Teaching in diversity: teachers and pupils about tense situations in ethnically heterogeneous classes
Radstake, H.

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Chapter 6  
Conclusions and discussion

The aim of this thesis is to contribute to the scientific knowledge on tense situations in ethnically diverse classes as experienced by teachers and pupils. Tense situations are perceived as opportunities for citizenship education in an ethnically diverse society. These may present suitable occasions to, for example, discuss values that are related to living in an ethnically diverse society and for pupils to reflect on this theme. The research project consisted of two empirical studies that focused on three themes: first, teachers’ and pupils’ experiences with tense situations; second, teachers’ reactions to tense situations; and third, teachers guiding discussions in ethnically diverse classes on sensitive issues related to living in society.

The specific research questions were as follows.

Regarding teachers’ and pupils’ experiences:

1. Which tense situations do teachers and pupils experience in ethnically diverse classes and to what extent do they relate these situations to the ethnic diversity of the class? (chapters 2 and 3)
2. Are the experiences of teachers and pupils with tense situations related to personal and context characteristics? (chapters 2 and 3)

Regarding teachers’ reactions:

3. How do teachers react to tense situations? Do teachers find it difficult to determine how to react to tense situations? (chapter 2)
4. How do pupils appraise the reaction of teachers to tense situations during class discussions? Is their appraisal related to ethnic origin, the ethnic composition of the class, and the specific way the teacher reacts? (chapter 4)

Regarding class discussions:

5. How do teachers shape and guide discussions in the ethnically diverse class about sensitive issues regarding ethnic diversity in society and which professional demands can be identified for this? (chapter 5)

In this chapter, I will summarize and discuss the main findings of this research project. Next, I will elaborate on the strengths and limitations of the research methodology that was used. The chapter concludes with suggestions for the educational field. To draw the context for a proper interpretation of the findings, I will first give a summary of the design of the empirical studies.

6.1. Design of the empirical studies

6.1.1. Survey study

A national survey was set up to produce an extensive overview of the experiences of teachers and pupils with tense situations. To be able to analyse the relations between school, class and individual variables, my aim was for 34
schools and 100 classes (three classes per school) to participate. I had to approach 71 schools to find 34 willing to participate. The response was thus 48%. The survey included teachers and pupils in 102 classes; 87 teachers (a response of 85%) and pupils from 89 classes (a response of 87%) ultimately returned the questionnaire. The research group comprised 1,987 pupils.

The sample was made up of pupils from 59 classes (66%) providing pre-vocational secondary education and from 30 classes (34%) providing general secondary education. This closely resembles the national distribution of pupils (60% of pupils attend pre-vocational secondary education). Half of the classes were from schools in the four largest cities in the Netherlands (Amsterdam, The Hague, Rotterdam and Utrecht) and the other half from middle-sized towns and cities all over the country. The ethnic background of the pupils in the sample was representative of the different ethnic groups living in the Netherlands, such as Turkish, Moroccans, immigrants from the former Dutch colonies and refugees from all parts of the world. The following groups were distinguished in this research project, based on the country of birth of their parents (N=1,780): Dutch (44.7%), Moroccan (12.6%), Turkish (10.6%), Surinamese and Dutch Antilleans (10.1%), pupils with two parents who were born in ‘other’ non-Western countries (mixed foreign) (11.7%) and pupils with one Dutch parent and one parent who was born abroad (mixed Dutch) (10.3%). The percentage of pupils from a non-Dutch background in each class ranged from 11% to 100%. The percentage of pupils from a non-Dutch background was divided fairly equally over the different educational tracks, taking into account the distribution of the pupil population over the different types of education.

The operationalization of tense situations was based on an interview study conducted by Leeman in 2002 that focused on dilemmas that teachers had experienced in relation to teaching in ethnically heterogeneous classes (Leeman, 2003, 2006). As no such study on pupils’ experiences was available, the questionnaire that was constructed for pupils was also based on these teachers’ reports. The questionnaire presented a selection of the situations that the teachers interviewed reported. The 20 situations selected were all situated in the classroom. The situations represented a wide range of possible experiences and were illustrative of dilemmas that the teachers experienced: some were overt; others were more disguised in nature; situations were included that could occur in any lesson as well as situations that arose during class discussions; some concerned the contact between teachers and pupils; others concerned tension among pupils themselves; and lastly, the situations varied in content (see Appendix 1 for the list of tense situations).

