Responding to the challenges of diversity in education

INTER NETWORK
Intercultural education. Teacher training and school practice.

Piet Van Avermaet

Centre for Diversity & Learning

University of Ghent

E-mail: piet.vanavermaet@ugent.be

Website: www.diversiteitenleren.be

steunpunt
diversiteit & leren

The concept diversity

- **Diversity has to be interpreted very broad**

- **Individual and group dimension**

- **Identity**

  "Identities change, shift, grow and adapt themselves constantly to the context in which an individual or a group can be found. Identity is a continuous process of (self)realisation. Every picture, every well-defined form of identity is just a snapshot of this continuous process" (Pinxten en Verstraete, 1998:36)

- **Multiple identities and polycentricity**

Education: diversity, equity and excellence

- The school is a public space where diversity cannot be ignored

- Two objectives

  - Dealing with diversity as an objective of citizenship education in a democratic and plural society

  - Dealing with diversity as an essential condition for equal opportunities for all children: to tackle social inequality.

steunpunt
diversiteit & leren

Dealing with diversity: six objectives

1. Seeing diversity as a normal phenomenon which everyone encounters in various situations on a daily basis (*normality*).

2. Avoiding prejudices and generalizations, where possible and desirable; refraining from and combating any form of discrimination (*absence of prejudice and non-discrimination*).

3. Looking at events, contexts and people from a variety of perspectives (*multiperspectivity*).

4. Functioning in different contexts in continually changing circumstances and new situations (*capacity to adapt*).

5. Opting for dialogue and collaboration (*dialogue and collaboration*).

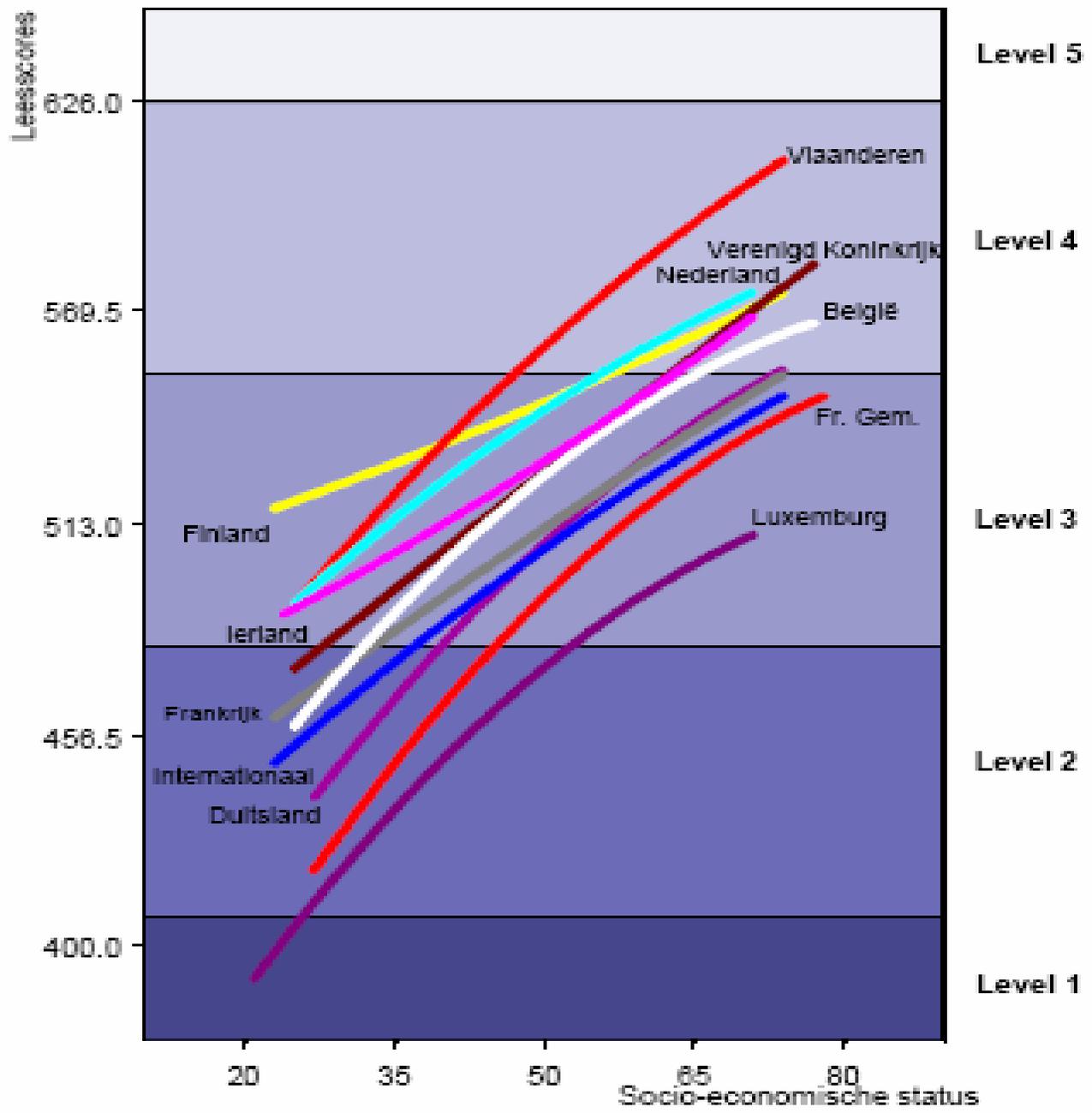6. Learning from each other's visions, experiences and competencies (*learning from each other*).

