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"I Refuse to Answer This Question!": Teachers' Diversity Beliefs and Dutch Higher Education Transformation

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Abstract

In an era of increasing diversity in higher education, understanding teachers' positions and diversity beliefs is crucial. Teachers are often seen as primary actors and change agents in diversity policies within higher education institutions. However, there is a lack of an overview regarding these beliefs in European contexts. Transitions for diversity and inclusion in higher education are often slow due to the invisible normalization of institutional norms, which often stem from teachers' diversity beliefs. Therefore, this article investigates the diversity beliefs of higher education teachers at Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences through ethnographic research. Using interviews, informal conversations, and participatory observation, I analyze these beliefs within a framework of conservative, liberal, and critical diversity perspectives. I present an overview of these perspectives, showing the prominence of a liberal view. Notwithstanding its prominence, interactions during diversity and inclusion events reveal that teachers challenge this dominant perspective, highlighting aspects that often remain unseen. These findings show that diversity perspectives of teachers are not static, but instead represent dynamic, contextual, and relational positions for connection, navigation, and negotiation. This provides insights into the potential for transformation by teachers in contexts resistant to diversity and inclusion. The article contributes to current debates on teachers' diversity beliefs and their relation to transformation.

Keywords

diversity and inclusion; higher education; resistance and transformation; teachers' diversity beliefs

1. Introduction

In an age marked by increasing diversity in higher education (Essanhaji & van Reekum, 2023), understanding how teachers position, negotiate, and navigate their beliefs around diversity in higher education is crucial. In the Netherlands, diversity in ethnicity, prior education, socioeconomic background, and gender is rising in higher education (Central Bureau for Statistics, 2024). At the same time, educational inequality and underachievement of minority students are growing (Onderwijsraad, 2017), revealing processes of marginalization and exclusion (Wekker et al., 2016).

As a response, higher education institutions developed strategies and policies to counter structural inequality, enhance diversity and inclusion, and transform the education environment (Bhopal & Pitkin, 2020; Danovitz, 2015; Essanhaji & van Reekum, 2023; Icaza & Vazquez, 2018). This was also the case for Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences (RUAS), one of the Netherlands' largest higher education institutions for professional higher education (*hoger beroepsonderwijs*, or *hbo*, see Luijckx & De Heus, 2008). RUAS is located in Rotterdam, a city commonly characterized as superdiverse (cf. Vertovec, 2007), and a pioneer for national and local diversity policies (Dekker & van Breugel, 2019, p. 107).

In the diversity policy of RUAS, teachers were presented as the main change agents (RUAS, 2016). Teachers, i.e., academic staff involved in teaching, are frequently seen as the primary actors for translating policy into practice (Brown et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2021). On account of the decisive position of teachers in educational settings (Hattie & Yates, 2014) and their expected ownership of policy implementations (Snoek et al., 2019), an analysis of the ideas, opinions, and practices of educators is therefore paramount to understand educational transformations, as envisioned in diversity and inclusion policies (Griffioen et al., 2017). In policies, diversity is often conceptualized in an all-encompassing sense. Yet, in the Netherlands, in practice, racial and ethnic diversity are highlighted as an implicit contrast to the dominant norm (Essed & Hoving, 2014; Wekker, 2016). It is therefore interesting to know how teachers in higher education understand diversity.

Previous work on teachers' beliefs *in general* has elaborately analyzed teachers in the European context (cf. Liu et al., 2021). However, research on teachers' *diversity* beliefs has been carried out mainly in Anglo-Saxon contexts (Castagno, 2019; hooks, 1994; Sian, 2019). Additionally, research in the Netherlands on educational diversity, inclusion, and inequality has mainly focused on students in minority positions (see Crul et al., 2013; Paulle, 2013; Rezai, 2017) or on diversity officers and diversity policy discourses (Bonjour et al., 2020; Essanhaji & van Reekum, 2023). Therefore, to contribute to existing debates (Agirdag et al., 2014; Kennedy et al., 2024), in this article, I draw on ethnographic fieldwork with teachers from RUAS to investigate: How can we understand diversity beliefs of Dutch higher education teachers in relation to transformation for diversity and inclusion?

Research into teachers' diversity beliefs is also relevant, as transformations in higher education for diversity and inclusion are often slow, due to persisting attachments of academic staff and management to traditional and taken-for-granted norms and values (Dee et al., 2023; Lane, 2007), such as hierarchical structures and meritocratic thinking that perpetuate systemic and structural inequalities. It is within these contexts that teachers maintain their diversity beliefs. Hence, to understand resistance to change, as well as potential for transformation, I argue that it is imperative to analyze teachers' diversity beliefs in these contexts. Thus, in addition to providing an overview of teachers' diversity beliefs in Dutch higher education, I also investigate teachers' interactions, exchanges, and negotiations on these beliefs.

