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Teachers and social cohesion in diverse secondary classrooms

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ABSTRACT

The present paper aims to examine how teachers contribute to social cohesion in terms of the three dimensions: social relations, group identification, and the common good. A qualitative study was conducted using interviews with teachers and students and observations in two Dutch secondary schools with diverse student populations. The results showed that the dimension most often addressed was the dimension of social relations, and teachers seemed to focus on individual students more than on the group as a whole. Bridging home and school, and group formation were main themes in the dimension of group identification. The main theme in the dimension of the common good was teacher practices with regard to rules, in which fairness was an important topic for students. The three dimensions of social cohesion are inter-related and should be considered alongside each other when schools are committed to strengthening social cohesion.

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Social cohesion; secondary schools; diversity; teacher practices; teacher beliefs

Introduction

For some time now, increasing migration in combination with social problems, such as dynamics of polarisation, stigmatisation, and exclusion have led to concerns about social cohesion (Maxwell, 2016; see also Mircea Alexiu & Sordé, 2011). These concerns have resulted in a focus of policymakers and researchers on the topic of social cohesion in Western societies in general (Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017), as well as in the education sector (Mickelson & Nkomo, 2012). Mickelsen and Nkomo contend that schools with diverse student populations may provide for ‘educational outcomes that undergird the attitudinal antecedents to and structural conditions for social cohesion in multi-ethnic, democratic societies’ (p. 197). It is, therefore, relevant to focus on ways in which education could lead to these outcomes and invite students to develop positive attitudes and tolerant relations between different groups. The present paper focuses on the teacher

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as one of the most relevant actors in education. The aim is to find out more about their possible impact on social cohesion processes in classrooms.

To make sense of the role of the teacher, we follow the multidimensional conceptualisation as proposed by Schieffer and van der Noll (2017). They reviewed the literature on social cohesion in order to provide conceptual clarity in the research field. Their starting point refers to the findings of an earlier review by Chan et al. (2006) who uncovered two discourses with regard to social cohesion. The first discourse stems from academic social science disciplines (mainly sociology and social psychology) and the second from policy makers and policy research. Chan et al. (2006) show how the first discourse focuses on systemic questions of social integration and stability, while the second discourse stems from societal concerns related to migration, multiculturalism, and social cleavages. Both Schieffer and van der Noll (2017) and Chan et al. (2006) set out to integrate the two discourses in their conceptualisation of social cohesion as a characteristic of a social entity, as multidimensional, and as a relevant concept on a micro, meso, and macro level. Schieffer and van der Noll (2017) have analysed the main approaches to investigating social cohesion, and arrive at a core set of six dimensions. These are social relations, identification, orientation towards the common good, shared values, inequality and objective, and subjective quality of life. On the basis of a conceptual analysis of antecedents and consequences, Schieffer and van der Noll (2017) arrive at three core dimensions: ‘the essential features of social cohesion are (1) the quality of social relations (including social networks, trust, acceptance of diversity, and participation), (2) identification with the social entity and (3) orientation towards the common good (sense of responsibility, solidarity, compliance to social order)’ (p. 595). The other three core dimensions can be considered as either antecedents or consequences of social cohesion. Firstly, equality can be seen as an antecedent of social cohesion as large social cleavages may cause lower levels of social cohesion and strong social cohesion may buffer negative effects of, for example, poor living conditions. But equality is not necessarily a component of a socially cohesive group. A similar argument can be made for values, value homogeneity can be seen as a contributor to social cohesion, but diversity of values does not necessarily stand in the way of social cohesion. Finally, it can be argued that a socially cohesive society may result in a larger objective and subjective quality of life. Thus, this sixth core dimension can be viewed as a consequence of social cohesion.

Given the goal of our paper, investigating the impact of teachers on social cohesion in their classrooms, it is relevant to consider the applicability of Schieffer and van der Noll’s framework in the context of schools and classrooms. In a recent review study in the area of education (Veerman & Denessen, 2021), the goal was to analyse conceptualisations of social cohesion as well as instruments employed in research on education. A review of five instruments to measure social cohesion in schools showed that most studies in education focus on specific indicators of social cohesion, such as peer relations, school belonging, and fairness of rules, but not on the overarching concept of social cohesion. Because of this focus on indicators, the research in education seems fragmented with regard to the concept of social cohesion. In that sense, the added value of employing the Schieffer and van der Noll framework is that it can draw together

three dimensions and provide a comprehensive picture of social cohesion in education. We, therefore, decided to use the framework in the current study. Below, the main findings in educational research on each of the three dimensions are described separately.