In the questionnaire, teachers and pupils were asked about the frequency in which they experienced the twenty situations over a period of five to six months (the first months of the school year 2003/2004). They were also asked about the level of tension they experienced in each situation, and the extent to which they related the situations to the ethnic diversity of the class. In the question on how teachers’ reacted to tense situations, the respondents could
choose from options that reflected more teacher-centred and more pupil-centred reactions.

Virtually nobody – neither pupils nor teachers – experienced one particular situation that had to do with pupils quarrelling over sexuality issues during a class discussion. This situation was therefore excluded from the analyses, which then included 19 situations in total (see appendix 1 for the list of situations).

6.1.2. Interview and observation study
A small-scale interview and observation study was conducted to gain deeper insight into how teachers shape discussions in ethnically diverse classes on sensitive issues related to living in an ethnically diverse society and the professional demands this requires of teachers. There were several reasons for choosing to focus on the professional demands on teachers regarding these discussions. Firstly, the survey showed that teachers mainly react to tense situations by talking about these with their pupils. In addition, tensions that occurred during class discussions proved to be some of the most difficult type of situations for teachers to deal with. An example is the situation in which pupils do not respect their classmates during a discussion on political or religious subjects. Lastly, deeper insight into guiding a discussion is relevant because it is a preferred strategy from the perspective of citizenship education.

For the interview and observation study, five demands on teachers’ professionalism were distinguished, based on the literature. Five teachers in the theoretical track of pre-vocational secondary education (vmbo-t) were asked to guide a discussion in their ethnically diverse classes. Four classes were almost completely made up of pupils from a non-Dutch origin. One class consisted of 50% pupils from Dutch origin. Preceding the class discussions teachers were interviewed about the objectives and approaches they considered desirable and attainable. Observations provided information of their actual behaviours during such discussions. In the interviews following the discussion, teachers reflected on the class discussion, considered if they had achieved the goals they had set and evaluated their professionalism in this field. The objectives of the teachers, and the approaches which they had planned and realized, were analysed in the context of the professional demands that were derived from the literature.

6.2. Conclusions and discussion of the main results
6.2.1. The relation between tense situations and ethnic diversity
Regarding teachers’ and pupils’ experiences of tense situations, I was especially interested in the extent to which they perceived tense situations as being related to the ethnically diverse composition of the class. In the political climate in the Netherlands during the time of data collection, any conflict in an ethnically diverse context was easily perceived as an intercultural conflict. I wanted to find out whether teachers and pupils link tensions to the ethnically diverse class-composition.
The results of the survey showed that teachers experienced on average one third of the presented situations. Nearly 50% of the pupils reported the incidence of at least five of the 19 situations. As such, the situations presented were recognizable to teachers and pupils. However, not all of these situations were experienced as tense, and even less were perceived as being related to the ethnically diverse composition of the class. The percentages of teachers and pupils that experienced tensions in relation to the situations presented varied strongly from situation to situation (from 28 to 82% of the teachers and from 43 to 66% of the pupils). The percentages of teachers and pupils who did relate the situations they had experienced to the ethnic composition of the class varied from situation to situation, from 16 to 70% for teachers and from 24 to 63% for pupils. Situations that teachers and pupils did find stressful were, according to them, fairly often related to the ethnic composition of the class. Teachers and pupils did not report that these relatively stressful situations occurred frequently.

These findings indicate that the prevailing image of numerous huge tensions in ethnically diverse schools requires modification. Situations that occur in the class are not all found to be stressful by everyone nor related to ethnic diversity. Other research carried out in approximately the same period as the research for this thesis did not confirm the dominant image of frequent, heated tensions in ethnically diverse schools either. A quick scan amongst members of staff at 25 secondary schools in Amsterdam on intercultural relations in ethnically diverse schools showed that short-lived tensions between ethnic groups only occurred at three schools with some regularity. The intercultural relations between pupils were structurally bad at one school; at 21 schools they were reasonable to good (Stichting Voorbeeld, 2005). Research on escalated conflicts in 32 ethnically diverse primary and secondary schools in the Netherlands showed that almost no schools where a conflict had escalated did have a structural problem with enduring conflicts (Roede, Karsten & Leeman, 2008).

