

Inclusive education: less tension with intercultural knowledge

Increasing diversity in vocational secondary education (MBO) is leading to value-driven tensions that teachers can't always deal with. This finding comes from PhD research by Kennedy Tielman (Education & Learning Sciences).

Tielman has worked for years as a teacher trainer at Fontys University of Applied Sciences. He sees many teachers struggling with inclusion. They feel tension whenever 'difficult topics' are addressed in their multicultural classes, such as sexuality, politics or religion. Discussions sometimes get so heated that teachers prefer to avoid certain topics altogether, says Tielman. His research focuses on vocational secondary education, but he doesn't rule out parallels with higher education.

Teacher training

Cultural diversity has increased rapidly in MBO schools in recent years. In some cities, 80 per cent of students have a multicultural background. That

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means teachers not only have to be good as teaching their subject but also need to be able to manage a culturally diverse class. That is not an easy task, especially because there are now so many aspects to cultural diversity. 'You don't just need to take someone's cultural background into account, but also whether they are a first-, second- or third-generation migrant,'

explains Tielman. 'That is why people sometimes talk about superdiversity'. For his research, he surveyed 900 teachers in 20 MBO schools where at least 60 per cent of the pupils have a migration background. Half of the teachers reported experiencing value-driven tension at times, and 13 per cent felt this regularly. Tielman found a clear link between knowledge and tension: the more multicultural knowledge a teacher has, the more relaxed they feel. 'If you know a student doesn't make eye contact for cultural reasons, you can still say, "I prefer it if you look at me". But as a teacher you feel less tension if you know the reason for that behaviour.' Tielman therefore thinks the teacher training programmes should pay more attention to multicultural knowledge. Tielman also found another association: the higher a teacher rated their own multicultural skills, the more



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tension they reported. That might seem surprising, but Tielman doesn't think so. 'As people become more skilled in multicultural matters, they are more likely to recognize areas of tension. Also, such skilled teachers are more likely to be allocated the "difficult" classes.'

Best intentions

He is convinced nearly all teachers stand in front of the class with the best intentions. He doesn't think they do many things wrong either. 'But there are things they could do better.' In addition to multicultural knowledge, he sees an open, inquiring mind as a key factor. 'That doesn't mean you shouldn't set limits as a teacher. But talk to your students, show curiosity about their reasoning. Teachers who are prepared to consider behaviour from various perspectives experience less tension.'

Best intentions

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