



Research paper

How past experiences of being a student from a racially nondominant background shape the practices of current teachers in Dutch schools

Brianna L. Kennedy^{a,*}, F. Zehra Çolak^b, Simone Kremer^b, Jan Doornhof^c

^a University of Glasgow, United Kingdom

^b Utrecht University, Netherlands

^c Willem van Oranje Onderwijsgroep, Netherlands



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ABSTRACT

Despite awareness of the need for better teaching of students from nondominant backgrounds, few studies exist in Dutch research that position members of these groups as experts. Using a theoretical lens that centers culturally responsive pedagogical practices in the three domains of teaching, we conducted 14 interviews with teachers from racially minoritized groups who attended Dutch schools to understand how their experiences shape their current teaching. Findings suggest that participants' experiences with (not) belonging in school particularly shape their teaching in the domain of relationships. Participants also had deficit perspectives, highlighting the need to develop teachers' critical consciousness.

Defining and describing effective teaching of students from nondominant racial and ethnic backgrounds in Dutch schools is gaining attention in both teacher preparation and broader national discourse (Agirdag et al., 2016; Soeterik et al., 2023). Although not an unproblematic category, we use the term “nondominant” for groups that are marginalized or minoritized due to social experiences of institutionalized Othering based on visible racial or ethnic traits (Kennedy et al., 2023; Kennedy & Melfor, 2021),¹² The educational disparities correlated with belonging to a marginalized racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic group in the Netherlands reflect broader trends across international contexts (Haahr et al., 2005; Schofield, 2010). International scholarship has demonstrated that deficit-oriented explanations of these achievement gaps—those that attribute the causes to student or family deficiencies—incorrectly neglect the roles of systemic and institutionalized racism and fail to reflect the critical roles that teachers can play in addressing these gaps (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Kennedy & Soutullo, 2018; Liu et al., 2024; Valencia, 1997, 2010).

Although teachers cannot single-handedly ameliorate the causes or impacts of racism or poverty, teacher practices significantly impact students' educational experiences and outcomes (Alton-Lee, 2003; Hattie et al., 2016). Teacher dispositions and skills play a role in teachers' capacities to educate students from minoritized groups (Ferguson, 2003; van den Bergh et al., 2010). Striving for equitable educational experiences for all students requires the shifting or broadening of who is positioned as knowledgeable in the education of minoritized students (Agirdag et al., 2012; Liu et al., 2021; Quijcho & Rios, 2000). Previous research has indicated teachers from similar backgrounds as their students may be more effective with these students than teachers from other racial groups (Gershon et al., 2016; Hawk et al., 2002; Redding, 2019). Teachers who share students' minoritized backgrounds have navigated the educational system as students and teach in these same contexts, potentially allowing them to address educational injustices with insights about students' experiences (Hawk et al., 2002; Kohli, 2008; Quijcho & Rios, 2000; Villegas & Irvine, 2010).

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: brianna.kennedy@glasgow.ac.uk (B.L. Kennedy).

¹ We use this term when conducting research on race in the Netherlands as an adaptation of categories used by the Dutch government to collect national statistics. In the Netherlands, demographic data are collected using the terms “Non-migration background,” “Western migration background,” and “Non-Western migration background,” which are a proxy for race. Currently, 12% of people living in the Netherlands have backgrounds that the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) categorizes as “non-Western,” which has also been correlated with disproportionately low educational outcomes such as standardized test scores and secondary education track placement (CBS, 2019; van den Bergh et al., 2010).

² <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/onze-diensten/methoden/begrippen/persoon-met-een-westerse-migratieachtergrond>.

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A particular focus on the recruitment and retention of teachers who share the same minoritized backgrounds as students in some international contexts shows that education professionals in these regions believe that teachers from such backgrounds can better support these students.³ However, research literature examining teachers' own racialized experiences primarily derives from the US and frequently employs critical lenses such as critical race theory to examine racialized social discourse and power, specifically racial (in)equity in education (see Foster, 1997 for an early contemporary example and Duncan, 2022 for a recent one). The degree to which these theories or lenses may or should be used to explain phenomena in Europe has been a subject of debate (Cole, 2009; Gillborn, 2019; Moschel, 2007). Perhaps due to a reluctance to center racialized experience in Europe, few studies exist in this context that position teachers who are members of racialized groups as experts of their own experiences. In the Dutch educational sciences, several studies do focus on the practices of teachers of students from nondominant racial backgrounds. However, these studies (re-) center White Dutch educators or scholars as experts while omitting or downplaying the expertise and lived experience of racially minoritized teachers (for example, see Lavigne et al., 2022; Wansink et al., 2021; vanTartwijk, denBrok, Veldman, & Wubbels, 2009).

Previous research from other contexts has established the importance of exploring the perceptions and practices of educators from nondominant backgrounds (e.g., Kohli, 2008; Quiocho & Rios, 2000), but there is a dearth of such work in the European context (Agirdag et al., 2016). Therefore, this study focuses on the experiences of racially marginalized teachers in the Netherlands and explores the relevance of critical theoretical lenses that are currently most prominent in US literature for understanding teacher experiences in the Dutch context. We focus on the perspectives of teachers from racially minoritized backgrounds who attended Dutch schools and address the following research question: *How do past experiences of being a student from a racially marginalized background in Dutch schools shape the practices of current teachers?*

1. Teaching diverse students as a racially nondominant teacher

Teachers from racially minoritized groups bring unique assets to the practice of teaching students from such groups because teachers themselves may have experienced Othering as students (Villegas & Irvine, 2010). Elsewhere we have defined Othering in education as “the process that occurs when individuals from a dominant social group create binaries between how they perceive of their own group and how they perceive of those who are not like them” (Kennedy & Melfor, 2021, p. 85) and act on these binaries to create insider and outsider positionalities. International research suggests that many teachers of color continue to experience Othering as teachers as well, keeping their sensitivity high to this experience that they share with their students (El & Fereidooni, 2016; Kohli, 2016). Students from minoritized backgrounds experience Othering through teacher and peer underestimation of their abilities, misrecognition of their identities, microaggressions, and tokenism (Çolak et al., 2023; Kennedy et al., 2023; Solórzano & Huber, 2020; Williams et al., 2020). These Othering experiences are situated within the structures of wider institutionalized inequities and have profound consequences.

