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Research paper

Dutch history teachers' perceptions of teaching the topic of Islam while balancing distance and proximity

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Dutch history teachers can perceive the Islam-related issues as sensitive.
- Teachers' experiences are captured in 3 dimensions: interpersonal relationship, perceived identities, sources of knowledge.
- Teaching context and aims influence teachers' proximity and distance toward students in these three dimensions.
- Differences between students and teachers regarding their epistemological authority can be a sensitivity factor.
- Undefined use of the word 'Islam' and 'Muslim' can increase tensions in the classroom.

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ABSTRACT

Teaching about the topic of Islam may be challenging. We report the results of a survey study (N = 81) of Dutch history teachers and six in-depth interviews examining the sensitivities experienced when teaching Islam-related issues and the motives that underlie teachers' decisions. We developed an analytical framework comprising three dimensions that describe the proximity and distance between teachers and students from interpersonal, identity and knowledge perspectives. Our results show that differences between teachers and students regarding their sources of knowledge and epistemological authority are an important factor affecting the sensitivity of Islam-related issues.

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1. Introduction

Due to the influence of migration and the increased exchange of knowledge, values and ideas in globalized societies, previously undisputed topics can 'suddenly' become sensitive issues in the classroom; such changes also depend on the diverse backgrounds of the student population (Cowan & Maitles, 2012; Goldberg & Savenije, 2018; Hess, 2002; Noddings & Brooks, 2017). In November 2020, two weeks after a French history teacher who showed a cartoon of the prophet Mohammed in his classroom was beheaded in the streets, a Dutch teacher was threatened on social media because of a cartoon that he posted in his classroom. The cartoon, which showed a person wearing a Charlie Hebdo t-shirt mocking the jihadist who had just beheaded him, had been hanging in the classroom for 5 years as a prompt to discuss freedom of speech. A short commemoration for the French teacher in the school suddenly evoked controversy over the cartoon, culminating in threats and the teacher going into hiding.

Teaching about Islam-related topics increasingly poses challenges to history teachers. Research indicates that teaching about these historical topics can be difficult because some students may react strongly or share extreme perspectives in the classroom on topics, such as Islamic terrorism, migration and conflict in the Middle East (Ensel & Stremmelaar, 2013; Jikeli, 2013; Wansink et al., 2019; Wansink, de Graaf, & Berghuis, 2021). Simultaneously, international research also points out that anti-Islam sentiments or islamophobia have increased since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, which can lead to 'political trauma' among Muslims (Bouma & De Ruig, 2015; Brooks, 2019a; Eraqi,

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2015b, Klepper, 2014; Merchant, 2016; Sondel et al., 2018). Hence, teachers have the challenging task of acknowledging the perspectives of all students and simultaneously addressing the perspectives of those students with extreme beliefs (Niyozov, 2010).

Discussing sensitive topics such as those described above provides opportunities for the development of skills, such as forming a reasoned opinion grounded in evidence and acknowledging and questioning critically contrasting perspectives (Goldberg & Savenije, 2018; Savenije & Goldberg, 2019). These skills are considered an important aspect of active, democratic citizenship, especially in diverse societies (Barton & Ho, 2020; European Education Culture Executive Agency Eurydice, 2016; Oulton et al., 2004). Additionally, students believe that discussions regarding sensitive issues are important and often have positive attitudes toward these discussions (Hess & Posselt, 2002). However, such discussions challenge teachers' pedagogical tact and classroom management skills, as sensitive issues can evoke strong emotions, particularly when the topic is related to religion (Hess, 2009; King, 2009; Savenije & Goldberg, 2019). Furthermore, history teachers struggle to maintain a neutral position in their representations of the past while confronted with their emotions, which can be triggered by their social identity and beliefs regarding historical knowledge (Donnelly et al., 2020; Wansink et al., 2018; 2019).

Previous research concerning teaching sensitive issues in the history classroom has mostly described why teachers have difficulties teaching sensitive issues in general and how to overcome these difficulties (Barton & McCully, 2012; Hess & Posselt, 2002; Kello, 2016; Oulton et al., 2004; Wansink, Logtenberg, Savenije, Storck, & Pelgrom, 2020). However, the preferred approach to teaching sensitive issues greatly depends on the specific nature of the sensitivity of the topic in a particular teaching context (Goldberg & Savenije, 2018). The complexities of teachers' experiences with Islam-related issues and the various motives underlying teachers' decisions regarding how to react in specific teaching contexts remain understudied topics (Panjwani & Revell, 2018; Kasamali, 2021; Saleh, 2021). Therefore, the aim of this paper is to investigate to what extent and why history teachers consider Islam-related issues sensitive and how Muslim and non-Muslim teachers working in different school contexts navigate these sensitivities in their classrooms. We report the results of a survey study ($N = 81$) involving Dutch history teachers and six in-depth interviews regarding teaching Islam in the history classroom.

1.1. Defining sensitivity regarding Islam-related topics in history education

Several partially overlapping concepts are used in research investigating sensitive issues in history education. The notion of controversial issues refers to the existence of contrary views within the academic historical community or society (Dearden, 1981; Goldberg & Savenije, 2018), while with 'difficult history', the focus is on the intersection of trauma, suffering and oppression (Sheppard, 2010). In this study, we use the term 'sensitive' to emphasize factors of personal values, beliefs and identity that are related to the sensitivity of the issue while acknowledging the social embeddedness of these factors (Goldberg et al., 2019). Moreover, we assume that the sensitivity of such issues is context-bound and depends on one's positionality (Wrenn et al., 2007; Goldberg & Savenije, 2018). Therefore, what is considered to be sensitive differs across individuals and changes over time and place.