It is relevant here to bear in mind the way in which tense situations were investigated in this research. The survey provided knowledge about teachers’ and pupils’ experiences of situations that were presented in a questionnaire, but not about the way these situations progressed, nor about their outcomes. According to social-psychological literature, group formation - often making use of existing group differences - is a generally occurring phenomenon when tensions or conflicts result into escalation (De Dreu, 2005). Thus, ethnic diversity might start to play a role during the process of escalation, while the cause of a situation was not necessarily connected with diversity. The above-mentioned research on escalated conflicts at ethnically diverse schools did indeed show that, according to those involved, ethnic lines often start to play a role when a situation escalates (Roede, Karsten & Leeman, 2008). However, it is important to keep in mind that there are no indications from the empirical studies in this field that daily interactions in ethnically schools are structurally characterized by tensions, conflicts or escalations.
In this study, I assumed that teachers’ and pupils’ experiences of tense situations would differ by personal characteristics. For teachers, I focused on ethnic background, intercultural sensitivity and teaching experience in ethnically diverse classes. Hardly any relation was found. Intercultural sensitivity, operationalized as the extent to which teachers value an ethnically diverse pupil population, did prove to be relevant. Teachers who are more interculturally sensitive experienced fewer of the situations that were presented to them in the questionnaire and reported a lower frequency of some situations than less sensitive teachers. Interculturally sensitive teachers might experience less tense situations because they are able to build a relationship based on trust with pupils from different ethnic groups, and to create a pleasant, safe social climate in the class (Cochran-Smith, 1995; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Another possible explanation is that because of their positive attitude towards ethnic diversity, interculturally sensitive teachers view an ethnically heterogeneous pupil population as an educational resource and perceive these situations as normal in their teaching context. Therefore, they might not associate these situations with tensions and difficulties (e.g. Henze, Katz & Norte, 2000).

For pupils, the focus was on differences based on ethnic background and ethnic identification i.e. the ethnic group with which they mostly identify themselves (see paragraph 6.1.1. for the categories). The results of the survey showed that groups with a Moroccan, Turkish, or mixed foreign background reported experiencing a higher frequency of tense situations than Dutch pupils did. For ethnic identification, hardly any significant relation was found.

Looking at all the situations separately, it was shown that pupils of Moroccan and (to a lesser extent Turkish) origin experienced particular situations more frequently than Dutch pupils. These situations dealt with circumstances in which the pupils’ respect for their teacher was under pressure (either from the teachers’ or pupils’ point of view) or in which tensions were related to political, religious or cultural issues. In addition, Moroccan pupils reported more tension than Dutch pupils in 13 of the 19 situations, and Turkish pupils in three of the 19 situations. Moroccan and Turkish pupils also related four respectively three of the 19 situations to a higher extent to the ethnically diverse class than Dutch pupils did.

A possible explanation for the findings that pupils from some ethnic-minority groups were generally more aware of tense situations might be the political climate in the Netherlands at the time of data collection. The emphasis on the integration of ethnic minorities and on differences along ethnic lines might increase the feeling of pupils from an ethnic-minority background of being seen as ‘different’. As a result they were possibly more sensitive, and therefore more aware, of the situations described in the questionnaire that consisted of overt situations as well as situations that were more disguised in nature. The fact that I hardly found any differences between the various groups of ethnic minority pupils, but did find differences between Dutch and non-Dutch
pupils, supports this explanation. The finding that non-Dutch pupils might be extra sensitive to tense situations is in line with other studies. These showed that they can be very sensitive to negative stereotyping, a non-inclusive school climate and a lack of respect for their background (Leeman, 2006; Severiens, Wolff & Rezai, 2006; Wolff & Crul, 2002).