Literature from the US about effectively teaching Black and Brown students rests upon critical race theory, which asserts that racism in Western colonizing countries is culturally and historically embedded, is continuously enacted in all social institutions, and creates and perpetuates Othering (Crenshaw et al., 1995). As a powerful, public institution,

education is imbued with racism and Whiteness, which is “a system of beliefs, practices, and assumptions that constantly center the interests of White people” (Gillborn, 2019, p. 112). These interests are normative and thereby invisible to White people, but still powerful in their Othering impact on those who are not considered to be White (Harlap & Riese, 2021; Picower, 2009).

Culturally responsive pedagogy builds upon critical race theory to establish the following necessary principles for decentering Whiteness and engaging in anti-racist teaching: Students' backgrounds and experiences are tools for learning; teachers push students toward academic excellence; and students develop critical consciousness to challenge societal inequities (Ladson-Billings, 2014). Critical consciousness is the collection of dispositions, knowledge, and skills necessary to identify ways that oppressive power structures are enacted in society and to take action for change (Freire, 1970). Culturally responsive pedagogy pertains to all three domains of teaching: relationships, classroom management, and curriculum and instruction (Kennedy-Lewis, 2012). Relationships describe the ongoing patterns of interactions between teachers and individual students, teachers and the class, and among peers. Classroom management includes the rules, routines, and teacher behaviors that structure teaching and learning. Curriculum includes both the explicit and hidden content that is taught, whereas instruction includes the activities and formats used to teach content. Teachers adopting a culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) develop authentic, respectful, and caring relationships with their students (Kennedy-Lewis, 2012), express consistency, fairness, flexibility, and responsiveness in their classroom management (Siwatu et al., 2017), set high learning expectations, and draw on their students' funds of knowledge in their instruction to make learning more relevant and effective for them (Esteban-Guitart, 2021). In other words, culturally responsive educators have the tools and skills to create affirmative learning spaces where all students can “be and act as fully themselves” (Calabrese Barton et al., 2021, p. 1243) without experiencing discrimination and Othering.

Teachers from racially marginalized backgrounds may more easily understand these principles and practices due to their personal experiences with Othering. However, just being a teacher from a racially marginalized background does not automatically prepare teachers to understand White normativity or to be culturally responsive (Jackson et al., 2021; Kohli, 2012). Pre-service teachers may require explicit, scaffolded support to do this, and even more so in contexts like the Netherlands where racial literacy remains low (Sealey-Ruiz & Greene, 2015; Wetzel et al., 2021).

In the Dutch context, there exists less awareness about institutional racism, which also differs from the US in that: i) historical colonialism occurred primarily in distant colonies; ii) Dutch society is more homogeneous and relies on a colorblind national discourse (Kennedy, 2021; Kennedy et al., 2023); and iii) actions viewed as critical of the existing social structure by education professionals are subject to suspicion due to the social desirability for teachers and other public figures to convey neutrality (Wekker, 2016). Therefore, effective teaching in multicultural Dutch classrooms using a critical lens is a relatively new topic, and education stakeholders are skeptical about drawing upon research, policy, and practices from the US, which are sometimes viewed as radical and polarizing. In this study, we begin with the premises of critical race theory while suspending conclusions about effective teaching in the Dutch context in order to conduct an inductive exploration of the experiences and practices of teachers who themselves have experienced Dutch schooling.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research approach, positionality, and trustworthiness

We relied upon a constructionist epistemology and an interpretive research paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), meaning that the positionalities of the researchers played a role in our methodology (Charmaz,

³ For an example from England, see Singh, 2020; for an example from Scotland, see Seith, 2023; for an example from Germany, see Rotter, 2012; for an example from Australia, see Rice et al., 2023; for an example related to indigenous education in Central and South America, see Lopez, 2020.

2011). We are a team of three women and one man occupying different dominant and marginalized intersectional social positions. The first author is a White, native English-speaking woman with US citizenship who was living as an immigrant in the Netherlands at the time of data collection. The second author is a Turkish-speaking woman with Belgian citizenship. Both of the first two authors speak Dutch as an additional language. The third and fourth authors are White, cisgender, native Dutch speakers. The fourth author is a male teacher working in the same type of educational context as our participants. As a research team, we span the age range of early twenties to mid-fifties. From these positionalities, we collaboratively analyzed data (Charmaz, 2011). For example, we compared and contrasted what it meant to (not) belong in settings across our experiences as well as those of our participants in order to better understand their perspectives. To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, we used the strategies of member checks, consensus development, and investigating counter examples (Twining et al., 2017). Our positionalities sensitized us to how we interpreted findings, providing materials for discussion during consensus development and the sensemaking of counter examples.

2.2. Data collection

In compliance with university ethics regulations, we recruited 14 participants through our networks who identified as visibly non-dominant, who had attended Dutch primary and secondary schools, and who were teaching a diverse class⁴ in the vocational track of secondary education⁵ (see Table 1). Participants were ethnically Moroccan ($n=4$), Afghan ($n=2$), Surinamese ($n=2$), Turkish ($n=1$), Thai ($n=1$), and biracial ($n=4$). They ranged in age from 23 to 42 and had taught between 3 and 20 years, with the median being 10 years. Ten participants had started their schooling in the Netherlands, whereas the families of four participants immigrated to the Netherlands when participants were in primary school. In 60- to 120-min interviews, we asked participants about their own belonging experiences in school as they related to participants' race or ethnicity. Then, we asked about participants' current teaching practices and how those related to their own experiences. Interviews were transcribed verbatim in Dutch and translated to English. Participants were asked to check the accuracy of the transcripts and given the opportunity to clarify their answers before analysis.

2.3. Data analysis

We first created case narratives in order to have a holistic picture of each participant (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). Next, we used the case narratives to organize a case-level display, organized by subtopics related to the research question and theoretical framework (Miles & Huberman, 1994). We filled in each cell of the display using the narratives as the primary data source and wrote syntheses across cases for each topic, paying particular attention to counter examples (Twining et al., 2017). The spreadsheet format allowed multiple members of the research team to make notes to contribute to syntheses and for multiple researchers to compare and contrast across participants. After writing a draft of the findings, we conducted a constant comparative analysis between the findings and the raw data using half of the interview

⁴ We defined "diverse" as composed of 25% or more of students with an immigrant background, including both Western and non-Western immigrants. This percentage is reflective of the Dutch population.