steunpunt
diversiteit & leren

The role of education?

- Its main task: acquisition of those competencies that enable a person to function in society
- School is not the only actor in this education process
- In certain social environments more competencies, that are perceived as relevant by schools, are (being) developed than in others
- To compensate for this inequality is a very specific emancipatory task of education and schools in particular
- Education and schools have to aspire that the opportunities of children in society do not only depend on the opportunities they are provided with from home

steunpunt
diversiteit & leren

Equal opportunities in education? .../...

- Children with lesser chances begin with an arrear in education. During schooling this gap often increases
- The task of a school cannot be to reproduce social inequality
- If success or failure of children in school is systematic we are phased with a major problem.
- In Europe children with a low SES are over represented in the group of low achievers.
- A mismatch between the input in children's primary stage of socialisation, the home context on the one hand and the norms, codes and interaction patterns that are seen as legitimate in education and school.

**steunpunt
diversiteit & leren**

Equal opportunities in education?

Two options:

1. No discussion about norms, interaction patterns, codes that are seen as legitimate at school. To 'prepare' children, to remedy them before entering the school.
   - If this is the case, isn't education giving back its basic functions and tasks to society?
2. Norms, codes, interaction patterns and methods of knowledge acquisition are negotiable. A school adapts its teaching methods to the observed diversity, so that it can compensate for the children's differences.
   - It this way, the school adapts to the students rather than the students to the school.

**steunpunt
diversiteit & leren**

Whose problem?

- Migrants, migrant children and their '(language) problem' are often seen as the main 'problem' of education.
- The fact that they do not use the 'target language' is seen as one of the most important causal factors of their 'language problem' and their failure of school success. The discourse is negative and stigmatising.
- However, we also observe 'problems' with 'non-migrants' and not all migrants seem to have problems at school.
- The so-called 'language problem' of migrant children is not just a problem of language proficiency.
- It is a socio-culturally determined problem. Differences in communication and interaction; differences in cultures of knowledge acquisition have to be central in the way we help/support children to unravel, unlock knowledge and to acquire competencies
- So the question is: is the 'problem' that can be observed a problem of the children or a problem of the school?

steunpunt
diversiteit & leren

To remedy or to deal with diversity?

- How do we have to deal with differences in socio-economic and socio-cultural background, so that ALL children can learn?

- To remedy starts from the idea of homogeneous groups: homogenisation can have negative effects: less opportunities for diversity, a negative cascade system, lowering of norms, goals, less focus on academic knowledge: Pygmalion and self fulfilling prophecy

- Only focusing on (language) 'remedying' reduces the 'problem' to a problem of an individual child and a problem of 'language' in the language classroom. Homogeneous 'groups of migrants' might lead to stigmatisation.

