

A school culture that unites

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Pupils from different ethnic and cultural groups learn to get along with each other at school. Together with their teachers, they form a specific living and working community, a *school culture*. At least, if they attend school together. The reality is that school populations are becoming increasingly segregated, being either predominantly 'white' or predominantly 'black' (ethnic minority pupils). The Education Council recently issued recommendations on the best approach to segregation in education. This advisory report focuses on schools with a multicultural pupil population. The central question of this report is: how can you create a school culture that unites the different ethnic groups in the school?

There is no easy solution to the issues and problems arising at culturally diverse schools. This report can therefore only offer guidelines which may help in considering and tackling the problems and issues which occur. The recommendations pertain to all government-funded schools, the upper years of primary schools, secondary education and senior secondary vocational education (MBO).

Main message: a feeling of connection is the key

The 'we feeling' and vision

A sense of community is the basis for a school culture that creates bonds between pupils. The schools studied for this report all talk about a 'we feeling': the concept that everyone is part of the school, and that they share a set of particular values, standards, habits and activities. Diverse schools are especially successful if they have set out their vision on the added value their school offers. This can be set out in a document indicating how the school deals with its multicultural character. This can then form the basis of a uniform image of the school which it can then convey to its partners, to parents and to other stakeholders. However, diverse schools must be responsive in the way they manage their vision and policy. If the school population changes, the school must change with it.

Three policy lines

The information on the schools studied for this report resulted in the identification of three different visions and associated policy lines.

1) Convergence and being Dutch as key elements

These schools strive to be the driving force in the support of individual talent, irrespective of a child's background. The school therefore focuses on the talents, rights, obligations and responsibilities of the individual pupil or student. A conscious decision has been made not to focus on the cultural or religious background of pupils. It is a pupil's future rather than their background that is the school's focus.

2) Focus on diversity

These schools believe it is essential not to deny the cultural backgrounds of pupils. They present themselves as a multicultural community, for example, as a 'world school' or as a meeting place for different cultures. They see themselves as Dutch schools with Dutch standards and values. However, considerable attention is also given to a range of different religious or lifestyle convictions, without anchoring any one of them in the school's vision. On the contrary, the vision focuses on recognising and identifying the plurality of beliefs and culture among the population, as well as the value this has.

3) Identity through religion or ideological convictions

In these schools, people's convictions and religion bind them together. For a publicly run school, this might mean actively getting to grips with the principles of public education. And a denominational school, for example, might look at other religions and ideologies from the

perspective of its own identity. At these schools, pupils can learn that other beliefs and religions include elements that correspond with their own.

Differences between the different types of schools

In *primary education*, pupils often relate to each other with an open mind. The same cannot always be said of their parents. If this is the case, school policy is often more focused on promoting a sense of community among parents than among pupils. Schools for *senior secondary vocational education (MBO)* are sometimes less focused on creating a sense of community, and more on imitating the desired attitude and culture in the professional sectors for which students are being trained. Finally, safety and a sense of security are perhaps more important in pre-vocational secondary education (VMBO) than in other educational sectors.

What can schools do themselves?

In the first instance, working towards a successful school culture is the task of the schools themselves. The Education Council has four recommendations for schools.

1) Consider which elements of your school culture are important

Every school culture is built on common pillars such as shared assumptions, values and standards. These are expressed in stories, symbols, rituals and celebrations. Playing sports together, expressing grief together, protesting together, a shared logo, joining forces to do something for someone else. Things like this strengthen a school culture. School would do well by making these shared experiences more explicit and by consciously promoting them.

2) Invest in external relationships

By making clear choices, the school board and the school management team can make the school culture recognisable for their contacts and the partners they work with. This school image forms the basis of its interactions with others. Sports tournaments, digital collaboration on projects, and other meetings between schools can help strengthen the school culture.

3) Urge pupils to share responsibility through citizenship education

Citizenship education should be a part of daily school life as well as the curriculum. It should focus on essential values and principles, but also on smaller virtues such as respect for others and common courtesy. Citizenship education also occurs when young people are given joint responsibility for the school building, the organisation and the education provided.

4) Make sure the school boards, head teachers and teachers are culturally aware

The role of the board of governors and the head teacher in the development of school culture is crucial. The *school board* should ensure there is a head teacher who has a vision and is willing to put it into practice. The board should allocate responsibilities: who has the portfolio for school culture and cultural diversity? The *head teacher* should maximise support for his vision and policy by maintaining good working relations with the teachers. All *teachers*, but especially teachers at a multicultural school, need to develop cultural sensibility: they should have a sincere interest in others, including in individuals with a different cultural background from themselves. They should also be able to communicate with people who think and act differently from themselves.

What can the government do?

1) Join with existing efforts in citizenship education and encourage research into school cultures

Starting with the 2006-2007 school year, the Education Inspectorate will oversee the way schools put new legislation on active citizenship and social integration into practice. The Education Council believes the law also obliges schools to attend to their school culture, because pupils learn to participate in a community at school and this is an important part of citizenship education. The new law provides sufficient tools for this. Our recommendation is that, after a certain period of time, the Minister should reassess whether the law and supervision are still having the right effect on school culture, particularly in culturally diverse schools.

2) Clarify the place of new population groups in the canon

The second policy line discussed in this report concerns the development of a canon for teaching. Each relevant section of the canon should include aspects that relate to specific stories and the contributions of various population groups. Teachers could address these aspects in the classroom, for example, by dealing with the past and current relationships between the Netherlands and the countries of origin of immigrant groups.

3) Develop a school profile based on religion or ideological conviction

Pupil populations are not only multicultural, they are also multi-religious. The Minister could consider launching a project in which schools can gain experience with the theme of religion and other ideological convictions. Schools that take the lead in this field could be granted extra funding in order to further the development of the school profile.

4) Encourage cosmopolitan a school profile for culturally diverse schools

The fourth policy line discussed in this report is the internationalisation and interculturalisation of education. The Education Council advises the Minister to encourage multicultural schools to develop an international or cosmopolitan profile. The Education Council would consider it an important step if the Minister were to ask one multicultural school specifically to think about offering the International Baccalaureate (IB) in addition to existing IB initiatives.

5) Encourage teachers to develop multicultural competencies

The last policy line pertains to the professional skills of teachers. Teachers at multicultural schools should be open to other cultures. In fact, this should apply to every teacher, and every teacher training programme should give specific attention to this theme. It is therefore not recommended that a separate training programme for multicultural school teachers is created. However, the Minister should ascertain how many teacher training programmes offer modules or course on this theme and, if necessary, reach agreements on increasing them. The Minister could also designate one or more field organisations as an expertise centre for multicultural education, as an extension to existing initiatives in the field.

Final note: schools which are *not* culturally diverse also have a multicultural remit

Schools which have few pupils with a different cultural background should nevertheless provide education which brings pupils into contact with other cultural outlooks, customs and expressions. A school populated predominantly by indigenous Dutch pupils could set out in its school plan and prospectus how it intends to do this. Over time, increasing numbers of schools will have a more diverse pupil population. These 'schools in transition' will also benefit from the above recommendations.