⁵ Dutch secondary education consists of three tracks into which students are sorted at age 11: the university preparatory track (VWO), the basic higher education preparation track (HAVO), and the vocational track (VMBO). Teachers play a large role in deciding which tracks students can qualify for. This track assignment is referred to as the teacher's "advice." Secondary school tracks are ethnically stratified, with VMBO being the most diverse.

Table 1
Participants.

PARTICIPANT	AGE	ETHNICITY	AGE BEGAN SCHOOL IN NL ^a	YEARS TEACHING	SUBJECT (S) TAUGHT
AHMED	42	Moroccan	9	20	Auto Shop
AMSAH	40	Moroccan	9	20	English
FARIDA	25	Moroccan	4	3	Economics
HAKIMA	27	Moroccan	4	3	Social Studies
JASMIN	32	Afghan	10	11	Design, Economics
MARTIN	38	Surinamese	4	14	Physical Education
MIA	36	Caribbean Netherlands; White Dutch	4	3	Social Studies
PRIYA	23	Caribbean Netherlands; Surinamese	4	3	Social Studies
RAFA	30	Afghan	4	8	English
RAMESH	32	Surinamese	4	9	Dutch
RANA	40	Iraqi; White Dutch	4	17	Social Studies
SAMANTHA	39	Caribbean Netherlands; Surinamese	11	19	English
SINEM	25	Turkish	4	4	English
SUNAN	34	Thai	4	12	Economics

^a Formal education begins at age 4 in the Netherlands (NL).

transcripts, which guided us to reorganize and further specify the findings to better account for all participants. We then conducted an additional constant comparative analysis of these revised findings with the remaining interview transcripts. All four members of the research team checked these analyses against the original transcripts, which enabled further finetuning of the synthesis to ensure accuracy and completeness. These steps of constant comparison between raw data and synthesis reflect the rigor that supports the study's trustworthiness (Twining et al., 2017).

3. Findings

Participants shared that they had all been confronted with racialized encounters in some way during their time as students in Dutch schools. These experiences sensitized them to those of their current students. In this section, we first summarize participants' past experiences that connect to their current teaching practices. Next, we examine how participants' pasts shape their practices within the three domains of teaching. We organize the findings sections by looking at each of the three domains of teaching in turn in order to gain a full understanding of the connections that appeared in the data between these teachers' past experiences and positionalities and all three domains of teaching practice.

3.1. Participants' racialized experiences as students: teacher bias in tracking

In the Dutch education system, students' secondary education placements are tracked (see footnote above). Previous literature has documented racial biases in tracking as well as its racially stratifying effects (Kennedy, 2021; Kennedy et al., 2023; Weiner, 2016). Participants reconfirmed these previous findings as they described their schooling experiences. Seven participants recounted being tracked into VMBO even though they believed they could perform at a higher level. Ahmed told us about a teacher who had underestimated him because his mastery of Dutch language was behind his peers. He stated:

I remember very well the teacher I had in [grade 5] ... said something like, 'He needs to go into the practical field. Education is still too difficult for him. He just needs to work with his hands.'

Ahmed gave this example in the context of explaining that he did not feel seen or considered as a developing individual in elementary school. Amsah further explained that according to her test scores, she should have been placed in the university preparatory track. But her teachers had responded by saying, "Oh, you have a VWO advice? Well, we will put you in a HAVO/VMBO class. Go and do VMBO, that's safe enough." Once at VWO, she felt like, "You had to fight really hard to show that you could do [VWO], that you belonged." Participants' experiences with tracking caused them to have a racialized and negative image of themselves as less than capable and needing to earn their place, a place that was more easily occupied by their White Dutch, middle-class peers. Low tracking advice was just one of several ways that teachers communicated low expectations related to participants' race, ethnicity, or religious background.

3.2. Participants' racialized experiences as students: being singled out

Another marginalizing experience was when participants were singled out as different. These experiences sometimes occurred as a result of explicit communication about how they were different, and at other times occurred due to participants' own anxieties about not wanting to be different in a context where they clearly were. Amsah explained that her chemistry teacher would ask her privately about her background and religion, and that, when done in this way, the questions had brought connection. However, her religion teacher would ask such questions publicly, which had positioned her as representing an entire group, and when this occurred, she felt singled out as different. Some participants described experiencing explicit racism whereas for other participants, these experiences were more subtle. Participants linked discriminatory encounters to their perceived religious affiliation, their hair color or texture, or their clothing.

Due to the hostile experiences that participants had encountered, they expressed that they had felt more like they belonged with other students or teachers who were considered "foreign" like them. For example, one of Farida's favorite teachers from secondary school had had a Moroccan background and had worn a hijab. She stated, "We really enjoyed it because I thought, 'Hey, I recognize myself in you.'" The recognition she said she had felt was that she just was not different, which was something she did not think she would have felt with a teacher with a White Dutch background. She reported that when she was in class with a Muslim teacher, she knew that she did not have to be the one to explain or justify anything related to ethnicity or religion. Having a teacher who could respond themselves instead of pointing her out to be the one to respond had made her feel safe.

3.3. How participants implemented the three domains of teaching

The most direct link that nearly all participants made between their pasts as students and their current practices as teachers had to do with their relationships with students. Participants' practices in the domains of classroom management and curriculum and instruction were more nuanced, as we explain below. Because participants discussed student-teacher relationships most robustly, we report on this domain in the most detail in the next three subsections.

Foundation for Relationships: How Participants' Past Experiences Shaped Empathic Interpretations of Their Students' Experiences With Bias and Racism.