Social relations

Schiefer and van der Noll (2017) distinguish between four components of social relations: social networks, trust, tolerance, and active participation. Social networks refer to the quality and quantity of social relations in the network. In a socially cohesive group, there is also a certain level of trust. Not just between the members of the group, in this case the students and the teachers, but also trust in the institution, i.e. the school. The third component is tolerance. Tolerance with regard to diverse views contributes to social cohesion in the group. Finally, active participation is also important for social relations. When students participate in classroom activities, collaborate, and work towards shared goals, it indicates good quality relationships and contributes to social cohesion.

Teachers can play an important role in promoting positive relations among students. Javiera Muñoz Hurtado (2018) identified three roles that teachers can play: (1) teachers as protectors against negative consequences of peer relations, (2) teachers as ‘architects’ of classroom structure and dynamics and (3) teachers as social referents. With respect to the first role, good relations between teachers and students prevent externalising problem behaviour and aggressive student behaviour (see, for example, Silver et al. (2005), who analysed data from the Wisconsin Study of Families and Work). As such, teachers promote the acceptance of students by their peers. Regarding the second role, she contends that teachers should be aware of the social dynamics in their classrooms, be able to monitor student interactions, and productively organise social relations in the classroom (Gillies, 2004), supporting isolated children, and to actively promote prosocial behaviour of their students (Hamm et al., 2011). Regarding the third role, teachers fulfil the role of model for peer relations among students which refers to the influence of teachers’ behaviour on children’s perception of their peers.

In the context of diverse classrooms, it is also relevant to consider inter-ethnic social relations. Thijs and Verkuyten (2014) reviewed the literature in this field and describe the conditions for good peer relations in diverse classrooms. One of the conditions is multicultural education. It can be expected that teachers that employ practices related to equity and diversity, for example, by integrating multicultural content and paying attention to prejudice (see Banks, 2014), support positive relations in their diverse classrooms. Another condition is the quality of the teacher–student relationship itself. In fact, this relationship is crucial; a good relationship is related to student achievement, motivation, and engagement (see, for example, Roorda et al. 2011 and 2021). Frequently, however, research also shows that relationships between teachers (with mostly native backgrounds) and pupils from migrant backgrounds are less positive, that teachers see building that relationship as more challenging (Thijs & Fleischmann, 2015; Severiens et al., 2019; Saft & Pianta, 2001; Wubbels et al., 2006) and that the correlation between relationship quality and achievement is greater for pupils from migrant backgrounds (den Brok et al., 2010; Roorda et al., 2021).

Identification and belonging

The second dimension of social cohesion in the conceptualisation of Schiefer and van der Noll (2017) refers to the extent to which students identify with the classroom and the school, as well as with subgroups of students inside and outside of school. Their identification and sense of belonging is, for example, indicated by being proud of their school and recommending it to their peers. It is important for students to feel they belong in their school, identify, or feel attached to the school. It helps them to form good-quality social relations.

Teachers can promote identification and belonging by fostering students' sense of belonging. According to Osterman (2010), teachers directly influence students' sense of belonging through interpersonal and autonomy support and through the use of cooperative learning principles. More specifically, from a self-determination theory perspective (Ryan & Deci, 2000), the concept of need-supporting teaching (Stroet et al., 2015) stresses the importance of teacher support of the basic needs of autonomy, relatedness, and competence for students' school engagement and belonging. Warm and caring teachers result in students' experience of well-being and school belonging. With regard to belonging in diverse classrooms, van Vemde et al. (2023) emphasise the importance for schools and teachers to try and prevent ingroup favouritism. In their study in urban secondary schools using questionnaires, Dutch ethnic students seemed to experience a more negative sense of belonging. Van Vemde et al. (2023) explain this finding by suggesting that the ethnic Dutch students may have experienced 'out-group' threat and refer to previous research showing a larger chance of peer victimisation for Dutch ethnic students in minority positions. Preventing processes of bias and peer victimisation can be realised, for example, by implementing interventions in the area of perspective taking and empathy skills.

The common good

In an educational context, orientation towards the common good is about abiding by the school rules and experiencing the rules as fair, it is about solidarity and a helping stance. In socially cohesive classrooms, students adhere to the school rules, are committed to the group, and care for each other (Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017; Veerman & Denessen, 2021).

