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Uncovering the role of teacher educators in the reduction of inequalities in education: a critical discourse analysis

Abstract

Teacher educators play a crucial part in preparing student teachers for teaching in diversity. Because of their modelling role, they automatically convey messages about approaching diversity via their practices. In this study, we look into these -often hidden- messages of teacher educators to uncover the discourses that inform and are being reproduced by how they talk about (approaching) diversity. We critically analyse how such discourses relate to reducing inequalities in education. Critical discourse analysis was conducted on interview data (n=14) about teacher educators' perceptions about diversity and practices to approach diversity. The findings suggest two main discourses. First, a power-challenging discourse compels all teacher educators to take responsibility to reduce inequalities. Secondly, a power-affirming discourse tempers their beliefs about their agency and responsibility regarding the matter. This latter discourse is mainly manifested via statements that perpetuate existing exclusionary mechanisms. Most teacher educators seem to combine both discourses. We argue that the simultaneous use of both creates paradoxical narratives which are unproductive to foster responsiveness to diversity for teacher educators and their student teachers. This study adds to the literature on a theoretical and practical level. Raising teacher educators' awareness of their messages could prove powerful in combating inequalities in education.

Keywords

responsiveness to diversity; teacher educators; social justice; educational inequality; critical discourse analysis

1. Introduction

"*I was completely unaware of it until I was in the middle of it: I've never felt so much at the source of social improvement. But as an elementary school teacher educator… it's just the source of everything*"

(Participant 8)

If we believe that a single teacher has the potential to make improvements to the educational system (Fullan, 1993), then we must also believe that someone who prepares the next generation of teachers has the potential to impact the system even more. The crucial task of educating future teachers falls to teacher educators (European Commission, 2013). Because all teacher educators inevitably model ideas of teaching to their student teachers (Loughran & Berry, 2005), they will also convey implicit or explicit messages about matters of diversity and inequality (The Teacher of Color Collective & Souto-Manning, 2022). In this study, we are interested in the role of teacher educators in potentially reducing inequalities in education via the discourses that inform and are reproduced by their ways of talking about (approaching) diversity. By critically analysing interview data on teacher educators' perceptions about and practices in diversity, we aim to uncover underlying discourses, and explore how these discourses relate to the potential reduction of inequalities in education.

1.1 Approaching diversity in a responsive way

Undeniably, educational professionals are more than ever challenged to approach diversity (Vertovec, 2007). Diversity is understood as the myriad ways in which people differ from each other (Van Avermaet & Sierens, 2010; Van Vuuren et al., 2012). Because diversity emerges in societies with existing power relations and structures that favour people with certain identity markers and disadvantage others (Crenshaw, 2003; McIntosh, 1990), inequalities in society

and education are experienced by many people and (re)produced constantly (Agirdag, 2019). As such, diversity and social inequality can be seen as two sides of the same coin. Both are not new phenomena (Banks et al., 2007). Nevertheless, nowadays the educational field is increasingly urged to address matters of diversity and inequality in more profound ways (OECD, 2021; Unia, 2018). Globally, policy makers (e.g., European Commission, 2017; UNESCO, 2017) and social movements (e.g., decolonisation of education) demand educational systems to move towards more inclusion, equity, and social justice (Castillo-Montoya et al., 2019; Opertti et al., 2014). Therefore, every way of approaching diversity, like all educational activities, can never be neutral and is always political (Giroux, 2020). In line with current social demands, we deliberately take a stance on approaching diversity from principles of inclusion, equity, and social justice (Cochran-Smith, 2004). In our research we conceptualise this general stance as 'responsiveness to diversity':

> Responsiveness to diversity in education is twofold: it is taking into account differences between people in order to create qualitative learning environments for all, as well as responding to discriminatory injustices that exist in society and (in)directly impact education, in order to create a more equitable world. (Ponet et al., 2021)

With this conceptualisation we refrain from reducing diversity to one axis of diversity (e.g., gender, ethnicity, ability…) and its associated educational strategies (Mitchell, 2016). Three noteworthy considerations from the literature informed this conceptualisation. First, due to the emergence of compartmentalised literature and research on different forms of diversity, many professionals believe separate educational strategies are needed for every axis (Van de Putte & De Schauwer, 2018). As a result, educators feel overwhelmed to meet all these demands or even frustrated that every strategy is presented as an extra add-on (Vantieghem &

Van de Putte, 2019). By taking an integrated approach, we highlight the underlying common aspects in strategies for responsiveness to diversity so it becomes more practically feasible (Opertti et al., 2014; Vantieghem et al., 2020).

Second and in line with the first argument, we agree with intersectionality theorists that individual experiences are shaped by overlapping systems of power that create inequalities (e.g., racism, sexism, classism…) (Crenshaw, 2003). An individual's identity markers become more salient depending on the context they are in, resulting in unique and varying intersected positions of (dis)advantage (Hankivsky, 2014). Hence, justice cannot be resolved by only focussing on one system of power or one aspect of diversity (Mitchell, 2016). Moreover, by taking into account multiple aspects of diversity and acknowledging identities as multi-layered (Agirdag, 2019), we hope to avoid the risk of essentialising people to one identity marker (Matus & Infante, 2011).

Third, we aim to tackle the common held misconception that approaching diversity is solely focussed on targeting people from minoritised groups, that is, people with identity markers associated with oppressed positions (Bell & Hartman, 2007). This perception is problematic because it normalises the idea that certain people are 'non-normal' and strengthens a deficit approach (Van Avermaet & Sierens, 2010). In contrast to this, we follow critics who believe that people in privileged positions are to be targeted as well by diversity-responsive strategies in education (Kohli et al., 2021; Ohito, 2016). For true social change to occur, all people, whether in a position of advantage or disadvantage, are asked to commit to pursuing inclusion, equity, and social justice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; hooks, 1994).