Participants described their relationships with students as being characterized by empathic understanding of students' racialized experiences and participants' desires to support and inspire student belonging and success. Experiences of being unfairly judged sensitized these teachers to the experiences of their students and also positioned

them as role models. They wanted to show their students that they could succeed even though the students had been tracked into VMBO. Teachers referred to their own experiences as evidence that students could also succeed. Ahmed, Amsah, Hakima, Mia, Ramesh, Samantha, and Sunan spoke about being placed into vocational education and having to complete extra years of schooling in order to be able to obtain their teaching certification. Ahmed explained:

Often those students in VMBO have a negative image [and think,] "We won't make it anyway" ... Then I say: "No guys. That is not true at all, just look at me. I am a teacher now, but ten years ago I was classified lower than you are."

Because of their experiences, participants were able to understand their students' frustration and demoralization and also to motivate their students to persist. All of the participants expressed how VMBO students were either perceived as unintelligent by other teachers or thought of themselves in this way. They could empathize with their students who found this situation to be unfair. Hakima explained, "I have students who are doing [their final year of vocational education], who still think after years: I don't really belong in VMBO, but actually in VWO." She continued recounting how some students had test scores to support a higher placement but that teachers persuaded parents that a lower placement would be better.

Because participants themselves had had these experiences, they understood and believed students' perspectives about what had occurred. Farida stated, "If I didn't have a Moroccan background or [had] just a [White] Western background, I might think, 'Okay this is a story' and that's it. But ... I recognize myself in certain stories [that students tell about their lives] ..." Participants recognized the impact such experiences had on their students and noticed how their students continued to grapple with racial bias, self-doubt, and being "not seen as a full-fledged Dutchman," which was how Mia described her students' perspectives while also relating them to her own. She described the impact as being "not heard, or not seen." She connected this experience to her current practice, saying, "Now I see them all." Amsah gave another explicit example of connecting her past experiences with her empathic disposition and practice, explaining why she did not read the files collected about students' past performance or behavior before meeting them:

[When I came to school as a student], I came in and I had black hair. I was the only Moroccan, so my teachers also had those associations and that's how I was approached. Yes, that [discrimination] has had a negative effect on me in that sense and I hope that [as a teacher] I won't do that ...

Ahmed, Amsah, Farida, Hakima, Mia, Rafa, and Samantha explained ways that their students encountered similar biases, which shaped these participants' practices.

Participants were also sensitized to colleagues' other deficit perspectives related to student backgrounds and empathized with students when they described instances of blatant racism. Hakima recounted how a teacher had made a sound and gesture like a monkey when a Black student answered a question. That student got angry and Hakima sided with the student when that colleague claimed that the actions were not racist. Participants also noticed ways that students had not been supported or protected by colleagues due to biases. Rafa gave an example of how colleagues had not explored potentially abusive behavior occurring in a student's home because they had thought that physical violence was normalized in the child's culture. Amsah stated that colleagues discussing student files had equated being Moroccan with having a learning disability or other type of disorder. She stated, "That was really a trigger, and I said, 'Oh, I didn't know I had a disorder too. Do I need to get treatment, too ... ?'" Farida pointed out that actual learning disabilities might go unnoticed because teachers presumed the learning difficulties of students perceived not to be White could be attributed to cultural deficits or language deficiencies. These realizations shaped participants'

enactments of all three domains of teaching.

3.4. Foundation for Relationships: students' perceptions of participants' empathic potential

Even before participants demonstrated care to students, students themselves looked up to these teachers for being “foreign.” This admiration occurred even when participants themselves did not prioritize their racialized past experiences as being important in their teaching. Ahmed, Hakima, Martin, Mia, Priya, Rafa, Rana, Sinem, and Sunan expressed that they probably made a faster connection with students or parents due to students' and families' perceptions of participants' nondominant race or ethnicity. Participants explicitly spoke of this “double role,” as Farida coined it, as role model and as teacher. Their ethnic backgrounds and experiences afforded them the ability to understand when their students did not feel seen, to communicate effectively with parents, and to interpret student language and behavior in culturally relevant ways. Amsah recounted how she contacted parents even if students said that their parents did not speak Dutch. She stated, “I speak everything ... so no excuses there.” Farida described how her ability to understand parents' motives and values brought particular meaning to her work. She said, “That piece of recognition is what makes my [teaching role here] really great because I feel that I can have an extra meaning just by understanding.” Farida, Hakima, and Martin also specifically defined their roles as supporting students in broadening their own perspectives about what people from their cultural or socioeconomic backgrounds could accomplish.

One consequence of students' implicit trust in these teachers was that students more readily reported racial discrimination to them. For example, Mia described how her students had explicitly complained about harsh and disparate disciplinary sanctioning, which they had experienced as racist. Another consequence of students' perceptions of participants' empathic potential and racial awareness was that students would also dare to raise more controversial topics or perspectives with them. Farida said, “I think that maybe they dare to say that to me more easily, because they think, ‘You also belong to that group.’” Several other participants also described having easier or more open interactions or relationships with students due to students' perceptions of them as non-White. Sometimes, these implicit connections also allowed participants to more quickly, confidently, and easily confront students of color who demonstrated challenging behaviors, as we discuss below. These examples also demonstrate how positive student-teacher relationships pave the way for encounters of belonging in all three domains.

3.5. How participants explicitly implemented the domain of relationships

The domain of relationships was explicitly identified as most important by nearly all participants, although the interdependence of relationships with classroom management and curriculum and instruction was also acknowledged. Ahmed, Amsah, Farida, Priya, Rana, Sinem, and Sunan mentioned that students found relationships with teachers more important than curricular content, which some participants also linked to being a characteristic of students in the vocational track. Priya stated, “If [VMBO] students don't like you, they don't do anything.” The value students placed on this domain matched that of nearly all participants, who prioritized developing relationships with students over promoting students' mastery of subject matter. Amsah, Farida, Priya, Rana, Samantha, and Sinem stated that their relationships with students were what they valued most about teaching. Ahmed did home visits and spent time with students outside of school in order to develop relationships with them. He also advocated for tailor-made approaches to meeting students' individual needs. Jasmin prided herself on having the respect and trust of students. Rafa said that emotional safety had to come before curricular content, making relationships the most important focus of the class.

