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Social competence as an educational goal: The role of the ethnic composition and the urban environment of the school

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Abstract

This article concerns the relationship between social–educational goals and the school context. We used a questionnaire to map the educational goals of teachers in pre-vocational education in the field of social competence, and investigated whether these goals were related to the percentage of students from ethnic-minority groups and to the urban environment of the school. The results show that all teachers, regardless of the school context, value promoting the social development of their students as an educational goal. We did not find a relationship between the context the teachers work in and the social-competence goals they aspire to in their subject. However, teachers working in a more complex school environment, in terms of both the ethnic heterogeneity of the student population and the urban environment of the school, did consider a number of social-competence goals to be less attainable for their students. The results are discussed in the light of research on the competences young people need to participate in a multi-cultural society and the implications for teachers and teaching.
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1. Introduction

The role of teachers in the social development of students has become a widely discussed theme in education in recent years, owing to public concern about social cohesion in present-day society. The lack of social cohesion, or threat thereof, particularly applies to environments with many population groups that differ socially and culturally (Gordon, 2003; Hansen, 2001). Like most other West-European countries, the Netherlands has rapidly developed into a multi-ethnic society over the last 20–30 years (see Rijkschroeff, ten Dam, Duyvendak, de Gruijter, & Pels, 2005). Currently over 50% of secondary-school students in the large cities in the Netherlands are first and second-generation migrants from Turkey, Morocco, Surinam, the Antilles and several African countries. Today's young people are expected to learn how to acquire the 'social capital' (Putnam, 1993, 2000), i.e. the attitudes, knowledge and skills, needed to be able to function in such a social context. All schools need to prepare their students to participate in a democratic and multi-cultural society but schools situated in a culturally complex setting have to fulfil this task in a specific context. They are often directly confronted with the social tensions inherent

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in a multi-ethnic society (Leeman, 2006; Paulle, 2005).

Against this background, schools strive to achieve many and diverse types of objectives concerning the social development of students. The focus may, for example, be on the personal well-being of the student, with objectives like improving students' self-confidence or their attitude towards learning. The quality of the interaction between individuals is another important social goal, including objectives like respect for others and tolerance for social differences. Finally, goals regarding the relationships between social groups may be encountered (Boyd & Arnold, 2000; see also Ennis, 1994).

Recent Dutch research shows that the orientation of teachers' objectives regarding the social development of students indeed varies from working on students' self-confidence and their ability to cope, to wanting to stimulate their sense of social responsibility and knowledge of society (Zwaans, ten Dam, & Volman, 2006). Thus teachers' answers to the questions, 'From which perspective should social goals be chosen and evaluated?' and 'Which aspects of social competence should be part of the development of children and young people in present-day society?', appear to vary. The literature pays little attention, however, to the factors determining teachers' orientation on social–educational goals. This article explores the extent to which teachers' opinions regarding social–educational goals are formed by the context in which they work.

2. Social competence and the school context

Two perspectives on the social development of young people can be differentiated in research on social competence: an 'educating for adulthood' perspective and an 'educating for citizenship' perspective (ten Dam & Volman, 2007). In the 'educating for adulthood' perspective, social competence is related to the age or specific phase of development of a child (see e.g. Englund, Levy, Hyson, & Sroufe, 2000; Jackson & Bijstra, 2000). The term 'social competence' is used to denote the intended outcome of guidance and instructional strategies to enhance the pro-social development at student level. It refers to the totality of knowledge, skills and attitudes which students need to fulfil developmental tasks, such as making friends or co-operating with peers (e.g. Elias & Weissberg, 1994; Raver & Zigler, 1997; Rose-Krasnor, 1997).

In the citizenship perspective the focus is on the demands that are made on young people to be able to function as citizens in a democratic, multicultural (plural) society. Mainly concepts like character education, moral education and democratic education are used in the literature to denote the societal element of social competence. The importance of enhancing students' social development is seen more in the light of 'social tasks' (cf. Rychen & Salganik, 2003) than of developmental tasks (which every individual is confronted with in a particular order in his or her development) in this perspective. Social tasks explicitly refer to functioning in a group or more broadly in society. These are tasks that everyone must be able to fulfil and that are inherently social, such as participating in society and dealing with social differences (e.g. Glass, 2000; Kaplan, 1997; Kerr, 1999; Rychen & Salganik, 2003; Solomon, Watson, & Battistich, 2001; van der Wal, 2004). Yet social competence encompasses more than participating in a given society; socially competent citizens must also be able to make their own critical contribution to society (ten Dam & Volman, 2003; Veugelers & Vedder, 2003; Wardekker, 2001). 'Reflection' is, therefore, seen as an essential aspect of social competence because it increases the quality of participation.

The 'educating for adulthood' perspective puts a relatively high emphasis on problem behaviour and the identification of young people at risk. The 'educating for citizenship' perspective, on the other hand, emphasizes more explicitly that education must aim at cognitive and social goals for all children.