Related to the third dimension, teachers can strengthen social cohesion by building a strong classroom community and by creating a sense of justice in their classrooms. A study by Solomon et al. (1996) on elementary schools in urban and suburban contexts in the USA analysing questionnaire and observational data showed that (1) being warm and supportive, (2) emphasising prosocial values, (3) encouraging student cooperation, (4) eliciting student thinking and expression of ideas and (5) minimum use of extrinsic control, were related to a strong sense of classroom community. Solidarity also implies a sense of care for others. On the basis of an Australian study in primary education, Whittington and McInnes (2017) argue that strong classroom communities in which students help and support each other, create trusting relationships. Strong classroom communities require sharing of power by the teacher, and the teaching of social-emotional skills is crucial. In their study, a grounded theory approach was used to

analyse reflective interview data as well as class sociometric data. Veerman and Denessen (2021) argue that positive classroom climates invoke solidarity in the classroom as well as outside the school.

In order to create a strong community, it is also important that teachers and classroom rules are perceived by students as just. A study by Berti et al. (2010) investigating classroom justice using student and teacher questionnaires in Italian secondary schools showed that a sense of classroom justice was related to compliance to these rules and to more student engagement (Berti et al., 2010). Teachers can foster this sense of justice by showing strong principles of equality in the distribution of care, of positive and negative feedback, and of grades and punishment. In their review of educational research on social cohesion in classrooms, Veerman and Denessen (2021) also described the importance of rule compliance in classroom settings for students to feel safe (see also Thapa et al., 2013). This includes teacher practices such as communication of rules, consistent response to violations, and belief in school rules. It also includes a role for the students themselves, students should participate in setting school rules.

Research questions

The present study contributes to the research literature on social cohesion in education by focusing on the role of the teacher. The two research questions read as follows:

- (1) What are teacher practices with regard to creating social cohesion in diverse classrooms, in terms of social relations, group identification, and orientation towards the common good, and how do teachers account for these practices?
- (2) In what ways do teacher practices specifically address the diversity of the student population?

By teaching practices, we refer to behaviour in terms of teaching methods, didactics, or work formats, but also in terms of interpersonal relationships both between teachers and students, and among students. Social cohesion is relevant in any classroom, but specifically so in multicultural classrooms, given the increasing diversity, and potential accompanying processes of tension and inequity, hence the second research question on diversity.

Method

Design

A qualitative research design was implemented in two schools characterised by cultural-ethnic and socio-economic diversities. The two participating schools offer the three tracks in the Dutch secondary education system: the prevocational, general, and pre-university track.¹ The research activities included classroom observations, in-depth interviews with teachers and school staff, and group discussions with students. The research design combines these different sources and ways of collecting data in order to be able to provide a rich description of teacher practices in the context of a diverse

student population. Focus group sessions with students were chosen in order to create a relatively safe environment for students to talk about social cohesion. Furthermore, focus groups often lead to more dynamic conversations compared to individual interviews because the interaction between the participants provides additional information. Moreover, we chose observations complementary to the focus group discussions, as they allow for the collection of nonverbal data in different contexts, further adding to the depth of our data.

The current paper is a part of a larger study on social cohesion in education, starting with a conceptual exploration of social cohesion in education, followed by empirically exploring views of teachers and students on the basis of which two tools for teachers were developed aiming to strengthen social cohesion in their classrooms.²

Procedure

Two secondary schools were selected on the basis of the following criteria: 1) the schools are situated in an urban context; 2) the student population of these schools is characterised by cultural-ethnic and socio-economic diversities; and 3) social cohesion is a focus of attention for these schools. Both schools are located in neighbourhoods identified as priority areas by the Dutch government in 2007 due to social, physical, and economic challenges. At that point in time, the national government invested additional funding in these priority areas (there were 40 in total) and the goal was to stimulate local organisations (for example, health care, welfare, and housing organisations) to collaborate in improving the specific issues in each of the priority areas.

School leaders of the two schools that met the above-mentioned criteria were invited to participate in our study, and they were both interested in participating and able to facilitate the implementation of the research design. We focused on the second year, given the fact that at the start of the year most students have been in the same class for more than 1 year, they know each other well and have established relationships. Students, teachers, and school staff from the selected classes participated based on active informed consent (of parents for the students) separately for the observations and interviews. Consent was given by all teachers and school staff, and by 48% of the students and their parents. Groups of 4 or 5 students per class were selected for a focus group interview.

The selection of participating classes and their teachers was done by the school leaders, based on a prior discussion with the researchers about the objectives of the research project and the number of informed consents given per class. The teachers and students of three classes were selected in each school, one class in each of the three tracks: a prevocational, intermediate, and pre-university track. The selection of students, for participation in the group discussions, was also done by the school leaders together with the homeroom teachers.

The homeroom teacher of each of the participating classes was also interviewed.³

The data collection was conducted over a period of 6 months (October 2019–February 2020). Observations were conducted between November 2019 and February 2020. Interviews and group discussions were conducted in January and February 2020.