In the domain of relationships, seven teachers explicitly stated that they wanted their students to feel seen and heard and two others expressed similar sentiments. Being seen was the core experience that in their view led to a sense of belonging. For example, Mia recounted that when she returned to school after an absence, students had come to her door and said, “Oh teacher, finally you're back! Finally, a happy face again!” She continued, “I really think that they [would] ... definitely say that they are all seen and feel like they belong.” As discussed in previous sections, participants linked the priority they put on these experiences to their own experiences of either not being seen or heard as students or else to particularly positive encounters with favorite teachers they themselves had who did make them feel seen and heard. Amsah stated, “I want to be the person that I didn't have myself.” Participants used their knowledge of students' backgrounds and home situations to develop relationships in class and to respond to students in culturally appropriate ways that also impacted their classroom management.

3.6. How participants implemented the domain of classroom management

Participants discussed the critical role of classroom management in making teaching possible and based their classroom management on having good relationships with students. Participants' classroom management approaches varied widely. Amsah, Farida, Hakima, Martin, Rana, Ramesh, Samantha, and Sunan spoke about the importance of clear boundaries and needing to be strict and consistent. Farida said her students described her as “good strict,” and Jasmin repeated rules at the beginning of each class, stating that VMBO students need this. Priya, Rafa, and Sinem found it hard to be strict and consistent and thought that their classes were still chaotic. Hakima did not want to “stand in front of the class like some kind of Putin” whereas Ramesh wanted to provide structure but also keep students guessing about what their punishments would be in order to maintain control. Teachers with fewer years of teaching experience seemed to describe more difficulties with classroom management than more experienced teachers.

Ahmed, Amsah, Hakima, and Jasmin described being able to connect with students and correct them more easily due to their ethnic backgrounds. Amsah explained:

If I'm sitting with a student [who expressed support for ethnic violence in class] and I say ... ‘Do you really mean that? Did you learn that from our faith to do this?’ Then such a student can more quickly say ... ‘But ma'am, yes sorry ... no ... I didn't mean it like that.’ Then I can just see him again as ... just a student. But a [White] Dutch colleague ... hears an opinion like that from a student and [says ...] I don't know what to do with it.’ ... [Another] example ... [was] Purple Friday.⁶ We had put up a rainbow flag in the auditorium and ... there was a group of boys [that] suddenly took off with the flag ... Well, the colleagues were shocked ... they didn't know how to deal with it, they didn't dare talk to them. And for me, at that moment, that's like: ‘Well, no, I'll hang the flag back, I'll call those guys together, and I'll have a talk with them.’ And I dare to have that conversation.

Jasmin also discussed how she could correct students more directly and more effectively than many of her White colleagues, but she attributed this ability not only to students' perceptions of her ethnicity but also to her relationships with them. She explained that there were Turkish colleagues who had strict dispositions who also received negative responses from students because, as her students said, those teachers “treat [them] like dogs.” Having a nondominant ethnic background seemed to pave the way for easier connections with students, but teachers then needed to also invest in positive relationships to reap the benefit of this predisposition.

Differences among participants' implementation of classroom

⁶ A day focused on supporting LGBTQ + inclusion.

management might also point toward participants' intersectional considerations of both ethnicity and gender. Farida, Jasmin, and Sunan specifically mentioned how they avoided publicly chastising boys with Turkish or Moroccan backgrounds because this was seen as humiliating and could damage students' egos or trigger further resistance. Martin attributed misbehavior among male students as being due to their being "street urchins" who may not have a father figure or mentor at school, so he positioned himself in this role. Like Ramesh, Martin spoke about providing structure to these students. Mia also expressed that students of color need clear management due to the strictness of their mothers. Of her own classroom management, she stated:

I'm so clear ... I know for example how Surinamese mothers are ... not all of them, of course, but most of them are pretty strict. So, when someone ... doesn't get clear instructions, they can become noisy ... It's just important for [children of color] ... to just have clarity. They get that at home as well. And if they don't get that at school, they're just going to be chit chatting. That's just it. Just be clear.

She used her understanding of students' family communication styles to adjust her classroom management in a dominant Dutch context where explicit expressions of teacher power are frowned upon. Rana similarly expressed that she is strict with students, which is a style that she inherited from her aunts who are all "feisty women."

3.7. How participants implemented curriculum

Participants' limited discussions of curriculum included carrying out mandated requirements while trying to use relevant examples and meeting the social and cognitive needs of their students. Nine participants stated that they followed the prescribed curriculum in order to prepare students for the exams at the end of the course. However, six participants either shortened or modified certain lessons or added engaging stories or relevant examples in order to adapt to students. Jasmin, Martin, and Mia expressed that they would throw out the lesson plan to respond to students' experiences or current events. Farida explained how she made explicit connections to Muslim students' experiences when explaining the concept of mortgages and interest in economics class since interest is not permitted in Islam. Mia incorporated discussions about Ramadan and *Keti Koti*⁷ into her lessons to reflect student backgrounds and interests.

Some participants said that adapting curriculum to students' interests and daily experiences was more relevant than adapting it to their cultural backgrounds. Amsah and Jasmin both made adaptations based on gender. Amsah said, "If I have boys ... from the technology department, they find it much more interesting to read about cool cars, and with the girls, I often take something from an English tabloid or something about celebrities." Jasmin stated, "it's hard to motivate [boys] to like art." She said she referred to their cultural backgrounds for this motivation, such as by letting students choose topics relevant to their own lives to draw. She gave the example of a student who had chosen to draw a mosque because he found it beautiful, which had allowed her to then engage with the class about Islamic architecture and aesthetics. Mia also mentioned gender and sexuality as relevant topics for her students, but rather than categorizing student preferences by gender, she mentioned that she had both boys and girls in her class who identified as LGBTQ+. She recognized that queerness is "not seen" in society, so she tried to discuss it in class despite "the fuss in the classroom when [she talks] about it." She stated that teachers need to be aware of the diversity of students in their classes and sensitive to it. Mia's example connects her desire for students to be seen with her willingness to confront their discriminatory behaviors. Her strong relationships with students support this curricular decision-making.