1.2 Teacher educators' messages about approaching diversity

In this study, we focus on higher education-based teacher educators who prepare student teachers in teacher education institutions (universities or colleges of higher education). As teachers of teachers, this specific group of teacher educators is in a unique position

(Vanderlinde et al., 2021). Since their students are becoming teachers themselves, not only what teacher educators teach (i.e. the content), but also how they teach is of the utmost importance (Lunenberg et al., 2007). Russell (1997) described this notion as 'How I teach is the message'. Therefore, any pedagogy of teacher educators is said to be a *second order pedagogy* (Murray & Male, 2005): while teaching a subject, teacher educators will inevitably engage in *modelling*, which is of instructive value to the student teachers as well (Loughran & Berry, 2005). In other words, these teacher educators are always conveying implicit messages to their student teachers with regard to ideas of teaching (Vanderlinde et al., 2021). Hence, when it comes to approaching diversity in education, messages will be communicated consciously or unconsciously, and more or less in line with our idea of responsiveness to diversity. Given our understanding that every educational matter is a political and ethical matter (e.g., Sleeter & McLaren, 1995), we argue that teacher educators have the potential to direct the future teaching of student teachers towards a commitment to inclusion, equity, and social justice by conveying corresponding messages (Murray et al., 2021). Moreover, according to a growing number of scholars (e.g., Applebaum, 2007 Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Vanderlinde et al., 2021), teacher educators have a responsibility to be socio-political change agents and, as such, challenge power structures in education that perpetuate exclusion and inequalities (e.g., Freire, 1970/2017).

As we learned from a prior systematic literature review on teacher educators' diversity-responsive practices (Ponet et al., 2021), specific research on their messages about approaching diversity is lacking in the literature. Most of the time research focuses on teacher education in general: on desired student teacher outcomes for approaching diversity (e.g., Watkins, 2012; Vantieghem & Van de Putte, 2019), or curriculum designs and corresponding content to realise these outcomes (e.g., Dursun et al., 2021; Florian & Pantic, 2017). Even though teacher educators' role in implementing programmes is often mentioned explicitly in such research

(Ponet et al., 2021), conclusions cannot be drawn from it about teacher educators' executed practices and corresponding messages they convey to student teachers. For instance, the prevalence of didactic strategies like Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (Gay, 2018), Differentiated Instruction (Tomlinson et al., 2003), or Universal Design for Learning (Griful-Freixenet et al., 2020), suggest that many teacher education institutions intend to align their policies and curricula with international policy ambitions towards more inclusion, equity, and social justice, to which these strategies are historically linked (e.g., UNESCO, 2017). However, if and how many teacher educators in these institutions truly adopt this alignment in their own practices remains an unanswered question. Consequently, little is known about whether or not teacher educators actually take on the role of socio-political change agents regarding approaching diversity. New research should therefore focus on the actual language used by teacher educators. According to Foucault (1972), language inherently (re)produces knowledge that (re)produces power structures. It reflects dominant discourses in society: particular, historically contingent ways of talking about and understanding of the world (Joye & Maeseele, 2022). This study is a first attempt to fill in this gap.

1.3 Context

This study takes place in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. Like many educational systems, the Flemish one is known for failing to serve all their students (Ainscow, 2016; UNESCO, 2015). Currently, Flemish compulsory education is characterised by high inequality in educational outcomes (e.g., Agirdag, 2019). PISA data has persistently shown a big achievement gap regarding socio-economic status and ethnicity (OECD, 2016). High segregation with regard to ability, ethnicity, and socio-economic status is present as well (Sierens et al., 2006). Furthermore, the Flemish teacher workforce is no representation of the student population but rather homogeneous: white, able-bodied, high-SES, cisgender people of

which most identify as female (SERV, 2020), while within teacher education programmes, the student body is becoming more heterogeneous every year. However, drop-out rates of students from minoritized groups are high (VIVES, 2021), indicating the remaining presence of hidden exclusion mechanisms. Consequently, there is a great need for improvements with regard to approaching diversity.

While there is an extensive tradition in other places in the world, like the US, for teacher educators to take a critical stance to approaching diversity (e.g., Cochran-Smith, 2004), this stance seems to be far less present, or at least rarely documented, in Flanders. Many studies related to diversity issues seem to shy away from explicitly incorporating a clear stance on the matter. A possible explanation might be found in the neoliberal climate in which the Flemish teacher education programmes are grounded (Pulinx et al., 2021). Currently, national policy makers are mostly interested in evidence-based research of what works best, (un)willingly reducing teaching to a technical implementation. In such discourse, critical research that questions the status quo is given little value (Biesta, 2014). However, recently, we do note new collaborations of (teacher) educators who are fed up with the status quo (Pulinx et al., 2021). New strings of research have appeared, focussing for instance on the sense of belonging of student teachers (Morreel et al., 2021), collaboration with compulsory education (Vantieghem & Van de Putte, 2019), or the professional development of higher education staff (Emmers et al., 2022). This study adds to this development, raising a critical view on the Flemish educational system.

2. Research aim

In this study, we argue that teacher educators can play a crucial role in fostering improvements for inclusion, equity, and social justice (Cochran-Smith et al., 2016). More specifically, we assume that teacher educators' ways of talking about (approaching) diversity can potentially

foster social change in education at large. Therefore, we aim to critically analyse the discourses about approaching diversity in interview data to uncover how these discourses relate to potentially reducing inequality and exclusion mechanisms in the Flemish educational system.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research background

This paper is part of a larger research project on how teacher educators approach diversity. Here we use data from a prior qualitative study in which we explored how Flemish teacher educators perceive (approaching) diversity and engage in diversity-responsive practices. The constant comparative analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994) we conducted in this prior study indicated incongruence within teacher educators' ways of talking about (approaching) diversity. Since further analysis of the underlying discourses seemed promising but was outside the scope of our prior study, this additional study was launched. We decided to adopt a methodological approach specifically directed towards the discourses, allowing us to analyse the interview data from a different lens in a more profound manner.