Table 1. Background information of interviewed teachers.

School A		School B	
Teacher 1; German; Vocational track	Male; age: beginning 50s; experience: five years	Teacher 1; PE; General track	Male; age: end 20s; experience: four years
Teacher 2; Geography; General track	Male; age: mid 20s; experience: two years	Teacher 2; PE; Vocational track	Female; age: end 20s; experience: seven years
Teacher 3; English; Pre-university track	Female; end 20s; experience: one year (intern)	Teacher 3; Geography; Pre-university track	Male; age: mid 20s; experience: two years
Teacher 4; Economics; Vocational track	Female; beginning 20s; experience: one year		

Participants

Below background information is given for each participant group.

Schools: The two schools each have a unique socio-geographical context.

The first school (school A) with a total of 1358 students is situated on the outskirts of a city within a post-war neighbourhood that underwent recent renovations. The school serves students from both this neighbourhood as well as the neighbouring villages. The students living close by the school are generally characterised by different migration and low socio-economic backgrounds. The students from the surrounding villages have various socio-economic and migration backgrounds. The school offers all different tracks. Because the student population in the different tracks vary according to cultural-ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds, in the sense that there is an overrepresentation of high socioeconomic and Dutch native backgrounds in the higher tracks, the school board has made it their specific aim to enhance social cohesion by implementing policies that facilitate interaction among students across various tracks.

The second school (school B) has a total of 741 students and also offers all tracks. The school is located in the middle of a neighbourhood in an urban area, with a significant number of reported safety concerns. The neighbourhood mainly has inhabitants from lower socioeconomic and migration backgrounds. Safety is an important issue in the school, the school board aims to strengthen social cohesion through policies that create a safe environment.

Teachers: Seven teachers were interviewed (see [Table 1](#)). Interviews lasted between 30 and 45 min.

Students: 22 students were interviewed in five small groups. The students were in the second year of secondary education and aged 13 or 14. The second year was chosen as students in this year still follow all courses together in one group and, because all students know each other quite well, this allowed us to examine social cohesion and group processes in detail. The groups were formed based on diversity in terms of gender and migration background. The interviews lasted between 30 and 45 min.

- School B, general track: four students
- School B, vocational track: five students

Table 2. Background information of the classroom observations.

School A		School B
Pre-university track	English (two observations) Geography PE	Biology Geography (plus an informal conversation) Dutch (plus an informal conversation) English Economics
Vocational track	Economics (two observations plus an informal conversation plus an interview with the teacher) German (2 observations) History (plus an informal conversation)	Biology Dutch History
General track	English (three observations) PE (plus an informal conversation)	Biology Geography Dutch English Economics

- School B, pre-university track, four students
- School A, pre-university track: five students
- School A, general track: four students⁴

Classrooms: In total, 25 classroom observations were conducted of classes lasting 50 min on average. Some of the observations were followed up by an interview with the teacher, or by informal conversation in the teachers’ room (see [Table 2](#) for detailed information).

Instruments

When conducting the observations, the researcher took a seat in the back of the classroom and made field notes using an observation scheme.⁵ The field notes were processed into a logbook as soon as possible after the observation to retain as many details as possible.

The observation schedule consisted of the three basic dimensions, each indicated by student and teacher behaviour:

- (1) Positive social relationships: examples are students helping each other, students sharing experiences, teachers stimulating positive social behaviour, teachers giving compliments
- (2) Group identification: examples are students showing they belong to each other (gestures, clothing, etc.), students standing up for each other, teachers inviting students to talk about home, helping students to understand differences, teachers validating students, teachers being approachable)
- (3) Focus on the whole: examples are students show solidarity and support, teachers communicate rules and school values,

Semi-structured interviews were conducted, since we were interested in detailed and in-depth information about opinions and experiences of the different interviewees. The

interviews were based on the three dimensions of social cohesion as described in the introduction: social relations, belonging, and common good.⁶

Semi-structured interview with teachers: The teacher interviews consisted of the following three basic questions:

- (1) What do you, as a teacher, do to create, stimulate, and strengthen positive social relationships? What role does diversity play in this?
- (2) What efforts do you make to give students in your class the feeling that they ‘belong’ and to strengthen the group feeling within the class? What role does diversity play in this?
- (3) Which rules do you apply and do you enforce, aimed at the common good? Are students willing to comply to the common rules and do they help each other? What role does diversity play in this?

Focus group interviews with students: The student interviews consisted of several questions, one of which concerned the teacher:

-How do you feel about the teachers in this school? What do you like about them, and what should be changed?

