

# **Minority status and culture: local constructions of diversity in a classroom in the Netherlands**

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In this paper, we explain diversity in knowledge-sharing strategies in a multi-ethnic classroom both from a minority status perspective and from a cultural production perspective. The analysis shows how these perspectives are dynamically related in local productions of diversity. The paper argues how, at the level of classroom practice, culturally learned experiences are shaped by status relationships and, at the same time, how status relationships are expressed in cultural formats. Moreover, it is also argued that at a larger social level, collective attitudes towards schooling develop as a co-construction between cultural processes and status issues.

## **Introduction: ethnic diversity in classrooms**

In this paper, we deal with the question of how we can explain significant diversity in the positions students adopt in multi-ethnic classrooms when working together in small groups. Understanding diversity in matters pertaining to educational success that is related to ethnicity has been, and still is, an issue that is seen as theoretically and politically relevant. Increasing migration from countries which culturally diverge from the host country have made this issue even more relevant. Our objective in this contribution is to discuss the explanations that have been given in the social sciences for the nature of the diversity among ethnic groups in their responses to education, using our own data from a multi-ethnic classroom in the Netherlands. We discuss the theories that have focused on cultural explanations as well as those that have focused on social status and the wider societal dynamics of power. Moreover, we discuss how both in the work of John Ogbu and in other approaches these two issues have been brought together. Our aim is to show from the interpretation of our own data how both lines of thought have contributed to the debate on ethnic diversity in education

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and how both status aspects and cultural aspects are formative for each other. We also address the issue of responses among minorities to schooling, a key principle in Ogbu's explanatory frame, from current debates and the literature in the Netherlands on minorities, schooling, minority status and integration. Here too, we argue for a perspective that accounts for difference in terms of (the struggle for) social positions as well as in terms of the culturally informed variety in issues related to education.

### **Explanations for minority positions: culture or social status?**

In the wide variety of explanatory models that have been documented for the causes of educational success or failure (see e.g. Eisenhart, 2001; Montero-Sieburth & Batt, 2001) we think two basic lines of thought can be distinguished theoretically. One line of thought takes *culture* or *cultural discontinuity* as the basic principle, and the other line of thought stresses structural differences in the *social positions* ethnic groups hold and the power struggle that is part of the (re)production of these positions.

In the approach that stresses cultural discontinuity, diversity in the classroom is seen as the result of diversity in home socialization practices. According to this line of thought, the more socialization patterns differ from those of formal schooling, the more difficult the adaptation process is that students have to go through, and the more difficult it is to be successful in school. Diversity is seen as the result of a specific, culturally formed socialization process with particular ways of behaving, thinking and feeling which differ from other socialization processes. Culture is seen here as 'patterns in a way of life characteristic of a bounded social group and passed down from one generation to the next' (Eisenhart, 2001, p. 210) and is generally considered to be relatively stable and permanent. Cultural discontinuity in this position is a relatively autonomous concept in the sense that the mere difference in experiences that result in certain attitudes, customs, norms, skills and dispositions is responsible for difficulties in adaptation processes. The very fact that the cultural 'content' either differs or is similar is responsible for the failure or success of the adaptation to a cultural system without looking at the social dynamics that are at work when a particular cultural content is evaluated, adopted or changed.

A classic example of the cultural discontinuity perspective is the study by Heath (1983) in which she demonstrated that the language patterns of a middle-class community were much more similar to literacy practices at school compared with the language patterns of a white working-class community and those of a black working-class community. Other studies in a similar vein include work by Philips (1983), Cazden *et al.* (1972), Au & Jordan (1981), Erickson & Mohatt (1982) and Spindler & Spindler (1994). For overviews, see also Cazden (1986), Mehan (1998), Eisenhart (2001), Gallego & Cole (2002), Elbers & de Haan (2004). Although this approach was developed in the 1960s and 1970s, it still continues to inspire much research (see e.g. Miller, 1995) and educational reform (Jacob & Jordan, 1993; Yamauchi & Tharp, 1995).