To contextualize the sensitivities present when teaching about the topic of Islam in history lessons, we explored three dimensions. The first, general and overarching dimension was proximity and distance in interpersonal teacher-student relationships. Proximity and emotional support in teacher-student relationships are considered central to creating safe learning environments and are positively related to students' school engagement and achievement (Roorda et al., 2011; Wubbels et al., 2006). Close interpersonal relationships between teachers and students are particularly important when teaching sensitive issues because of the tensions these issues may evoke in the classroom (Hess, 2002; McCully, 2006). However, to manage these tensions, literature on citizenship education and discussion of sensitive issues also emphasizes the need to set boundaries and to assert norms, which implies a certain distance between teachers and students (Hess, 2009; Wansink et al., 2019). Based on previous research, we propose that in the extent to which teachers experience this proximity or distance when teaching about Islam-related religious issues, two other dimensions seem to be relevant factors (e.g., Abu El-Haj, 2007; James, 2010; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Zembylas et al., 2019). The first factor is whether teachers and students experience a sense of shared identities. For example, history teachers sometimes struggle with teaching nonreligious topics to specific religious groups because of the possible identification of these groups with particular social identities and perspectives that differ from the teachers' perceived identities (e.g., Jikeli, 2013). The second factor is whether teachers and students value similar sources of knowledge. Within a history curriculum in which the origin and development of world religions is taught from a historical perspective, tensions could be avoided or neglected by teachers based on their position toward religious sources or insufficient knowledge about Islam (Anderson et al., 2013). Thus, we assume that when teaching about Islam-related issues in history lessons, the three dimensions are important to explore. In each dimension, teachers may experience more or less proximity or sharedness toward their students: 1) interpersonal relationships (proximity-distance), 2) teachers' and students' perceived identities (more or less shared) and 3) sources of knowledge (more or less shared). Although a result of the inductive process of analysis, these conceptualizations of distance and proximity have been affected by our understanding of teaching, particularly teaching history, as a continuous balance between reducing and maintaining distance between teachers and students and between students and the past (Wansink et al., 2018; Grever et al., 2012; Klein, 2017). In the following, we elaborate upon these three dimensions to formulate our research questions.

1.2. Role of interpersonal relationships

The proximity dimension refers to the degree of cooperation and affection in teacher-student interpersonal relationships (Wubbels et al., 2006). Positive interpersonal teacher-student relationships entail a personal connection, support to develop autonomy, and structure (Pianta et al., 2012; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Several scholars have pointed out that the pedagogical approach of history teachers is related to their perceived ability to manage a class and their personal relationship with students (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Fehn & Koeppen, 1998; Martell, 2013), which is particularly the case when teaching sensitive history that can cause heated debates in the classroom. Teachers can avoid teaching sensitive issues when they experience classroom management problems because the teaching of sensitive issues may cause emotional resistance from students (Bekerman & Zembylas, 2011; Hess, 2002; McCully, 2006). Discussing sensitive issues can trigger negative feelings among students with diverse cultural backgrounds, thereby creating barriers to students' engagement and historical understanding (Savenije et al., 2014a; Sheppard, 2010). Previous research proposes that tensions in the classroom also provide an opportunity to reduce the level of prejudice and stimulate social and historical perspective taking (Gehlbach, 2014; Wansink et al., 2019). To enable such processes, it is important for

teachers to create a safe and trustful classroom environment (Darragh & Petrie, 2019; Pantić & Wubbels, 2012; Sheppard & Levy, 2019; Virta, 2009).

Although teachers are generally expected to focus on subject-specific knowledge and skills, they may also consider themselves mentors who guide students in their personal development. Such conversations aiming to promote personal development and develop citizenship demonstrate closeness in the relationship between teachers and students (Cooper, 2010). However, teachers are not always sufficiently trained and, consequently, do not always feel confident in engaging in pedagogical practices with their students, particularly regarding religious topics and identities (Brooks, 2019b; Willemse et al., 2015). Although proximity in teacher-student interpersonal relationships is generally considered preferable, teachers may deliberately or unintentionally create distance between themselves and their students when teaching sensitive issues. Therefore, this paper examines how teachers perceive their interpersonal relationships with students when teaching about Islam-related issues.

1.3. Teachers' and students' identities in the history classroom

In this dimension, we describe the degree to which teachers perceive a shared common identity with their students. To maintain close interpersonal relationships when Islam-related issues become sensitive, it is crucial for history teachers to navigate between their identities and the perceived identities of their students. In this paper, we particularly focus on social and religious identification. Individuals construct ideas of themselves and others by positioning either themselves or others within a social categorization system (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Groups shape historical narratives to represent a positive moral image of their group (Goldberg, 2017) and silence specific sensitive issues that pose a threat to their social identity (Bar-Tal, 2017). Historical narratives can shape social and religious identities and create personal feelings of belonging and continuity. However, people may also form identities by resisting these national narratives (Abu El-Haj & Bonet, 2011; Grever et al., 2012; Grever & Stuurman, 2007). For example, Holocaust education and remembrance in Western countries was recently challenged by students of Islamic religious convictions or Arabic backgrounds. A study by Jikeli (2013) involving Muslim adolescents in Berlin, Paris, and London showed that many adolescents doubted or even denied the consensual factual narrative of the Holocaust. Students from a marginalized group who express such radical beliefs often feel the need to defend their identity group (Wansink, Akkerman, & Kennedy, 2021). Within history education, the aim to discuss diverse perspectives may conflict with societal and psychological needs for a shared historical narrative. Teachers face the challenge of balancing these divergent needs in which, evidently, they do not have a neutral position either (Goldberg & Savenije, 2018).

Van Straaten, Wilschut, & Oostdam (2016) described how the historical narrative of secularization can be used to define one's (non)religious identity. However, religious discrimination and a lack of bonding with the teacher could interfere with the process of national identification (Thijs et al., 2018; Yoder, 2020) and feelings of safeness (Wubbels et al., 2006). Intergroup bias research has shown that individuals processing information regarding in-group or out-group members almost always favor the in-group (e.g., Sahdra & Ross, 2007). In addition to nationality, ethnic and socio-cultural background, religion can be perceived as a distinguishing element in teachers' and students' identities. In many Western countries, currently, a debate exists regarding the extent to which teachers should behave as neutral agents of the state or show their religious identities (Lizotte, 2020; White, 2009). In a case study, Rissanen (2012) described 3 Finnish teachers in Islamic education balancing teaching a normative authoritative discourse and leaving space for their students to construct their worldviews. This issue poses challenges for teachers in balancing their personal and professional identities in the classroom. Furthermore, the often expected neutrality with regard to religion in public schools may leave limited space for students' religious identities and their need to learn to interact with religion in their own way (Niyozov, 2010). All this raises questions regarding how perceived sharedness of social and religious identities impacts history teachers when teaching about Islam-related issues that may be sensitive.

1.4. Sources of historical knowledge

In this dimension, we describe the degree to which teachers and students share in common their sources of knowledge *and* their approach to these sources to construct their narratives. Evaluating various historical sources and differing perspectives on the past is an integral part of understanding history. In a previous study (Wansink et al., 2017), history teachers mentioned that having sufficient subject matter knowledge, i.e., knowledge about substantive content, procedural concepts and conceptualizations of the discipline, is a precondition for discussing different perspectives in relation to sensitive histories. However, currently in Western societies, the knowledge regarding Islam presented in history textbooks, films, media and news can be characterized as monolithic (Elbih, 2015). Furthermore, these representations show a lack of knowledge of the role of Islamic civilization in the past (Moore, 2006). History textbook research in France has pointed out that the treatment of Islam is often limited to the history of the origin of Islam and thus does not provide a pluralistic representation of Islam (Estivalèzes, 2011). Similar research in the U.S. has found that in history textbooks, Muslims are often discussed with regard to historical conflicts (Eraqi, 2015b). Additionally, in the Dutch history curriculum, the topic of Islam is rarely addressed (CvTE, 2021). The simplistic and negative frame of Islam in historical representations influences teachers' and students' images of Islam and creates a divide between teachers and students who use different (e.g., non-Western or religious) sources and hold different perceptions of Islam.