For this investigation, I propose using the work of feminist and queer thinker Sara Ahmed (Ahmed, 2012). Her work fits in anthropological understandings of culture as an underlying, omnipresent (macro) structure, expressed in relational, dynamic, and contextual (micro) interactions (Kottak, 2011). Ahmed (2012) shows how enduring resistance to, and potential transformation of, diversity and inclusion in higher education institutions are connected to processes of institutionalization. According to Ahmed, institutionalization happens when routinized habits are perceived as natural and "recede from view" (Ahmed, 2012, p. 21). She observes how this process is supported by expressions such as "how we do things around here," where the "how" does not need any further explanation (Ahmed, 2012, p. 25). In the same vein, resistance can be understood as a process that highlights taken-for-granted norms and brings them to the fore. Ahmed sees how power operates through uncontestable categories, and it is these fixed categories that she advises "we *should* trouble" (Ahmed, 2015, p. 182). As I will show, through beliefs and practices around diversity and inclusion, teachers can both trouble and preserve these categories, and thus both reproduce institutional habits and call them into question.

1.1. Methods

Ethnographic research, with its prolonged contact, attention to personal narratives, and "thick" descriptions, can provide unique insights into essential, and often implicit, seemingly self-evident actions and considerations of teachers, for example, about diversity work and "how we do things around here" (Ahmed, 2012; see also O'Reilly, 2012). From October 2020 to July 2022, I investigated the experiences of teachers involved in diversity and inclusion initiatives at RUAS. Participation in over 60 RUAS events, more than 50 teacher meetings, 63 interviews with teachers and staff, and countless informal conversations on diversity and inclusion highlighted recurring themes and organizational dynamics. To better understand their ideas and thoughts on diversity and inclusion, I followed around 10 teachers more closely, e.g., for their original initiatives or unique positions. This article is based on insights shared by these key informants and participatory observations at RUAS events.

Following ethical standards for anthropologists, I repeatedly clarified my role as a researcher to ensure informed consent, beforehand where possible, at the start, and during meetings (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002). I made notes of meetings and informal conversations, which I digitized as soon as possible, and provided pseudonyms for confidentiality (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002). I audio-recorded and transcribed interviews with the help of a student assistant, and I analyzed the transcriptions and field notes with a qualitative, interpretative approach (cf. DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002), based on the teachers' diversity beliefs framework (see next paragraph and Table 1).

My position as a 40-year-old white woman and a teacher-researcher amongst teachers at RUAS naturally impacted my research. My familiarity with Dutch higher education enhanced access and relations of trust (*rapport*). Yet, the proximity potentially risked making assumptions or taking aspects for granted (cf. Alvesson, 2003). Moreover, especially whiteness, an often invisible yet predominant influence linked to class, religion, sexuality, and gender, affected my perceptions of the field and that of others about me (cf. Castagno, 2019). To limit these risks, I asked for feedback from research participants, including careful conversations on my interpretations and positionality. Together with personal reflection and insights from literature, this deepened *rapport* and increased my understanding (cf. Alvesson, 2003).

Table 1. Analysis themes.

Conservative diversity perspective	Equality ("we are all equal"); colorblindness; meritocratic values ("work hard"); diversity avoidance.
Liberal diversity perspective	Diversity recognition; diversity celebration; disadvantages/achievement gaps acknowledged; differentiation or compensation need.
Critical diversity perspective	Structural, systemic, institutional factors (racism, discrimination); social/educational inequity; power differences; marginalization.

To understand teachers' diversity beliefs and their relation to the transformation of higher education by teachers, in this article, I analyze teachers' diversity beliefs as expressed in the dynamic and relational context of RUAS. I have divided the remainder of this article into three parts. First, I outline the conceptual framework, commonly used in Anglo-Saxon contexts, to define the diversity beliefs of teachers. Then, to provide an overview of teachers' diversity beliefs at RUAS, I apply this framework to higher education teachers' experiences and expressions of diversity and inclusion at RUAS. Finally, I present a typical exchange between teachers on diversity and inclusion to analyze how teachers position, negotiate, and navigate different diversity beliefs within a context of resistance and potential transformation. The interactions of teachers show what otherwise remains invisible, providing insights into potential higher education transformation by teachers as change agents.