The other questions in the student interviews often evoked remarks about teachers as well, we included these excerpts in our analyses when relevant for answering the research questions.

These other questions referred to sense of school belonging, the role of diversity, the role of social media, and there were general questions asking about how things are going at school, generally speaking.

Analyses

The analysis process was conducted in five steps. A content analysis was conducted combining a deductive approach in step 1 and an inductive approach in steps 2 and 4 (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Step 1: The observations, interviews, and group discussions were conducted by the second author, audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcriptions of the interviews and logbooks of the observations were coded and analysed, based on the three dimensions (see Table 3), using a software program designed for qualitative data analysis (NVIVO).

Table 3. The basic codebook employed in step 1.

Dimensions	Components
Social relations	Social networks
	Trust
	Mutual tolerance
	Participation
Belonging	Belonging
Common good	Solidarity
	Compliance towards rules

Step 2: The first author coded all interview and observation excerpts related to teacher practices, accounts of these practices, and all excerpts related to diversity.

Step 3: The results of the first two steps were combined and extensively discussed between the first and second author until agreement on the interpretation of the three dimensions and components was reached.

Step 4: The first author analysed teacher practices in terms of behaviour, and in terms of underlying values, beliefs or attitudes, and their lines of reasoning. The results of these analyses were closely discussed with the second and third authors until agreement on validity of interpretation was reached.

Step 5: All authors considered the results of step 4, in terms of the internal consistency and conceptual clarity, until agreement was reached. The results of this final step are described in the next section.

To support or demonstrate research findings and results, quotations and excerpts of the transcriptions were translated in English and included in the results section.⁷

Results

Below, we will describe teacher practices, as well as their accounts of these practices, on the basis of an analysis of the observations and interviews according to the three dimensions of the theoretical framework of social relations, belonging, and orientation towards the common good.

Social relations

Social relations at both schools and in each of the classrooms were generally described as positive. Teachers referred to trust, safety, caring for each other, and helping each other as indicators of these positive social relations. Teachers acknowledged the importance of good social relations and they seemed to be aware of their own role in this, yet they did not always know, or were able to describe, how to assume this role. Mostly based on the observations, we could identify a number of teaching practices that teachers applied that seem to help build positive social relations:

- Monitoring the classroom by walking around in the classroom, asking questions to the students during independent work, enquiring about absent students, and thus showing commitment to the students.
- Positive non-verbal interactions, such as walking towards and standing next to students who do not pay attention, or nodding to stimulate students to go on, and thus contributing to a positive and supportive classroom climate.
- Connecting with the home environment of the students and thus demonstrating engagement with students in a holistic way. This is not only in relation to school and schoolwork but also in relation to pupils' lives outside school. Connection with the home environment was sought, for example, through the home languages of students:

I learned a few words of Arabic. Then, for example, I teach about the Middle East and the Euphrates and the Tigris. And then I let a student who speaks Arabic come up front and I say ‘how do you write this in Arabic?’ And then I try to repeat it. And then I tell them they can write it down in Arabic on the test, so it’s also correct. (School B, Teacher 3)

When asked about practices that stimulate positive social relations, teachers mentioned several elements referring to the social context of students that make it difficult to establish these positive relationships. For example, differences in appreciation and interpretation of remarks (intended as a joke, but perceived as bullying behaviour), escalation of conversations into fights on social media, and street culture that sometimes result in tensions in the school.

They also shared examples that refer to underlying beliefs. They talk about, for example, how they aim to set an example for the students by showing respect for different beliefs themselves, and by sharing their own beliefs. Above all, teachers feel that they set an example to students, and that their behaviour determines in large part the atmosphere and social relationships in the classroom.

I think it all starts with the teacher, so you have to come across as respectful yourself. Because I do believe in being a role model. (School A, Teacher 4)

In addition, teachers expressed a belief in the importance of being available for students. They found it important that students know that they can contact them with problems or concerns, that they are accessible and approachable.

I do say that they can always come. I’m always there. I am there every day. I’m always in the same classroom, they know where to find me. And they do come, which is nice too. (School A, Teacher 1)

Finally, teachers believed in the general importance of a personal relationship with students. They frequently have small conversations, they follow-up on issues that students share, and discuss their home situations. In this way, they show their underlying value of the importance of connection.

Students are aware of the role of the teacher in the social climate of the classroom.