Hakima focused on making curricular connections with students' contemporary cultural life worlds, which she interpreted as being related to crime, drill rap, weapons, and vaping. She had an ex-convict come to class to speak with students in order to engage them. Just as Amsah's and Jasmin's approaches reinforced dominant cultural binaries related to gender, Hakima's interpretation of what was relevant and engaging to students focused on criminality, which arguably reinforced a dominant cultural view of Black and Brown students as being pathological outsiders who break laws and societal norms. Conversely, Rana specifically taught students about the impact of colonization on language related to race and gender in her classroom. She may have gained this perspective as a result of navigating her own intersectional identity as a queer woman from a Muslim family. In summary, similar to findings related to classroom management, some participants made curricular accommodations related to teaching students from nondominant racial backgrounds. Practices varied widely across participants and no participants explicitly linked their curricular practices to their prior experiences as students.

3.8. How participants implemented instruction

When participants discussed their implementation of instruction, they explained the priorities they have when they are teaching as well as the activities they use in order to accomplish their goals.

Instructional Priorities. Participants shared three main priorities related to their instructional decision-making. The first related directly to their empathic relationships with students: They wanted students to feel seen and supported. For example, Samantha made time to structure and prepare for lessons because she thought that good organization was what makes students feel safe and seen. Mia, Rana, Samantha, and Sinem specifically mentioned the importance of student learning as the outcome of a lesson, but Sinem also stated that even if they did not learn anything new, she wanted students to leave the lesson with a good feeling.

The second priority was that participants wanted students to obtain certain skills and dispositions. Jasmin wanted students to gain self-confidence and described scaffolding this confidence through requiring students to give presentations. She explained, "I went to school here in the Netherlands. I know how it is. You have to do everything yourself in the end." Sunan made YouTube videos of himself explaining concepts in simple language because language was also an issue for him as a student. Ramesh tried to make lessons fun but did not accommodate based on student background because he wanted students to assimilate so they could have a salary, marriage, and "*huisje, boompje, beestje*," a house, tree, and pet, which is a Dutch saying to indicate that someone has accomplished the middle-class lifestyle. He linked students' success to the way he accomplished success for himself: through the adoption of middle-class White norms.

The third priority was that participants wanted to keep students engaged and to support students' learning. Farida broke content into small steps with skills checks and required students to do more independent work where they could take ownership of their own learning. Amsah grouped students homogeneously by their abilities on certain skills and then varied class activities so that different skills were emphasized in different lessons. This variation supported the academic strengths of different students. Mia varied class activities to play to the preferred instructional styles of each student. Sometimes lessons were quiet and individual and sometimes full of discussion. These decisions related to students' needs for engagement and also aligned with her desire for every student to feel seen just as she wanted to feel seen as a student.

Instructional Activities. In contrast with participants' diverse implementation of classroom management, curriculum, and instructional priorities, participants shared similarities related to instructional activities. Nearly every participant had a similar description of their typical class period. They described following the "method" that was

⁷ Annual celebration on July 1 marking the abolishment of slavery in Suriname and the [former] Dutch Antilles.

given to them by the school, which included short, large-group instruction or small group instruction, an instructional video or brief lecture, then independent work or an activity facilitated by the instructor, with a brief review at the end. Ahmed, Amsah, Mia, and Rana explicitly stated that instructing in a large group for too long did not work, with Mia attributing this to VMBO students having a shorter attention span or less motivation and requiring instructional videos or more engagement. Mia also mentioned that she tried to vary content and format each day so that the variety would keep students engaged and tap into their preferred working formats. Sinem and Sunan adjusted the activities and pace depending on how fast students caught on to a particular concept.

Participants also varied activities depending on their subject matter. Samantha taught English and described her instructional formats as including technology, word webs, videos, listening exercises, puzzles, and grammar using a flipped approach. Jasmin taught design and included student presentations. Mia taught social studies and was the only participant to explicitly name critical thinking as an important learning objective. She stated, "They always have to give arguments about why they think something. I think that's very important." She explained that society sees her VMBO students as "stupid people" and she intended to challenge that image by using the instructional format of debates in her class.

Participants used small group activities strategically. Ahmed, Amsah, Farida, and Hakima described their intentional use of heterogeneous grouping to develop academic skills, social skills, and classroom community. Ahmed grouped students heterogeneously by ethnic background so that students from different groups would get to know each other and learn to work together. He reported that students found this challenging in the earlier grades of secondary school but became quite comfortable with each other by the later grades. Amsah spoke about grouping students homogeneously by skill level across different skills so that students would experience success together.

3.9. How participants revealed their own stereotypes and biases across the domains of teaching

Despite participants' own experiences with discrimination, some of them revealed that they also harbored biases against their students from nondominant ethnic backgrounds. We identified this finding particularly when exploring counter examples in the data. Amsah expressed that she grappled with her own stereotypes about her nondominant students, and Jasmin, Martin, and Ramesh stereotyped students as, using Martin's term, "street urchins." Mia stated, "Teachers of color ... often have a prejudice toward students of color, that they might not be capable, or might [just do things that are negative]. So those are just prejudices that come from society." Jasmin claimed that Afghan students like herself cared more about education than her Turkish and Moroccan students due to priorities placed on education at home. She described her own parents as highly educated and established professionals in Afghanistan before immigrating. She linked her value of education to social class but then claimed that other Afghans from lower social class backgrounds eagerly take opportunities they did not have in Afghanistan. She did not see this same eagerness in her Turkish and Moroccan students. She also attributed this to the fact that she taught in VMBO where students were less motivated by school success.

Six participants discussed how their knowledge of "street culture" could help them relate to, and create boundaries for, their students who affiliated with this culture. Amsah mentioned the importance of being able to use "street language" with her students. She stated, "I now wear a [hijab] so that's just not possible, but then it was like, 'hey (use of street language),' and then you quickly established a bond with the class." Amsah's integration of her stereotypes with her desire to connect with students and be relevant reflects the complexity of participants' positions, as we also saw in Hakima's attempts to make her curriculum relevant by incorporating her students' "street culture," including drugs,

weapons, and criminality, even while she also acknowledged that some students had never heard about these things. Martin explained that his own Surinamese background allowed him to understand that the loud volume of voice of the Surinamese boys in his class came from their culture. However, he also attributed their retaining of this behavior to the lack of father figures in students' homes, which motivated him to be highly involved in their lives outside of school, thereby improving his relationships with them.