Since we were not solely interested in *which* discourses were present in the data, but also in *how* they relate to social inequality, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was chosen as the most adequate approach (e.g., Shevlin & Gill, 2020). CDA "is a systematic, linguistic analysis of discourse in its social context" (Joye & Maeseele, 2022, p. 17). It concerns itself with how language (re)produces power and inequality, or facilitates social change (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000; Rogers, 2011). According to the literature, there is no straightforward implementation of CDA (van Dijk, 1993), but it does rely on some general assumptions (Joye & Maeseele, 2022). Firstly, texts are believed to be manifestations of an underlying discourse. Semiotic data is therefore the unit of analysis in CDA (Hansen & Machin, 2013). Secondly, these discourses are constituted by historically and culturally specific social practices and are

also constitutive of such practices (Phillips, 2006). Hence, discourses should be analysed within the broader social context by linking it to relevant institutions and dominant ideologies in society. Thirdly, the use of language is never neutral. A discourse creates a reality that allows some actions and excludes others (Fairclough, 1995). CDA aims to unravel possible structures of power and how these are (re)produced or changed. Consequently, and fourthly, researchers must adopt a critical stance while conducting CDA (Joye & Maeseele, 2022). This means that this critical stance should be directed towards language by never taking it for granted but challenging it, on the one hand; and that a researcher should be critical towards their own positionality, that is, ideologies guiding their actions, on the other hand (Stevens, 2011).

3.2 Researcher positionality

Most of this study's analysis was executed by the first researcher. Therefore, the researcher team deemed it worthwhile to describe his positionality. It aims to increase the research transparency and, as such, contributes to the trustworthiness of this study (Willig, 2013).

B. P. is a white, middle class, able-bodied, queer man in his late twenties who has been actively engaged in the field of education in Flanders for over five years. First as an elementary classroom teacher in alternative education, then as a professional development facilitator of in-service teachers, and currently as an educational researcher with supervisory assignments regarding university students. Furthermore, he has been a voluntary youth worker for more than ten years: organising leisure activities for children of all backgrounds, taking on different leading roles in youth movements, and facilitating courses for other youth workers and new facilitators. Both areas of experience have led to the interest in the topic of approaching diversity in society at large and in education in particular. More specifically, B.P is convinced that our current educational system underserves many youngsters he has encountered and that change is needed. He therefore concurs with Fullan (1993) and Cochran-Smith (2004) that

teachers have the potential to be socio-political change agents. However, as a student teacher and later as an in-service teacher, B.P. felt his impact was limited when colleagues did not share this vision. It strengthened his belief that teacher educators are important gatekeepers to stimulate improvements towards approaching diversity on a larger scale. Mindful of these beliefs and the resulting positionality, we sought to avoid biases during coding and reporting of the data.

3.3 Sampling

A purposive sampling strategy (Mortelmans, 2013) was used to find a group of participants, corresponding with the heterogenous profession of higher education-based teacher educators (Tack et al., 2018). In total, 14 teacher educators agreed to participate voluntarily. The participants worked in three different institutions (two colleges of higher education and one university), in three different roles (subject-specific, general pedagogical, and practicum-oriented courses), and in four different teacher education programmes (kindergarten, primary, lower secondary, and higher secondary education). The age of the participants ranged from 36 to 60 years. All teacher educators presented as having a White-European descent, 13 presented as female, and one as male.

3.4 Data collection

Between June 2021 and October 2021, the first author conducted semi-structured interviews with the Flemish teacher educators (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The Covid19-pandemic required us to do twelve out of fourteen interviews online using Microsoft Teams. Both online and in-person interviews resulted in similar conversations that lasted from 75 to 105 minutes. Of all interviews, audio-recordings and pseudonymised verbatim transcriptions were made

(Miles & Huberman, 1994). The created textual artefacts were the starting point for our critical discourse analysis.

Prior to the interviews participants received an informed consent (Mortelmans, 2013), including information about the goal of the research, management of the data and opt-out options. In line with the research goals of our prior qualitative study, an interview protocol was developed to elicit perceptions on (approaching) diversity, as well as practices teacher educators engage in with regard to approaching diversity. First, contextual information about the study was provided and participants were allowed to ask clarifying questions. We also asked about the interviewee's background characteristics (e.g., courses involved, prior professional experience, additional tasks in ITE). Next, the participants were prompted to share their perceptions of the concepts diversity and approaching diversity. Other questions focussed on the concrete practices of teacher educators to approach diversity. Finally, we raised questions about factors that might hamper or stimulate teacher educators' ways of approaching diversity. Before ending the interviews, participants could share remaining thoughts and comments. The protocol was piloted with one teacher educator prior to the data collection process (Miles & Huberman, 1994), leading to minor adaptations for improvement.

3.4 Data analysis

CDA was operationalised by following the model proposed by Fairclough (1992). The model encompasses three dimensions of analysis: text, discursive practices, and social practices. The first dimension, *text*, refers to the grammatical and semantic choices of an author which can be directly observed in the data (Chouliaraki, 2006). The second dimension, *discursive practices*, is about the more general ways of using language that underlie a text. Someone's textual choices are informed and limited by the production, dissemination, and consumption processes inherent to contextual factors of professional and institutional nature (Fairclough, 1995). To

make the contextualisation of the textual dimension, researchers rely on the notion of intertextuality: the understanding that meanings in a text are conditioned by previous expressed meanings and thus should be interpreted as such (Fairclough, 1992). Simultaneously, interdiscursivity is considered as well: being aware of how different discourses can be articulated in one text, possibly reinforcing or conflicting one another (Kress, 1985; Lewis & Ketter, 2011). In the last dimension, *social practices*, the broader social context is scrutinised in which textual and discursive dimensions reside. Fairclough (2003) stated that "social practices can be thought of as ways of controlling the selection of certain structural possibilities and the exclusion of others" (p. 23). Therefore, CDA researchers are recommended to make links to structures, institutions, and dominant ideologies in society that also permeate discourse (e.g., politics, economy) (Joye & Maeseele, 2022).