I especially like the atmosphere, except for (course X). It gets really restless there. And we do get restless, but I don’t even mind that so much. But the teacher’s atmosphere is just not nice. (School A, students general track)

According to the students, teachers can stimulate positive social relationships, by classroom practices such as introductory games at the start of the school year, group work, interactive forms of work such as a quiz. Furthermore, organising field trips and providing the students with nice, cosy places at school would also stimulate social cohesion. It is often the responsibility of the individual teacher to organise such field trips, and they do not seem to happen often. Students felt this was a pity.

Identification and belonging

When asked about ways to strengthen identification and a sense of belonging, most teachers and students referred to group formation. It seemed that the general belief is that group formation is acceptable as long as everyone belongs to at least one subgroup. Students also indicated that group formation is common. The groups are formed—according to students and teachers—on the basis of previously formed friendships or shared interests, such as sports and computer games.

Similar to the teachers' reflections on their practices with regard to social relations, teachers seemed to find it hard to describe their practices of stimulating identification and belonging. With one exception: the use of seating plans. They assign places in the classroom in order to break through certain group formations, to assure a calm classroom climate or to improve the well-being of the students by allowing them to sit next to a close friend. Despite the fact that teachers do not often explicitly mention school belonging, the observations do show examples of addressing the needs of autonomy, relatedness, and competence, which can be expected to contribute to school belonging (Osterman, 2010; Stroet et al., 2015). For example, addressing the need for competence was observed by teachers enquiring whether all instructions were clear, walking around, and asking questions when students were working on assignments. Moreover, in several instances, we have observed teacher practices related to positive expectations, for example, by giving positive feedback remarks on test results. The need for autonomy was provided for by offering structure and clarity, by following similar steps in each lesson, and by letting students work individually and allowing for quiet conversations between students. The need for relatedness was addressed, for example, when teachers were asking why some peers were absent, or after class asking about personal situations.

The topic of diversity was mentioned in several instances when reflecting on identification and belonging. Apparently, asking about this topic invited to also talk about diversity and related tensions, suggesting that diversity may threaten sense of belonging and identification in a general sense.

The diversity seems to be seen by teachers as a given, a reality in which the school functions and teachers and students take up their own roles. Students and teachers made little explicit reference to cultural-ethnic diversity as a possible cause of tension. Yet the ethnic, cultural, and linguistic differences sometimes do come to the surface as problematic. In some instances, there was explicit reference to International Bridge Classroom students who migrate during the school year. These are students who have recently arrived in the Netherlands and start their educational careers in separate 'bridge' classrooms focusing on learning the Dutch language. When these students acquire a certain level of mastery, they are placed in regular classrooms in an age-appropriate grade.

I think it's often (student X) and (student Y). (...) So they can regularly make a joke about their pronunciation or they want to correct someone. Some ignore it, others find it annoying. If it happens in my classroom, I'm pretty quick to say something about it right away (School B, Teacher 1).

The theme of racism was mainly mentioned in one class at School B. Students indicated that their peers regularly make racist remarks, often disguised as jokes, at school and in the classroom. Especially the lack of intervention by the teacher was perceived as problematic by the students. They would like the teachers to be much more decisive in these cases:

But often jokes are made that are slightly racist. (...) It's more like outward racism or those homophobic remarks. (Interviewer: And does the teacher react to this?) Sometimes, really sometimes. It depends on how that teacher looks at it. Because some teachers leave it, ignore it. Some teachers say, 'You shouldn't say that.' And other teachers just don't say anything. (School B, students pre-university track)

Common good

With regard to the common good dimension, the interviews and observations focused on the role of school rules, as well as on the ways in which students were stimulated to help each other. With regard to this last topic, helping each other, the observations did show some teachers asking students to collaborate with the peer sitting next to them, and to help each other when needed. However, this practice was rare, and teachers never referred to the importance of helping each other in relation to social cohesion explicitly in the interviews.

Respondents indicated that often agreements and rules were not clear to either teachers or students or were sometimes interpreted or applied differently by different respondents. An example of rules and agreements not being clear:

(About smartphone use in the classroom) What I have been told, at least, is that the school rules are very strict that no pictures may be taken in class. Now I heard from some teachers that they didn't know that. So how clear that is, I don't know either. One time someone was taking pictures, yes, I did actually take that phone. (School A, Teacher 3)

Sometimes the rules are drawn up by teachers and students together, but instead of contributing to social cohesion, these rules can also lead to challenges to cohesion as they trigger tensions among students. The students provided an example of this:

Yes, we made those [rules] at the beginning of the year because we had several arguments in the group app at that time. Then rules were drawn up: no name-calling, just being nice. Don't interfere with everything. No spam. (. . .) Don't say more than is necessary, otherwise you can just do it privately. We were all given a sheet of paper and then we wrote down what we could and couldn't do. Sometimes it just helps when there are rules, but we didn't feel like everyone was listening to them. Because then, that's when the big argument (in the group app) started. (School A, students general track)

Students were very sensitive to the fair application of the rules and the possible sanctions of not obeying the rules. Unfairness was a source for negative feelings towards classmates and might endanger social cohesion. To ensure that rules function as regulators of cohesion, it was important that the rules are considered shared and as fair for all students.

