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## **Culturally responsive teaching in Dutch multicultural secondary schools**

Theeuwes, B.C.

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# Summary / Samenvatting





## Summary

Diversity in Dutch schools has increased in recent decades, especially in the 'Randstad'. Besides gender and cognitive and ability differences between students, teachers are faced with cultural differences such as differences between students' migration histories, religions, values, native languages and social classes. This diversity creates opportunities for teachers to foster students' social and societal competencies in an authentic environment, which will help them to be part of and contribute to our pluralistic, democratic society. However, besides this enriching opportunity, the multicultural classroom also presents challenges for teachers. It can, for example, be a challenge to ensure that students with different values respect each other. Moreover, students, whose cultural frames of reference often differ from those of their teachers, do not immediately recognize their own lifeworld and values in their teachers and vice versa. This can lead to mismatches in classroom interactions but also to misconceptions or misunderstandings in students' learning processes or misinterpretations of the topics presented in the curriculum.

To create a safe and supportive classroom environment in which all students feel a sense of belonging and can unleash their full academic potential, it is crucial that teachers create bridges to cross cultural borders and connect with and use the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and cultural frames of reference of their students in their teaching. These two aspects come together in the competence of *culturally responsive teaching*. In this dissertation, the competence of culturally responsive teaching is examined for teaching in a Dutch multicultural secondary education context. We examined the set of components that make up this competence, namely attitudes, knowledge, skills, and resulting practices. With regard to the skills component, we focused on noticing skills, in particular on noticing through a cultural lens.

The central research question of this dissertation was:

*Which attitudes, knowledge, noticing skills and practices regarding the competence of culturally responsive teaching do teachers report with respect to teaching multicultural classrooms in a Dutch secondary school context?*

## **The studies**

Components of this main research question were addressed in three studies, each reported in a chapter (Chapter 2, 3, and 4).

Chapter 2 reports on the first study in which 13 expert teachers from three different multicultural secondary schools were interviewed about how they provide a supportive classroom environment in their multicultural classrooms. The aim of this study was to gain more insight into expert Dutch secondary school teachers' culturally responsive teaching practices. The main research question was: *'How can expert teachers' reasoned practices with respect to teaching multicultural classrooms be characterized?'* Teachers mentioned 18 reasoned practices which, could be clustered into five categories: (1) fostering interpersonal relationships with students; (2) preventing and addressing disruptive behaviour; (3) fostering social cohesion; (4) fostering personal development; and (5) supporting students' learning process. The first two categories related to classroom management, the third and fourth categories to citizenship education and the fifth focused on pedagogy. The teachers particularly emphasized practices related to the category of interpersonal relationships with their students. Several teachers indicated that this is important in every classroom but that it requires even more attention in multicultural classrooms. The reasoned practices mentioned under this 'interpersonal relationship with students' category emphasised the importance of knowing students well, by paying attention to their home situation and showing interest in their cultural backgrounds. This shows similarity with what is referred to as the 'funds of knowledge/identity approach'. Furthermore, explicit awareness of a cultural lens was revealed throughout all the categories.

In Chapter 3, a qualitative questionnaire study is presented that focused on the cultural lens highlighted in the previous chapter. This study focused, in particular, on noticing through a cultural lens, which can be interpreted as a skill component of culturally responsive teaching. Participants were 25 student teachers and 10 expert teachers. The research questions for this study were: (1) *Which events do student and expert teachers identify in a multicultural classroom context?* (2) *What culture-specific interpretations do they give to these identified events?* and (3) *How do student and expert teachers differ in the way they identify and interpret events in a multicultural classroom context?*

To examine student and expert teachers' noticing through a cultural lens, three Spherical Video-Based Virtual Reality (SV-VR) clips were developed and used. SV-VR clips refer to Virtual Reality technology with 360° videos. The clips were installed on 20 head-mounted displays (HMDs: Oculus Go). Each clip simulated a common multicultural classroom with events that could occur in each classroom but because of the multicultural context, could potentially be interpreted through a cultural lens. Viewing the clips with an HMD allowed participants to have an individual experience unhindered by distractions from the 'real' environment. Moreover, to make the experience even more immersive and authentic, the clips were recorded from a first-person point of view, which means that the participant was the teacher in the clips who watched the class from a central position. After watching each video, the participants completed a questionnaire with two open questions: (1) Which three events caught your attention the most in the clip? and (2) What do you think was going on in these events? The results of this study were surprising. Neither student teachers nor expert teachers referred to a cultural lens in any event. It seems that when teachers are not explicitly asked to interpret events through a cultural lens, they do not do so. This result prompted the third study in which we examined the competence of culturally responsive teaching more broadly and questioned noticing through a cultural lens more explicitly.

In Chapter 4 we used the same SV-VR clips watched with an HMD as in the previous study but now with a different aim, different participants, and using a different methodology. The aim of this study was to further explore expert teachers' competence of culturally responsive teaching. The research questions were: (1) *How do expert teachers notice events in a multicultural classroom?* (2) *What attitudes and knowledge do expert teachers demonstrate when confronted with events in a multicultural classroom?* and (3) *What intentions do teachers report to respond to events in a multicultural classroom?* Deardorff's Pyramid Model of Intercultural Competence (PMIC) was used as a sensitizing concept for analysis.