In addition, from an epistemological perspective, students' and teachers' criteria for evaluating sources of knowledge can differ. The origin of the source, the person behind the source, and by whom a source is communicated can result in different perspectives on its reliability. Particularly in the domain of history, topics can be perceived as controversial because of the historian's personal backgrounds and motivation (Thomm et al., 2017). Additionally, students tend to review familiar topics and sources less critically (Barzilai et al., 2020). Regarding the interplay between people's religious convictions and their dealings with knowledge and truth claims, Gottlieb and Wineburg (2012) examined how educated adults, religious/nonreligious adults and historians/non-historians switched epistemically when evaluating historical sources. These authors emphasized that people hold different epistemologies and that when they study important historical issues, they pursue not only knowledge but also meaning. Therefore, teachers and students may differ in the sources of knowledge to which they attribute epistemic authority and their reasoning. In present day society, epistemological differences may also be related to conspiracy theories, fake news and distrust of the epistemic authority of science (Kienhues et al., 2020). In the classroom, such differences may increase the perceived distance between teachers and students and create tensions among students or between students and their teacher.

1.5. Research aim and questions

To choose suitable teaching approaches to overcome difficulties when teaching sensitive issues, it is important to understand the specific nature of the sensitivity of the topic in a particular teaching context. Therefore, this paper investigates teachers' experienced sensitivities when teaching about Islam-related issues. This study explored tensions regarding teachers' interpersonal relationships with students, teachers' and students' perceived identities, and their sources of historical knowledge. In so doing, we aimed to shed light on how teachers can navigate distance and proximity in relationships with their students to create opportunities for learning using safe and open dialog. The research questions were as follows:

1. To what extent do Dutch history teachers perceive the topic of Islam as a sensitive issue in their teaching and why?
2. To what extent do Dutch history teachers experience proximity in interpersonal relationships with their students and sharedness in their perceived identities and sources of knowledge when teaching about Islam in history classrooms?

2. Methods

2.1. Respondents

Through various networks (of teacher educators and researchers in history education throughout the country and via websites), Dutch history teachers were invited to participate in this study by completing an online questionnaire. The respondents were 81 Dutch history teachers aged 24–64 years (mean = 38.27), of whom 57% were male and 43% female. Most of the teachers reported a self-described Dutch identity (91% were fully Dutch, and 5% shared a Dutch-migrant background), and 2% reported a foreign identity. The percentages of students with migrant backgrounds in the teachers' classes were 0–20% (56%), 21–40% (28%), 41–60% (11%), and 81–100% (5%).

We purposefully selected (Seidman, 2006) six teachers for individual interviews by contacting the teachers who responded to the questionnaire and using our professional networks. We approached teachers who considered the 'theme of Islam' a sensitive issue and/or who related to a Dutch Muslim community in their professional or personal life. This focus was based on our analysis of the responses to the questionnaire that showed that teaching about the topic of Islam was considered one of the main teaching challenges according to the respondents, particularly in relation to teaching in multicultural settings and teaching Muslim students. Table 1 provides an overview of the six participating teachers and their teaching contexts.

2.2. Data collection

2.2.1. Questionnaire

The questionnaire data were collected by the first author within the context of an international study investigating sensitive historical issues in nine European countries and Israel (a part of the COST Action IS 1205, 'Social psychological dynamics of historical representations in the enlarged European Union') (Goldberg et al., 2019). In this paper, we used only the descriptive data and two open-ended questions that were the most relevant for answering our research questions: 1) Are there issues that you have experienced as sensitive in your teaching practice? 2) How (in what sense) were these issues sensitive, to whom and why?

2.2.2. Interviews

To further examine these sensitivity factors, we conducted six semi-structured individual interviews focusing on the most prominent theme, i.e., Islam. We used open-ended questions and the example case of a lesson that occurred after a terrorist attack claimed by the Islamic State in which students expressed radical Islamist and extreme-right positions. We used open-ended questions as recommended for explorative studies (Cohen et al., 2011). Moreover, research suggests that teachers' knowledge and beliefs about teaching are tacit and tenacious and, therefore, might be better investigated with open-ended questions (Pajares, 1992). Furthermore, we presented the results of the analysis of the questionnaire responses and asked the teachers to respond to these results in terms of recognizability. The full interview protocol is included in the appendix.

2.3. Analysis

2.3.1. Questionnaire

The sensitive issues that the respondents mentioned (N = 237) were analyzed to detect overarching themes, and the analysis was guided by previous research literature investigating sensitive issues in the Netherlands (Kleijwegt, 2016; Sijbers et al., 2015). After

Table 1
Background and teaching practice of the interviewed teachers.

Name (alias)	Sam	Bob	Tim	Ugur	Mohir	Reda
Gender	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male
Age	43	30	36	25	34	34
Self-described sociocultural background	Dutch, Catholic	Dutch, progressive metropolitan	Dutch, Antillean, Spanish	History teacher, migrant background, Muslim	Dutch, Moroccan, Utrechts [Dutch city]	History teacher, Muslim
Years of teaching	7	8	14	2	3	13
Academic background	MA in History Teaching, MA in History	BA in History Teaching, MA in History	BA in History Teaching	BA in History Teaching	BA in History Teaching, doing a MA in Dutch language	BA in History Teaching, MA in History
Students' level	Upper secondary education	Adult secondary education	Upper secondary education	Vocational education	Upper secondary education[b]	Upper secondary education[b]
Students' age	16–18	18–20	12–15	16–20	12–15	12–18
Percentage of students from a migrant background	80–100	20–40	40–60	60	5–10	0–5
Students' SES[a]	Below average	Unknown	Average	Below average	Above average	Above average
Denomination school	Islamic	Secular	Secular	Secular	Catholic	Christian

[a] Students' SES is not measured or filed in Dutch schools. These are the teachers' estimations.
[b] In the Netherlands, there are different levels within secondary education. These students were enrolled in the highest level.

several discussions and axial coding (Boeije, 2010), three main themes of sensitivity were identified. A sample of 20 responses (8%) was coded by a second rater. The interrater reliability (Cohen's kappa) of this coding was 0.87.