The analysis of the different dimensions did not happen in a linear way. Respecting the dialectical nature of Fairclough's approach (1995), we made a recursive movement between in-text and social analysis. The coding process from our prior constant comparative analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994) was used as the starting point for analysis. Then, the first author revisited the interview data to code the linguistic choices of the interviewees on the one hand (Machin & Mayr, 2012), and intertextual links suggesting an underlying discourse on the other hand (Fairclough, 1992). Additionally, critical literature was consulted to give insight into the broader social context in which the educational system and teacher educators operate (e.g., Biesta, 2014; Giroux, 2020). Clear documentation and subsequent discussions within the research team about emerging insights from the data assured the quality of the research process (Mortelmans, 2013).

4. Results

The critical discourse analysis of our interview data revealed two prevailing, conflicting discourses permeating teacher educators' ways of talking about approaching diversity: (1) a power-challenging discourse and (2) a power-affirming discourse. To illustrate each dominant discourse, respective extracts from interview transcripts were selected as representative of these discourses and supplemented by supporting quotes from other transcripts. Additionally, we discuss what realities are (re)produced by these discourses and their repercussions for reducing inequality in education.

4.1 Discourse 1: Teacher educators challenge what is taken-for-granted

This first extract illustrates the struggle of a teacher educator with evaluating a dyscalculic student teacher's fitness to become a teacher. More in particular, the interviewee wonders about teacher educators' responsibility in evaluating students and, implicitly, in serving as gatekeepers for the teacher profession.

> One student had over 15 years of experience in education. She already had a degree and wanted to get a second degree. And then, by being here [in the teacher education programme], it was revealed that she had dyscalculia. After almost 20 years of being a student, you see. Then I wonder: "Come on, has no one ever noticed this? Hasn't it been considered?" So then it's up to us to consider: "How diverse can we be in awarding diplomas without our checklist [of competences]? Can we look at that child holistically, like she is, as a total package? And can we then confidently say: "Okay, you can teach in education, even with that learning disability?" Because it is a disability… When students come here, they can indicate a number of things from the start: "Do you have dyslexia? Dyscalculia? A physical disability? Or autism?" Then they can receive

> compensatory measures. If this is possible, we should also have the courage to consider: "Okay, despite her disability, can we allow her to become a teacher?" Or is that label enough to say: "No, we will not allow such diversity [in the teacher workforce]." Hence, it's an ethical issue as well. But we have to consider it. We ourselves give the message to student teachers: "You have to like everyone in your class, you have to like all the children, you have to differentiate, and not every child is the same." Okay, then it should be the same for us. Not every student is equal. We must dare to admit that and then also try to think about it and... Actually, we just have to dare. And yes, in case you were wondering: she passed.
>
> (Participant 9)

By pointing out how the student's special needs were not noticed and accommodated for, the teacher educator shows awareness that the current educational system does not serve all students. The use of questions at the beginning of this extract reflects some sort of disbelief at the students' situation, as well as disappointment towards the educational system. Immediately after, the teacher educator starts talking about *us* and *we*. Combined with imperative discursive statements, it becomes clear that this person attributes a shared responsibility to teacher educators to address such systemic shortcomings. Later on, the term *ethical issue* is used, which amplifies the idea that teacher educators should have the responsibility to think about the implications of their evaluation processes for the in- or exclusion of people.

More in particular, this teacher educator calls attention to the importance of teacher educators to lead by the messages they themselves are assumed to convey to student teachers about liking all children and acknowledging that students differ from each other. Such messages align with international policy discourses on inclusion, which have made their mark

on policies of Flemish educational institutions (e.g., Opertti et al., 2014). By actualising principles of inclusion in the context of teacher preparation, the teacher educator creates a space in which conventional ideas of what a teacher should be, that is, non-disabled, are questioned and the future teacher workforce is imagined as a better representation of society.

Using words like *courage* and *dare* suggests an awareness that creating such disrupting spaces won't be easy or might be met with resistance from certain people. Since teacher educators function as gatekeepers of who can become a teacher, their choices will always impact the broader educational system. Opening the gate for people with (learning) disabilities to become teachers will eventually confront schools to rethink their self-evident ways of organising. Also, within the teacher education programme, this asks for changes in the way students are evaluated, potentially leading to colleagues feeling discomfort.

Concretely, this interviewee recommends a holistic form of evaluation. Concerned with using labels like dyscalculia, the teacher educator concurs with a broader discourse in society that is reluctant about labelling, since it risks essentialising people and masking their strengths (Maalouf, 1999/2021). As such, the plea for holistic education again resonates with a larger educational evolution that puts children and their rights at the centre of education (UNESCO, 2017). Reflected in the vision statements of the main institutions that prove education (GO!, 2022; Katholiek Onderwijs Vlaanderen, 2022), this holistic approach seems quite present in Flemish compulsory education and part of the teacher preparation programmes.

> We must be aware to keep working to ensure everyone's access to or participation in the existing facilities. It is too easy to say: "Yes, everyone has equal opportunities and everyone can meet the requirements [because the facilities exist]" I think you [as a student teacher] need to get stimulated [to participate fully], which is partly a task of the wider community and educational community. Likewise, for example, also a

> teacher in schools... To facilitate every child's development as good as possible according to his possibilities and according to his dreams, teachers need to be stimulated by going into conversation and dialogue with parents from all backgrounds… What they [children] want and what they aspire to, we [as educators] should facilitate that. And that it is an important task also as a teacher [educator] to be aware that everyone... That there has to be a bit of a push for everyone, a help for everyone. That we should not assume that everyone just can grab an opportunity on their own.
>
> (Participant 12)

Similar to the first extract, this teacher educator talks from a *we-standpoint* in combination with imperative statements. Again we see a responsibility being attributed to teacher educators to remain *aware* of the implications of their actions for the in- or exclusion of people. In this particular case, it is pointed out that it cannot be assumed that all students are thriving just because an inclusion discourse has become part of most educational institution policies. In contrast, the use of the sentence *it is too easy to say* rather indicates a call to stay alert for what still needs to be done, despite achieved progress that might have accompanied inclusion discourse. This means avoiding satisfaction with the current situation which could blind one from perpetuating exclusion mechanisms.

