Teaching in an inclusive classroom

Highlights from a literature study

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Teaching in higher education is an interesting subject to talk about. Nonetheless, it has become a growing challenge over time. The traditional teaching method of a teacher standing in front of a class and transferring knowledge to a group of students who 'only consume' has decreased over the years. A new kind of teacher is emerging: a coaching one, who facilitates and supports an active and critical study attitude in students, with the student as an intrinsically motivated youngster for his study. However, there is more to it. Providing a good education can be a complex process in itself, but the complexity has increased in the last ten to twenty years. This is partly because of the rapidly changing composition of the student population, for example by ethnic origin, but because also the context in which teachers teach has changed a lot. In the Netherlands, this is especially true in the area with the four biggest cities (the so-called Randstad area). Additionally, the student population also varies with other characteristics such as gender, previous education, social-economic status and religious background, physical and mental health, talent, commitment, motivation, involvement, and academic (study) skills (for an overview see also Kappe (2017) and Wolff & Baars (2017)). Moreover, it appears that certain groups (e.g. women and/or students without a migrant background and the pre-higher education tracks Havo and Vwo) have structurally more study success compared to other groups.

Today, the question is how can teachers, within this dynamic educational environment, keep as many students from such diverse backgrounds motivated and provide them with successful study experiences. In other words: how can we ensure that teachers in higher education provide inclusive learning in the - what Schneider and Preckel (2017) call - 'microstructure' oriented learning environment, in which every student, regardless of his or her background, a) is stimulated and free to show his or her talents and b) has equal opportunity. With microstructure, we not only mean what occurs in the classroom interactions between teachers and students but also what happens among students and how teachers react to it. In the following , we \address the following question based on various scientific insights and theories:

How can you, as a teacher in higher education, create and maintain an inclusive learning environment that focuses on microstructure?

The main expectation when asking questions such as this is that it will be answered with tips and tricks, bullet points and/or points of action for quickly accomplishing an inclusive classroom environment. This is also our ultimate outcome. However, it is not the whole story! Therefore, it is very important to indicate

which underlying mechanisms play a role in interactions between teachers and students. Moreover, the quality of inclusive teaching will improve if teachers are more aware of the impact of their behavior on students' achievement and the mechanisms behind this impact. In this way, teachers will know why certain action perspectives promote an inclusive learning environment.

Our argument consists of the following elements:

1. Mechanisms behind interactions between teachers and students
2. A safe learning environment for teachers
3. Suggestions for promoting an inclusive learning environment

Mechanisms behind interactions between teachers and students

According to Bourdieu (1989), the learning environment can be understood as a 'field'. Within this field, a wide range of players (such as teachers and students) move and specific rules and power relations apply. These rules are partly culturally determined, for example in a socio-economic, ethnic, gender, religious and/or generational sense and are expressed (explicitly or implicitly) in concrete interactions between teachers and students. These rules can be referred to as the 'institutional habitus'. Reay, David and Ball (2001) describe institutional habitus as 'the impact of a cultural group or social class on an individual's behaviour as it is mediated through an organisation' (see Thomas 2002: p. 430). In other words, an organisation (higher education institution) consists of a group of people (lecturers/teachers, student supervisors, management) who agree on who is considered as a 'good' student (for example in terms of the right attitude towards studying), and thereby influence the behaviour of individuals (students). Interactions between teachers and students will be more positive in those cases where the cultural capital of students - cultural capital, as elaborated by Bourdieu (1997), refers to 'knowledge of the norms, styles, conventions, and tastes that pervade specific social settings and allow individuals to navigate them in ways that increase their odds of success' (see: Massey, Charles, Lundy & Fischer, 2002, p.6)) - is more in line with the institutional habitus. In Thomas' vision (2002), teachers will more readily recognize, value and acknowledge the cultural capital of students with highly educated parents (because it fits within the 'institutional habitus') than that which students with less educated parents have to offer. As a result, students with highly educated parents are, because of their cultural capital, in a better position to acquire and increase their social capital (social capital, based on Putnam (2000) and Coleman (1988), refers in our case to relations and contacts that are relevant to achieve study success). In turn, this influences student's 'social and academic integration' (concepts introduced by Tinto, 1993) or the extent to which students feel part of the learning community in their institution ('sense of belonging'), and, ultimately, their study performances and study success. These insights are illustrated by Bourdieu based on social class, but can also be applied to other phenomena such as gender, religion, ethnic origin or a combination of these.

Inclusion and exclusion mechanisms are often not explicit. Instead, these mechanisms often work implicitly and/or unconsciously. Examples of these are 'implicit bias' and 'micro-aggression'.