Then the analysis focused on the theme of Islam. The reasons that the respondents provided for the sensitivity of this theme (N = 97) were coded as follows: 1) the subjects for whom the issue is considered sensitive (e.g., teachers, students, or parents); 2) how the teacher describes the students for whom he/she considers the issue to be sensitive (e.g., religious or cultural denominations); and 3) the factors that render the issues sensitive. We analyzed the sensitivity factors in two steps because many responses combined a reference to identification with explanations for why this identification could cause difficulties in the classroom. First, we coded identification, and second, we analyzed the reasons why identification could be problematic or cause conflict. A sample of 17 responses (18%) was coded by a second rater. The interrater reliability (Cohen's kappa) values of these reasons were 0.75, 0.91, and 0.67, respectively. Final differences were resolved by discussion. The sensitivity factors were presented and discussed in the individual interviews for content validation.

2.3.2. Interviews

The recorded and transcribed interviews were analyzed using ATLAS. ti qualitative analysis software. We started the analysis by 'open coding' and identified different patterns within each case that emerged from the raw data via constant comparison (Miles & Huberman, 1994). We used the conceptual lens of the three dimensions discussed above (interpersonal relationship, perceived identities, and sources of knowledge) to help us in this process of coding (Bowen, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In the second phase of the analysis, we included specific teaching contexts and teacher characteristics. Through a cross-case comparison, we positioned the teachers in a relative ranking of distance and proximity/sharedness between the teachers and the students in each dimension. Each step in this process was carried out by the authors separately, followed by a group discussion of the findings. The visualization of the ranking was then performed to help the reader interpret our interview results. We present these rankings in the findings section.

3. Findings

3.1. Sensitive issues in the Dutch context

A quarter of the respondents to the questionnaire noted that they did not perceive any issue as sensitive in their practice. Among the sensitive issues that were mentioned, we found three overarching themes. We named the most prominent theme 'differences and conflict between Islamic and non-Islamic people' (hereafter 'Islam'), which was followed by the themes of 'colonialism' and 'WWII and Holocaust' (see Table 2). The second theme, i.e., colonialism, includes issues such as 'slavery/slave trade' and 'the Dutch East-Indies'. Examples of the third theme, i.e., WWII and Holocaust, are 'Holocaust' and 'the persecution of Jews in WWII'. Examples of the first theme are 'the rise and development of Islam' and 'terrorist attacks after the appearance of cartoons about Muhammad (Denmark and other countries)'. We broadly used the first theme by including issues that may not necessarily or solely relate to a religious conflict, such as 'the conflict between Israel and Palestine'. Here, we elaborate upon the theme of 'Islam' by presenting our analysis of the reasons for sensitivity that the respondents noted.

Table 2
Themes of sensitive issues (N = 237).

Theme	Percentage
Differences and conflict between Islamic and non-Islamic people	31.2
Colonialism	19
WWII/Holocaust	8.9
Other	34.2
Not applicable	6.8

3.2. Factors affecting the sensitivity of the theme 'Islam'

In the majority of the reasons provided for the sensitivity of the topic of Islam, the teachers referred to students as the subjects for whom, or because of whom, the issue was sensitive (see Table 3). In approximately one-third of the cases, the teachers used the term 'students' in general and did not provide a further identity category or specific group. However, when they did, they used both religious and cultural denominations. The teachers mentioned the cultural backgrounds of the largest minority groups in the Netherlands, such as the Turkish or Moroccan, or migrants in general, and they used the category 'Muslim' the most (24%). The categories of 'Dutch' or 'white' were used in 1% of the reasons.

When explaining why the issue was sensitive, the respondents regularly referred to the identity dimension. Interestingly, the teachers referred to the social identification of students (38%) as a factor of the sensitivity of the topic of Islam almost as often as to religious identification (39%). The following is an example of a reason that referred to religious identification: 'My students of Muslim background can react strongly'. The following is an example of a reason that included social identification: 'Students from the Middle East consider the Crusades as a prediction of later Western interference in the Middle East'. Apparently, although described in religious terms, these issues are also often perceived as sensitivities between social groups. In 18% of the reasons, there was no reference to identification.

When respondents explained why this type of identification could cause difficulties in the classroom, we could discern reasons related to sources of knowledge and to interpersonal relationships. Regarding the dimension of sources of knowledge, 49% of these explanations mentioned the strong and contrasting perspectives that students expressed in the classroom. For example, a respondent noted that 'particularly, the large diversity in opinions and the fierceness of these opinions cause strong discussions to arise'. Additionally, in 9% of the explanations, the respondents expressed the wish to present and discuss multiple perspectives of an issue in an objective way and felt this was not well received by students 'because some students who clearly identified with a particular group found it difficult to study history "objectively"?. Regarding the dimension of interpersonal relationships, the explanations referred to the management of either emotional engagement or disengagement. In total, 17% of the responses referred to the emotional engagement of students or hurt feelings; for example,

Table 3
Subject and identity category for whom the theme of Islam is sensitive as described by the teachers in the reasons for sensitivity (N = 97).

Subject	Percentage	Identity category	Percentage
Teacher	12.4		
Students	81.4		
		Cultural	12.4
		Religious	29.9
		Undetermined	32.0
		Other	7.2
Students' parents	2.1		
Not applicable	4.1		

'Some students are not capable of studying these topics with emotional distance'. In 5% of the responses, the respondents noted that issues could be sensitive because of students' indifference, such as 'students who wave everything away and react insensitively'.

The analysis shows that in all three dimensions, teachers sought to find an effective position regarding distance and proximity in their relationships with students and their presentation of the past. On the one hand, they aimed to present a multiperspective historical narrative and to stimulate emotional distance in discussions. On the other hand, they were concerned with providing space for students' perspectives and feelings and wished to engage them. Based on the analysis of the six individual interviews, in the following, we elaborate upon this positioning in more depth.

3.3. What is 'the issue with Islam'?

Before reporting our results of the three dimensions, it is important to briefly describe how the interviewed teachers perceive the 'sensitive issue of Islam'. These six teachers recognized the results of the questionnaire that issues related to Islam can be considered sensitive. Four of the six teachers had classroom experience with sensitivities surrounding Islam as represented in the complete sample (the spread of religion in the Middle Ages, the Crusades, Middle-Eastern conflicts, recent terrorist attacks by radical Islamists and current anti-Muslim sentiments among (extreme) right-wing groups). Two teachers, Mohir and Reda, experienced such sensitivities in other contexts, such as during a previous job in journalism or within their religious community. However, none of the teachers considered these sensitivities serious restraints in their teaching as suggested in recent reports regarding Dutch history teachers (e.g., Kleijwegt, 2016). Our interviews revealed a nuanced picture of the sensitivity of the topic of Islam and further showed differences across various teaching contexts. We discuss these variations within the three dimensions of interpersonal relationships, perceived identities, and sources of knowledge. In each dimension, we present our relative ranking of the teachers in terms of the distance and proximity/sharedness between teachers and students.