Social competence is a normative concept. What is considered to be desirable from the 'educating for adulthood' perspective and/or the social perspective is not free of values and does not by definition apply to everyone in the same way. Hence, the answer to the question, 'Which components of social competence should form part of the development of children and young people?', depends on the society in which they are or will be participating.

Participation in a multi-ethnic society is an important reason for enhancing social competence. Emphasizing the importance of this objective is not restricted to just one of the perspectives on social competence mentioned above. The two different perspectives do place different accents, however, in their elaboration of this objective.

The 'educating for adulthood' perspective pays attention to the intrapersonal and interpersonal

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components of social competence, such as fostering students' self-confidence and working on their social and communicative skills (see ten Dam & Volman, 2007). This results in an exploration of the consequences of growing up in a multi-cultural society, in particular the consequences for interaction between young people. Being able to form interracial friendships in modern society, for example, requires multi-cultural sensitivity (Hunter & Elias, 2000). Young people must be capable of working together and communicating effectively with people from different cultural backgrounds and show respect and understanding for cultural diversity. This has been defined as a liberal form of multi-culturalism (Leeman & Ledoux, 2003).

Within the 'educating for citizenship' perspective the accent is on the societal components of social competence and on critical reflection regarding social structures and social relations (see ten Dam & Volman, 2007). In line with this, special attention is paid to the balance of power between different ethnic groups, as well as to the conflicts and processes of negotiation regarding cultural differences (cf. Ogbu, 1993, 2003 about the importance of the interpretation of cultural differences). Young people must acquire insight into the social structure of the multi-ethnic society and learn to deal with social tensions (see also Boyd & Arnold, 2000; Naval, Print, & Veldhuis, 2002; Print & Coleman, 2003). This 'critical approach to the multi-cultural society' (Leeman & Ledoux, 2003) is less accepted in society than the liberal form of multi-culturalism mentioned earlier (Gutman, 1994). This possibly applies even more to a concept of education that traditionally places a major accent on liberal values like individual development.

Within the broader context of society that young people are part of, orientations on objectives in the field of social competence are linked to the specific context in which one is supposed to act in a socially competent way (cf. Foster-Clark & Blyth, 1992). In this article, we focus on two characteristics of the context in which teachers try to achieve social goals: the degree of urbanization of the school environment and the schools' student population.

The ethnic composition of the student population is an important factor in creating the school environment in which students live and learn (see Leeman & Pels, 2006; Paulle, 2005). No empirical research has been done, however, on the relationship between social competence as an educational goal and the school context as determined, for example, by the ethnic composition of the student population. Research does show that teachers' expectations of students, which are partly determined by students' ethnic background, have an influence on the cognitive learning content offered to these students and on their achievements (e.g. Farkas, 2003; Oates, 2003). Other research shows the influence of the social-ethnic composition of the student population on classroom processes (Elbers & de Haan, 2004) and on cognitive and social–educational outcomes (see e.g. Peetsma, van der Veen, Koopman, & van Schooten, 2003; Verkuyten & Thijs, 2000). Such research, however, is not about the social goals aspired to by teachers.

Several studies relate the ethnic composition of the student population to the possibilities, or lack thereof, for intercultural education. Intercultural education is considered to be important for all students, with a view to democratic citizenship in a multi-cultural society. Until recently, it was argued that ethnically heterogeneous schools had 'an advantage' in this respect (Fase, 1993; Leeman & Ledoux, 2003). They were supposed to have more resources, i.e. their ethnically heterogeneous student population, to give shape to intercultural education (see e.g. Paccione, 2000). In the last few years, the emphasis has shifted to the demands ethnic heterogeneity in schools puts on students and teachers, in terms of maintaining a task-oriented learning climate (cf. Paulle, 2005). We wonder whether the degree of heterogeneity in schools is in any way reflected in the kinds of objectives teachers aspire to in the field of social competence. Do schools differ in the aspects of social competence they particularly pay attention to, according to the composition of their student population?

The second context factor in our study is the *environment of the school in which students have to learn* to act in a socially competent way. The social tasks, for example, young people are confronted with in large cities, are different to those in less urbanized areas, which implies that other components of social competence are demanded. Gordon (2003) describes the challenges of functioning and growing up in an urban environment (see also Zhou, 2003). The presence of many different population groups (in terms of ethnic and cultural background and social–economic position) with different interests and points of view, groups that are dependent on each other in all manner of ways, makes conflict

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almost unavoidable. 'The city' makes relatively heavy demands on the ability of young people to deal with cultural differences and social tensions. It supposes that youngsters acquire insight into social processes. The high population density in cities facilitates on the one hand a great diversity of social contact. On the other hand, it is an invitation to withdraw into anonymity or it prompts clashes between groups (Spierings, 2003). From the point of view that social cohesion is important for society, young people in the large cities in particular are expected to have social capital that contributes to this cohesion. Young people must have the ability to create 'bonding' within a group, to realize the relationship between groups ('bridging') and to contribute to the relationships between individuals, groups and institutions ('linking') (Green & Preston, 2001; Putnam, 1993, 2000). We therefore expected teachers in schools in the big cities to pay more attention to the competences young people need to live in a socially heterogeneous environment than teachers in schools in small or medium-sized towns. As far as we know, there is no empirical research investigating this relationship.

