

The Amsterdam version of the guest model
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At the beginning of this century, I worked with a colleague as a school leader at a primary school in Amsterdam's Bijlmer. The district is characterized by a mix of residents from different countries and cultures as well as from different religions. At that time, the district had two large school boards, one public and one interdenominational, and several small boards, often on a religious basis.

My school was part of the interdenominational board and at that time made a change in the way we dealt with religious education. With the help of 'identity counselors' (of which Ina was one at the time), we expanded our religious education. Christian traditions remained important in the school, we celebrated Christmas and Easter and told stories from the Bible. In addition, attention was paid annually to at least one other major world religion. With the help of teaching boxes, guest teachers and teaching letters, we covered, for example, Hinduism, Buddhism or Islam.

The lessons had different purposes. By talking about the faith, its characteristics, rituals and traditions, the children broadened their knowledge. In addition to knowledge, similarities and comparable rituals, values and intentions were always sought. By emphasizing the similarities, the children experienced someone else's faith as less unfamiliar and possibly strange or threatening.

In addition to these lessons, we annually celebrated a holiday that is important for that particular religion. We also did our best to visit a place of worship of the relevant religion.

I will never forget how a former student who was doing an internship emotionally expressed how recognized he had felt when Hinduism, his religion, was discussed in class. How proud he was that he could tell the class something about it and how grateful that the group felt safe enough to do so.

It was nice for the teachers that the guest lessons were given by people who knew the religion well, which was a great added value at the time and also meant that the lessons went further than just transferring knowledge. Through these experts or sometimes parents of our students, the experience of religion was also given a place in the lessons. This was sometimes difficult for the teachers. There were teachers who could also talk to the children about the experience of faith. There were also teachers who found this difficult, sometimes it was too personal, sometimes they were too convinced of their own religion, which meant they were not sufficiently open to another religion and sometimes they were not religious themselves and it was difficult to teach about the value of faith.

The school was in the same area as a public and an Islamic school. Although the schools belonged to three different boards, we as principals got along well with each other and shared the same vision on education and development for the children. Together we wanted to be the 'village that raised a child'. We could not stand the fact that the children from the same flat were given different options because their parents had chosen a different school. We explored the possibilities of offering after-school activities together. What activities would be appropriate for all schools and suitable to start with, how do we deal with mixing the

students from the three schools and how do we communicate this to parents? We started with accessible activities where the rules surrounding, for example, mixing boys and girls from the Islamic school did not play a role. We presented this collaboration to parents and children as something we felt was self-evident, and the respective boards were also included in this development that we as principals believed in so much.

The more we spoke to each other as management, the more precarious topics were brought to the table. As a woman, I always received a handshake from my Islamic colleague, but would I also be welcome in his school without a headscarf (and sometimes with short sleeves)? What about sports for boys and girls, what agreements would he like there and were we prepared to go along with that? How did we all explain to our sponsors, parents, children and boards that we considered similarities and coherence more important than differences and that we therefore continued to look for a common path?

We discovered that the enthusiasm and firm conviction of the good of this collaboration was an indispensable basis that ensured that we could shape this collaboration. A collaboration that has even led to a new joint school building for the three schools, including some communal areas. The schools each continued to teach according to their own concept and vision and the boards remained separate.

Especially when the new building was ready, we spent a lot of energy on collaboration between the different teams and getting acquainted with the different forms of education that were common at the three schools.

Looking back, we should have put even more energy into this, ensuring that this vision of 'the village to raise a child' was just as ingrained in the team's DNA as it is in ours. With the change of management at the three different schools, the belief changed that this collaboration was necessary to do the best for all children and to let them experience that there are more similarities than differences. The enthusiasm of the management has certainly set a lot of good things in motion, but has not been sufficiently successful in making this a permanent fixture within this school.