2. A Framework of Teachers' Diversity Beliefs

With regard to teachers' beliefs on diversity, educational scholars distinguish three perspectives: a conservative, a liberal, and a critical perspective (Gorski, 2006; King & Ladson-Billings, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1995). I will explain these perspectives in more detail before illustrating how they are reflected in teachers' experiences and expressions.

First, a conservative perspective on diversity assumes that students should be treated equally with "equal attention, resources, and choices" (Hosseini et al., 2021). Teachers adopting this perspective often embrace a colorblind approach in their aim to avoid discrimination. From a meritocratic viewpoint, students' positions are understood on a level playing field, and in this perspective, marginalized groups are expected to assimilate into the dominant culture (Gorski, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Yet, students often start higher education with different (unequal) positions, due to, among other factors, their socioeconomic status or background. In addition, abundant research has demonstrated unequal treatment of students by teachers based on their gender, race, ethnicity, class, and other factors that influence teachers' biases to assumed "strong" or "weak" students (e.g., Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). Moreover, studies have shown that by not acknowledging difference, a conservative perspective leaves no room for actual and experienced discrimination (Gorski, 2006; Hosseini et al., 2021).

Second, a liberal perspective, in contrast, does address differences and aims for equity instead of equality. This perspective is based on a human relations approach that recognizes, accepts, and celebrates cultural diversity and plurality (Gorski, 2006). In this perspective, teachers often feel responsible for compensating students for possible disadvantages, i.e., through language or study skills training adjusted to specific knowledge gaps. Additionally, from a liberal point of view, diversity is generally cherished by valuing

students' talents and connecting them to social "funds of knowledges," e.g., multilingualism, intercultural skills, and knowledge from other parts of the world (Acevedo & Solorzano, 2021; Yosso, 2005).

However, a liberal framework holds the risk of a deficit approach (cf. Acevedo & Solorzano, 2021; Yosso, 2005). Here, disadvantage is understood primarily as an individual trait and translated into a form of lack. In this view, students from marginalized groups are held responsible for the inequality they experience, without any recognition of the social processes that cause marginalization. As a result, equity is reduced to offering opportunities to "keep up" with the dominant group, without questioning structural barriers to equality or the fabric of the educational system itself (Gorski, 2006; Hosseini et al., 2021; King & Ladson-Billings, 1991).

Finally, a critical perspective challenges liberal and conservative perspectives and explicitly addresses the influence of unequal divisions of power, control, and access on marginalization and inequality in society and education (Hosseini et al., 2021; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Rather than expecting marginalized students to adapt and "catch up," a critical perspective questions the principle values and norms of societal and educational structures and systems. From a critical point of view, diversity is understood not as individual difference but as structural inequality. From a critical perspective, challenging these taken-for-granted norms and values is indispensable to breaking the chain of inequality and rectifying injustices.

In the following section, I use this conceptual framework to analyze higher education teachers' perspectives and beliefs regarding diversity. I start with the conservative perspective, which does not account for diversity. This is followed by the critical perspective, which relates diversity to structural power differences. The conservative and critical perspectives on diversity I observed only among a small number of teachers. I will end the next section with a two-fold description of the liberal perspective, recognized in the majority of my research participants, where diversity was mainly understood as an individual characteristic. There, I will first show how expressions of teachers can be connected to the liberal perspective, and then I will describe how a liberal perspective can lead to a deficit approach to diversity.

3. Teachers' Diversity Perspectives in RUAS

3.1. Conservative Perspectives on Diversity

Among the teachers I followed during my study, I recognized a small number who viewed diversity from a conservative perspective. One of them is Trudy, a 60-year-old white woman, who participated in various diversity-related initiatives in her educational program. Regarding diversity and inclusion, she indicates feeling uncertain about its meaning and presence in her education:

> Well, you know….I actually don't experience diversity at all. Yes, I can see it exists, but I don't see it as a problem. I help everyone to the best of my ability. Everyone is equal to me, and it doesn't matter where you come from or what you do. I try to see every person as an individual. And everyone brings their own baggage [*pakketje*]. But if students themselves don't mention their struggles, or whatever, then I'm not going to poke around. (interview, March 21, 2021)

In Trudy's view, we can identify a conservative perspective of diversity. Regarding diversity, Trudy emphasizes the wish not to discriminate. She indicates she "does not experience diversity," she underlines that "everyone

is equal," and tries "to see every person as an individual." She steers clear of categorizing her students' needs, "struggles, or whatever," and stresses they need to mention these themselves; otherwise, she will treat them all the same.