6.2.3. Differences in experiencing tense situations: Context characteristics
This research investigated whether educational track and ethnic composition of the class were related to the perceived occurrence of tense situations. Schools providing pre-vocational secondary education are generally considered to be a type of school where an excessive number of incidents and tensions occur, which are perceived to be related to the high percentage of ethnic-minority pupils and pupils from lower socio-economic status groups (Kleijer, Van Reekum & Tillekens, 2004). Around the turn of this century, some worrying signals on classes in the lowest tracks of vocational education came from small-scale studies. Incidents and problems seemed to rule the daily interactions at these schools and endangered the time spent on teaching, as well as the quality of teaching (Beekmans, 2004, 2006; Paulle, 2005). In the research for this thesis, no meaningful relations were found between the perceived occurrence of tense situations and educational track. As such, the findings do not support the prevailing image of schools providing pre-vocational secondary education as a type of school where an excessive number of incidents and tensions occur.

The ethnic composition of the class was not significantly related to teachers’ perception of the frequency of tense situations, but it did prove to have a small but significant effect on how frequently pupils experienced tense situations (after controlling for pupils’ individual ethnic origin). The higher the percentage of pupils of Dutch origin in the class, the lower the frequency in which pupils of that class reported tense situations. A significant effect was only found for the proportion of pupils of Dutch origin and not for the proportion of specific ethnic groups of pupils (for example, Moroccan, Turkish or Surinamese). The explanation for this probably lies in characteristics of the research group. In 36 of the 89 classes at least 50% pupils were of Dutch origin, while, with the exception of one class with 62% of the pupils being of Moroccan origin, there were nearly no classes with a majority of any particular ethnic group. It is plausible that when a group is numerically in the majority, it has a stronger influence in the class than smaller groups have (cf. Vermeij, 2006). Possibly, Dutch culture strongly affects pupils’ perspectives in classes with a majority of pupils of Dutch origin. In more heterogeneous classrooms a diversity of opinions presumably presents itself more naturally (cf. Parker, 2003a).

The results of this research did not give indications that tense situations occur more frequently in one school or the other. The analyses concerning the distribution of variance at school, class and pupil level showed that it is necessary to differentiate by pupil and class level, but not by school level. 9% of the total variance was explained by differences between classes, the remainder
was explained by differences between pupils. That there was hardly any between-school variation might stem from the study focusing only on situations in the classroom during lessons, and not on situations in the larger context of the school, for example during the breaks, in the communal areas or out of the teacher’s presence. Then, school characteristics might play a larger role.

The research on escalated incidents in ethnically diverse schools mentioned earlier also did not find differences between schools (Roede, Karsten & Leeman, 2008). Schools where conflicts had not escalated proved to be very similar with regard to intercultural relations to those where escalation(s) had occurred. The research implies that escalations can occur at any school. Whether conflicts escalated or not did not seem clearly related to school policy or the implementation of specific programmes in this field.

6.2.4. Teachers’ reactions to tense situations

With the aim of contributing to the knowledge base of tense situations as opportunities for citizenship education, this thesis also provides insight into teachers’ reactions to tense situations. The findings of the survey on teachers give some positive indications for perceiving tense situations as possible occasions for citizenship education. First, the results give the impression of teachers who are aware of tense situations and who were willing to take action. Nearly all teachers decided to react to a situation and in the majority of situations, they reacted immediately. They sometimes also came back to the situation later on. Noticing situations and reacting to them are prerequisites for utilizing tense situations for citizenship education. Second, most teachers who participated in this study seemed to prefer an open way of dealing with tense situations. They reacted in particular by talking with the pupils concerned, in combination with a discussion with the class. These are preferred teaching strategies from the perspective of citizenship education.

The results of the survey on pupils show that their appraisal of the way their teachers’ reacted to possible tense situations during class discussions (these were six of the nineteen situations in the questionnaire) was generally positive. The ethnic background of the pupils and the ethnic composition of the class did scarcely significantly predict the extent to which pupils appreciated their teachers’ behaviour in tense situations during class discussions. The way in which teachers reacted did prove to be a significant predictor for their appreciation in some situations. I assumed that pupils would have a preference for teaching strategies that gave them the opportunity to share their opinions and experiences in the class, in contrast to teaching strategies that were more teacher-centred. The results, having controlled for covariates, gave some support for this expectation. In one of the six situations a significant negative relation was found with a teacher-centred reaction, namely punishing pupils. In two of the six situations the pupils’ appreciation was significantly positively related to the teachers’ reaction to have a class discussion. Pupils appreciated it when teachers took a personal stance during these discussions.
6.2.5. Teachers’ professionalism