The line of thought that stresses power positions and the reproduction of inequality was equally strongly argued for in past decades. Although several major theoretical

fields of studies which have different accents can be counted under this position, they all see diversity as the result of more structural, longer-lasting inequalities between social groups that are being 'played out' in schools. School is seen as the place where the differences in class, position or power that already exist are reconstructed or reconfirmed. In contrast with the cultural discontinuity perspective, no particular cultural pattern in itself is said to be responsible for the differences in success at school. It is rather the value given to these differences induced by status differences that are decisive. Both in classic accounts of reproduction theory (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) and in more recent accounts (D'Amato, 1988; Giroux, 1983; Ogbu, 1991), cultural differences are the specific forms the working of status differences and the privileging of certain symbolic capital take on, and cultural differences have no explanatory power in themselves. For instance, Willis (1977), in his classic study of how a white working-class high school group of boys, 'the lads', produce a 'counter-culture' to the school ideology, shows how it is not the cultural differences that were there initially that are responsible for school failure but the active construction of the counter-culture by the students as a response to unequal social positions. Therefore, although resistance takes on a specific cultural form (e.g. a counter-culture), that form itself can only be understood as a particular response to social contradictions at a larger level.

Interestingly, in these more recent theories, the cultural and the structural become more integrated as cultural responses occur in a particular field of larger scale power relationships. Also, John Ogbu's criticism of cultural discontinuity research is an important contribution to the rethinking of how culture interacts with more structural processes of integration and group status relationships (Eisenhart, 2001). In his cultural ecology theory, he criticizes the one-sided focus on culturally informed communication patterns in classrooms in the cultural discontinuity approach and points to the importance of adaptation responses to school based on more structural adaptation processes of specific minority groups (Ogbu, 1991).

Ogbu pointed out that the relative gap between school culture and minority cultures cannot explain the differences between the variation in school success of minority groups. The nature of the integration process of the minority group in the guest country is seen as more relevant than the distance between cultural patterns *per se*. It is not so much the cultural environment that produces or fails to produce certain cognitive, linguistic, socioemotional competencies or attitudes, nor the particular treatment students receive at school. What distinguishes academically successful minorities from less academically successful minorities is the 'type of understanding they have of the workings of the larger society and of their place as minorities in that working order' (Ogbu, 1991, p.8). These understandings of how society works for them are founded in their histories as minorities. Important elements for this 'understanding of the workings of society for the minority group' are (a) initial terms of incorporation in the host society, and (b) the pattern of adaptive response to discriminatory treatment, for example.

Ogbu's distinction between primary cultural patterns (those that exist before contact with dominant culture in the guest country) and secondary cultural patterns

(those that develop as a response to contact with the culture of the guest country, e.g. resistance patterns) is relevant here. Thus, it is not the cultural distance *per se* that is relevant but how this distance is acted upon both by the minorities themselves as by the receiving country. Perceived status, patterns of (selective) assimilation and processes of resistance are considered relevant in this respect (Gibson, 1997; Portes, 1995).

Here, the *reconstruction* of cultural differences is stressed and the fact that cultural patterns do not exist as such but always are a reaction (resistance, adaptation) to and exist in particular social structures in which minority groups take certain positions and have certain histories. Thus, in Ogbu's approach, as in Willis' approach, cultural differences are shaped by or repositioned by longer term, more structural and collective processes of status construction.

We think that it is precisely this dynamic between cultural and status theories that is interesting and has continued to inspire more recent studies on diversity, also in classroom studies. An interesting example is Locke Davidson's study (1996), which draws explicitly on Ogbu's work but extends it by arguing that academic identities are not *per se* connected to a particular ethnic group but are reshaped in local classrooms. She shows how being black in one classroom means 'low achieving' and in another 'high achieving', as a result of particular local histories. It is this *local* reworking of both status differences and cultural differences that has inspired many recent studies on diversity in education, in line with the current rethinking of culture as actively appropriated rather than fixed. See for instance Levinson, & Holland (1996) or, for an overview, Eisenhart (2001). In this study, we take up the idea of local reworking of status relations and culture as well as the idea that status relationships and culture work together in one dynamic.

### **A study on how diversity is framed in collaborative learning situations**

We present here the results of a study on collaborative learning in multi-ethnic classrooms as a case that we use to discuss the culture–status relationship dynamic discussed above. The aim of this study was to investigate how students from different ethnic backgrounds collaborate on math tasks and what kind of knowledge-sharing practices and role divisions they would develop. Finally, we were also interested in whether and how the variety found in the classroom would be related to variety in other contexts (see Elbers & de Haan, 2004).