Teachers' individual experiences of the SV-VR clips were used as stepping stones for deeper reflections in five focus groups with three expert teachers each. In contrast to the previous study, teachers were primed to consider a cultural lens

in their reflections. One of the main findings of this study was that – although teachers were explicitly primed to look through a cultural lens – they initially indicated that it was irrelevant to consider culture in their interpretations because the events that occurred in the SV-VR classroom could occur in any classroom. However, as the group reflections progressed, they did mention events where culture could play a role and some interpretations of those events were further elaborated. These elaborated interpretations referred to students' learning process and student interactions.

Another finding of this study referred to the role of general cultural knowledge when teaching multicultural classrooms. Examples of this kind of knowledge are knowledge about traditions, customs, and shared values of different cultural groups. Different perspectives regarding the requirement to have general knowledge about cultural groups were found. In several groups, this general cultural knowledge emerged in the discussions when teachers discussed their own practices and this knowledge tended to be stereotypical. Although there was no agreement regarding the need for general cultural knowledge, what recurred in the conversations and what teachers seemed to agree on, was the need to gain knowledge of their students' personal cultural backgrounds and their home situations. This corresponds to what teachers indicated in the first study and can be related to the concept of funds of knowledge/identity. Adopting a genuinely curious attitude was highlighted in this regard.

Regarding intended culturally responsive practices, the teachers in this study barely referred to how they would respond to what they had noticed in the SV-VR clips, but instead, they discussed their own practices regarding teaching multicultural classrooms. These practices mainly referred to how they cope with controversial subjects, students who speak their native language in class, and students who bring street culture into the classroom.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

The central concept of this dissertation was the competence of '*culturally responsive teaching*'. This concept refers to a pedagogy in which teachers build bridges to cross cultural borders and make connections with students by using

students' knowledge, prior experiences, and cultural frames of reference to create a safe and supportive classroom environment in which all students feel a sense of belonging and can unleash their full academic potential. To gain insight into how this competence is shaped in a Dutch multicultural secondary education context, we focused on expert teachers' reasoned practices and noticing through a cultural lens, but also scrutinized required attitudes and knowledge.

The results of the studies described in this dissertation show that culturally responsive teaching crosses several dimensions of teaching which could be categorized as: (1) fostering interpersonal relationships with students; (2) preventing and addressing disruptive behaviour; (3) fostering social cohesion; (4) fostering personal development; and (5) supporting students' learning process. Teachers emphasized the importance of a good interpersonal relationship with students. They indicated that this dimension is important in all classrooms but when teaching multicultural classrooms this is even more important.

To build good relationships with students, but also in the context of monitoring social cohesion in the classroom, fostering students' cultural identity and making learning content personally relevant for students, it is important that teachers adopt a curious attitude towards students' funds of knowledge/identity. Funds of knowledge refer to students' knowledge and skills acquired out of school and funds of identity to the funds of knowledge that students themselves consider important aspects of their identity. From this knowledge base, which also includes students' cultural backgrounds, bridges can be built that connect different cultures.

Knowledge of individual students in class seems to be at the heart of the knowledge component of culturally responsive teaching. From that knowledge of individual students, more general knowledge can be built up about different cultures while keeping in mind the diversity within each cultural and other groups to which the student belongs. This may help to reduce stereotyping, since every personal situation is unique. It is about teachers really 'seeing' students for who they are and taking into account the different groups they belong to and the extent to which and how they relate to these different groups. To achieve this, it is important that teachers look at students and their behaviour from different perspectives, including through a cultural lens.



To prepare teachers to teach multicultural secondary school classes, they should be encouraged to adopt a curious attitude towards their students' funds of knowledge/identity, including their cultural background, during teacher education. For this to happen, it is important that, in addition to the usual perspectives through which they learn to look at students and their behaviour, such as cognitive and socio-emotional perspectives, they also become aware of a cultural perspective, or in other words look through a cultural lens.

The cultural lens is also relevant when teachers are interpreting classroom events. This could also be developed during teacher education. However, this requires experience to be gained within a multicultural context to build scripts for this context. This is difficult for student teachers who do not have an internship at a multicultural school. It is possible that the SV-VR clips could provide opportunities to gain experiences regarding learning to notice through a cultural lens.

In conclusion, cultural responsiveness permeates all educational domains. Crucial for culturally responsive teaching is developing a genuinely curious attitude towards students' funds of knowledge/ identity. The knowledge acquired in this way can be related to students' educational needs to make teaching more relevant to them. Furthermore, it is important that teachers are aware of a cultural lens and look at students and events in the classroom through this cultural lens, besides other lenses. At the same time, care must be taken that the cultural lens does not become a stereotyping lens.

Developing cultural responsiveness seems to require a multifaceted approach that cannot be developed in one or a few course days. I suggest that cultural responsiveness should receive attention in all courses throughout the whole teacher education program and should continue beyond initial teacher education. There is no end point in developing cultural responsiveness because teachers will face a multitude of different multicultural contexts throughout their professional careers in which cultural responsiveness is relevant.