None of the teachers explicitly linked rules with social cohesion. One intended function of school rules in the sense that they form a common ground for achieving social cohesion, remained at best implicit in teacher practices.

Conclusion and discussion

The present paper followed the multidimensional conceptualisation of social cohesion as proposed by Schiefer and van der Noll (2017) and examined its dimensions in an educational setting. Contrary to sociological theory and research, social cohesion is not a concept that has been used extensively in educational theory and research. Given the growing societal concerns about social cohesion and the possible role of schools in strengthening social cohesion, it is relevant to find out more about dimensions of social cohesion in education. The paper focused on the teacher to uncover ways in which education might take up the challenge of contributing to social cohesion.

The results showed that most teacher practices seemed to address the first dimension in the Schiefer and Van der Noll conceptualisation: the dimension of social relations. The teacher practices that were observed involved individual attention for students, such as helping individual students, asking about home and using home languages. Practices also involved creating a positive atmosphere in which students feel welcome. It was remarkable that in order to stimulate social cohesion, teachers seemed to focus on individual students more than on the group as a whole. Rarely did teachers mention ways in which the groups dynamics, among students or groups of students, were addressed. It seemed that teachers see their role first and foremost in terms of the relationship between themselves and individual students, and not so much in terms of the relationships among students. The context of secondary education, in which teachers spend their days with rotating groups of students in classrooms, may evoke this view. It may also indicate a belief in not being responsible for group dynamics, possibly in combination with a low level of competence in this area. At the same time, paying attention to the group level is important because peer social dynamics and social concerns related to peer acceptance and popularity have important implications for school adjustment (Dawes et al., 2021). Teachers can influence these dynamics through their own relationships with students (Javiera Muñoz Hurtado, 2018), but also through managing peer social dynamics (Dawes et al., 2023). Given the importance for school adjustment, it is relevant to further explore the observed lack of focus on social dynamics as well as ways in which teachers can support students' social concerns, including teacher competence needed to do so.

Several ways in which teachers can stimulate social relations, as mentioned in the literature, also emerged in the present study. For example, attention for individual students and creating a positive atmosphere, as well as to act as social referents by setting a good example was described by Javiera Muñoz Hurtado (2018). Teachers believed that by showing respect, by caring for students, or by helping students, they stimulate this kind of behaviour in their students which creates positive social relationships and thus a socially cohesive classroom. They also believed it is important to always be available for their students in case of problems. They want to be accessible for their students, and want them to know that in case of problems, students can always ask for help. These accounts of teacher practices related to social relations also show teachers' focus on the individual students' wellbeing and relationships with their students.

With regard to the second dimension, identification and belonging, the main themes were bridging home and school, and group formation. The existence of different subgroups in schools and classrooms were considered to be acceptable, as long as all students belong to one or two subgroups. The only explicit teacher practice with regard to group formation concerned the use of seating plans. Assigning places to students was considered to contribute to a productive learning climate (see also Gremmen et al., 2016). The relevant literature in the area of identification and belonging often refers to self-determination theory and need-supportive teaching (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Stroet et al., 2015). A common teacher practice in this area is employing cooperative learning principles, which is shown to have a positive effect on social relations as well as on sense of belonging (Gillies, 2004; Osterman, 2010). Collaborative work formats were, however, rarely applied by teachers in the current study. Furthermore, our results showed

that personal and academic support for individual students seemed to be in place, but, as stated above, much less attention was paid to the whole group.

Dominant in the dimension of the common good were teacher practices with regard to rules, the variety of ways in which rules were created and interpreted, and whether violations were condoned or punished. Fairness was also a topic that surfaces when the rules were discussed. Students did not always perceive the rules as fair and this may indicate a threat to social cohesion. The importance of fairness was also shown in the literature, the sense of classroom justice is important for compliance to the rules (Berti et al., 2010). Besides this aspect of fairness, creating a strong classroom community is also considered to be important in the literature on this dimension. Teacher practices that create such a community are, for example, emphasising prosocial values, encouraging student cooperation and less use of extrinsic control (Solomon et al., 1996). Teaching practices that aim to stimulate a helping stance and solidarity in the group were not observed nor described in the interviews. This does not necessarily mean that teacher practices in this area were never applied in the two schools in our study, or not considered to be important. It does seem to imply that practices and underlying beliefs remain implicit. Further exploration of teacher beliefs and practices is needed in the area of the common good dimension of social cohesion.