This article focuses on the extent to which teachers in diverse educational contexts strive for different types of objectives, under the general heading of 'social competence'. Earlier, we expounded on two factors of the context in which teachers aspire to social-competence goals. These factors are linked, but do not always coincide. From an ethnic point of view, schools in the large Dutch cities are situated in more varied social environments than schools in small and medium-sized towns in the Netherlands. Generally, Dutch schools in a big-city environment have an ethnically heterogeneous student population but this is not necessarily the case (Karsten, Ledoux, Roeleveld, Felix, & Elshof, 2003). The increasing segregation in education has resulted in the emergence of predominantly 'white' and 'black' schools, particularly in the large cities. We have therefore divided the general question posed by this article into two subquestions:

(1) To what extent are the social-competence goals teachers strive for and consider to be attainable linked to the ethnic composition of the student population of the school?
(2) To what extent are the social-competence goals teachers strive for and consider to be attainable linked to the degree of urbanization of the school?

These questions have been investigated in prevocational education in the Netherlands. For this purpose, we formulated the following hypotheses. Firstly, we assumed that the objectives teachers strive for in the field of social competence are linked to the ethnic composition of the student population. Teachers in more heterogeneous schools will be more aware of the social baggage required by their students to function in society than teachers in more homogeneous schools. Therefore, we expected that the more heterogeneous the student population of a school is, the more attention teachers will pay to the societal and reflective components of social competence (citizenship perspective). At the same time, they are confronted with the complexity of living and learning together in heterogeneous classrooms and the resulting social tensions. This context may influence how they perceive the attainability of social-competence goals for their students. We therefore expected teachers in ethnically heterogeneous schools to consider social-competence goals to be less attainable for their students. This expectation applies equally to the components of social competence derived from (a) the 'educating for adulthood' perspective and (b) the 'educating for citizenship' perspective.

Secondly, we expected that the objectives teachers strive for in the field of social competence are related to the urban environment of the school. Elaborating on studies on 'social capital' for 'social cohesion' (Green & Preston, 2001; Putnam, 1993, 2000), we have formulated an analogous hypothesis to the one on the relationship between objectives in the field of social competence and the ethnic composition of the student population: the more complex students' urban environment is and the greater its diversity, we expected that teachers would pay proportionately more attention to the societal components of social competence (citizenship perspective). At the same time, we expected teachers to consider objectives for social competence to be less attainable for students in schools in the large cities, given that the demands made on this group of youngsters are greater than those made on youngsters in less urbanized areas. We expected this to apply to both the 'educating for adulthood' perspective and the 'educating for citizenship' perspective.

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3. Method

3.1. Research group and procedure

The data for this study are derived from a larger Dutch study on the goals for social competence which teachers strive for in stimulating and enhancing social competence in their students (Zwaans et al., 2006). In total, 284 teachers of grade-nine students (age 14–15) in pre-vocational education (teaching the Dutch language and a vocational subject, either care or technology) completed a questionnaire on learning objectives in the social domain. Pre-vocational education was chosen because of the relatively high percentage of ethnic-minority students. The teachers were selected on the basis of an a—selective random sample.

The response to the questionnaire was 37%. Of the respondents, 36% were female and 64% were male. A non-response survey showed no difference between the non-response group and the response group in the extent to which they consider social competence to be an important educational goal.

The research data were supplemented with data from the Dutch Ministry of Education on the percentage of students from ethnic-minority groups in the respondents' schools[1] and on the degree of urbanization of the location of the respondents' schools. We used the unique identity code of every school in the Netherlands to make this match possible, which did indeed prove possible for 269 of the 284 respondents. This link between research data and administrative data from the ministry showed that the ethnic composition of the schools in the response group is on average 10% (SD 12%). The minimum number of ethnic-minority students in the data was 0%, the maximum 69%.

We determined the degree of urbanization of the schools of the 262 respondents on the basis of the place names. Twelve of the teachers who responded work at schools in an environment with a high level of urbanization (one of the four big cities in the Netherlands); 56 teachers at a school in an environment with an average level of urbanization (medium-sized towns); and 194 at a school in an environment with a low level of urbanization (rural areas).