However, the colorblindness in Trudy's words is contradictory because she says she does not experience diversity, but also that she does "see" it. She therefore associates diversity with something you can see, skin color, hairstyle, clothing, i.e., something that stands out as "different." She also says that everyone is equal, but also that it does not matter "where you come from." Hypothetically, she could refer to urban and rural differences, but it is more likely that Trudy refers to migration background and her students' possible connection to countries outside the Netherlands. Someone's appearance can therefore show that they are "not from here," that they are "different"—a questionable claim in a superdiverse city like Rotterdam. Trudy's comments reveal a characteristic contradiction in egalitarian and conservative thinking: between not mentioning diversity for fear of discrimination (everyone is equal) and the need to categorically organize the world (from here, not from here).

Reflections from teacher Dilay, a woman of color of around 30, also contain notes of a conservative perspective on diversity, albeit from a different angle. I ask her about her ideas on diversity, when Dilay mentions that she does not have much to say on the topic:

> I live in Rotterdam, where everyone is different. I'm the hipster teacher. Students call me the most fashionable teacher at our institute. I have never experienced discrimination or racism. And no, me being different, it just has never bothered me. By the way, I wanted to ask you something: I have to choose a topic for the master's program I'm also doing. Do you think online education could be a good topic? (interview, February 14, 2022)

Dilay is a practicing Muslim, and given the examples and studies of racist treatment of Muslim women and women of color in the Netherlands (Essed, 2018; Essed & Hoving, 2014), it seems unlikely that Dilay has not experienced discrimination. Essed (2018) observes how black women in her study transformed racism into an individual experience, which they could keep at bay through control of their interpretations. Similarly, Dilay mentions she is "not bothered by it" and simply smoothly changes the subject at the end of the conversation, decreasing the likelihood of further discussing the topic with me, a white researcher without similar personal experience of racism or discrimination.

Despite differences, teachers such as Trudy and Dilay express views that relate to a conservative perspective, in which diversity is explicitly avoided. However, among my research participants, I noticed that the conservative perspective was less common.

3.2. Critical Perspectives on Diversity

Among teachers at RUAS, I also rarely recognized a critical perspective on diversity. Neyla, a woman of color in her late 30s, was one of the teachers whose views did reflect this perspective. In an informal conversation, Neyla described how many colleagues developed their own initiatives for inclusion. Yet, for Neyla, diversity and inclusion were not about participation and initiatives, but about structural changes in the institute:

> I hear colleagues talk about inclusion, but I wonder: inclusion in what? Who should be involved in what? And who are the gatekeepers? I don't mean the people talking, but those making decisions. Management and senior management consist mainly of men, and no people of color. How do they…based on what do they determine the outlines of an inclusive organization? (personal communication, June 17, 2021)

In her descriptions, Neyla starts by questioning underlying power relations and the normative framework of RUAS's inclusivity efforts. Neyla wonders whether inclusion is possible if it essentially means assimilating people into the school's otherwise unchanged system. Neyla's request to look at the "gatekeepers" draws attention to the distribution of power and more structural aspects of inequality. In her response, she makes clear that for her, inclusion does not necessarily relate to initiators of inclusion (teachers), but rather to decisive power (of managers). With her reference to the composition of management, she wonders what the point of inclusion is if it revolves around integration into a system where whiteness and masculinity are still the norm.

By disputing the current educational system's principles, i.e., how prerequisites for an inclusive organization are established and its link to leadership composition, Neyla analyzes inclusion not at the operational level of initiatives, but at the systemic and structural level of the organization, relating the organization's structure to societal power structures. Neyla questions the reproduction of inequalities, and her words reveal what normally remains invisible and abstract. Through her mention of the overrepresentation of masculinity and whiteness among managers, she sheds light on relationships that are taken for granted, such as those at the management level and their influence on definitions of diversity and inclusion within the educational institute.

While Neyla clearly articulated views that fall within a critical perspective, this view was rare among teachers at RUAS. As I will show below, a liberal perspective on diversity was most prominent among teachers in this study.