Data were collected in the two highest grades of a primary school in the Netherlands with an ethnically mixed population: 80% of the students had a non-Western migrant background, mainly Dutch-Moroccan. We use the term Dutch-Moroccan, Dutch-Ghanaian for migrant students referring both to their background and their socialization in Dutch society (irrespective of nationality). The analysis we refer to here is based on a 20-hour audio data-set of student group talk. There were five different subgroups in this class: two were groups consisting only of minority students and three groups were mixed, i.e. they comprised Dutch and minority students (mostly Dutch-Moroccan). There were two parts to the analysis.

Qualitative descriptions of the talk between students focused on how students organize their activities to share and produce knowledge, e.g. what kind of model on how knowledge can or should be shared do they put forward, what kind of role division is set up between them, what norms on participation and collaboration are developed. In particular, we focused on whether the aspects mentioned would present proof of how they perceive or (re)construct the (ethnic) diversity in the group.

A quantitative analysis was conducted, based on the findings of the qualitative descriptions. In the qualitative analysis, we found that there were basically two 'modes' of collaboration, the peer-tutoring mode, based on a more asymmetric relationship, and the peer-collaboration mode, based on a more symmetric relationship (compare Foot *et al.*, 1990).

The peer-tutoring mode was characterized by the fact that one student took on a teacher role and would structure the activity for the other students, ask questions, evaluate answers, take responsibility for the learning of the other student, be careful not to give the solution right away, and refrain from answering questions or doing tasks while he or she was doing the explaining. This mode is similar to what has been called the Child As Performer (CAP) principle. According to the CAP principle, the teacher structures the activity so that the student is able to perform and the teacher refrains from performing (e.g. by asking questions such as 'what do you think you should do next?' (Nilholm and Säljö, 1996). Below, an example is given of a typical peer-tutoring situation in which a Dutch student adopts a tutor role.

*Segment 1: a typical peer-tutor situation*

The students are working on a task that requires them to calculate how many small boxes can be put into a larger box. The assignment consists of a picture of a store where candy can be bought either in small, regular packets or in a large family-size pack. Segment 1 is the beginning of the interaction in this group immediately after the teacher has introduced the task and told the children to start working together. The group consists of Goran, a Dutch-Yugoslavian boy, Maktoub, a Dutch-Moroccan boy, Annelies, a Dutch girl and Berend, a Dutch boy.

*Segment1 (Group 3, 5-6-00)*

- (1) Annelies: OK. Problem 4. How many times does a standard packet fit into the family pack? Now work it out.
- (2) Maktoub: Three times.
- (3) Annelies: What?
- (4) Maktoub: Three times.
- (5) Annelies: No. Think logically.
- (6) Goran: (*reads*) How many times does ...
- (7) Annelies: Look.
- (8) Goran: How many times?

- (9) Annelies: Yes. Look. Standard packet, three times like this...
- (10) Maktoub: and three times ...
- (11) Annelies: times like this. There you already have nine. You should take that three times, because the three here is also here.
- (12) Maktoub: Yes.
- (13) Annelies: And three goes three times into nine, so you should take it three times. Three times nine is twenty-seven.
- (14) Goran: Say it again.
- (15) Annelies: Do you understand a bit?
- (16) Berend: (*laughs*) Yes

What typifies the *peer-collaboration mode* is that the student who is explaining would do so *while* he or she is actually doing the task, accepting solutions from fellow students as solutions to the problem at hand (and not as answers to a test). This contrasts sharply with the peer-tutor mode, as illustrated in the above example, where one student directs the activity of the other students, structuring their learning. In the peer-collaboration mode the solutions from all participants are of the same nature, any questions posed are not known-answer questions but simply serve as a means for getting information.

Below, we present an example of a peer-collaboration situation:

*Segment 2: A typical peer-collaboration situation*

The fragment comes from a group with only minority children (Feliz, a Dutch-Turkish girl, Samira, a Dutch-Moroccan girl, Assad, a Dutch-Moroccan boy, and Hassan, a Dutch-Moroccan boy). The segment contrasts with Segment 1 from the mixed group in case 1 as Hassan, although clearly explaining things, does not adopt a tutor position. These students are working on the same task as in Segment 1.