Additionally, the teacher educator seems to imply that inclusion should not be reduced to a mere focus on participation and access. Critiquing such an oversimplification reflects an anti-meritocratic sociocritical discourse that problematises how systematic barriers are kept in place by focussing on the individual responsibility of students (Vantieghem & Van de Putte, 2019). This discourse, often linked to egalitarianism, has been gaining ground in Flemish scholarly work for many years (Hirtt et al., 2007). The teacher educator's denouncement of

meritocratic beliefs can be observed via the suggestion to facilitate more stimulation. Like the first extract, it reflects a clear awareness of possible actions to stimulate deeper change. In this last claim, the interviewee specifically urges teacher educators to limit assumptions and, thus, prejudices about others. This claim is consistent with what a growing group of Flemish researchers promotes in a search for social justice for all: teachers' awareness is the first step in combating inequalities (e.g., Agirdag, 2019; Pulinx et al., 2021).

Accordingly, both extracts are illustrative of a first dominant underlying discourse that informs teacher educators' ways of talking about (approaching) diversity in the interview data: a power-challenging discourse. Self-evident practices, policies, or structures in education are questioned from a socio-critical perspective, implying an awareness that achieved progress does not equal justice for all. The implications of being a gatekeeper (first extract) or being satisfied with inclusionary practices (second extract) were not the only ones questioned in the interview data. Interviewees, for instance, also question Eurocentric representations in course materials, the (lack of) allocation of time and resources within an institution to discuss diversity issues, and the bureaucracy in higher education. Even the institutional policy on diversity and inclusion was sometimes criticised: "It [central administration promoting inclusion initiatives] sometimes makes me feel like: look, we can tick that off now too, we have informed the staff" (Participant 8).

The reluctance to settle for the status quo and instead to think in terms of an ongoing battle recurred throughout various interviews: "My dad shared this combative attitude of: come on, everyone has to get his share on this earth" (Participant 10). On the one hand, it stimulates sensitivity towards remaining injustice. On the other hand, it opens spaces for potentially dislocating actions regarding power relations. Individually and collectively, teacher educators, and by extension, student teachers and all educational professionals, are made responsible for

taking action within their circle of influence. Through their individual practices, professionals can provide adapted support to students and spread awareness of injustice in society at large by modelling it. “It’s our job as academia to shake up education from time to time” (Participant 13). This shaking up also ties with the collective level: the idea is reproduced that the educational field should be (more) vocal about systematic elements that hinder further progress in public debate and in policy circles where decisions are being made.

This power-challenging discourse produces a reality that aims to alter normative ideas of how schooling and education are organised. The teacher educators using it urge themselves and others to take action within their context to do things differently, believing that those actions contribute to more social justice for all. More specifically, they aim to proactively and structurally make education a place of belonging for everyone. In doing so, people (from minoritised groups) don’t need to get hurt to signal where oppressive structures are at work before action is undertaken. “Throughout our programme, I actually believe we are quite activist. We do regularly receive a conscience-punch from our students as well [and act on it]” (Participant 6). Of course this potential reality is not envisioned by everyone in society, let alone by everyone working in teacher education. Inherently, employing the discourse means facing resistance and thus being courageous to stay true to what you believe in: “Basically, you have to believe in what you are doing and go for it. OK, that will come with bumps and bruises and you get a lot of headwinds” (Participant 10).

4.2 Discourse 2: Teacher educators affirm normative exclusionary practices

In this following extract to illustrate the second prevailing discourse in our interview data, the teacher educator shares thoughts on Muslim students, and more specifically, on wearing a hijab while being in a teacher education programme.

> A few years ago, we had a girl wearing a *cloth* [hijab], a Muslim girl. She wore that cloth in our courses, but she had to take it off during the internship. In her internship school, she was not allowed to wear it. When I visited her, I didn't recognise her. So I said: “Is that you? Such beautiful hair (laughs).” It was very confrontational. Then I also asked: “Why are you even doing that [wearing the hijab] now?” And you always get the same answer: “It's not compulsory…” Now, in her case, it was compulsory because of her parents. But as soon as she left school, on the bus, for example, she immediately put on that cloth again. So yes... Sometimes I have a hard time with that. In the sense that you are not more or less faithful with that cloth, you know. But that's personal, of course. I'm never going to blame her [for wearing a hijab], that's for sure. But I'm like: “Why present yourself like that? It's not necessary. If you have faith and follow those rules, it doesn't matter if you wear a headscarf or not.” But that [idea that it does not matter] is super hard to get through. So I think: “It's just the way it is.” And actually, I’ve noticed that it has only worsened. Almost 40 years ago, when I started teaching, there were some Muslims, but those girls and boys did integrate.
>
> (Participant 4)

Throughout the extract, the teacher educator only uses the word *headscarf* once. All other times *cloth* [doek] is used, which in Dutch has a disparaging connotation. The repeated use indicates the word was not a slip of the tongue, while the knowledge of the word *headscarf* even suggests the derogatory term was deliberately chosen to pass on underlying disapproval. In the beginning of the extract, this disapproval seems to be directed towards the expression of religion via clothing prescriptions. The teacher educator’s secular idea of faith is claimed to be universal via sentences like *you are not more or less faithful with that cloth*. The hijab is reduced to an object, stripped away from symbolic meaning. Little awareness of and respect

for other (religious) frames of reference seems to be present in the discourse used. Instead, the teacher educator speaks of a *confrontational* experience and having a *hard time* when interacting with a student who does not fit these supposed universal ideas. By making it a *personal* story and underscoring the emotions felt, the teacher educator tries to generate some kind of sympathy for their alleged struggle. On top of that, it is the teacher educator who *will never blame* a student for wearing a hijab and who has a *super hard time to get through* to reinstall the universal ideas. Consequently, while the interviewee is portrayed as a hero, the student is depicted as a burden and a passive victim of her surroundings, unable to know what is good. Meanwhile, the fact that wearing a hijab during the internship is not allowed is seen as self-evident and not problematised. Again, little awareness seems to be present of the implications of such self-evident claims for the student teacher's identity development and well-being. It reflects the broader neutrality discourse in Flemish education that advocates the stripping away of religious symbols in state-owned schools (Celeste et al. 2019).