3.3. Liberal Perspectives on Diversity

From a liberal perspective, teachers acknowledge interpersonal differences, including unequal starting points, and recognize, accept, and highlight diversity. I observed this, for example, in Els, a white woman in her 50s. In her work as a teacher, Els bases her approach on trust and difference, emphasizing similarity in differences among students and herself:

> We are all different. Sometimes, first-year students reluctantly come to me and "confess" they're dealing with something—like medication for ADHD, depression, or similar issues. I say, "Welcome to the club!" We're all a little odd, there's something with all of us [*we hebben allemaal wel wat*]. (personal communication, December 17, 2020)

Els brings this view into practice in her teaching. On a regular afternoon, Els moves toward her class. She chats amiably with her students about the upcoming Easter weekend, and is about to let them in the classroom, when she jumps up and heads off, only to return a minute later, wearing a headband with large pink ears of an Easter bunny in her hair. "I almost forgot my ears!" she quickly whispers to me, and with a wide gesture and a shake of her pink bunny-eared headband, she turns to her students, proclaiming: "Good morning, everyone! Are you looking forward to the days off?" (personal communication, March 29, 2021).

Els' words match the liberal perspective: She takes into account unequal starting positions and experiences. Everyone "has something," and as a teacher, Els makes room for that. Els tries to actively build in space to be crazy and different, for example, by wearing pink Easter bunny ears as if it were normal. Els takes a personal approach seriously, emphasizing her own individuality and that of her students. Her warm welcome "to the club" creates space for students to be themselves, and the silliness makes space to be "different," just like her.

Likewise, teacher Oscar, a man of color of around 50, wants to celebrate diversity as a multitude:

> We really do get students from all backgrounds, you know, we have LGBTQIA+ people…students with different sexual orientations, from different backgrounds, a rainbow of tones, economic backgrounds, family types, from families that are really conservative to very progressive, divorced parents, parents who are together. I myself also have a different [national] background…I have accepted that [this background] is what makes me a unique person. This is what I try to convey to my students as well: What are your strengths? What are your skills? Your qualities that make you unique? I use myself as an example…then [students] also start thinking: "Oh yes, okay. What do I have? What can I do? What makes me unique and sets me apart from the rest?" (interview, March 19, 2021)

Oscar recognizes diversity in myriad ways. He values and makes space for these different types of diversity, and celebrates difference as a characteristic with which people can stand out as unique and special.

The words of Mohan, a male teacher of color in his 50s, also resonate with a liberal perspective on diversity, although his words also indicate a critical perspective. He emphasizes the acknowledgement of differences and inequalities between students. Yet, like Els and Oscar, he also levels out personal distinctions with an individualized idea of diversity:

> Don't get me wrong: Treating people equally is pure discrimination. People are not the same. And if we do nothing about inequalities, we privilege mainly white, young men in our society. But you cannot achieve rapprochement without recognizing another human being in the other person. Inside, we are all the same: We all want recognition, appreciation, love. When discrimination occurs, you have to talk about it, from person to person. (interview, June 13, 2022)

In this depiction, Mohan discusses the discriminatory effects of equal treatment. His words express differences between people, and his mention of "white male privileges" invokes structural inequality where different treatment leads to discrimination and marginalization, matching critical perspectives on diversity. Inequalities and discrimination, in his view, must be contested. However, Mohan mainly emphasizes the similarities between people, stressing diversity ("not the same") as similarity ("all the same"), seeing personal, individual connections "from person to person" as the solution. This connects him to the liberal perspective.

These illustrations accentuate how teachers view diversity mainly at the individual level. Taking Els' account as an example, she mentions that "each of us" has "something." She reduces diversity to "having something," being an "outsider," a deviation from the norm. Although she seems to want to normalize diversity—"we are all different"—Els implicitly refers to what is often labeled as deficits: the use of medication, disabilities, ADHD, depression, or other "issues." Additionally, her promotion of Easter also reiterates the normalization of white, Christian-based traditions, pointing to conservative elements in a liberal perspective. In her

discussion of diversity, she acknowledges unequal starting positions, but, similarly to Oscar, does not identify them as possibilities for discrimination or racism, not even implicitly. From a liberal standpoint, Mohan, Oscar, and Els acknowledge difference, but claims such as "we all want the same" or "we are all unique" ultimately level out those differences.

From a liberal perspective, an individualized notion makes the diversity of different people interchangeable. It simultaneously highlights and downplays diversity as interpersonal differences and, moreover, prevents an understanding of inequality or exclusion at a structural or institutional level.