We have designed our instruments, analysed the data, and described the results according to the three dimensions of Schiefer and van der Noll (2017). The conceptualisation has been valuable in order to categorise the ways in which teachers promote social cohesion. We noted in the process that all dimensions are related, but especially the first two: good social relationships are associated with identification with the group and a sense of belonging. Schiefer and van der Noll (2017) noted this relationship as well, when they state that there is a strong conceptual overlap between the two dimensions (p. 589). Taking it one step further, some of the teacher practices that were described under the heading of the social relations dimension, could also be described under the heading of identification and belonging. For example, when interviewing teachers on how they stimulate identification and a sense of belonging, they talk about the use of seating plans. This practice can also be interpreted as a way to organise social relations between students. In fact, Javiera Muñoz Hurtado (2018) described the role of teachers as architects of classroom structure and dynamics in her essay on ways to stimulate peer relations. Another example is the use of home languages. When asking about the social relations, teachers talk about how they try to connect to the home situation of individual students and use their home language in classroom situations. Teachers' underlying belief is that this positively impacts their relationship with students. It can also be argued that connecting to students' home situation helps students to experience a sense of belonging in the classroom. It seems that some of the teacher practices that were observed can contribute to the different dimensions of social cohesion at the same time. We would argue that conceptually, the three dimensions can be distinguished, but there is a strong inter-relatedness and the dimensions should be considered in tandem. In other words, when considering ways to stimulate social cohesion in the classroom, it seems more fruitful to address the dimensions of social cohesion alongside each other, instead of focusing on each of the dimensions separately.

The present study has been conducted in the context of two schools with diverse student populations. As societal concerns with regard to social cohesion

often relate to concerns of migration and diversity, in our observations and interviews, we also examined the role of this diversity. In our analyses, diversity did not emerge as a significant topic of reflection or discussion among the teachers. Diversity was incidentally mentioned in the second dimension of identification and belonging. The results showed two practices: connecting to the home environment and the use of home language in the classrooms. Aside from the two practices, we did not observe any other culturally relevant teaching practices (Alhanachi et al., 2021) or ways to address equity issues, racism, and discrimination.

One of the limitations of our study is that, despite being located in different regions, the two schools were quite similar in terms of their profiles. Conducting a study among schools with different profiles could uncover a different set of practices with regard to social cohesion. Furthermore, as mentioned above, more exploration seems to be needed with regard to relationships among students and creating a community and the lack of reflection of the meaning of diversity in schools. It is possible that a different research design and instruments would be able to uncover the implicit or tacit knowledge in these areas. In future research, we, therefore, suggest employing a methodology specifically aiming to reveal these more implicit views and practices. Collaborative inquiry (Bridges & McGee, 2011) including deep interpretative processes may help to uncover teacher practices and their tacit knowledge in this area in a more detailed way.

Aside from further research, on the basis of our study, we suggest that more explicit reflection by teachers on the three dimensions of social cohesion in diverse schools is needed. If schools are committed to strengthening social cohesion, they need to consider the three dimensions alongside each other and reflect on the role of diversity. Furthermore, the study showed limited teacher agency in the area of social cohesion and its underlying dimensions. Teachers all emphasised the importance of social cohesion but seemed limited in their competence and in their perceived opportunities to address social cohesion issues. It seems, therefore, important to build up more explicit teacher knowledge and skills to develop and implement practices that strengthen social cohesion in classrooms, as it may ultimately help to address societal concerns with regard to social cohesion.

Notes

1. At the end of primary education (age 12), on the basis of standardised test results and a track recommendation, students enrol in one of three tracks. The prevocational track consists of four years and gives access to senior vocational programmes. The general track is five years in duration and gives access to universities of applied sciences, and the pre-university track consists of six years and prepares for research universities.
2. For more information, <https://nwa-jeugd.nl/onderzoeken/sociale-cohesie-in-de-klas>
3. One additional teacher was included, as this teacher volunteered to be interviewed.
4. A group interview in the vocational track of school A was planned, but not conducted because of the COVID-19 situation.
5. The scheme can be obtained from the researchers.
6. During a small number of the observations a second member of the research team was present in order to align the interpretation and application of the observation scheme.
7. The possibility of (limited) loss of nuance and specific meaning of typical Dutch expressions has to be taken into account. To guarantee the anonymity of the respondents, no names are used.

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