As expected, there was a clear relationship between the degree of urbanization and the percentage of ethnic-minority students. In the schools in the large cities, 39% of the students belonged to an ethnic-minority group, 14% in the schools in the middle-sized cities and 7% in the other schools. Nevertheless, a small number of the schools with less than 2% ethnic-minority students were located in the large cities.

3.2. Instrument

The 'objectives of social competence' questionnaire is based on a conceptual framework for social competence as an educational goal developed by ten Dam and Volman (2007) as presented in Section 2. In this framework, components of the broad concept of social competence, which young people need to participate adequately in a democratic, multi-cultural society, were selected on the basis of two criteria:

(a) Contribution to social chances.
(b) Contribution to social responsibility.

The conceptual framework differentiates on the one hand between the intrapersonal, interpersonal and societal dimension of social competence; on the other, between attitudes, knowledge, reflection and skills.

Each compound in Fig. 1 was operationalized as an item representing a concrete goal, which teachers could or want to strive for. These goals, 39 in total, were included in the questionnaire in random order. Some examples of the survey items are shown below, to give an impression of the questionnaire:

[1] In Dutch educational policy, a student from an ethnic-minority group is a student who fulfils one of the following conditions:

- belongs to the Moluccan population group;
- at least one parent or guardian originates from Greece, Italy, former Yugoslavia, Cape Verde, Morocco, Portugal, Spain, Tunisia or Turkey;
- at least one parent or guardian originates from Surinam, Aruba or the Dutch Antilles;
- at least one parent or guardian has been admitted to the Netherlands by the Minister of Justice as an alien under article 15 of the Aliens Act;
- at least one parent or guardian originates from another non-speaking English country outside Europe, with the exception of Indonesia.

Schools receive proportionately more funding for ethnic-minority students to rectify their greater disadvantage (a so-called 'weighting factor').

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	Intrapersonal	Interpersonal	Societal
Attitude	Self-confidence	Confidence in other people	Democratic
	Self-respect	Respect for other people	Equality and equivalence
		Involvement with other people	Equity / care
	Willing to take responsibility for one's own actions	Willing to take responsibility for relationships with other people	Willing to take responsibility for and to participate in society
	Self-reliance, in the sense of daring to set one's own course	Willing to enter into dialogue with other people	Willing to listen to other people
Knowledge	Self-knowledge	Knowledge of social rules and manners	Knowledge of society
Reflection	critical insight into one's own wishes, abilities and motives	Critical insight into the wishes, abilities and motives of other people	Insight into the social structure of society
		Insight into group processes	Insight into social processes (inclusion and exclusion)
		Insight into the influence of one's own actions on other people	Insight into the influence of the social structure of society on intrapersonal and interpersonal functioning
			Insight into one's own capabilities and incapabilities to act in relation to the social structure of society
Skills	Regulation skills (regulation of one's own impulses and emotions, self-control, self-discipline)		
		Social-communicative skills	Being able to handle cultural differences and differences regarding social position / status
		Being able to change perspective	Being able to handle social tensions

[i]Source: ten Dam & Volman, 2007

Fig. 1. Components of social competence (*Source*: ten Dam & Volman, 2007).

Intrapersonal dimension:

- confidence in your own abilities, thinking and behaviour (attitude);
- self-knowledge (knowledge);
- understand what you are good at and what you are not good at, understand why that is (reflection) and
- show self-discipline, be able to control your emotions and impulses (skill).

Interpersonal dimension:

- be willing to take responsibility for your relationships with other people (attitude);

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- know what conduct is appropriate in a situation, know social rules (knowledge);
- understand how the things you say and do influence other people (reflection) and
- be able to hold a conversation with different people in diverse situations (skill).

Societal dimension:

- be willing to strive for justice, be engaged with other people and stand up for them (attitude);
- know about the structure of society (knowledge);
- understand how some groups of people are being excluded due to prevailing opinions, practices and habits (reflection) and
- be able to manage differences between people regarding e.g. ethnicity, religion, social status (skill).

The teachers were asked to answer four questions in the following order on each item in the survey:

(a) Do you think this item is an important developmental goal for youngsters? (existence of goal).
(b) Is fostering this item an educational task of the school? (goal for school).
(c) Do you consider this item to be an attainable goal for your students? (attainable goal).
(d) Should this item also be addressed within the subject you teach? (subject goal).

Questions (a), (b) and (d) are in a hierarchical order of increasing engagement with social competence as an educational goal. Question (c), however, is different. It concerns the extent to which teachers consider their own students can attain social-competence goals, regardless of the importance attached to these goals. The four questions were formulated in this way for the following reason. By asking about a specific item in different ways we intended to tackle the problem of socially desirable responses. We assumed that few teachers would admit that they do not think social competence is important. (Who does not consider it to be an important issue?) Question (a), and to a lesser extent question (b) gave the teachers the opportunity to show that they were not 'against' social competence. Having been able to express this, they would then be less likely to give socially desirable responses to questions (c) and (d). The data confirmed this supposition (see Table 1). Hence, we decided to include only questions (c) and (d) in the analyses. Teachers were asked to indicate their opinion about the objectives of social competence on a 3-point scale, with 1 meaning 'no', 2 'slightly' and 3 'yes'.