- Dealing with children coming from 'lower' social background is actually and in the first place dealing with diversity in heterogeneous groups.

steunpunt

diversiteit & leren

An integrated perspective …/…

☐ How does education have to look like in order to give all children the opportunity to profit from it?

☐ Psychological perspective:

deficiency ⟶ remedy

☐ In this view the sociological perspective is often neglected

steunpunt
diversiteit & leren

An integrated perspective

- If we agree, however, that migrant children are socially disadvantaged learners, it is the social aspect of learning that has to be taken more into account.

- Not only the child as a learning individual.

- But learning as a social process (Vygotsky, Brüner, …)

- A social constructivist approach instead of an instructivist approach

Diversity at all levels at school

- School policy: coherent view (intake, flow through, (out)flow)
- Personnel can deal with diversity
- Students can deal with diversity
- Pedagogical and didactical conditions for a more effective diversity approach

steunpunt
diversiteit & leren

School policy level

- Diversity is not just an intercultural project
- Do not reduce diversity to culture and ethnicity
- Do not reduce diversity to a policy for specific target groups (endlessly, stigmatising, boxes, solutions for each group separately)
- Do not reduce 'problems' to 'language problems' and a language arrear.
- Development of a school policy with and supported by the whole team: intake, flow through and (out)flow
- A multicultural and multilingual policy at all levels of the school.
- A coherent view: actions fit in the vision of the school and are a result of interaction with all participants (school staff, parents, students, …)
- From the OECD (PISA) we learn that school and students perform better in a climate of high expectation, willingness to invest, the pleasure to learn/of learning, open and positive teacher-student relationship, development of a professional team, …

steunpunt
diversiteit & leren

DIVERSITY AT SCHOOL LEVEL: key aims

1. Learning to deal with diversity as an objective to be achieved among all pupils and teachers at the school.
2. Creating the pedagogical and didactic conditions for an effective approach to diversity at class and school level.
3. Making the school an interactive and learning organization.
4. Aiming for a diverse composition in all areas of the school.
5. Situating the school as a learning and living environment within a wide network of partners.

steunpunt
diversiteit & leren

Dealing with diversity in classroom practice and activities

- Take advantage of the diverse composition of classrooms and groups
  - 'take advantage' = actively making use of different intelligences (not only cognitive), interests, character, informally acquired competencies
- Taking the socio-cultural context of the learner as a starting point
- Contextualised education
- Purposive (aim oriented) but functional
- Increase the contribution of the learner
- The teacher as a mediator (between learner and learning objective)
- Increase motivation, involvement, commitment and interest
- More interactive, cooperative and problem solving learning
- Heterogeneity as an asset

**steunpunt
diversiteit & leren**

COMPETENCIES FOR PROFESSIONAL TEACHING

1. Observing diversity in the classroom, at school and in the world outside.
2. Approaching diversity in a positive manner.
3. Guiding pupils to achieve effective interaction with each other and with others.
4. Integrating diversity into the total educational process of pupils.
5. Dealing effectively with diversity among colleagues, parents and external partners.
6. Being aware of one's own social responsibility and acting accordingly

steunpunt
diversiteit & leren

WHY DO WE HAVE TO INVEST IN EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES AND DIVERSITY?

- Multilingualism and multiculturalism are and will maintain to be a reality. We will have to learn to deal with it and use it as an asset instead of a problem in education
- Children come from different backgrounds, are different and have diverse needs
- Diversity often leads to innovations
- The economic, political and societal cost and impact of doing nothing will at the end be higher than to take action in equal opportunities and diversity.

steunpunt
diversiteit & leren

UNIVERSITEIT
GENT

THANK YOU

Piet Van Avermaet

Centre for Diversity & Learning

University of Ghent

E-mail: piet.vanavermaet@ugent.be

Website: www.diversiteitenleren.be

steunpunt
diversiteit & leren