According to Conaway & Bethune (2015) –referring to Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz (1998) - implicit bias consists of "actions or judgments that are under the control of automatically activated evaluation, without the performer's awareness of that causation". The authors continue with: 'this means that a person could be biased yet remain unaware they are projecting their judgments towards others. The literature suggests that these biases are displayed "actively unconsciously, involuntarily, and/or without one's awareness or intentional control" (Staats & Patton, 2013, p. 7)' (p.164). Research by Ferguson (2003) shows that implicit bias occurs in the classroom. For example: white teachers may, due to 'preconceived sets of expectations of particular students based on group membership such as race or ethnicity', unconsciously interact more often with white students, than with non-white students, which, implicitly, conveys the message that white students are smarter.

As a specific case of microaggression, racial microaggressions has been defined as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group" (Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007, p. 273). Micro-aggressions can occur in different forms, such as 'jokes' (e.g.: 'You're a moslim, aren't you? Then I'd better watch out, hahaha!") but also as well-meant compliments. A Dutch teacher who praises a student from migrant background by saying that she is pleasantly surprised by his Dutch writing skills, also sends the message that she didn't expect him to write so well because of his migrant background. Although a microaggression in itself can be perceived as harmless, a cumulation of these microagressions can sum up to a structural feeling of being excluded.

Mechanisms such as implicit bias and micro aggression may, in turn, affect students' performance. For example, in a test taking situation, members of a stereotyped group are unable to perform up to their full potential due to a performance inhibiting pressure not to fail. A concrete example are women who feel extra pressure to pass a mathematics test because of the stereotype that 'math is for boys' (see also: Nadler & Komarraju, 2016). This phenomenon is known as 'stereotype threat'.

A safe learning environment for teachers

The above may give the impression that teachers always act from a certain professional certainty. However, teachers themselves also have questions. Possible (reflective) questions are: How do I keep a group of students who are very diverse in harmony? Why do I manage to make contact with one student easily whilst other students remain alien to me? What does that say about me as a teacher and about my learning environment? Are my ways of teaching and testing more favorable for one group of students than for other groups in terms of learning process and study success?

The ability to reflect (how do I see myself in relation to others and how do I see the others?) appears to be an important skill in order to address these questions and is, ultimately, an important condition for achieving an inclusive learning environment. However, it isn't always easy to express and share doubts and challenges with others like teacher peers or the program management. Ghorashi (2006) states that when judgments are temporarily suspended and people listen to each other in a receptive way, they are able to connect to each other and create a (educational) context that promote such a safe space (see also: Banks (1993) and (2016)). Within this safe space, a debate can then be conducted on equal footing between teachers (and students). This new perspective on the reality, in which everyone is perceived and recognized, is a prerequisite for being able to act (De Jong and Nelis, 2018), and to further develop.

Suggestions for promoting an inclusive learning environment

In order to create and maintain an inclusive classroom, we believe, based on the above, that attention should be paid to the following themes, accompanied by some suggestions to make each theme more concrete to work on (see also: Radstake, Handgraaf, Van der Hulst, De Jonge & Roosloot (2010)):

Encouraging student motivation and involvement

Some suggestions:

- Providing learning material that connects to students daily lives and interests
- Teaching high quality content-based knowledge and skills
- Providing challenging assignments/exercises
- Stimulating interest for one's course among students
- Providing students with useful feedback

Structure and clarity

Some suggestions:

- Providing structure and clarity on rules of conduct in class/class culture
- Formulating clear learning objectives
- Designing a logical outline of lectures/classes
- Providing students with clear explanations
- Organizing small-scale educational settings

Culture of openness

Some suggestions:

- Stimulating positive relations between teachers and students and among students, combined with an attitude of reflection. Do not assume that teachers and students always have to agree with each other. Other outcomes are also satisfactory, such as listening to each other and an atmosphere of mutual respect.
- Asking open questions and providing room for discussion.
- Being approachable for students.
- Monitoring and managing group processes.
- Dealing in a pragmatic way with religious and cultural differences in class.
- Being empathetic towards all students.
- Acting in such a way that all students feel treated equally.

Reflection on one's own behavior and attitude

Suggestion:

- Having a standard mindset that not all students know 'how higher education works' and are familiar with the 'hidden curriculum' in higher education. This means that teachers are skilled to reflect on the impact of their behaviors and attitudes on students, and the willingness to adapt if necessary

The above themes are not new and formulated in general terms (and not, for example, ethnic-specific). However, we have tried to provide a research-based context that indicates why these themes, and the perspectives for action within them, are important when it comes to making the learning environment more inclusive. How these themes and suggestions can be made concrete in specific educational situations should be discussed and practiced in settings such as teacher trainings. Exchanging experiences, inspiring each other, and coming together to find possible solutions is, in our opinion, a much more powerful and sustainable way to improve as a teacher and to achieve an inclusive class, than ticking off a list of do's and dont's on an individual basis. Hopefully, this document will make a constructive contribution to these dialogues and conversations.

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