*Segment (Group 1, 5-6-00)*

- (1) Hassan: One, two, three
- (2) Assad: Three times three, is what?
- (3) Samira: I am here
- (4) Assad: One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine.
- (...)
- (5) Assad: (counts up to twenty-seven)
- (6) Hassan: For, here, this is twelve centimeters, and here it fits three times, so three boxes fit here like this, and ..
- (7) Samira: three boxes fit
- (8) Hassan: going up three boxes also fit, isn't that right?
- (9) Samira: Yes, because three times three is nine, four times three is twelve.
- (10) Hassan: Here three, here three, and here three, and here twenty-seven and twenty two, twenty-two boxes.

- (11) Samira: How do you do that?  
 (12) Hassan: Just like that. (...)

*Hassan sits opposite Samira. He now walks to Samira's side of the table.*

- (13) Hassan: Look here, twelve centimeters. Three times, so, three, three boxes like this and then we look at the height. Here it also fits three times, so three boxes up, three boxes like this, and here also three times, so three boxes up, here three (...). (Counts from one to twenty-seven). Look, here is three up, in the middle is also three up, and there is also three up.

Furthermore, we also registered who was doing the explaining and to whom, using the following categories: (some categories are not relevant because of the specific composition of the group): (1) Dutch student explains to minority student(s); (2) Dutch student explains to Dutch student(s); (3) minority student explains to Dutch student(s); and (4) minority student explains to minority student(s). The results of this analysis can be summarized as follows (for a detailed report, see Elbers & de Haan, 2004).

Dutch students explained more frequently compared with the minority students, irrespective of what mode they used. Moreover, although the peer-collaboration mode was most frequently used in all groups, the peer-tutor mode was used relatively more frequently in the groups where minority and Dutch students worked together.

Looking in more detail at specific positions and relations we were able to see that the tutor position was given and taken up by Dutch students explaining to the minority students, and this relationship was not once reversed. Therefore, the use of the peer-tutor mode seems to be related to a particular ethnic relationship: the Dutch students explaining to the minority students.

Thus, these two modes of interaction tended to develop in this classroom in particular ethnically composed groups where the peer-tutor mode seems to be specific for the mixed groups. From our conversations with the teacher and interviews with the school principal, as well as from an analysis of how the teacher encourages her students to collaborate, we learned that the school fosters a view in which students should ideally learn to guide other students in their learning as a tutor ('what do you think the next step would be?'), rather than adopting a more demonstrative way of working ('just telling them how to do it') although apparently the school does allow a variety of strategies to develop (De Haan & Elbers, 2003).

From our analysis, we were able to see that both modes of interaction are *active* constructions which the students in this class have worked on and have struggled about, in particular establishing norms regarding the rules that belong to an interaction mode. For instance, in the peer-collaboration mode, equal participation and the sharing of expertise on an equal basis was the norm in the minority-only groups, as the following example shows. Here, in the same group as in segment 2, a conflict arises around Feliz, who adopts a learner or tutee position, but is criticized for not having a more active role in contributing to the solution.



*Segment 3: the active construction of the equal participation norm**Segment 3 (Group 1, 5-6-00)*

- (1) Samira: So the first is two thousand, two hundred, two thousand  
 (2) Feliz: Is the first two thousand?  
 (3) Hassan: (*irritated*) Hey man.  
 (4) Samira: You only want to copy it, come on!  
 (5) Feliz: I don't understand, you understand.  
 (6) Samira: Yes, you don't *work* with us.  
 (7) Hassan: Two thousand  
 (8) Feliz: I do. But you don't tell me anything.  
 (9) Hassan: We say nothing. You do nothing.  
 (10) Samira: Because you don't work with us.  
 (...)  
 (11) Hassan: Do you know why we say nothing, because you should have your own  
 ...  
 (12) Feliz: Explain it, explain it to me.  
 (13) Assad: Why do we have to explain? You should work with us.

