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

Citation for published version (APA):
Summary

Over the course of the last few decades, the pupil population of schools in the Netherlands has become increasingly ethnically diverse, particularly in large and middle-sized cities. In response to this, a stronger emphasis has been placed on the task of schools to provide citizenship education aimed at preparing pupils for citizenship in an ethnically diverse society. The importance of this task became even more evident in 2006 when the law on ‘active citizenship and social integration’ came into effect. Awareness of ethnic diversity in thoughts on citizenship education has a brief history. Thoughts on citizenship education have been affected by the widely publicized international philosophical debate during the Eighties and Nineties of the Twentieth century regarding social cohesion and diversity in democratic societies. For one, multicultural citizenship, characterized by maintaining a balance between commonality and diversity, has become an important concept (Banks, 2001, 2004). Through citizenship education pupils can learn to develop carefully considered viewpoints about living in an ethnically diverse society, by taking into account different, and perhaps conflicting, perspectives, interests and values, as well as issues of public importance (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996; Parker, 2003b).

An important starting-point of this thesis is that tense situations in ethnically heterogeneous classrooms can provide opportunities for citizenship education for living in a ethnically diverse society. Citizenship education is not limited to lessons specifically on this subject; it also occurs by merely going to school together (Solomon, Watson & Battistisch, 2001). From a citizenship education point of view, educational strategies that attribute a great deal of value to an open learning environment and the active-learning of pupils, such as cooperative learning and dialogue, are to be preferred. During discussions, different perspectives and values related to living in an ethnically diverse society can be considered and pupils can be encouraged to reflect on them.

The aim of the thesis is to create a broader knowledge base regarding tense situations as experienced by teachers and pupils in ethnically diverse classes. Three themes are central to this study. First, experiences of teachers and pupils with tense situations, second, reactions of teachers to these tense situations and third guidance of discussions in ethnically diverse classes about sensitive issues related to ethnic diversity.

Method

A national survey was conducted in order to increase our understanding of the experiences of and reactions to tense situations. Teachers and pupils from 89 ethnically diverse pre-vocational and general secondary education classes from 34 schools in different cities in The Netherlands participated in the survey. The sample consisted of 87 teachers and 1987 pupils. 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.
Participants were presented with 20 potentially tense situations by use of a questionnaire. The operationalization of the situations was based on an interview study conducted by Leeman in 2002, focusing on dilemmas experienced by teachers when teaching ethnically diverse classes (Leeman, 2003, 2006). Unfortunately, similar preliminary research was unavailable for pupils. Therefore, the situations presented to the pupils in their questionnaire were also based on the experiences of the interviewed teachers.

The teacher and pupil questionnaires presented 20 situations that were located in the classroom. The situations illustrated the variety of dilemmas that the interviewed teachers encountered during their work in ethnically diverse classes. Teachers and pupils were asked to indicate how often they had experienced each situation during the first five to six months of the school year (2003-2004), how they rated the level of tension of each situation and to what degree they perceived the situation to be related to the ethnic composition of their class. Additionally they were asked to indicate how the teacher had responded to the situation, thereby given alternatives that indicated more teacher-centred or pupil-oriented approaches.

A small-scale study, consisting of interviews and observations, was conducted to provide more in-depth knowledge regarding the way teachers guide class discussions about sensitive issues in ethnically diverse classes and regarding the particular professional demands these discussions require from them. Based on literature, five professional demands were identified. Five teachers guided a discussion in their classes in the theoretical track of pre-vocational schools for secondary education. Four of these classes consisted almost completely of pupils from a broad range of non-Dutch backgrounds. In the fifth class 50% of the pupils were of Dutch origin. Preceding the class discussion teachers were interviewed about the objectives and approaches they considered to be desirable and attainable. Observations of the class discussion provided information of their actual behaviours during such discussions. In the interviews following the discussions, teachers reflected on the class discussion, considered if they had achieved the goals they had set and evaluated their professionalism. 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.

Results and conclusions
While researching the experiences of teachers and pupils with tense situations the main focus was to determine which tense situations they experienced and to what extent they related these particular experiences to the ethnic diversity of the class (Chapters 2 and 3). The study indicated that 19 of the 20 presented situations were recognizable to teachers and pupils. As a result the analyses covered 19 situations. Not all situations that were reported by teachers and pupils were perceived as tense or related to the ethnic diversity in the class. Situations that were labelled tense were often associated with the ethnic
diversity of the class. However, these situations were not reported very frequently. All in all, the findings do not appear to offer support to perceive ethnically diverse classes as contexts in which tense situations occur particularly frequent.

Additionally, the study explored whether experiences of teachers and pupils were related to personal and context characteristics. Personal characteristics of teachers that were included were for example gender, ethnic background or experience with teaching and intercultural sensitivity. The findings indicate that experiences of teachers were related to intercultural sensitivity: more sensitive teachers had 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. A possible explanation for this finding might be that more sensitive teachers are better at creating a positive class environment and are able to build a trusting relationship with pupils from diverse ethnic backgrounds (Cochran-Smit, 1995; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Alternatively, it might be that these teachers, because of their more positive attitude towards diversity, regard these situations as normal in the teaching context instead of associating them with tensions and difficulties (see further Hanze, Katz & Norte, 2000).