The questionnaire also asked for background information: age, gender, teaching experience, levels and domains of the curriculum in the teachers' schools (general secondary or pre-vocational education, technology or care), the subject(s) taught by the teacher (Dutch, vocational subject), and the denomination of the school (Protestant, Catholic, Muslim, state and other). Lastly, the respondents were given the opportunity to make additional comments on the results at the end of the questionnaire and to indicate whether they would like to receive the report on the research results.

In a pilot study, we checked whether the questionnaire was suitable for teachers in pre-vocational education. Some of the questions were then reformulated. Table 2 gives the Cronbachs alpha value for each scale. The average score for the items has been calculated per scale. In addition, average scores were calculated for the 'educating for adulthood' and the 'educating for citizenship' perspectives. For the former, these are the scores for the aspects in the intrapersonal and interpersonal columns with the exception of the items on reflection. For the latter, these are the items in the societal column, including all the items on reflection.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics on the scores for the questions on social competence as a general educational goal, an educational task of the school, attainability of objective and objective for own subject ($N = 284$)

	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
A: General educational goal	2.08	3.00	2.83	0.18	−1.42	1.97
B: Educational task of the school	1.48	3.00	2.69	0.27	−1.07	1.64
C: Attainability of objective	1.33	3.00	2.23	0.31	0.27	0.37
D: Objective for own subject	1.35	3.00	2.45	0.37	−0.32	−0.72

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3.3. Analyses

To answer the first research question on the relationship between the social-competence goals, which teachers pursue and consider attainable, and the ethnic composition of the student population of the school, we calculated the non-parametric correlations between the scales (Spearman's ρ for dimensions and aspects of social competence—see Tables 3 and 4) and the percentages of students from ethnic-minority groups. As indicated above, we expected a positive relationship between the percentage of students from ethnic-minority groups and the extent to which teachers pay attention to the societal components of social competence (the citizenship perspective) and a negative relationship with the extent to which they consider these objectives attainable for their students. We have operationalized the degree of ethnic heterogeneity in schools as the percentage of students from ethnic-minority groups.

This research does not include, as already mentioned, any schools with a homogeneous ethnic-minority population; the highest percentage of students from ethnic minorities is 69%. Only seven schools in our data have a student population with more than 50% from an ethnic-minority background. A starting point of this research was, therefore, that the higher the percentage of ethnic-minority students in a school is, the ethnic heterogeneity will also be higher.[2] In calculating the correlations, we have repeatedly checked whether they are linear. When this is not the case, we will point this out below.

To answer the research questions, we will present per sub-question (d, c), the average scores for the different dimensions (intrapersonal, interpersonal and societal), aspects (attitudes, knowledge, reflection and skills) and perspectives ('educating for adulthood' perspective and 'educating for citizenship' perspective) in relation to the degree of urbanization (big cities, medium-sized cities and others), and in relation to the heterogeneity of the student population. With the help of non-parametric correlations (Spearman's ρ) we have tested whether there was evidence of significant correlations. We have also checked, with the help of partial correlations, whether any of the correlations found are still evident when controlling for the background characteristics of gender and the subject taught by the teachers.

Table 2
Reliability of the scales (dimensions and aspects of social competence) (Cronbach's alpha for the questions on social competence as an attainable objective and objective for own subject)

	Attainable goal	Objective for own subject
Items/aspects		
Attitude	0.88	0.89
Knowledge	0.70	0.61
Reflection	0.83	0.88
Skills	0.82	0.81
Items/dimensions		
Intrapersonal	0.80	0.82
Interpersonal	0.88	0.88
Societal	0.86	0.91

4. Results

All teachers, regardless of the school context, appear to be in favour of social competence as an educational goal. Their answers to the questions on the attainability of the various social-competence goals and whether these objectives should indeed be worked on in their subjects are positive.

When looking at the difference between the attainability question and the question on the social-competence goals teachers strive for in their own subject, it appears that they score lower for all social-competence goals in the first question (attainability, mean = 2.23) than in the second (own subject, mean = 2.45) (see Table 1).

Regardless of the ethnic composition of the school and the degree of urbanization of its environment, all the teachers score lower for the 'educating for citizenship' perspective than for the 'educating for adulthood' perspective. This is true of both the attainability (mean citizenship perspective = 2.1; mean adulthood perspective = 2.3) and the extent to which social-competence goals are considered to be objectives for teachers' own subject (mean citizenship perspective = 2.4; mean adulthood perspective = 2.6).