3.4. Dimension 1: interpersonal relationships

All interviewees emphasized the importance of establishing good interpersonal relationships with their students when teaching about Islam. The teachers reported that using their competencies to create a safe learning environment is a precondition for open dialogs among students and between students and teachers. Nevertheless, the teachers could be ranked in a relative manner in terms of the greater distances or proximities they choose in these interpersonal relationships. As shown in Fig. 1, we placed Tim and Ugur on the right side of the dimension (proximity). These two respondents discussed their students' personal interests and provided many examples during their interviews of personal conversations they held with their students during class or at school. These respondents also shared their personal stories with their students. Tim and Ugur felt that many of their students appreciate this close contact and that such contact creates the basis of trust needed for learning. Interestingly, both respondents explicitly discussed that they sometimes doubted this close relationship and openness. For example, Tim said the following:

> Sometimes I say, 'Guys, now it's not the teacher speaking, it's Tim with a different story. I personally feel it's terrible or great what's happening'. Of course, I think I can show the person Tim a bit, but you should always keep in mind that you've got a vulnerable target group, and, of course, you're not here to indoctrinate them.

Both Tim and Ugur expressed this concern about influencing their students' opinions too much by revealing their own position in particular discussions, thus demonstrating their effort to balance openness and aloofness in their interpersonal relationships with students.

Compared to Tim and Ugur, Sam and Bob were slightly less inclined to establish close relationships with their students (see Fig. 1). These respondents said that they did not know much about their individual students and did not share many personal stories in their teaching, demonstrating a relatively more distant interpersonal relationship with their students. However, they also showed proximity, by emphasizing the importance of a safe classroom climate and understanding students' perspectives and struggles. For example, Sam explained,

> A boy was suspended from school because he made a Nazi salute. But do you think that boy will change his mind? What is the purpose of that punishment? No, that won't work.
>
> I: How do you think a teacher should respond to that?
>
> Sam: Context, context, context. If a little boy of 12 years old does that, then there's plenty of time to work on it through discussion. And yes, it would help to know his national background; for example, this boy was Pakistani, and if you know that Pakistan is the most anti-Semitic country in the world, well then, I think I can say, I think you can understand where it comes from and then you can talk about it as well.

This quote emphasizes the need to stay in contact with students who show extreme beliefs or behavior instead of scaring them away by punishing them. It shows Sam's wish to understand the students' reasoning and give them space to explain their opinions. Although this was also very important to Mohir and Reda, their interpersonal relationship with students was more distanced, which is why we ranked them relatively on the left side of the dimension (see Fig. 1). These two respondents focused on their wish to educate students to become reasonable and open human beings and thought that their students did not seek personal contact with their teachers. Mohir said,

> I think at the lower levels students like to make contact. They ask questions themselves a lot, then it's a bit smoother. And maybe at the highest level, it is a bit less; they are more restrained, more independent, indeed more formal, more business-like maybe, really just looking for what they want to get, they know exactly what they want.

Both Reda and Mohir related this attitude of students to their educational level (upper secondary education – highest level), showing the influence of the specific characteristics of teaching contexts on how teachers perceive and address the sensitivities of the topic of Islam.

To summarize, although all interviewees seemed to experience rather close interpersonal relationships with their students and acknowledged the importance of these relationships, there were

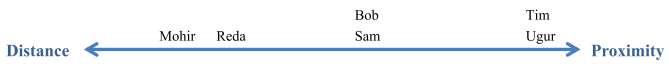


Fig. 1. Respective ranking of the teachers in the dimension 'interpersonal relationship.

relative differences. While teachers wished to show involvement and establish personal contact (proximity), they were aware that keeping distance could provide space for students to develop their own opinions.

3.5. Dimension 2: social and religious identification

While teachers address the theme of Islam in the classroom, the experienced sharedness in teachers' and students' perceived identities often played a crucial role. An important factor in this dimension is whether teachers understand the sensitivity of the issue in social or religious terms. Consistent with our findings from the questionnaire, the interviewed teachers reported that both social and religious identification processes are sensitivity factors related to the topic of Islam. For example, Sam emphasized the sociocultural aspect:

> With regard to anti-Semitism or the Holocaust, these topics are highly sensitive to children of Palestinian, Syrian, Egyptian or Turkish backgrounds, while they are much less so to Moroccan, Bosnian or Somali students. So, in that respect, I really want to separate this from the label of 'Muslim', which of course is used a lot in the current political debate, because in my experience, being a Muslim is less of influence than their parents' national identities when I discuss these issues.

When discussing conspiracy theories in the interview, Sam again stressed that these theories are not related to Islam or religion. Instead, he emphasized individual students, their national backgrounds and the extent to which they are exposed to media in which such theories are freely discussed. Working at an Islamic school, he experiences differences among Muslim students from different sociocultural backgrounds every day. He concluded that 'I truly resist the label of Islam that the government is putting on it'. However, for Sam, as a non-Muslim teacher in an Islamic school, it could also be difficult to delve into religious questions or claims made with reference to the Quran or a religious authority. Sam (self-described as Dutch and a nonpracticing Catholic) said that in relation to teaching about Islam, he experiences himself as belonging to a different social identity group than his students. The same applies to Bob (self-described as Dutch and a progressive metropolitan). Therefore, both respondents were placed on the left side of the dimension identity because of this feeling of distance from their Muslim students (see Fig. 2). Bob said that he is very aware that when teaching about Islam, there are Muslim students in his classroom who dismiss him as a source of knowledge because of his non-Muslim identity. Thus, although these two teachers mainly talked about the sensitivity of Islam-related issues in terms of social identification, they did feel that their non-Muslim identity placed them in a different social identity group than their Muslim students.

The three Muslim teachers did not report the experience of not being trusted in regard to their knowledge when they discussed Islam in the classroom. These teachers all said that such teachings may be easier for them than for non-Muslim teachers. Mohir explicitly stated that you cannot ignore the claims made by terrorists that they act in the name of Islam. He thought that it is important to discuss these claims with both Muslim and non-Muslim students. However, the interviews revealed that the perceived Muslim identity of Ugur, Reda and Mohir impacted their teaching practice in very different ways as shown in Fig. 2. Ugur, who we ranked on the right side of the dimension, truly stood out in this dimension compared to the other teachers. He felt that in many ways, he shares aspects of his identity with his students:

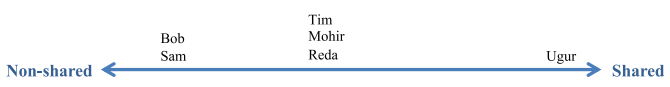


Fig. 2. Respective ranking of the teachers in the dimension 'perceived shared identities'.