The segment shows how equal participation is favored above playing the role of student. This is in sharp contrast with the norms in the mixed group in segment 1 in which Annelies does not expect this kind of participation: adopting a student role is sufficient for her.

Likewise, in the mixed groups, we observed discussions about the tutor-tutee relationship and how tutors and tutees should fulfill their roles, focusing, for instance, on the quality of the explanations tutors gives or on the question if the expertise of the tutor is sufficient.

## **Discussion**

### *An explanation from a cultural discontinuity perspective*

How can we interpret these differences in the preference for a particular collaboration mode? If we follow the cultural discontinuity idea, we could argue that previous experiences with particular formats of how knowledge is shared are reproduced in the classroom. The literature on Dutch and Moroccan socialization shows us that contrasting patterns exist in instruction practices (Pels & de Haan, 2003). In the Moroccan case, direct verbal instruction by adults to 'teach' a particular skill is rare, and learning is mostly fostered through modeling and participation in adult activities. In addition, speech role norms mean that children cannot join conversations of adults as equals but should adapt their speech to their social position. However, children spend a considerable amount of time outside parental control, where they learn in the relatively open and free environment of peers. The egalitarian relationships between peers is said to favor the development of certain skills. A different pattern exists among the Dutch, where adults intervene more readily in the peer world and



structure the learning experiences of their children through language-based interventions in which the adult adopts a tutor position. This contrast could explain why Moroccans do not model tutor relationships while working amongst peers. They are not familiar, as are the Dutch students, with the one-to-one adult intervention in their play and in their socialization in general and are therefore less inclined to borrow from such a model that is characterized by asymmetry. Moreover, the Moroccan students, unlike the Dutch students, are not familiar with the explicit teaching implied in the tutor mode.

*An explanation from minority status and collective orientations to school*

Taking the perspective of status relationships of ethnic groups, focusing on the aspects relevant in John Ogbu's theory on minority status and orientation towards schooling, it can be argued that the differences in the use of collaboration modes is related to the status relations in this classroom and, moreover, that these status relationships work out in such a way that the Dutch students are able to identify with the institution more strongly than the Dutch-Moroccan students. We will not apply Ogbu's typology between voluntary and involuntary responses here, as this typology does not match the Dutch situation in the same way it does the situation in the US (see e.g. Eldering, 1997; Hermans, 2004). Instead, we focus on the underlying idea that the history of incorporation and status positions that result from this history and minorities' perceptions of the working of school, is essential for them.

With respect to status positions, we can conclude that, in Dutch society, there are structural differences between the migrant population and the native Dutch population with respect to their participation in the labor market and the school system. A disproportionate number of migrant workers are found in the lower echelons of the labor market, and their children are less successful in terms of schooling, even when taking the lower educational level of their parents into account. This points to influences beyond class stratification.

These status relationships have obviously influenced the relationships between the students in this classroom. Our research has shown that ethnicity is a meaningful social category for these students and that 'Dutch' and 'white' are considered to be higher in status than 'Moroccan' or 'brown' (a category that students in this class use for minorities). The interpretation that the status difference implied in the ethnic relations in this class have induced the particular use of these tutor roles was confirmed by the teacher who reported that Dutch students feel that 'you just don't let a Moroccan explain things to you'.

At the same time, these status relationships expressed in tutor-tutee positions seem to be related to how students identify with school. From our analyses of the transcripts, we found that Dutch students would sometimes act as representatives of 'the way things are' at school. They would 'defend' or explain the rules or adopt the teacher position when interacting with minority students, whereas the minority students did not take on such positions. Moroccan students therefore seem to take

more distance from positions that represent the official status of the school. This is in line with what other studies have indicated about how Moroccan students identify with school (Andriessen & Phalet, 2002) and how Moroccan parents view Dutch schools (Eldering, 1997; Hermans, 2004; Pels, 1998). Although they see school as an important means for social mobility and have high expectations of their children's school career, they mostly develop a critical attitude towards the Dutch school system, especially as their children grow older. Parents believe that there is little discipline in Dutch schools and regret the seeming lack of equal opportunities for their children. According to D'Amato (1987), distancing oneself from school by turning to a peer culture is more likely to occur when students believe the merit-based ideal does not work for them. In accordance with this view, the development of a more peer-based collaboration mode can be seen as creating a different workspace in which the Moroccan students develop alternative interaction patterns that differ from the ones promoted by the institution and through which the distance they experience with the institution is expressed. Therefore, the Moroccan students' reluctance to adopt a tutor position could be both an expression of a status position with respect to the Dutch, as well as a representation of a certain attitude towards the Dutch institution.