4.1. Ethnic composition of the school

Table 3 presents the results of the questionnaire. It shows that the ethnic composition of the student

[2] At schools with, for example, 60% students from an ethnic-minority background (and 40% majority students), the ethnic heterogeneity is higher than at schools with, for example, 40% minority students (and 60% majority students), as the ethnic origin of the group of minority students is diverse.

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Table 3
Correlations (Spearman's ρ) between scores on the question on social competence as an objective for own subject and as an attainable objective, by ethnic composition of the student population ($N = 269$)

Goal for own subject	Dimensions			Aspects			
% Ethnic minorities	Intra	Inter	Societal	Attitude	Knowledge	Reflection	Skills
Correlation	0.01	0.06	0.05	0.03	0.07	0.06	0.03
Attainable goal	Intra	**Inter**	Societal	**Attitude**	Knowledge	Reflection	**Skills**
Correlation	−0.09	**−0.12**	−0.10	**−0.13**	−0.08	−0.06	**−0.10**

Bold print = significant correlation ($p < 0.05$).

Table 4
Mean scores on the 'educating for adulthood' perspective and the 'educating for citizenship' perspective, by ethnic composition of the student population

Goal for own subject	Perspectives	
% Ethnic minorities	'Educating for citizenship' perspective	'Educating for adulthood' perspective
Correlation	0.06	0.04
Attainable objective		
% Ethnic minorities	'Educating for citizenship' perspective	**'Educating for adulthood' perspective**
Correlation	−0.08	**−0.14**

Bold print = significant correlation ($p < 0.05$).

population of the school is not related to the social-competence goals teachers say should be paid attention to in their subject. Teachers in schools in a relatively complex environment in terms of heterogeneity of the student population are thus not, contrary to what we expected, more aware of the social competences their students need.

The ethnic composition of the student population of the school, however, is indeed related to the objectives teachers consider to be attainable for their students. The more ethnically heterogeneous the school population is, the less attainable teachers consider the 'interpersonal goals'. The results show a similar trend for the 'intrapersonal goals' and the 'societal goals' (not significant). If we also look at the different aspects and dimensions of the concept of social competence, we see that teachers' estimation of attainability of the objectives for their students depends on the composition of the school population: the more ethnically heterogeneous the school population is, the lower teachers' expectations are of their students attaining the 'attitude objectives' and the 'skills objectives'. The differences between the 'knowledge goals' and the 'reflection goals' point in the same direction but are not significant. When controlling for the background characteristics of gender and subject taught by the teacher, the correlations remain practically the same.

In Section 2, two perspectives on the social development of young people were differentiated: an 'educating for adulthood' perspective and an 'educating for citizenship' perspective. With regard to our first research question, the results show that the more ethnically heterogeneous the student population is, the less attainable teachers consider the social-competence goals derived from the 'educating for adulthood' perspective to be. Differences between teachers regarding the social-competence goals derived from the 'educating for citizenship' perspective show the same tendency (n.s.) (Table 4).

4.2. Urban environment of the school

The results regarding the question on the extent to which the social-competence goals teachers strive

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for and consider attainable are linked to the degree of urbanization of the school show a similar picture (see Table 5). There appears to be no relationship between the objectives teachers say they want to work on in their subject. Our hypothesis that the complexity of an urban environment matters in terms of teachers' awareness of the social competences their students need was not confirmed.

Differences between teachers are apparent, however, regarding the objectives that they consider attainable for their students. The greater the degree of urbanization of the school, the less teachers think the 'intrapersonal goals' are attainable. The results on 'interpersonal goals' and the 'societal goals' show the same trend (n.s.). Teachers consider the 'attitude goals' to be proportionately less attainable for their students, the more urbanized the environment of the school is. The differences between the 'knowledge goals' and 'reflection goals' also show the same tendency (n.s.). The 'skills' aspects do not show this tendency. When controlling for the background characteristics of gender and subject taught by the teacher, the correlations remain practically the same.

An analysis in terms of the different perspectives on social competence (Table 6) shows first and foremost that teachers, regardless of the urban environment of the school, score lower on the 'educating for citizenship' perspective than on the 'educating for adulthood' perspective. There is a relationship between the urban environment of the school and the type of social-competence goals teachers consider to be attainable by their students. The more urban the environment of the school is, the less attainable teachers think the 'social-competence goals from the 'educating for adulthood' perspective' are. Once again, the differences between teachers regarding the social-competence goals derived from the 'educating for citizenship' perspective indicate the same tendency but are not significant.

5. Conclusions and discussion

In this article, we have differentiated two context factors, the ethnic composition of the student population and the degree of urbanization of the environment of the school, in relation to social competence as an educational goal. The focus of our study stems from the observation that social cohesion is decreasing in contemporary Western societies, and that this particularly applies to environments with many socially and culturally different population groups (Gordon, 2003). Today's young people are expected to learn how to acquire the 'social capital' to be able to function in such a social context. It is increasingly seen as a core task of education to prepare young people to participate in society (cf. Biesta & Lawy, 2006). To be able to do this in a responsible and adequate way, both the cognitive and the social development of students are important.