The results of this study provide insight into the professionalism of teachers in dealing with tense situations (survey) and in guiding discussions in ethnically diverse classes about sensitive issues regarding ethnic diversity in society (interview and observation study). The two empirical studies gave information about different aspects of teachers’ professionalism. The results of the survey gave insight into the awareness of teachers of tense situations and their decisiveness to react to them. This study gave positive indications of their professionalism. The results showed that teachers generally indicated few difficulties in deciding how to handle the situations they had experienced. They did not avoid situations and they acted decisively, mostly by talking with pupils about the situation.

The results of the interview and observation study give reason to assume that teachers, while actually guiding these discussions, might be confronted with several difficulties. This study 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 with all pupils based on trust and proximity, being well informed about different perspectives on an ethnically diverse society, being interculturally sensitive, and taking patterns of domination into account. The dominant impression from the interview and observation study was of teachers who found it difficult to guide discussions in an ethnically diverse class about sensitive issues for living in an ethnically diverse society. Four of the five participating teachers were dissatisfied regarding their professionalism in this field. They were seeking ways to shape such a discussion. Their sense of insecurity mainly stemmed from concerns about the discussion proceeding in an orderly manner, about intercultural sensitivity, and about introducing a variety of perspectives on living in an ethnically diverse society.

For one teacher it proved impossible to realize a class discussion, owing to a lack of order in the class. Therefore, her lesson was not analysed. The remaining four teachers all set objectives for the discussion like broadening pupils’ horizons by exposing them to a diversity of perspectives on living in an ethnically diverse society, and encouraging them to reflect on their opinions and on possible ways of dealing with problems with living in an ethnically diverse society. However, three of them did not stimulate a diversity of perspectives while guiding the discussion. The content of the discussions under their guidance remained superficial or was limited to exchanging personal experiences. Two teachers only asked, for example, during the follow-up discussion with the whole class about the work that pupils had prepared in small groups, for the opinions of the groups without analysing them further. Afterwards, these three teachers were dissatisfied that they had neglected to stimulate a diversity of perspectives, even though they had set themselves the
Section IV – In conclusion

objective beforehand of introducing pupils to such diversity. According to them, this omission was due to their anxiety that discussions about this subject in their diverse classes would easily escalate. Talking about living in an ethnically diverse society was, they believed, an emotional issue for their pupils and they expected that pupils’ opinions would differ and might lead to clashes. These teachers did not know how they should react if such a situation did arise. In their preparations, and/or during the course of the discussion, they therefore focused on keeping order in the class. In practice, their pupils actually proved to be prepared to join in the discussion and in general they listened with interest to each other and to the teacher. When watching and reflecting on the video recording that was made of the discussion, it was evident that these teachers had acquired more confidence in both their pupils and their own actions. Participating in the research made them enthusiastic and they afterwards resolved to have class discussions about this kind of subjects more often and then to stimulate a diversity of perspectives.

The discussion guided by the fourth teacher was the only one in which pupils made an initial start on reflecting on a diversity of perspectives on living in an ethnically diverse society. This was initiated by the teacher who put forward alternative perspectives herself. The pupils in this class were also explicitly stimulated to think about how they themselves could act and behave when confronted with tensions or problems. Another theme of the discussion, put forward by the teacher, was the communal effort that is necessary for living in an ethnically diverse society. Compared to the other teachers, this teacher had some striking characteristics. She was the only teacher from a non-Dutch background and the only one who was experienced in talking with the class about living in an ethnically diverse society. Moreover, she had confidence in her own sensitivity and in her relationship with the pupils that was characterized by mutual interest and trust, thereby securing the safe environment necessary to conduct a discussion on sensitive issues. She assumed that the importance she attached to preparing pupils for citizenship in the ethnically diverse society is related to her own experiences of growing up in the Netherlands as ‘non-Dutch’. Moreover, she felt that her Surinamese origin automatically gave her insight into alternatives to the dominant perspective of living in an ethnically diverse society. This possibly made it easier for her, compared to teachers of Dutch origin, to create a relationship of trust with pupils of non-Dutch origin.