Ramesh and Samantha recounted their own pasts as "coming from the streets," as Ramesh stated it, or in Samantha's case, "going off the rails." They described using their own experiences to both relate to students and to reign in behavior that they viewed as problematic. Sunan attributed his own success to having learned Frisian, the language of the community in the north of the Netherlands where he grew up. As a teacher in the central Netherlands where Dutch is the predominant language, he encouraged his students to speak it in order to fit in. He summarized:

... You notice that boys, in particular, have trouble with [adopting dominant culture], or [they] have ... pride in the culture they come from, and they want to radiate that to the outside world. But the problem is that the prejudices that prevail in that culture, and the culture that they then radiate, are very negative. So, what I take away from that is I try to show them: "Well, try to conform to the situation you're in now."

He encouraged them not to take racist events too personally and said that if students get upset about racialized comments, they are just making their own lives more difficult.

Mia was the only participant who actively critiqued the term "street culture," which is also a popular term used to categorize the behaviors of nondominant students in urban education in the Netherlands (e.g., [el Hadioui, 2011](#)). In her specific discussion of "street language," Mia stated:

It really annoys me ... it's just Surinamese, Antillean, and Moroccan words that are used in Dutch and that is what they call slang ... it's actually just their language. It's what you get from home ... we have a lot of children from different ethnic cultures who communicate with each other in this way.

Mia and Rafa were the only participants who demonstrated critical consciousness regarding the role of the historical and social context in shaping the contemporary situations in which both students and teachers continued to experience racism and discrimination. However, Rafa also stated that she thought socioeconomic status and the urban/rural divide were more significant in shaping student experience and behavior. She recognized that in her own culture, there exists a preference for Whiteness that also shaped her thinking. Mia noted that racism and racialized thinking are from the past and that "at a certain point, we all just have to let it go."

3.10. The roles of teacher preparation, policy, and school level practices in informing participants' teaching

Participants described drawing upon their own experiences in determining how to teach their racially minoritized students. Although we did not ask about it, they occasionally mentioned teacher preparation, policy requirements, and school level practices indicating that these played a role in all domains of teaching. In the domain of relationships, participants engaged more directly with students on controversial topics as well as in relation to school-based discrimination. In explaining the difficulties these interactions could cause, Farida expressed, "You don't get this at the teacher training college: how to deal with this." The situation presented participants with the advantage of connecting with students as well as the additional challenges that their teacher preparation experiences did not prepare them to navigate.

In the domain of classroom management, five participants explicitly

referred to the escalation ladder, a strategy in which the teacher incrementally increases punishments which may culminate in excluding intransigent students from class. Participants knew from teacher training they would be expected to use this strategy to address unruly behavior, although they differed in whether and how they used it. They carried this strategy with them without information about how to implement it with their specific students. This example shows that these teachers not only have the helpful foundation of personal experience but also rely upon and retain lessons from their professional training. However, this training did not prepare them to teach in their current contexts.

In the domain of curriculum and instruction, the requirements of the standardized curriculum caused stress and limited participants' freedom to deepen topics or address new ones in response to students' needs. Farida explained how this pace also made it difficult for her to remediate the prerequisite skills that students may still have struggled with such as reading, research, and arithmetic skills. Priya prioritized the use of activating instructional activities, as did Rafa who also expressed that she did not always have enough time to be creative due to curricular requirements. Although they do not directly respond to the research questions, these unexpected findings have implications for future research, policy, and practice.

4. Discussion

Through a systematic analysis of how these teachers' experiences shaped all three domains of their teaching practice, we can identify both theoretical and empirical connections to international literature that have implications for teacher education in the Netherlands and beyond. We begin this section with a synthesis of key findings and then make further connections to theory, policy, and practice in the broader field.

Participants drew upon their previous experiences of being a student from a nondominant ethnic background in Dutch schools primarily by making sure that their students felt seen in ways that they themselves mostly had not. They primarily connected this experience with the domain of relationships, saying that they prioritized building and maintaining relationships over the other domains and felt most motivated by this domain of teaching. These teachers demonstrated authentic care based on their own painful experiences with micro-aggressions and being Othered (Valenzuela, 1999), and they prioritized their students' belonging in class (Faircloth, 2021; Gray et al., 2018). Although they did not receive training in their teacher education programs to address racism and Othering, their own experiences gave them intuitive ideas about how to develop these experiences with their students. Their particular pedagogies of inclusion, and the degree to which their practices were culturally responsive, depended on their diverse perspectives related to assimilation and acculturation.

4.1. Assimilation, belonging, and teacher practices in the three domains

Participants conveyed different perspectives about how their students could best belong in society. These perspectives aligned with views promoting assimilation or acculturation as the best mode for social participation and inclusion (Driessen & Dekkers, 2008). Valenzuela (1999) explained "subtractive assimilation" (p. 25) in education as schooling that requires students to give up, or subtract, parts of their cultures of origin in order to become more like the dominant majority. Subtractive assimilationist views prioritize students' alignment with dominant culture with regard to language choice and proficiency, normative behaviors, and values. Ramesh provided the clearest example of this perspective in providing strict structure for students so that they could achieve a middle-class Dutch lifestyle. Ramesh was the only participant who explicitly prioritized classroom management over relationship-building because he viewed this approach as most advantageous for students' assimilation.

Other participants like Martin, Samantha, and Sunan had more

nuanced views, stating at some points that students needed to align with the norms of dominant culture but then asserting at other times that the skills, languages, and styles that students bring with them should be embraced and built upon. Subtractive assimilationist views aligned most with deficit perspectives about students' lives outside of school (Valencia, 1997; 2010). Interestingly, participants framed both their assimilationist and their acculturationist perspectives as being routes to student belonging in society, differing primarily in what they thought it was appropriate to ask students to forfeit as well as the perspectives they had about whether and how institutional racism and social power structures played a role in schooling.