> I as a person, I can really make a difference with students. You are older, they see associations with you and say 'Hey you are also, let's say, a boy from the neighborhood or from [Dutch city], you are also a Muslim or also Turkish, uh, you are funny, you are young'. So, uh, but on the other hand, a native student says 'Oh, a young student' or 'Oh, he also goes to [soccer club]'; so, they also see a lot of nice things. I have won the trust of both groups.

Ugur felt that he not only shares such identity elements with his students but also, more generally, shares the feeling of being discriminated against because of his identity or how other people perceive him. He explained that when things happen in the world related to Islam, his colleagues always want to hear his opinion about the event. While he considers himself a neutral teacher, he feels that people measure his values, standards and opinions about issues and that they judge him. Ugur said that he thinks that for some of his students, this would be the same, although in different contexts; for example, they are often watched in the supermarket, while a native Dutch person is not. Therefore, Ugur struggled to find a balance in emphasizing sharedness in identity and being a professional 'neutral' history teacher simultaneously. He said that he was once called an Erdogan hater and elaborated as follows:

> I am in between because I try to be very neutral, but Muslim students actually complain, and native Dutch students also say, 'Well, he is very much attracted to students from migrant backgrounds even though those students think the other way around.' So, things like that hurt me sometimes.

These remarks show that although perceiving closeness with students in this dimension of identity can be helpful when teaching sensitive issues, it also poses challenges and personal issues for teachers.

Mohir and Reda both reported occasionally discussing their Muslim identities and migrant backgrounds in discussions with their students. However, for them, who both teach in schools with almost no Muslim students or students from migrant backgrounds, such conversations have a different dynamic. We ranked both of these teachers in the middle of the identity dimension (see Fig. 2). Regarding their Muslim identities and migrant backgrounds, they considered themselves to belong to different social identity groups than their students, thus experiencing distance in the dimension of identity. For example, Reda said the following:

> I do think students think of the first lesson like 'Hmm, what kind of teacher is this'?
>
> I: So why is this?
>
> Reda: Well, I mean I have a beard. You could say that I do not necessarily only have native characteristics but, uh, to put it neatly, I can imagine that not everyone has a half Moroccan/half Dutch person of origin in their circle of friends. Uh, yes, I always joke that I am going to teach you Dutch history and that I am partly Moroccan and they like that but also just after the first lesson, if the ice is broken, they quickly understand that I am just their history teacher.

This remark shows that Reda thinks that although students initially may feel estranged by his appearance and migrant background, they soon focus on the part of his identity that is more important for them in the context of their relationship, i.e., a history teacher. Both Reda and Mohir related to their students by engaging in history, i.e., studying the past by evaluating sources and grounding arguments in evidence. It is important to note that these teachers teach in the highest level of upper-secondary education. While they are aware of differences in backgrounds between themselves and their students in a cultural or religious sense, they experience proximity based on their professional identities. To them, this is the side of their identities that matters the most. Specifically, when teaching about Islam, they can use their knowledge of the issue to teach about Islam in a detailed and multiperspective way, bringing them closer to their students. This knowledge dimension is the final perspective we discuss.

3.6. Dimension 3: sources of knowledge and epistemological tensions

As the previous paragraph shows, the issue of shared or different identities between teachers and students also extends to more subject-specific discussions with students about historical knowledge and sources. All teachers described the presentation and discussion of multiple perspectives as a fruitful teaching approach when teaching about the topic of Islam. The teachers are used to allowing students to express their perspectives and stimulate them to build arguments grounded in evidence or, at least, question their sources. The struggle to convince students who are strongly attached to a single narrative or conspiracy theory to open their minds to different perspectives clearly emerged from the interview data as the most difficult aspect of teaching about the topic of Islam. The teachers felt rather powerless in reaching these particular students.

Our findings suggest that one of the factors in this struggle is teachers' perceived distance from students in their approach to historical knowledge and sources, which can be considered a difference in who, or what sources are perceived as an epistemic authority and thus trusted. All teachers believed that rational arguments and historical inquiries construct historical knowledge. They reported that they use literature, sources and the disciplinary criteria they were taught in their academic training. Depending on the specific teaching context of the teachers, they reported experiencing proximity toward or distance from their students with regard to these epistemological traditions and beliefs. For example, Reda, Mohir and Bob, who teach in the highest levels of upper-secondary education or adult secondary education, thought that students almost always use the same standards. Therefore, we ranked them on the far right side of the dimension (see Fig. 3).

However, for Sam, Tim, and, to a lesser extent Ugur, this was different. When confronted with students who reject the teachers' sources and who use different sources themselves, these teachers feel that their students are out of reach. We ranked Sam on the left in this dimension (see Fig. 3). For example, he stated the following:

> Yes, the conspiracy theories … The students are of course open to the media, have access to Al-Jazeera and other Turkish channels where these things are openly discussed. Difficult, that's really difficult.
>
> I: Why do you find this difficult?
>
> Sam: Well, I can teach about it extensively, you can go against it, get mad about it, but if this is what they see in the media on a daily basis, then, what can I achieve? I won't be saying that I'm descending from Mount Sinaï with the Ten Commandments and that I hold the truth. They wouldn't believe that anyway. So, the only thing you can do is cast doubt on possible conspiracy theories and hope that, by doing so, you contribute something to the thinking process they have to go through themselves.

Sam's remark shows distance from students with regard to not only the particular media sources they use but also their sourcing methods. His reference to Mount Sinaï seems to be prompted by the idea that the only way to reach and convince these students is by referring to a religious source. However, simultaneously, he acknowledges that they would not accept this source from him, not being a religious authority in Islam, and he returns to his epistemological practice of questioning and inquiry.

None of the teachers reported discussing these differences in beliefs about epistemic authority with their students. The teachers did not report explicitly reflecting upon or legitimizing their ideas regarding what constitutes historical knowledge with their students. The teachers also seemed slightly surprised or even somewhat uncomfortable with this idea when asked about it during the interview. These questions seemed to trigger a reflection process only during the interview with Bob and Reda. Although these teachers often reflected upon their position as teachers toward students, they concluded that they did not share such thoughts with their students. However, Bob did feel that regarding the topic of religion, his position is a sensitizing factor in relation to Muslim students:

> Well, personally I'm used to relativizing religion, so I seldom use a person's religious convictions in my analysis of why a person acts in a certain way. I much more often look for reasons in other things, but I know that people who feel much stronger about certain convictions would maybe think that I disqualify the possibility that what someone believes in is real and that what he or she thinks they should do is real.