Reviewing the results of the survey and of the interview and observation study, it can be concluded that teachers did not encounter noteworthy problems on a large scale in deciding how to react to tense situations. They often choose to have a discussion. The interview and observation study show that teachers may well encounter difficulties when they actually have these discussions with the objective of teaching pupils about living in an ethnically diverse society. This is supported by the finding from the survey that teachers find it relatively difficult to deal with tense situations during class discussions.
6.3. Discussion of the research methodology and suggestions for further research

This section will discuss the most important strengths and limitations of the research methods. Recommendations for future research will also be made.

A first strength is that the criteria for selecting the sample, which were laid down in advance, were on the whole fulfilled. It was, therefore, possible to build up a national picture of the experiences of teachers and pupils with tense situations in ethnically diverse schools in the Netherlands with the help of the survey. The first criterion was that schools in large and middle-sized towns and cities should be proportionally represented in the sample, because that is where schools with an ethnically heterogeneous pupil population are predominantly located. My aim, therefore, was for half of the sample to be made up of schools in the four largest cities in the Netherlands (Amsterdam, The Hague, Rotterdam and Utrecht) and the other half of the group of schools in middle-sized towns and cities all over the country. A second criterion was that I wanted the distribution of the classes by type of education to correspond with the national distribution of the pupil population. I therefore wanted 60% of the classes participating in the study to be pre-vocational secondary education classes (vmbo) and 40% general secondary education classes (havo and/or vwo). Lastly, I wanted the proportion of non-Dutch pupils in the class to be evenly distributed over the educational levels in order to study the effect of class-composition and of the educational level of the class separately.

A second strength of the surveys of teachers and pupils was their relatively large scale, whilst staying closer to the teachers’ and pupils’ perceptions of daily educational practice than is often the case in other surveys. Teachers and pupils were questioned, for example, about situations they had actually experienced and to indicate whether they considered these situations as tense and as being related to the ethnically diverse class. Other research on teachers usually asks about hypothetical situations, coupled with the question how teachers should react if the situations were to occur. By asking about situations that had actually occurred, the study’s ecological validity was enhanced and hence gave a more realistic picture of educational practice. To obtain a large-scale picture of the situations that teachers and pupils experienced, I decided to put forward prototypical situations in a questionnaire, which were formulated in such a way that everyone could recognize them. This means that teachers and pupils from the same class did not need to have the same specific incident in mind when they answered the questions about a situation presented in the questionnaire. As a result, no information was collected on the actual content of the situations teachers and pupils had in mind when they filled in the questionnaire. In subsequent research aimed at finding explanations for the differences by pupils’ ethnic origin regarding their experiences with tense situations, which this study identified, it would be relevant also to include the specific content and personal meaning attached to tense situations as the subject of research.
A third strength of this research project was the use of quantitative and qualitative research methods, thereby building on the findings from various studies. To obtain a nationwide picture of teachers’ and pupils’ experiences with tense situations, it was necessary to use questionnaires. To fit in as closely as possible with the teachers’ thinking, I used situations that experienced teachers of ethnically diverse classes mentioned, when they were questioned about dilemmas they had encountered in teaching in ethnically diverse classes (Leeman, 2003, 2006). Situations from the interview study were presented to teachers and pupils all over the country with the help of questionnaires. This resulted in a list of situations that were recognizable to many teachers and many pupils. In the analysis of the survey data, tense situations during class discussions stood out in the sense that a relatively large number of teachers and pupils experienced them as tense situations and related them to the ethnic diversity in the class. By then focusing on pupils’ appraisal of the actions of teachers in potentially tense situations during class discussions, some indication was found that pupils preferred educational strategies that gave them room to talk about the situation and whereby the teachers themselves took a personal stance. The surveys did not provide insight into how the class discussions on tense situations progressed in practice, nor whether teachers were oriented on citizenship education for living in an ethnically diverse society during the discussion. For this reason, the interview and observation study on guiding discussions in the class about sensitive issues related to living in an ethnically diverse society was then carried out. It provided insight into the teaching practice and the professional demands that teachers see themselves confronted with.