3.4. Diversity and a Deficit Perspective

Similar comments were made in conversation with teacher Lotte, a white woman in her 40s. In her description of diversity, we can see more clearly how the acknowledgement of diversity can become tied to a deficit perspective on diversity:

> I see diversity in a very broad sense. Diversity encompasses everything about [a person's] identity and everything in between. This includes taking students' prior knowledge into account. For me, this falls under diversity besides gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and cultural differences….When I started teaching at RUAS, I said things, formal words, terminology; my students didn't understand. I felt a sort of dilemma: What should I do? [*Wat kan ik nou doen?*] I can impose those words and terms on them and *make* them learn the concepts. Or I can adapt my lessons so that everyone understands. And I, well, noticed the second option was the best….As a teacher, you have to make sure that everyone can keep up. What about people from vocational schools, people from senior general secondary education, from pre-university education? Do they all have an equal chance to succeed in my subject? I realized I had to change. And that my nerdy terminology really was a bridge too far for most students. (interview, February 16, 2021)

In her response, Lotte uses terms such as "prior knowledge" and "unequal starting positions" of students, which relate to a liberal perspective on diversity. Comments such as "I realized I had to change" and "you have to make sure everyone can keep up" demonstrate Lotte's sense of responsibility for the needs and support of students to compensate for differences. In her class, Lotte sees how students do not understand her "nerdy" terminology and interprets this as a difference in prior knowledge that she should make allowances for. And she questions the effect of prior education ("people from vocational schools…from senior general secondary education, from pre-university education") on equal opportunities. Where teachers like Els or Oscar seem to celebrate these differences, Lotte concludes that she "has to adapt her lessons," implying that students will not understand her "nerdy" language. This shows a further individualization of disadvantage, and an understanding of students' knowledge as lacking (cf. Yosso, 2005), echoing a dominant conviction of deficit thinking in the Netherlands (Ghorashi, 2006; Ponzoni et al., 2017). The adaptation is well-intended, "taking into account" differences among students, but in fact implies low expectations of students who otherwise would not be able to "keep up." Such interpretations actually reiterate marginalized positions and existing disparities, by which teachers may unintentionally perpetuate and reproduce inequalities.

In this part of the article, I have described how different teachers express diversity perspectives. A conservative perspective on diversity is less prominent in expressions of teachers at RUAS, as is a critical

perspective. A liberal perspective on diversity is consistent with most expressions of teachers at RUAS. Diversity is acknowledged, but understood as an individual characteristic: a starting position, a need, a "something" that everyone has. Inclusion, then, is understood as "making space" for each person. In this liberal view, teachers mention experiences of exclusion, such as discrimination or racism, but understand this from an individualized form of diversity, in which "everyone is different" and where connection and support arise "from person to person."

However, as I argued in the introduction, teachers' diversity beliefs should not be understood as static definitions, but as part of dynamic and relational points within higher education contexts. In the next section, I therefore investigate how teachers interact, exchange, and negotiate their diversity beliefs within the dynamic and relational context of resistance and potential transformation.

4. Teachers' Negotiations on Diversity Beliefs

A good example to show how teachers interact, exchange, and negotiate diversity beliefs at RUAS is the workshop for new employees, as employees are introduced to the diversity and inclusion policy of RUAS. Every term, RUAS organizes a session, hosted by trainers of the Inclusivity Project Group. On April 16, 2021, I joined an online session. In the large gallery view of Microsoft Teams, I see almost all of the 34 attendees appear on my screen: small squares as a fan of colors from people's dress, furniture, plants, or bookcases in the background. One person is sitting in a dark living room, another in a study full of things. Someone carries a child on their lap.

"Welcome! I am Ricky Byawhu," the host says, and he lists names of people joining online: "I see Jannie joining us. Welcome, Jannie. And Marita. Welcome as well." The first hour includes an online coffee visit with the chair of the Executive Board, Ricky explains and adds: "The second hour includes a workshop by Gerry." In the top left corner of my screen, I see a woman waving, and Ricky continues: "It is on diversity and inclusion. Very important themes for Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences."

The first hour shows a highly interactive conversation with several attendees discussing the university's direction with the chair. In the second hour, Gerry, a woman of color of around 50, appears on screen and introduces herself as a teacher and member of the Inclusivity Project Group. "To give you an impression of the importance of the topics, we have created a quiz with a number of questions about diversity and inclusion in our university," Gerry explains.

She shares her screen and explains how attendees can join. The screen is full of red, blue, green, and yellow squares while upbeat music plays. At an accelerating pace, first slow then faster, participants' names appear: Hans, Annelien, Gerlaine, Annemarie, Marita, Odette, Casper, and so on. Gerry starts the quiz and shows the first question: "How many employees with an 'occupational disability' did the university hire since the implementation of the Participation Act in 2015?" Four options are shown, and when the timer runs out, we see the correct answer: "It is 43 employees, unfortunately," Gerry says, and briefly explains the goal of the Participation Act. The next question, on the academic success of "*autochtone* [native] women from *havo* [general secondary education]," evokes a chat response: "*Autochtone* really is an outdated concept," Annelien writes. "You're absolutely right," Gerry says, "but there are only limited characters available, so we couldn't elaborate further."