The relation between personal characteristics and experiences of tense situations was also analysed for the pupils. These analyses show that their experiences differed along ethnic lines. Pupils with a Moroccan, Turkish or mixed-foreign background experienced tense situations more often than Dutch pupils did. This finding is possibly related to the political climate in the Netherlands at the time of data collection. The strong emphasis that was being placed on integration of ethnic minorities and the focus on differences between ethnic groups might have left these pupils with a sense of being ‘different’, which probably made them more aware of the types of situations that were described in the questionnaires.

The relation between tense situations and context factors was examined through type of education (pre-vocational versus general secondary education) and ethnic composition of the class. Teachers and pupils of pre-vocational classes did not experience tense situations more frequently than teachers and pupils in general secondary education classes. As such, the current research does not provide evidence to confirm the commonly held view that tense situations and incidents occur particularly often in schools that provide pre-vocational education. Ethnic composition of the class and frequency of tense situations as experienced by pupils were significantly related. The higher the percentage of pupils of Dutch origin in class, the lower the frequency in which pupils of that class experienced tense situations. This effect was only found for the proportion of pupils of Dutch origin in a class and not for proportions of pupils from any specific ethnic group in a class. The explanation for these results probably lies in the characteristics of the research group. In 36 of the 89 classes at least 50% pupils were of Dutch origin, while there were nearly no classes with a majority
of any particular ethnic group. In more heterogeneous classes a diversity of perspectives presumably presents itself more naturally.

With regard to the topic of reactions of teachers to tense situations, it was first examined how teachers responded when they experienced tense situations. The picture that arose from the findings of the survey was that teachers in the study were decisive and confident: they experienced little difficulty in determining how to deal with the majority of the situations. They tended to immediately respond to a situation and sometimes readdressed the issue at a later time. Teachers preferred to deal with situations openly: they primarily responded by talking about the incident, not just with the pupils who were directly involved but with the whole class. These findings are encouraging when interpreting tense situations as opportunities for citizenship education.

From the perspective of citizenship education it is important to have an understanding of how pupils appreciate their teachers’ reactions on tense situations. This issue was addressed by focussing on tense situations during class discussions. This concerned six of the 19 situations. It was examined whether appreciation of pupils for their teachers’ actions was associated with ethnic characteristics on the level of the individual (ethnic background and ethnic identification) and of the class (ethnic composition of the class) and with the way teachers had actually reacted to the situation. The analyses showed that pupils generally had a positive perception of their teacher’s reactions. The level of appreciation scarcely depended on ethnic variables on the individual or class level. In three out of six situations the specific way in which teachers actually responded did prove to be a significant predictor for pupils’ appreciation. It was expected that disciplinary, teacher-centred reactions would be regarded negatively by pupils and that responses that offered room for pupils to join the discussion, while the teacher expressed his/her own point of view, would be appreciated positively. These assumptions were supported by a number of the results.

With regard to the guiding of discussions, the focus was aimed at how teachers shaped discussions in an ethnically diverse class about sensitive issues regarding ethnic diversity and which professional demands could be identified for this. The research sample consisted of five teachers of classes in the theoretical track of pre-vocational education at schools located in Amsterdam. One important finding of the study is that teachers might experience difficulties while guiding these discussions. In one particular class realizing a discussion turned out to be impossible because the teacher could not maintain sufficient order during the lesson. Three teachers actually seemed reluctant to stimulate a broad range of perspectives, while at forehand they had said their main objective for the discussion was to broaden pupils’ horizon by exposing them to a diversity of perspectives on living in a ethnically diverse society and encouraging them to reflect on these. Afterwards, these teachers were not satisfied with their own professionalism concerning the discussion. Their insecurities primarily concerned their ability to maintain an orderly discussion.
when dealing with issues that might be sensitive in an ethnically diverse class, their intercultural sensitivity and their ability to bring a broad range of perspective into the discussion. In one discussion an initial start was made to reflect on a diversity of perspectives on living in an ethnically diverse society and to consider the way pupils behave themselves. The teacher who had guided this particular discussion was the only one who expressed satisfaction about how the class discussion had developed. She felt familiar with the topic and was the only teacher with a non-native Dutch background. Furthermore, she felt confident about her own sensitivity and in her relationship with her pupils which was characterized by mutual interest and trust.

The studies in this thesis provide an insight into the professionalism of teachers in dealing with tense situations (the survey) and in guiding discussions about sensitive issues regarding living in an ethnically diverse society (the interview and observation study). Based on the survey held among teachers it was concluded that they did not experience considerable difficulties in deciding how to deal with tense situations. They often opted for discussions. The findings of the interview and observation study give reason to assume that teachers may well encounter difficulties when they actually guide these discussions with the objective of teaching pupils about living in an ethnically diverse society.

The thesis concludes with a number of recommendations for the educational field. Firstly, the usefulness of the methods of the interview and observation study when supporting teachers in their professional development. The participating teachers appreciated the interview before the class discussion (about their objectives and approaches) and the interview afterwards (about the video recording of the class discussion) as a means for reflection. By reflecting on what they had taken into consideration before, during and after the discussion, the teachers learned about their own actions and behaviour. A second yield of this research for the educational field concerns the list of situations that was provided by the survey. The presented situations were recognizable to many teachers and pupils. Teacher-education programs 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. Finally, it is pointed out that when the perceptions of pupils and teachers are taken into account, the persistent negative image of ethnically diverse classes as contexts of frequent and huge tensions, particularly in the vocational tracks of secondary education, needs to be reassessed. This is an important finding for politicians, policymakers, the media and present and future teachers.