First and foremost, we conclude on the basis of the research results that all teachers, regardless of the school context, are in favour of social competence as an educational goal. Teachers agree that it

Table 5
Mean scores on the question on social competence as an objective for own subject and as attainable objective, by urban environment of the school

Objective for own subject	Dimensions			Aspects			
Urbanization	Intra	Inter	Societal	Attitude	Knowledge	Reflection	Skills
Large cities	2.6	2.6	2.2	2.4	2.4	2.4	2.5
Middle-sized cities	2.7	2.6	2.4	2.6	2.5	2.5	2.5
Others	2.6	2.6	2.3	2.5	2.4	2.5	2.4
Total	2.6	2.6	2.3	2.5	2.4	2.5	2.5
	Intra	**Inter**	Societal	**Attitude**	Knowledge	Reflection	**Skills**
Attainable goal							
Large cities	2.1	2.2	2.0	2.2	2.0	2.1	2.1
Middle-sized cities	2.2	2.2	2.0	2.2	2.1	2.2	2.1
Others	2.3	2.3	2.1	2.3	2.2	2.2	2.1
Total	2.3	2.2	2.1	2.2	2.1	2.2	2.1

Bold print = significant difference ($p<0.05$) between the groups.

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Table 6
Mean scores on the 'educating for adulthood' perspective and the 'educating for citizenship' perspective, by urban environment of the school

Objective for own subject	Perspectives		
Urbanization	'Educating for citizenship' perspective	'Educating for adulthood' perspective	*n*
Large cities	2.3	2.6	12
Middle-sized cities	2.5	2.6	56
Others	2.4	2.6	194
Total	2.4	2.6	262
Attainable goal			
Urbanization	'Educating for citizenship' perspective	**'Educating for adulthood' perspective**	
Large cities	2.1	2.2	12
Middle-sized cities	2.1	2.2	56
Others	2.2	2.3	194
Total	2.1	2.3	262

Bold print = significant difference ($p<0.05$) between the groups.

is part of their task to contribute to the social competence of their students. Their answers to the question whether social-competence objectives should be worked on in their subject are all positive. Our research procedure was designed to ensure that these were not just socially desirable answers. Teachers' answers to the questions on the attainability of the various social-competence goals are also positive, but less positive than those on the extent to which they think such goals should be worked on in their own subject. Another qualification of this general conclusion is that teachers score lower for the 'educating for citizenship' perspective than for the 'educating for adulthood' perspective. This is true of both the attainability of these goals and the extent to which they are considered to be objectives for teachers' own subjects. This is probably not surprising, since the 'educating for adulthood' perspective is the one that most closely relates to current discourses on teaching. In addition to a focus on knowledge building in these discourses, social skills and attitudes like motivation and self-esteem are now regarded as basic necessities for learning. The citizenship perspective may be contested more, as it is politically and ideologically more loaded than the educating for adulthood perspective (Zwaans et al., 2006).

We expected that the more complex the context of the school is (in terms of the ethnic heterogeneity of the student population and degree of urbanization), the more teachers would think that attention must be paid to the societal components of social competence (the 'educating for citizenship' perspective). At the same time, we expected that teachers in a more complex school context would consider social-competence goals less attainable for their students. Our study only partly confirmed the hypotheses formulated on the differences between teachers working in different contexts.

We could not find a relationship between the ethnic composition of the student population of the school and the social-competence goals teachers say they want to work on in their own subject. The expected relationship between the urban environment of the school and the types of social-competence goals teachers aspire to was also not evident. Teachers in schools in a relatively complex environment are thus not, as we supposed, more aware of the competences their students need to live in a socially heterogeneous environment, or at least, this was not apparent in the extent to which they want to work on social-competence goals in their own subject.

On the basis of the results of this research it can be concluded that both context factors—the 'heterogeneity of the school' and the 'degree of urbanization of the environment where the school is located'—are linked to teachers' opinions on the attainability of a number of social-competence goals. Teachers who work in a more complex school environment, both in the sense of the ethnic

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heterogeneity of the student population and of the urban environment of the school, are more often of the opinion that social-competence goals are less attainable for their students than their colleagues elsewhere. This pertains to the objectives derived from the 'educating for adulthood' perspective. In terms of aspects of social competence, this particularly pertains to attitudes and skills in the interpersonal dimension. Hence, this part of the 'attainability hypothesis' can be confirmed.