Later on, the teacher educator's underlying disapproval might also be directed to religious and ethnic minority groups in general. For example, the comparison between Muslims now and forty years ago reflects frustration with people who do not assimilate to what the teacher educator thinks is the norm. Moreover, considering the intertextuality within the interview transcript, the already mentioned and other disparaging words uncover a sense of superiority towards people who do not fit this norm. For example, "It is mainly the Turkish population who struggles with language" or "It was a black, I cannot put it any other way, a n*****" (Participant 4). This kind of talk can be linked to what scholars call a discourse or ideology of White European supremacy (Gillborn, 2005); the construction of White identities around words with superior connotations and other identities as deviant and inferior (Virta, 2009). This ideology is a legacy of colonialism, still permeating European societies and its institutions today, for example, via educational curricula and procedures (Mohanty, 2003).

> It [the course content] is the same for everyone. That is not to say that you don't feel those differences [regarding pre-education] quickly, but I do my best not to bias myself. And I think... When it comes to more obvious *diversity characteristics* that indeed reflect origin, religion, or ethnicity, I don't approach that any differently. But I must add that I have a very white, Flemish [student] population. Very much, actually. Sometimes, there is someone in my classroom... We do also offer Islamic religion as a subject programme... So a few times, I've had an Islamic student combining that with [my subject]. I see from my experience with most of them [Muslim students] is that they have good knowledge of the [Dutch] language, but not with the same mastery as another Flemish student. That first [course] chapter I just talked about is very language-driven. So when we have just started, I immediately feel that distinction. Then I try not to do all that [be biased], but... For me, it has more to do with the fact that I try not to differentiate between my Flemish students because there is more diversity between them [with regard to prior knowledge] than with regard to multiculturalism. In my classroom, I mean. And then, when there are multicultural differences, language is the biggest barrier.
>
> (Participant 3)

In this last extract, the teacher educator repeatedly wants to be seen as committed to *not be biased*. At first glance, we could read this as an alignment with the first broad discourse we discovered in the interview data. However, here, the effort to be unbiased is supported by referencing behaviour aimed to *not differentiate* but treat all students the same. As such, the interviewee seems to reproduce the idea that avoiding prejudice means ignoring differences and should result in equal treatment. Such colour-blind, or in this study, diversity-blind ways

of talking are shown to be persistent in Flemish education (Celeste et al., 2019). It resonates with the broader meritocratic discourse that prevails in Western education systems (Biesta, 2014). In it, differences in outcomes are mainly attributed to personal efforts instead of systemic injustices, vindicating educators for making no adaptations to their teaching.

Furthermore, a paradox is noted between what the teacher educator explicitly says and what is said between the lines. Some clear biases contradict the expressed commitment to being unbiased. For instance, when reflecting upon *characteristics that reflect origin, religion, or ethnicit*y in the classroom, the interviewee suggests there are few since there is a *very white, Flemish population*. Like in the last extract, it suggests that whiteness is assumed to be the norm. Simultaneously, the Flemish students are supposed to be homogeneous, neglecting diversity beyond differences in prior knowledge. In a more obvious way, the teacher educator also makes assumptions about Muslim students and language acquisition. Immediately after this statement, reassurance is given that it should not contradict *try[ing] not to* be biased. The fact that the interviewee wants to reassure insinuates some awareness of this tension. By again proclaiming the practice of equal treatment and thus the use of the colour-blind discourse, the tension is allegedly resolved; as if ignoring different needs also erases the biases. This might be connected to prevailing ideas in education that teachers want to be perceived as neutral, not discriminating against nor favouring students (Cochran-Smith, 2004).

Lastly, we want to elaborate on the remark about Muslim students' language acquisition. This teacher educator generalises difficulties with the language of instruction (i.e., Dutch) to difficulties with languages as a whole. As such, little acknowledgement is given to the fact that students who have a different mother tongue than Dutch have already acquired proficiency in multiple languages. Due to particularities of Flemish history and society, the Dutch language received a lot of emphasis in education throughout the last decades, often at the cost of devaluing other languages (for a detailed description, see Van Avermaet & Gysen,

2009). The interviewee's statement might reflect a preference for monolingual education that is still dominant in Flanders.

In contrast to the first dominant discourse, the second discourse embedded in the interview data and demonstrated by the last two extracts does not challenge power relations. On the contrary, many teacher educators' ways of talking about (approaching) diversity reflected an underlying discourse aimed at conserving normative structures of schooling and education: a power-affirming discourse. With overt and covert statements, current exclusionary educational practices are portrayed as natural or even preferable.

Overtly, even though it was scarce, derogatory speech towards people from minoritised groups was not limited to ethnic groups (extract 1). "I think it's wrong [to have a teacher with dyslexia], but who am I?" (Participant 4). When such overt discrimination is still tolerated in teacher education, education at large will remain an unwelcoming place for many students. Additionally, in more subtle ways, it was normalised that a teacher's comfort is prioritised over students': "Then you wonder: what word to use now? Here we go again… It's hard, so then I often decide: let's just call it as it is, and if someone gets angry, it's just part of the deal" (Participant 5). This assimilationist train of thought implies that students, particularly from minoritised groups, should accept that harm and exclusion will inherently remain part of education. Amongst others, monolinguistic (extract 2), Eurocentric, and white supremacist (extract 1) discourses are reinforced. In doing so, seemingly unconsciously, educational professionals convey to their students that a part of their identity is not valued (e.g., Cummins, 2000). The literature shows that this deficit view on identity markers can hamper students' sense of belonging, perpetuating exclusion (Pulinx et al., 2017).