With this remark, Bob highlights the inevitable difference between how he and a religious person understand human action. His words show his effort to properly reflect other perspectives that are far from his own approach to the past. This issue of including religious motives and sources in history was also addressed by Ugur, who ranked slightly right of the middle on this dimension (see Fig. 3). He explained that he personally felt that the Quran is full of wisdom that could help students find their way, but he does not refer to the book as a source in class because he feels that such reference would be inappropriate not only because he teaches at a secular school but also because he thinks that students are very vulnerable, and he does not want to influence them too much.

To summarize, all teachers used disciplinary criteria to evaluate their sources of knowledge. Three teachers felt that they shared this approach with their students, while the other three teachers experienced distance from their students with regard to these epistemological traditions and beliefs. The main factors in these differences in teachers' experiences seemed to be the educational level of the students (the higher-the more shared) and the level of the teachers' discomfort with students' uncritical use of religious sources.

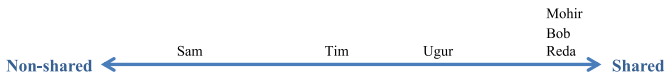


Fig. 3. Respective ranking of the teachers in the dimension 'sources of knowledge'

4. Conclusion and discussion

In this paper, we examined why and to what extent Dutch history teachers perceive the topic of Islam as sensitive. Second, we investigated whether teachers experience proximity and distance in interpersonal relationships with their students and sharedness in their perceived identities and sources of knowledge when teaching about Islam in history classrooms.

1) Regarding the first question, we found that 31% of the respondents considered issues within the theme 'differences and conflict between Islamic and non-Islamic people' sensitive. Therefore, Islam-related issues were mentioned as the most sensitive topic in history education at the time of our data collection (2018/2019). Teachers attributed the sensitivity of these issues mainly to their students and often related it to their students' social and religious identities as they perceived them. In addition to this factor in the dimension of identity, we found two factors in the dimension of sources of knowledge: 1. Wide diversity and fierceness of students' perspectives, and 2. teachers' wishes to discuss multiple perspectives that are not well received by students. Regarding the dimension of interpersonal relationships, the respondents mentioned the factors of either students' emotional engagement with or their indifference to a topic. These factors resonate with earlier research concerning teaching sensitive issues (Barton & McCully, 2012; Goldberg & Savenije, 2018; Kello, 2016). However, many of these studies were conducted in postconflict societies. Our study adds to this earlier work by showing that in other contexts, students' indifference can be as challenging for teachers as emotive reactions. Notably, one-quarter of the respondents did not perceive any topic as sensitive. Furthermore, the interviewed teachers emphasized that although they recognized the sensitivity of Islam-related issues, they did not experience these sensitivities as problematic in their teaching practice.

It is important to note that the interviewees emphasized that 'Islam' was often used carelessly as a category. This finding is consistent with the research by Berger (2014), who pointed out that the term 'Islam' can be problematic as it can include several representations of Islam that may be different or even mutually exclusive. For example, the term can refer to Muslims, Islam as a culture, Islam as a religion and Islam as an image. Perhaps due to the limitations of the instrument, the teacher respondents often used the terms 'Islam' or 'Muslim students' in a one-sided way in the questionnaire responses, thus neglecting the diversities of Islamic traditions and communities and the coalescence of both religious and social identities. However, this approach could also be a result of the representation of Islam in public debates and Western history textbooks (Elbih, 2015; Moore. 2006; Eraqi, 2015b). The undefined use of the word Islam complicates the understanding of what exactly teachers refer to when they state that Islam is a sensitive topic. Furthermore, we posit that treating Islam and Muslims as a homogeneous group can increase tensions in the classroom as it can hinder the establishment of real contact with students (Eraqi, 2015a; Hossain, 2017) and lead to exclusion and political trauma (Sondel et al., 2018). Acknowledging the diversity among students and having knowledge about their particular backgrounds and contexts are preconditions for culturally responsive teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). By disentangling the diverse perceptions and experiences of teachers, this study contributes to a more nuanced view of possible sensitivities surrounding Islam-related issues in various teaching contexts.

2) Regarding our second research question, our three-dimensional analytical framework revealed that the interviewees could be positioned at both ends of each dimension, depending on the teaching context, the student population and the topic. First, on the dimension of interpersonal relationships we found that teachers working with younger students or students in lower educational levels emphasized proximity in interpersonal relationships with their students more than teachers working in higher educational levels. Although proximity and emotional support are considered central to creating safe learning environments and recommended when teaching sensitive issues (Roorda et al., 2011; Wubbels et al., 2006; Hess, 2002; McCully, 2006), our study suggests that teachers' approaches towards interpersonal relationships vary according to their teaching context.

Second, on the dimension of perceived identities, the relative differences between the teachers in experienced sharedness could not be characterized according to a division into religious/nonreligious or Islamic/non-Islamic identities. Other characteristics were more decisive, such as the teachers' beliefs about their pedagogical role as professional history teachers or their perceived social identity as being a part of the majority or minority in the school. Our analysis revealed that the teachers were aware of their multiple identities and flexibly positioned themselves in different roles. Depending on the extent to which they considered the perceived identities of their students distant from their own with regard to the topic of Islam, they seemed to put specific aspects of their identities that they shared with their students to the fore. For example, teacher Ugur felt that his Muslim identity, his regional identity and his migrant identity resonated with different groups of students, which enabled him to appeal to all these groups. Such experiences of sharedness in identities can be powerful when connecting with bi-cultural students and can increase their self-esteem in modern diverse societies (e.g., Gehlbach et al., 2016; Thijs et al., 2018).

Third, on the dimension of sources of knowledge we found that teachers experienced distance when they teach students who use different sources of knowledge or who do not acknowledge the teachers' disciplinary methods for studying the past. In our study this concerned students who referred to the Quran or particular media channels as their only valuable source of knowledge or those who adhered to conspiracy theories. Students used (in the eyes of the teachers) unreliable sources in an uncritical way, and for this reason the teachers attempted to teach them academic historical inquiry skills. However, they did not openly reflect upon the difference in epistemological beliefs with their students or explicitly legitimatize their beliefs about epistemic authority. Interestingly, one secular teacher explicitly mentioned having doubts about applying corroboration techniques and asking questions about reliability when dealing with sacred sources due to a lack of knowledge and confidence and an unfamiliarity with addressing sacred 'things'. On the other hand, Reda stated that, as a Muslim parent, he truly experiences a void in this regard. He explained that many Muslim youth, parents and teachers he encounters in his personal life do not know much about Islam or how to evaluate Islamic sources (on paper, on video or in person). He thought that it may be helpful for history teachers to discuss Islamic sources much more explicitly. The self-described Muslim teachers did seem to be more at ease with combining the notion that while some sources may be sacred, one can still pose questions and voice doubts. This finding is consistent with earlier research showing that although Muslim teachers are not necessarily better in teaching about Islam, they operate with more flexibility regarding questions of epistemic authorities (Niyozov, 2010). Therefore, one could question whether there is a 'right' approach to historical sources and knowledge or whether various perspectives may coexist. Explicit reflection upon these different approaches and exercising *deliberate* epistemic switching (Gottlieb & Wineburg, 2012) in the classroom might be a way to navigate a seemingly unbridgeable distance in the dimension of sources of knowledge.