On the basis of the literature, we had expected to find a difference between the teachers working in different contexts concerning the social-competence goals derived from the 'educating for citizenship' perspective. We expected a low score by teachers in a more culturally diverse, large-city environment for the attainability of these objectives, owing to the complexity of the demands that are made on the social competence of their students. Teachers' opinions about the attainability of these objectives do indeed point in that direction but they are not statistically significant. Teachers in less complex environments also have a relatively low score on the attainability of goals derived from the citizenship perspective. A possible interpretation of this is that teachers at schools with a more homogeneous student population and in a less complex school environment are less likely to have the 'resources' at their disposal for preparing their students for participation in a multi-cultural society (cf. Leeman & Ledoux, 2003; Paccione, 2000).

Our results show that it is not necessary to convince teachers of the importance of social-competence goals. Teachers consider working on these goals to be part of their job. The fact that teachers generally score lower on the attainability questions than on the questions concerning the appropriateness of social-competence goals for their own subject, may indicate that they do not succeed in 'teaching social competence' to the extent that they would like to. In line with this, our study implies that teachers need support to achieve these goals.

Teachers' lower scores on the appropriateness and attainability of goals derived from the citizenship perspective compared with goals derived from the adulthood perspective may indicate that they require help in a particular domain. They probably find it harder to imagine how they can integrate 'citizenship goals' into the teaching of their own subject, and have less confidence in what they can achieve in this respect. This follows Biesta's (2007; see also Lawy & Biesta, 2006) conclusion that the contribution of schools to citizenship education is small compared with that of other social fields, such as the family, leisure, sport, etc. School offers the least opportunities for practising citizenship (e.g. taking initiative, having a say and being heard). However, if we want students to learn to act as competent citizens, we should not only pay attention to creating a more democratic school environment but also enable teachers to realize citizenship goals in their own teaching. Integrating citizenship education into the regular curriculum implies that students must learn to act and behave responsibly and adequately in society with the support of domain-specific knowledge and skills. Such learning goals refer, for example, to learning to think critically, learning values and to reflect on them, and to communicative skills. Although, there is increasing support in curriculum studies for this focus on citizenship education, empirical research into the effectiveness of the proposed teaching strategies appears to be non-existent (what do students actually learn?) (Schuitema, ten Dam, & Veugelers, 2008).

If our interpretation that different reasons underlie the relatively low attainability scores of citizenship goals in more complex and less complex school contexts is correct, this implies that teaching materials and methods for working on such goals should be sensitive to the contexts for which they are intended. The fact that teachers working in a more complex school environment consider social-competence goals derived from the 'educating for adulthood' perspective less attainable for their students than their colleagues elsewhere, indicates that teachers in these schools need extra support in this respect. Our results show that attitudes and skills in the interpersonal domain in particular are considered more difficult to achieve. We know from other empirical research that tense situations, which teachers have to react to in some way, do occur in daily educational practice (Leeman, 2006; Milner, 2006; Radstake, Leeman, & Meijnen, 2007). Teachers may interpret such situations in terms of students lacking attitudes and skills in the social domain. Likewise we know from research on teachers that citizenship values such as justice and care for others are under threat in the tense situations teachers experience in the classroom (Maslovaty, 2000; Tirri & Husu, 2002). Combining both types of research results, we suggest that teachers may experience the realization of the social-competence goals derived from the 'educating

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for adulthood' perspective as a prerequisite for being able to work successfully on the social-competence goals derived from the 'educating for citizenship' perspective. In these schools, teachers should be given support to develop ways of improving the patterns of interaction between teachers and students and between students themselves (cf. Fallona & Richardson, 2006). Creating opportunities for teachers to exchange 'good classroom practices' that go beyond getting students to behave in a certain way does seem to be especially important.

On the basis of our results, we have also formulated some issues for further research. Four themes require further attention. Firstly, now we know that differences exist between groups of teachers, qualitative research in particular is necessary to shed more light on the *motives* of different groups of teachers and individual teachers for paying more/less attention to certain social-competence goals (from both an 'educating for adulthood' perspective and an 'educating for citizenship' perspective). How do teachers decide which competences their students will need to be able to participate adequately in society, and in particular, what task do they see for education in this, and even more specifically, for their own school subject? Secondly, research regarding the *reasoning* of different groups of teachers and individual teachers on the attainability of the different types of objectives is important. To what extent do they relate the attainability of social-competence goals to the specific characteristics of the student population and/or to the resources of the school? Thirdly, 'social competence as an educational goal' demands research on the ways in which teachers give shape to teaching the different types of objectives. We need to know *what teachers actually do* to realize the objectives they consider to be important. Fourthly, the notion that the ability to 'bridge and link' are important in a democratic, multi-cultural society is an invitation to developmental research on *learning environments that contribute to citizenship competences* in different school contexts. What learning content and teaching methods are suitable for this? Teaching social competence as a special project might work to some extent but to improve the possibilities for transfer, it may be more desirable to integrate elements of social competence into subjects and learning areas. Research aimed at developing and evaluating both kinds of learning environments is essential.

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