Next, the idea of treating everyone *equally* (extract 2) was proclaimed and defended multiple times throughout the interviews. "I have to install a one-size-fits-all model"

(Participant 12). For sure, educational professionals have been urged for decades to refrain from bias, prejudice, and stereotypical thinking to prevent low expectations and associated self-fulfilling prophecy mechanisms (e.g., Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). However, according to contemporary scholars in the field of educational inequalities, this should not result in equal treatment of all, but rather in valuing all differences equally (e.g., Ainscow, 2016). The implicit colour-blind ideology that is being reproduced by the power-affirming discourse in our data has been discouraged for many years in educational literature for its negative effects on students from dominant and non-dominant groups; and the same goes for the persistence of the assimilationist ideology (e.g., Levin et al., 2012). Nonetheless, both ideologies remain persistent in Flemish education (Hagenaars et al., 2023).

In conclusion, the teacher educators using the power-affirming discourse reproduce a reality in which the status quo, an educational system that is undeserving of many students, is preserved. In seemingly unconscious and conscious ways, teacher educators then step away from the responsibility to reduce inequalities in education actively. On the one hand, teacher educators might not be aware of the implications of their beliefs on the outcomes of students. Such ignorance seems plausible if a teacher educator perceives (approaching) diversity from a narrow point of view: “For me, the student population is too homogeneous [white], which makes approaching diversity hard” (Participant 13). Consequently, this person’s sense of responsibility and agency regarding approaching diversity in a responsive way is small. On the other hand, the data also suggests that teacher educators consciously turn away from an assumed responsibility to reduce inequality: “Teacher education programmes should definitely address it [matters of inequality], but not in my course (laughs)” (Participant 8). Moreover, subtle, inconsistent remarks even hint that some might adopt the ignorant stance purposefully; meaning they actively chose to absolve themselves of responsibility by, for example, redirecting it to educational management or policy responsibilities: “You need a vision on the

level of the institution, as well as legislation. There are still many barriers, but it's not something an individual teacher educator can address" (Participant 13). The current neoliberal policy climate might reinforce such thought (Giroux, 2020). In it, education is perceived as a neutral, non-political endeavour in which educators should mainly focus on evidence-based teaching practices that allegedly serve all students effectively (Giroux, 2020). Consequently, systematic inequalities in education and the collective responsibility educational professionals can take up fade into the background. Since neoliberalism is all-around in Flemish society, its ways of talking and thinking can feel very natural and thus hard to question.

4.3 Prevalence of both discourses

In our small-scale interview data, we were unable to establish a link between the identified discourses and the specific background characteristics of the teacher educators we sampled. It appears that these discourses are utilized by teacher educators, irrespective of their individual backgrounds. In fact, we noticed that both discourses were used across all teacher education institutions, in all programs, and within the different roles that where part of our sample.

Furthermore, all interview transcripts contained the first discourse, the power-challenging discourse. However, only a few interviewees used this discourse exclusively and consistently when talking about their perceptions about (approaching) diversity and their practices to approach diversity. These people did not solely explicitly align themselves with a social justice perspective to approach diversity, but also gave many spontaneous examples of equity-pursuing practices. As such, their ways of talking also implicitly seemed to align them with our conceptualisation of responsiveness to diversity.

The second discourse, the power-affirming discourse, was never used exclusively but always in combination with the first discourse. Therefore, most teacher educators employed a

combination of both discourses when talking about (approaching) diversity. Remarkably, the second discourse was most often reflected in implicit messages about (approaching) diversity. Teacher educators rarely explicitly aligned themselves with the implications of this discourse, that is, the perpetuation of exclusionary practices in education, even though their ways of talking did imply such perpetuation. In contrast, by using statements about (approaching) diversity that clearly portray the first discourse, it seems they did want to showcase a commitment to responsiveness to diversity. Consequently, a tension arose in the interview data regarding teacher educators' genuine commitment to responsiveness to diversity. The interviews in which this tension was observed seem to suggest teacher educators are unaware or ignorant of it in their talking. Again, no relationship could be found between teacher educators' background characteristics and how both discourses were combined.

5. Concluding reflections

Given their unique position as role models who prepare the next generation of teachers, teacher educators automatically convey messages about (approaching) diversity that relate in some way to reducing inequalities in education. Therefore, they have the potential to function as socio-political change agents. However, research is lacking on this specific professional group, the discourses that inform and are reproduced by their messages, and how these discourses relate to reducing inequalities in education. Therefore, in this study, we wanted to explore more in-depth how teacher educators talk about (approaching) diversity. In particular, we critically analysed interview transcripts in which teacher educators talked about (approaching) diversity. We identified two broad discourses and how they relate to reducing inequalities in the Flemish educational system: (1) a power-challenging discourse and (2) a power-affirming discourse.

First, the power-challenging discourse questions self-evident practices, policies, or structures in education from a socio-critical perspective. It implies an awareness that social

justice is not yet achieved for all, leading to dissatisfaction with the status quo, which underserves many students, and an ongoing battle to change that status quo. Teacher educators are made responsible individually and collectively, to take action in their circle of influence: adapting support to students, modelling the awareness of injustice, and vocalising issues in public debate and policy circles. Inherently courageous to face accompanying resistance, teacher educators create spaces where power is dislocated to proactively and structurally make education a place of belonging for everyone. Hence, we align this first discourse with scholars who perceive teacher educators as socio-political change agents (e.g., Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). The discourse also ties in with a broader egalitarian discourse and the inclusion discourse in international policy organisations.