The third question concerns the success of "male students with a non-Western background from vocational (*mbo*) and senior general secondary education (*havo*)" in their first year. It appears that only 20 percent obtain all 60 credits and thus pass their first year. Gerry: "We see huge differences in study success between boys and girls in higher education. Apparently, we offer education that is more inclusive for girls than for boys."

Another participant, named Annemarie, responds: "In my experience as a secondary school teacher, I saw how non-Western students, like those from Iran and Syria, are extremely disciplined." Gerry replies that, of course, you cannot generalize about non-Western students: "We also have international students, and some of the students who are characterized as non-Western are born and raised here. What the term measures is the so-called Dutch background: whether both parents were born in the Netherlands or not." She then emphasizes:

> My point here is that we are not inclusive. Apparently, we discriminate on points that should not be relevant in education. For example, because we treat boys and girls differently. Or we differentiate between students from vocational education (*mbo*) and senior general secondary education (*havo*).

The chat reflects an active discussion and shows how participants disagree with the quiz content and phrasing: "Ethnicity is not the same as socioeconomic status!" a participant says. Another participant asks whether numbers are also available for Syrian refugee students, and a third asks what the university does against unequal treatment.

Gerry keeps her spirits up and shows the last question: "How much more often do students who do not fit into the male/female category and/or who are not heterosexual experience study delays?" For participant Hans, this crosses a line, and in the chat, he adds: "I refuse to answer this question!" Gerry asks him why. "I don't want to think in terms of categories," he explains verbally and adds: "I also think we shouldn't collect these numbers." The chat shows praise and support: "Hooray, Hans!" says one person. Another says: "Fair points, Hans!"

This exchange illustrates how teachers interact, exchange, and negotiate their diversity beliefs within the dynamic and relational context of resistance and potential transformation at RUAS. The first thing that becomes clear from the workshop's exchange is that multiple views on diversity exist at RUAS. In the workshop leaders' words, a liberal perspective can be recognized, as differences and disparities are acknowledged, but understood from an individual point of view. This becomes clear in contrast with the participants' reactions, who relate diversity and differences to structural inequalities, as I will explain below. A conservative diversity perspective does not seem to be expressed here. Also, it becomes clear that these views are not aligned. This is shown from the first criticism of Annelien on the outdatedness of the word "*autochtone*" and Gerry's indication of limited word count in defense, to Hans' refusal and the support this gains from other participants, as an act of resistance to the dominant view that seems represented by the workshop leader.

Secondly, it shows how the dominant perspective on diversity, as expressed in the questions of the quiz and Gerry's responses, is critiqued but also upheld and countered, using power-laden expressions similar to "how we do things around here." The workshop seems intended to point out the existence of structural exclusion "of boys over girls," and "non-Western students" at RUAS. Despite criticism of words and phrasing, workshop leader Gerry defends the choices made in the workshop in several ways. She justifies them by indicating practical limitations ("word limit"), and she wards off criticism by reiterating "the point" of the workshop. It is

as if she says that, despite possible unfortunate phrasings, participants should conclude that the university "apparently discriminates" and offers education that is "more inclusive for girls than for boys" or more welcoming for students from senior secondary education (*havo*) than from vocational education (*mbo*). In her response, Gerry does not directly discard critical questions, but does not truly engage with them either. The workshop leader does not divert from her path and instead dictates "how we should understand things around here" (cf. Ahmed, 2012). The *how*, i.e., how structural exclusion and apparent discrimination at RUAS come about, is not in question, even when this is related to the point that the workshop intends to make.

Yet, several participants challenge this dominant view in the chat and through verbal interventions. Annelien questions the use of outdated concepts, such as "*autochtone*." *Autochtone* and *allochtone* are Dutch conceptions to mark a difference between Dutch citizens. And although a full discussion of the debate is beyond the scope of this article, several scholars have pointed out how these terms use a stigmatizing, racialized perspective on presumed nativeness, by which parts of the Dutch population are perpetually excluded from equal rights and treatment as citizens (van Reekum, 2016; Yanow & van der Haar, 2013). Based on her remark, it seems that for Annelien, the use of "outdated" concepts does not reflect an inclusive position. Other participants question the derogatory and homogenizing presentation of "non-Western" students by providing varied examples that add nuance. In doing so, they challenge assumptions about the homogeneity of "non-Western" groups and identify the implicit negative associations that the question implies.