The choices made regarding the research methodology were also accompanied by a number of limitations. First and foremost, by choosing situations that had actually been experienced as the subject of the research, teachers and pupils, who had not experienced the situation in question, did not answer the follow-up questions on the intensity of the tension experienced, the relation with the ethnic diversity in the class, and the way teachers reacted. This resulted in systematically missing data on these variables. Consequently, the data available for the evaluations of tense situations by pupils are relatively scarce.

In addition, the study was structured in such a way that teachers and pupils from the same classes participated. Ideally the teacher and pupil data files should have been linked to each other, so that their perspectives and experiences of tense situations could be compared with each other. Matching the files of teachers and pupils ultimately proved not to be useful for two reasons. The first reason, as described above, was the large number of missing values for the questions on the intensity of the tension and the relation with the ethnically diverse class, as those questions were only answered for situations that had actually been experienced. The second was that, even though pupils and teachers were asked about situations that occurred in the class, they possibly did not have
the same specific incident in mind when they answered the questions about a type of a tense situation. Moreover, it depends on the individual whether a situation is actually noticed. In other words, the experiences with tense situations were not so much class-related, but highly individual-related variables. For these reasons it was not possible to deduce from the surveys whether teachers perceive the same situations as being potentially tense as pupils do, nor could pupils and teachers be compared regarding the intensity of the tension and the relation with the ethnic diversity of the class. In the pre-study for the interview and observation study about class discussions, interviews with pupils from five classes showed that many of them felt that teachers are mainly aware of situations when they themselves are involved (Radstake, 2005). They were more likely not to notice or consciously ignore tensions between pupils. In future research, an approach that facilitates comparison between teachers and their pupils would be preferable. Insight into teachers’ possible ‘blind spots’ regarding tense situations, which their pupils (or some of them) do experience, would then be possible. Gaining insight into possible differences between teachers’ and pupils’ perceptions provides relevant information if tense situations are seen as opportunities for citizenship education.

A third shortcoming concerns the fact that pupils’ perceptions of tense situations were studied by presenting them with a list of situations derived from an interview study of teachers. This was because no such study on pupils was available. As a result, teachers’ experiences were used to investigate pupils’ perceptions. If the pupils’ perceptions had been taken as the starting-point, they might have put forward different situations. In the questionnaire, pupils were given the opportunity to describe a situation that they had experienced themselves. They mostly mentioned tensions between pupils, such as fights, bullying, threats and stealing. These situations sometimes occurred in class, but often during breaks, before and after school, and in the communal areas. However, the survey was limited to tense situations during lessons in the classroom and concerned tensions between teachers and pupils as well as tensions between pupils. It would be interesting for further research to take pupils’ perspectives as a starting point in the study of tense situations at school, so as to be able to identify other types of situations that are possible opportunities for citizenship education.

Another suggestion for future research concerns gaining insight into the professional demands that teachers find themselves confronted with when guiding discussions about sensitive issues related to living in an ethnically diverse society on a large scale. The interview and observation study (chapter 5) showed that teachers experienced deficiencies in their professionalism in that field. Owing to the small-scale and the specificity of the sample, the results of this study cannot be generalized to all teachers of ethnically diverse classes. Only five teachers participated in this study and all five taught classes of the theoretical track of pre-vocational secondary education (vmbo-t). To obtain a representative picture of the professional demands that are put on teachers,
research on a larger scale on teachers and classes of differing types of education and grades is necessary.

Last but not least, future research on the learning experiences and learning outcomes of pupils is recommended. A starting point of this thesis was that tense situations can be opportunities for citizenship education for living in an ethnically diverse society. Several results of the studies in this research project are encouraging when interpreting tense situations as such. Whether pupils actually learned from the situations experienced and what, and how this related to the teachers’ actions, remained outside the scope of this study. To ascertain whether tense situations do actually provide opportunities for citizenship education, the connection between teachers’ pedagogical approaches and the learning experiences of pupils should be the subject of future research.

