion in their ethnically diverse classes. Two of them, Carol and Andrew, thought that this would be best achieved by pupils conferring first in small groups. Diane had no concern about an orderly course of the discussion. She felt secure about her authority as a teacher and was familiar with guiding discussions about sensitive issues in her class. In Marion’s class there was such a lack of order that it was not possible to have a class discussion and to include her in further analyses. Therefore, the following findings are about the four remaining teachers.

The second demand was a relationship based on trust and proximity with the pupils. All four teachers considered their relationship of trust with the pupils when preparing the discussion. Carol and Andrew endeavoured to keep a certain distance between themselves and the pupils, as was evident in their actual actions and behaviour. Carol’s reasoning was that she did not think that school was a suitable context to discuss personal subjects; Andrew was wary about the possible emotional reactions of pupils. Iris and Diane valued a personal approach which was evident in their discussions. Iris focused on the exchange of pupils’ experiences, also contributing her own experiences. Diane explicitly expressed her commitment to the topic of the discussion as well as her interest in the opinions and experiences of her pupils. She encouraged them to speak openly and she did so herself.

The third demand on teachers is that they are well informed about the subject. In the interviews preceding the class discussions, all four teachers expressed that they intended to introduce their pupils to different perspectives.
They did not specify these perspectives. However, the video recordings of the class discussions revealed whether they actually put forward different perspectives in the discussion. Diane was the only one who put this. Iris considered herself to be insufficiently informed on the subject to be able to do this. Andrew and Carol made no contribution to the content of the discussion, except the formulation of the assignment.

The fourth demand was intercultural sensitivity, which is characterized by a positive approach to diversity and of the social issues outside school that can have an impact on pupils’ lives. Diane thinks that learning to live in an ethnically diverse society is not possible without taking pupils’ experiences and ideas seriously. This includes pupils being able to express their anger and sometimes dislike of the Dutch. She had confidence in her own sensitivity and good relationship with pupils, thereby securing the safe environment necessary to conduct such a discussion. Andrew and Iris know that pupils’ life outside school has a great deal of influence on how they think about living in an ethnically diverse society. They did not explore this, however, because they feared escalation would be the result. Carol also realized the importance of pupils’ experiences outside school but did not want to include these in the discussion because she considered this to be too personal for a school context.

The last demand was to be alert to the patterns of domination in the class. Carol was aware in advance that such patterns could be an obstacle to diversity and she therefore formed mixed, small groups. Diane chose a whole-class approach so that she could be watchful that everyone contributed to the discussion. She also explicitly paid attention to domination in Dutch society as a theme in the discussion. Iris and Andrew did not take patterns of domination into account prior to the discussion. However, during the discussion about a sensitive issue concerning the relationship between the sexes, Iris showed that she was aware of the possible asymmetric relations regarding gender.

5.5. Conclusions and discussion

In this study, it was investigated whether professional demands that were derived from the literature were reflected in the thinking, actions and behaviour of teachers who prepared and guided a discussion in their ethnically diverse class. The following demands were distinguished: establishing order, developing a relationship based on trust and proximity with all pupils, being well informed about different perspectives on an ethnically diverse society; being interculturally sensitive; and taking patterns of domination in the class into account. With the help of interviews, we mapped the objectives and approaches that the five participating teachers considered to be desirable and attainable. Observations gave us a picture of their actual behaviour. Four classes were almost completely made up of pupils from a non-Dutch background. One class comprised 50% pupils of Dutch origin.

The results show that, with one exception, teachers experienced deficiencies in their professionalism. Their lack of confidence was mainly due to
concerns about the discussion proceeding in an orderly manner, about intercultural sensitivity, and about introducing a diversity of perspectives on living in an ethnically diverse society.