Participants' implementation of classroom management also varied widely, but this variation seemed to be related to years of experience and personal style more than to participants' own experiences as students. Participants used direct communication and consistency, which are tenets of culturally responsive classroom management, although they did not mention receiving training in these strategies. They only consistently mentioned the escalation ladder, which is not a strategy supported in culturally responsive classroom management literature (Milner et al., 2019; Murphy & Kennedy, 2019; Weinstein et al., 2003). Participants used knowledge of their students' needs to determine instructional approaches but also drew upon the curriculum and methods provided by the school, which explained why they described using similar lesson plans. Farida connected her curricular content to students' cultural backgrounds, and Mia and Rafa taught students to question oppressive structures, both core components of culturally responsive pedagogy (Alim & Paris, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2014).

These participants demonstrated their own critical consciousness of the ways that schooling could both damage and empower their students of color, whereas other participants stopped short of critiquing the biased racial context and institutional norms. For example, they characterized students' language as "street language" rather than contextualizing youth slang as a valid hybridization of linguistic codes that result from multilingualism. Participants' assimilationist perspectives can be understood when considering how some of them explain their own success as being due to having assimilated to Dutch society.

4.2. The power of being socialized into the field

Interestingly, participants told of the unfairness they felt when they were tracked into VMBO and found it too low. They referred to their own students on a number of occasions as "VMBO students" who had particular characteristics or needs. When participants themselves were at the age of being tracked, and when they recounted that experience, they did not feel like they belonged to this group. When they referred to their own students, this group came to have particular meaning and characteristics that could generalize across students, such as Priya stating that VMBO students will only work for teachers they like, Jasmin stating that VMBO students need consistent classroom management, and Mia stating that VMBO students have short attention spans. We attribute participants' perspectives about VMBO students as a group to the socialization that occurs to students after they are tracked as well as the socialization that occurs to teachers within the teaching profession (Marent et al., 2020; Wilson & Urick, 2021). Although students may not "be" VMBO students when they are tracked, we presume they may adopt shared characteristics as a result of being labeled in a particular way and exposed to educational policies and teacher practices that shape their own views about themselves and about education (Kearney & Boylan, 2015; Kennedy-Lewis & Murphy, 2016). Even as participants recounted how their current students found this tracking to be unfair, they continued to reify these labels and organize their own teacher moves according to their perceptions of what it meant to teach "VMBO students."

In an international context, the literature highlights how the socialization that novice teachers encounter when they enter a school setting full time can run counter to sound theoretical and empirical

underpinnings for teaching that they may have learned in their university preparation programs (Anthony et al., 2011; Kutsyuruba et al., 2019). This study suggests an additional relevance for teacher preparation programs to preserve and build upon pre-service teachers' life experiences while addressing organizational gaps in induction (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Vernikoff et al., 2022).

4.3. The importance of teacher education and professional development

All of these findings point to one clear, research-supported implication for teacher education and professional development: Teachers from minoritized racial backgrounds have advantages in working with diverse students but still need structured teacher preparation focused on culturally responsive teaching and social justice education to consistently teach in transformative ways (Agirdag et al., 2016; Dursun et al., 2021; Kohli, 2008; Zygmunt & Clark, 2016). Being from a nondominant background sensitizes teachers to students' racialized experiences, so there may be less need to convince them that these experiences are occurring. However, that sensitization does not necessarily lead to good teaching practices as defined by CRP literature, demonstrating the need for better teacher preparation and ongoing professional development (Liu et al., 2024).

Structured teacher learning should specifically address critical racial literacy, culturally responsive practices, and the development of critical consciousness in order for teachers to be able to teach for social justice, especially in the Dutch context which tends to lack a critical, race-conscious focus (Kennedy et al., 2023; Leeman & Ledoux, 2003; Wekker, 2016). Critically conscious approaches are necessary for teachers and students to be able to identify and transform the ways that Whiteness is made normative, Othering occurs, and social stratification is reproduced in daily lessons (Jackson et al., 2021; Valenzuela, 2016). Without critical consciousness, teachers' well-meaning and otherwise culturally relevant actions may reinforce racialized, meritocratic Othering (Lewis & Diamond, 2015). Such examples appeared in Hakima's attempt to be relevant by reinforcing stereotypes of non-White youth as criminals and Ahmed's style of role modeling that focused on individual hard work as an antidote for institutionalized discriminatory tracking policies. With critical consciousness, teachers can empower students to change their own plights while also scaffolding students' understandings about how to transform these policies into more equitable ones for the future (Ladson-Billings, 2014). These implications also highlight the relevance of critical lenses and pedagogies such as culturally responsive pedagogies in international contexts beyond the US.

5. Limitations and directions

This study had several limitations that suggest directions for research and practice. Our sample was limited in the range of teachers' subject areas, which meant that we could not explore connections between teachers' subject matter and their perspectives and practices. We also could not compare teachers' emphasis on relationship-building or their expectations for students with those in more academic tracks. Furthermore, we included a diverse range of intersectional positionalities among our participants, which had the advantage of helping us see trends across these positionalities. However, we could not draw more specific conclusions about how positionality shaped findings. For example, we cannot draw conclusions about the role of (dis)similarities in teacher and student backgrounds in classroom teaching and learning. Future research could address these limitations by including specific subject matter teachers across tracks with specific intersectional positions of both teachers and students.

We also did not specifically ask participants about their training to teach students from nondominant backgrounds and since the teachers differed in how long ago they had completed their training, they did not all speak about it. A focus on teacher preparation and professional development related to culturally responsive teaching could further

inform policy change. Additionally, we do not know how participants' students experienced them since we did not interview students or observe in classrooms. These additional methods could provide a more comprehensive picture of how participants already use CRP and where there might be room to grow.

Despite these limitations, this study provides evidence that teachers from minoritized racial groups in Dutch secondary schools build upon their own experiences with racism and Othering to help their students feel seen and connected to school. Teacher educators can support these teachers in further developing their transformative practices by scaffolding teachers' critical consciousness and diversity pedagogical content knowledge (Dursun et al., 2021; Valenzuela, 2016). However, to be able to do this, teacher educators themselves must also have critical consciousness and understand CRP (Francois & Quartz, 2021). The transformation of the current racially tracked Dutch secondary system and the low teacher expectations that enable it depends on such progress.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Brianna L. Kennedy: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **F. Zehra Çolak:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Simone Kremer:** Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Data curation. **Jan Doornhof:** Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Data curation.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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