6.4. Implications for the educational field
Two important starting points of this thesis were that 1) citizenship education for living in an ethnically diverse society is found to be increasingly important in the Netherlands and 2) that tense situations in ethnically diverse classes might be opportunities for citizenship education and that teachers fulfil a crucial role in realizing this. The tense situations that were the basis of this thesis were derived from an interview study about dilemmas that teachers experienced in teaching ethnically diverse classes (Leeman, 2003, 2006). One of the conclusions of the interview study was that teachers’ professionalism in this field was insufficiently developed. The eleven participating teachers, all with experience of teaching ethnically diverse classes, had often searched on their own initiative for ways of dealing with critical situations in ethnically diverse classes that posed dilemmas for them. They were not in a position to learn from others or exchange their expertise, as there proved to be no shared professionalism in this field. Several of them stated that by trial and error they had found ways of dealing with critical situations which posed dilemmas for them. Others were still searching (Leeman, 2003, 2006).

Although it is always necessary to be cautious of directly translating research results into educational practice, some findings of this thesis might be useful for the further professional development of teachers in this field. The interview and observation study in this thesis about guiding discussions in ethnically diverse classes on sensitive issues yielded insight into the professional demands that are made on teachers, and provided some suggestions for supporting their professional development. The professional demands that were identified were derived from the literature and from analysing the thinking, actions and behaviour of the teachers while preparing and actually guiding the discussions. Although it must be borne in mind that it is not known whether the experiences of the five teachers who participated in this study also apply to teachers on a large scale, the results indicate that teachers may need support to overcome their concerns and feelings of insecurity about guiding discussions in ethnically diverse classes. These were mainly about keeping order during a
discussion on sensitive topics, about introducing different perspectives on living in an ethnically diverse society and about being interculturally sensitive.

Conducting good class discussions, in which there is a real exchange of ideas between pupils and reflection on several perspectives, is generally not easy. Nor is it easy to teach teachers to guide them (Parker & Hess, 2001). Parker and Hess tried to do this by asking trainee teachers to reflect on examples of model discussions. Their study showed that, although teachers are very able to reflect on model discussions, this does not mean that they are capable of guiding a discussion themselves. The teachers participating in the interview and observation study of this thesis considered the research method that was used as supportive of their professional development in guiding class discussions about sensitive issues regarding living in an ethnically diverse society (see chapter 5). I reflected with them on the video recording of the discussion they had guided. During this session, the teachers who had not achieved what they had hoped for during the class discussion became more aware of the discrepancy between the goals they had set themselves beforehand and the way they had shaped the discussion in practice. By reflecting on what they had taken into consideration before, during and after the discussion, the teachers learned from and about their own actions. The research approach proved to be helpful in overcoming their initial hesitations, as well as in identifying their uncertainties, questions and needs. Methods like the one used in the interview and observation study, in which teachers have the possibility to exchange actual teaching experiences and reflect with others on them, prove to be valuable for teachers’ professional development, in the field of citizenship education about living in an ethnically diverse society (cf. Leeman & Ledoux, 2005) as well as for teachers’ professional development in general (cf. Meirink, 2007; Zwart, 2007).

Another outcome of this thesis for educational practice is the list of situations, provided by the survey, that were recognizable to many teachers and pupils. Teachers of ethnically diverse classes might come across these types of situations during their lessons. Teacher-education programmes can use this list to prepare teachers for such situations, by reflecting on them and on the dilemmas and tensions they may provoke, as well as on the possibilities they offer for citizenship education on living in an ethnically diverse society.

An important finding of this thesis was that, while the list of situations presented in the questionnaire was recognizable to teachers and pupils, not all were experienced as tense or related to the ethnic diversity of the class. As said, in the political climate in the Netherlands concerning social cohesion and diversity any conflict in an ethnically diverse context is easily perceived as an intercultural conflict and related to safety issues or problems of immigrant youth. The prevailing image of numerous huge tensions in ethnically diverse classes, specifically in pre-vocational secondary education, requires modification when teachers’ and pupils’ perspectives are taken into account. Hopefully politicians, policy makers and the media take notice of this finding and help to modify the prevailing negative image. This might encourage more
teachers to work in ethnically diverse schools, especially in the big cities where they are so badly needed nowadays.