Hans' refusal to answer the last question, finally, also points to an objection to the workshop's language use, even when his wish "not to categorize" is more ambiguous. It could indicate objection to distinction per se (i.e., colorblindness); to a stigmatizing causation of students' identities with educational disadvantages; to *this* question but not the previous, e.g., because of the topic of sexuality; or, as cheers of other participants suggest, to exclusionary language use, that "categorizes" students only as deviation of an assumed middle point and dominant norm (*not* male/female, *not* heterosexual), that reproduces an exclusionary binary, heterosexist perspective.

Besides negotiations of diversity beliefs related to resistance and potential transformation, we also see how taken-for-granted positions come to the fore by "troubling" the assumed natural categories. Through the critical comments of several teachers, the dominant view on diversity and inclusion at RUAS becomes visible, which would have otherwise remained largely unexamined. By putting "uncontestable categories that should not be discussed" up for discussion, the teachers expose how power gets naturalized (cf. Ahmed, 2012), as demonstrated in the workshop leader's disciplining attempts to get participants to "understand the point." Rather than leaving structural aspects of inequality in the background, through which a liberal perspective on diversity can be reinforced as the dominant view in higher education, objections and criticisms by participating teachers interrupt this process and make visible what before "receded from view" (Ahmed, 2012, p.21). The exchange described above points to the relevance of understanding teachers' diversity beliefs in dynamic and relational contexts.

5. Conclusion

As most Western societies are becoming increasingly more diverse, as Agirdag et al. (2014) point out, school boards, policymakers, and classroom teachers are searching for appropriate ways to serve these diverse

student bodies. Many higher education institutions respond by developing diversity policies, and, as is common with educational policies, teachers, i.e., academic staff involved in teaching, are commonly approached as the primary policy actors (Brown et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2021). Teachers are seen as prominent change agents for higher education transformations.

However, as I have argued in the introduction, change in higher education is often slow. In the case of diversity policy, this is frequently related to the perceptions and beliefs of teachers and other academic staff. Nevertheless, research on teachers' diversity beliefs in European contexts is missing. Therefore, in this article, I have analyzed teachers' diversity beliefs in the superdiverse setting of RUAS, the Netherlands, to overcome this hiatus and gain insights into its potential for higher education transformation. Because of the contextual factors that influence the frequently slow pace of change in higher education, I have also pointed to the need to investigate teachers' diversity beliefs in dynamic and relational educational contexts, for which an ethnographic research approach is fitting. Therefore, besides an overview of existing diversity beliefs of teachers, I have also analyzed the positions, negotiations, and navigations of these beliefs in the educational context of RUAS.

To investigate how we can understand diversity beliefs of Dutch higher education teachers in relation to transformation for diversity and inclusion, I first analyzed expressions and experiences of teachers at RUAS using a threefold framework of teachers' diversity perspectives. In my findings, a conservative perspective on diversity, which avoids diversity from meritocratic belief and out of fear for discrimination, and a critical perspective, which understands diversity, difference, and inequality on a structural level, are the least observed. A liberal perspective on diversity, which acknowledges and celebrates diversity but understands it mainly as individual characteristics, seems most common at RUAS. Additionally, I showed how this perspective can become tied to a deficit approach, and how teachers can unintentionally reiterate the inequalities they intend to counter. This overview can support the understanding of teachers' diversity beliefs in European contexts.

However, my findings also raise questions on the distinction between these perspectives, as teachers employ different diversity perspectives simultaneously. Teachers like Els simultaneously employ elements of a liberal and a conservative perspective on diversity. Other teachers like Mohan use liberal and critical viewpoints on diversity at the same time. Moreover, my analysis of the exchange of diversity beliefs between teachers in a RUAS workshop on diversity and inclusion more clearly demonstrated the concurrent existence of different and at times colliding teachers' diversity beliefs. Together with overlapping and colliding teacher expressions, this then challenges the usefulness of dividing teachers' diversity beliefs into separate categories. Instead of this separation, researchers should conceptualize the categories as inherently relational, contextual, and dynamic.

Additionally, my analysis of the workshop's exchange made clear how RUAS representatives advocated the preservation of dominant perspectives, with reference to "how we should understand things around here," a disciplining claim where the "how" is presented as a self-evident norm that needs no clarification. Yet, the negotiations and navigations of critical participants on the underlying diversity beliefs revealed how previously invisible principles can come to the fore. These interactions on resistance, by making visible what otherwise "recedes from view" (Ahmed, 2012), show how teachers can use diversity beliefs to achieve steps toward higher education transformation.

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Conflict of Interests

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