All the teachers participated in the research because they thought it was important for their pupils to learn about living in an ethnically diverse society. The teachers set different objectives. One teacher wanted her pupils, all from a non-Dutch background, to learn that they have to adapt to the dominant ideas and thinking in the Netherlands. Owing to the lack of order in her class, it was not possible to have a discussion, so her actual actions and behaviour were not analysed in this study. The main objective of the four remaining teachers was to introduce pupils to different perspectives on sensitive issues regarding living in an ethnically diverse society and to think about these perspectives. Despite this objective, three of them did not stimulate a diversity of perspectives while guiding the discussion. The two teachers who worked with small groups only asked for the opinions of the groups and did not explore these further. When the whole class was involved, the discussion did not go further than summarizing the results of the group work. One of the two teachers who held a whole-class discussion restricted it to pupils’ exchanging their personal experiences, though she did take into account the differences in experience between girls and boys. The whole-class discussion of the other teacher was the only one where pupils made an initial start to reflect on a diversity of perspectives on living in a ethnically diverse society and considered the way pupils behave and act themselves. She thereby explicitly paid attention to the communal effort that is necessary for living in an ethnically diverse society. The teacher who led this discussion was the only one who looked back on it with satisfaction. The other teachers were pleased that the lesson had proceeded in an orderly fashion and that the sense of security within the group gave pupils from diverse backgrounds the space to participate in the discussion. They were particularly dissatisfied with their failure in practice to stimulate a diversity of perspectives, even though this had been one of their objectives.

The satisfied teacher, who conducted the most successful discussion, was the only teacher who was experienced with talking about sensitive issues regarding ethnic diversity in society with the class. Moreover, she had confidence in her own sensitivity and good relationship with her pupils that was characterized by mutual interest and trust, that secured a safe environment for the discussion. Also, she was the only teacher from a non-Dutch background. She assumed that her Surinamese origins automatically gave her insight into more perspectives on living in an ethnically diverse society than just the dominant perspective. The importance she attached to learning to live in an ethnically diverse society was, according to her, also related to her own experiences of growing up in the Netherlands as ‘non-Dutch’. In addition she thought that her background had a positive influence on her relationship with pupils from a non-Dutch background. It would be interesting to research these suppositions in a study comparing teachers from different backgrounds.
conducted class discussions on living in an ethnically diverse society. Research on the teaching of Surinamese women teachers would also be of interest. They stood out in a study on women teachers keeping order in the class at the beginning of their careers. In contrast to their Dutch colleagues they did not have problems keeping order. The researchers assume that the matriarchal culture Surinamese women grow up in plays a role in this (Derriks & De Kat, 2007).

We were interested in class discussions in ethnically diverse classes because earlier research showed that there were shortcomings in teachers' professionalism in this field (Leeman, 2003, 2006). Our study also yielded indications in that direction. Research on a large scale is needed, for example on a bigger, representative group of teachers and on more types of education, to ascertain whether the deficiencies that the teachers reported in this study also apply to teachers in general.

Our study focused on teachers' considerations and behaviour. The learning experiences of pupils during the discussion and how they perceived and generally experienced the discussion were not within the scope of this study. In the context of purposefully teaching about living in an ethnically diverse society, it would be interesting to do further research on how pupils learn, paying attention to possible differences along ethnic lines.

The four teachers whose class discussions were analysed in this study experienced their participation in the study as helpful in guiding discussions about sensitive issues in their ethnically diverse classes. Three of the teachers had little to no experience of this and saw the research as a good opportunity to improve their skills. They were extremely unsure beforehand about the best way of tackling the discussion. They appreciated the research method used, which included a preliminary interview with the researcher and an interview afterwards about the video recording of the class discussion, as a means for reflection. Watching and discussing the video recording gave them more confidence in their actions and behaviour and in their pupils. Moreover, they gained more confidence in developing their professionalism in this field further. This approach helped them to conquer their hesitations about conducting a class discussion.

Our study identified quality demands that teachers possibly face when guiding discussions about sensitive issues related to ethnic diversity in society. By reflecting on what they had taken into consideration before, during and after the discussion, the teachers learned about their own actions and behaviour (cf. Bergen, Engelen & Derksen, 2006; Schön, 1983). The research method used helped them to formulate what their questions and needs were. Moreover, it gave them ideas about how to tackle discussions in the future. That practice-based knowledge offers good opportunities for further professional development, such as overcoming a sense of insecurity about teaching in an ethnically diverse class, was already apparent from the method of working in the project ‘Intercultural learning in the class’. This comprised exchanging
experiences with colleagues and designing and experimenting with new ways of developing lessons together (Leeman & Ledoux, 2003). The methods used in these projects could be used for further professionalization in this field. The participation of teachers from different backgrounds can broaden the horizon of experience.