Second and in contrast, the power-affirming discourse seems to stimulate teacher educators to leave power structures untouched, thus contributing to the conservation of inequalities in education. Failure of individuals or groups in education is attributed to a lack of effort or commitment on the part of students, or inherent deficiencies in people with specific identity markers, resonating dominant neoliberal voices in Flemish national policy (Clycq et al., 2014). Since neoliberalism claims that teaching is, or should be, a neutral, non-political endeavour (Biesta, 2014; Giroux, 2020), teacher educators' beliefs about their potential agency and responsibility with regard to social justice are being undermined. Via assimilationist and colour-blind statements, little acknowledgement is given to how the educational system underserves many students. On the contrary, a reality is reinforced in which education remains an inherently harmful and exclusionary space for many students, particularly for minoritised groups. Additionally, however scarce, derogatory statements about minoritised people also preserve overt discrimination in education. Taken together, many students' sense of belonging remains hampered, perpetuating exclusion and inequality (Ahmed, 2012).

Even though two separate discourses could be distinguished in the interview transcripts, we found that most teacher educators used both discourses simultaneously. Just a few of the participants only employed one, namely the power-challenging discourse. By being consistent in both their explicit and implicit ways of talking about (approaching) diversity, these teacher educators unambiguously (re)produce a reality that fosters the reduction of social inequality. Therefore, they can be perceived as having a genuine commitment to our conceptualisation of responsiveness to diversity. For all other teacher educators we argue this is not the case.

The simultaneous use of both discourses creates paradoxical narratives, in which teacher educators contradict themselves. This finding substantiates the incongruence we already noticed in our prior analysis of the interview data. In our current analysis, we saw this incongruence mainly reflected in the differences between teacher educators' explicit statements about (approaching) diversity and the implicit messages they conveyed via their talking about this topic in general. While many participants explicitly stated to align with a social justice perspective, seemingly reflecting the power-challenging discourse, the power-affirming discourse manifested itself predominantly via their implicit messages (e.g., when referencing a Muslim student's attire, assuming language barriers, or when derogatory terms are used to refer to a student of black ethnicity). Consequently, we argue that this specific dynamic of how both discourses are combined is rather unproductive to foster responsiveness to diversity. On the one hand, it is unproductive because if teacher educators are convinced that talking about inclusion, equity, and social justice justifies any other comment, they won't develop a tendency for self-examination to realise their narratives are inconsistent. On the other hand, it is also unproductive because the paradoxical narrative might leave student teachers confused or questioning the importance of responsiveness to diversity. Both teacher educators and student teachers will be less compelled to actually make changes in current power dynamics, leaving the status quo untouched.

Next, we take a critical look at the unawareness or ignorance of participants regarding their paradoxical ways of talking about (approaching) diversity. One could argue that some are truly ignorant of how some of their statements perpetuate places of exclusion. For instance, having assimilationist or colour-blind beliefs might come from a sincere conviction that it reflects a path to equity and social justice (Celeste et al., 2019). Especially when (time for) dialogue is lacking about the meaning of these concepts, it is plausible that such ignorance remains unchallenged and that diverging understandings stay in co-existence. However, given the important and unique role teacher educators have in education, the ignorant stance must also be questioned. The presence of the first discourse in every interview, as well as participants' knowledge of international and institutional policy regarding inclusion, equity, and social justice proves that teacher educators are knowledgeable that the current educational system is underserving. Consequently, exempting oneself from taking responsibility, for example, by not engaging self-examination, can be perceived as a conscious decision, a wilful ignorance (Zembylas, 2017). In the literature, such ambiguous attitudes are explained because of discomfort and other unpleasant emotions change can evoke, leading to defensive reactions like denial and disavowal in people of dominant groups (DiAngelo, 2018; Wekker, 2016). Since the participants of this study presented as White-European and able-bodied, this might be a plausible explanation here as well.

In conclusion, teacher educators will convey different, conflicting implicit messages about approaching diversity to student teachers. Inconsistencies within and between teacher educators might complicate straightforward commitments to responsiveness to diversity. Then, even though student teachers might become knowledgeable about exclusion and inequality in the current educational system, they might also become socialised to take a stance of wilful ignorance regarding the matter. By outlining both discourses, the dynamic of combining both, and a critical remark to the ignorance, this study adds to the literature on a theoretical level.

Practically, contributions are made as well. First, the theoretical insights can make teacher educators aware of how both discourses influence their approaching diversity. It can uncover inconsistencies in one's talking and thus unmask cases of wilful ignorance. Second, if teacher education institutions are truly committed to reducing inequalities in education, incentives should be raised for teacher educators to take part in professional development aimed at lowering persistent beliefs that affirm power structures and higher criticality. Increased pressure from internal policy, for instance by making approaching diversity part of job descriptions or job evaluations, might also stimulate teacher educators to approach diversity less voluntarily and more from a truly responsibilized point of view. Additionally, we recommend institutions to facilitate collective discussion about teacher educators' understanding of diversity and approaching diversity in order to reach more alignment. As such, what is taught about approaching diversity explicitly via teacher education curricula, will be more congruent with the implicit messages of teacher educators' practices. In taking such measures, teacher educators can really be at the source of world improvement.

The conclusions of our study are presented with some reservations. To start with, the voluntary participation of the interviewees might give a skewed representation of how the uncovered discourses are actually present in reality. Since the participants knew the interviews were about (approaching) diversity and their practices to commit to it, we assume that mostly people who have some affinity with the matter agreed to participate, possibly oversampling the presence of the power-challenging discourse. Furthermore, since our plan to conduct a CDA emerged after the first analysis of the interviews, we did not transparently inform teacher educators about this analysis. However, because informing participants upfront about our quest for underlying discourse could prompt them to downplay some beliefs and exaggerate others, it can be justified to withhold this information while collecting data. Nevertheless, CDA on interview data remains somewhat contested according to some scholars (Hammersley, 2014).

To tackle both limitations in future research, CDA could be conducted on other data containing teacher educators' ways of talking about approaching diversity that is more randomly sampled. Course observations, published articles, and staff meetings are just some suggestions to potentially analyse. Additional research could also investigate if and how raising someone's awareness about inequalities can actually change what discourses inform teacher educators' approaching diversity. Lastly, on an institutional level, it could also be worthwhile to study if such initiatives also raise the congruency between what curricula explicitly teach about approaching diversity and the implicit messages that are conveyed by teacher educators.

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