#### *Minority status and cultural discontinuity: cultural productions*

The kinds of explanations mentioned above have often been presented as being mutually exclusive. However, we believe that they can both contribute to our understanding of why certain differences (re)appear and why they become significant differences. In this particular study, we argue, in line with the studies that have focused on 'local reproduction', that previously learned ways of sharing knowledge have become the input for the attitude that students develop with respect to the dominant cultural norms in the school on how to share knowledge. The experience students have with these cultural forms was used either to develop an alternative model or to take up the dominant model. The active reproduction of these cultural models occurs in a field of social relationships in which both status and power are relevant. Therefore, it is not 'just' the cultural reproduction of culturally learned practices of teaching that we observed. The particular status relationships between the Dutch and the minority students, which in this classroom have been reworked in the cognitive domain, are formative for how these culturally learned forms take on their actual form. However, the status relationships or distance that students experience towards the institution expressed in the student position of the minority students and the tutor position of the Dutch students is not 'just' a reworking of social inequalities or view of Dutch institutions that exist elsewhere. They are *cultural* productions with specific meanings which point to particular conceptions of teaching which are more than just positions in a social structure of power relations.

We think that it is the power structure in this classroom that has been a condition for the development of the peer-based collaboration for migrant students, but the culturally informed rejection of asymmetric relationships by migrant students has also been a condition for the (further) development of specific local power positions

between the migrant and the Dutch students. Therefore, our conclusion is that minority status explanations and cultural discontinuity explanations are interwoven and become meaningful, especially when we focus on the local reproduction of cultural and social status elements.

*Minority status and collective orientations towards schooling in the Netherlands*

It is our opinion that the minority status theory, as put forward by John Ogbu, is a useful tool for understanding the attitudes that minorities have developed towards schooling in the Netherlands in recent years, if we also consider how these attitudes develop in a social arena where culturally formed practices and dispositions play a role. School (as a Dutch institution), on the one hand represents a path towards social success for some minority communities. But the same school is also perceived as socializing children according to Dutch models of control and discipline. As a consequence, particular forms of adult-child asymmetries develop in a complex process in which cultural and positional aspects interact. The distance expressed by (mostly first generation) Moroccan parents towards Dutch schools seems to be directly related to differences with respect to ideas pertaining to disciplining, practices of control, authority relationships between adults and children as well as a particular view of the role of Dutch institutions (thus, on cultural dimensions). Parents feel the school does not support their control practices, nor is it able to provide a proper alternative. Moreover, they feel that Dutch institutions do not take sufficient responsibility for their children in general and, instead, blame the parents unjustly for the undisciplined behavior of their children (De Haan, unpublished fieldwork, but see also Hermans, 2004). Their perception of how Dutch institutions work for them, that is, how and whether they will eventually lead to social success, but also how they experience the 'fairness' of the system is, as the above shows, not independent from cultural issues. Furthermore, status positions related to ethnicity in general do not develop independently from culturally informed processes. For instance, discussions on (perceived) differences between what is called Islamic culture and Western culture seem to be highly formative for the particular status positions that are constructed for particular ethnic groups in recent Dutch media debates. However, the reverse is no less true, and we think that this is one of the central and important contributions of Ogbu's theory. The cultural 'stuff' itself only becomes meaningful if we look at how these cultural processes are inserted into social processes of inclusion and exclusion, the production of collective status relationships and particular relationships between pivotal institutions and specific groups.

**Mariëtte de Haan** works at Utrecht University as a researcher and teacher. Her more recent work focuses on collaboration processes in multi-ethnic classrooms, ethnic segregation in education and informal socialization processes of migrant families related to schooling. In her work she combines micro analytical perspectives (e.g. interaction analyses) with broader sociocultural frameworks through an ethnographic perspective. This methodological approach strives to show how

local productions are linked with a diversity of other sociocultural levels on a larger scale.

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