Finally, our results suggest that teachers balanced distance and proximity on the three dimensions in a particular configuration depending on their perceived identity and sources of knowledge and those of their students with regard to the topic of Islam. For example, Ugur, teaching students of diverse cultural and religious backgrounds at a lower educational level, used proximity and sharedness on the interpersonal and identity dimensions to create an inclusive classroom that addressed all students. He maintained some distance on the knowledge dimension (towards some of his Muslim students) because he hesitated to refer to religious sources in the history classroom and he did not want to impose his perspective on these religious texts on his students. As another example, Mohir, teaching mostly white and secular students in the highest level of upper secondary education, experienced sharedness in sources of knowledge using a disciplinary approach to study both religious and non-religious sources. On the interpersonal dimension, he experienced some relative distance towards his students who were rather independent and mainly focused on a professional relationship with their teacher. These findings demonstrate that our ranking in terms of the dimensions does not imply a normative evaluation. Instead, this study reveals that teachers' conscious and unconscious positioning depends on their teaching contexts and aims. Of course, the division into the three dimensions is analytical, and interplay exists among the three dimensions. Nevertheless, the three-dimensional approach enabled a broader discussion of the sensitivity of Islam-related issues. The current debate on the sensitivity of Islam-related issues focuses on teachers' lack of knowledge of Islam (Elbih, 2015; Eraqi, 2015a); however, our study showed that this sensitivity can also be evoked by tensions regarding sources of knowledge and perceived identities and interpersonal relationships.

5. Limitations and suggestions for further research

When interpreting the results of this study, we need to consider that the findings presented here are based on a small sample from the Dutch context. Although the respondents to the questionnaire may be considered a rather representative sample of the teacher population, in general, we must assume a certain self-selection bias due to an overrepresentation of teachers who have interest in sensitive historical issues. Furthermore, although we attempted to acknowledge the diverse representations of Islam and Muslims in the data collection and analysis processes and the presentation of our findings, our white, Dutch and non-Muslim backgrounds may have hindered us from fully grasping and representing the issue in all its nuances and complexities. Nevertheless, we think that the findings from the questionnaire and interviews show the diversity of the teachers' experiences and reveal several main factors related to teachers dealing with Islam-related issues in the classroom.

Furthermore, our study shows that although most respondents to the questionnaire mentioned that students are the main actors and sources of sensitivity, further analysis through the interviews showed that sensitivity always arises in interactions between students and teachers. This finding may not seem to be a particularly revealing result, but our study suggests that it may be relevant for teachers to consider themselves 'actors of sensitivity'. Therefore, further research could examine the process of how topics become sensitive issues from the perspective of teachers within diverse teaching contexts. In particular, the religious denomination of schools may be an interesting factor to study more systematically (Zembylas et al., 2019).

Finally, our approach of ranking teachers on different dimensions should be subject to further research. Other sensitive topics and more diverse teachers in the history classroom could reveal different approaches regarding the identity and knowledge dimensions. For example, our interview sample included only male teachers. Further research could examine whether gender is an important factor in teachers' positioning on the dimensions. Furthermore, the method used to rank the teachers in these dimensions could be better validated, particularly for the dimension of sources of knowledge which was rather implicit and unconscious in teachers' experiences. One way is to allow students to score their teachers on the different dimensions. This approach can also open up a constructive dialog between teachers and students. Another way is to develop a quantitative questionnaire in which perceptions of teachers and students in these dimensions are determined.

6. Implications for practice

Despite the difficulties encountered by the teachers described in this paper, our study highlights the merits of teaching about sensitive issues such as Islam. Such an approach offers opportunities to teach students the dynamics of how, when and where topics become sensitive issues and thus enables both teachers and students to reflect upon how history and identity are connected. One cannot teach about sensitive issues in a neutral way; therefore, it is of the utmost importance for teachers and students to engage in examinations of the process of identification and conflicts related to historical significance (Savenije et al., 2014b; Peck, 2010; Yoder, 2020). We think that using the lens of proximity/sharedness and distance in the three dimensions of interpersonal relationships, perceived identities, and sources of knowledge may be a valuable entry point for such reflection. For teachers, this approach provides insight into how they position themselves and move among these dimensions regarding different topics and within their specific teaching context. This more conscious positioning may even enable them to teach about issues they consider sensitive and may have otherwise avoided teaching about. Extending this approach a step further, teachers may also use the findings of this study as didactical tools to perform similar reflection activities with students. Those who educate teachers can stimulate the development of such professionalism and thus increase teachers' awareness and understanding of the diversity of their students' cultural and religious identities and how these identities interact with their sources of knowledge. Thus, our distance-proximity approach can be used at various levels, i.e., student, student-teacher, teacher and teacher educator. Our approach emphasizes that teaching sensitive issues does not necessarily result in problematic discussions of opposites, which is especially important during a time of fake news and rising polarization in Western societies.

Appendix. Interview protocol

Introduction

Introduce the aim of the interview, i.e., examine the extent to which Dutch history teachers perceive the topic of Islam as a sensitive issue in their teaching and why. In the responses to the questionnaire, 'Islam' was indicated by many teachers as a sensitive issue in various ways both as a part of the curriculum (emergence of world religions and the Crusades) and beyond (contemporary Islam as discussed in the media in current events, such as terrorist attacks or the arrival of refugees in the Netherlands).

Part 1. Experiences

To what extent do you experience these Islam-related issues as sensitive in your own practice?

Topic:

1. Which aspects or subtopics? Why?
2. Has it always been like this?

Students:

1. How do students react?
2. For which students is the topic sensitive and why?
3. Does this sensitivity occur often? In which classes (particular levels, age groups, etc.)?
4. When and why do students (both Muslim and/or non-Muslim) react more strongly than to other topics? Do you feel that students think in terms of 'us vs. them' in those cases? If so, along which dividing lines?
5. To what extent are you aware of students' views?
6. What do you do to gain insight into students' ideas?
7. Have you experienced that the students' circle of friends, family or media play a role in the way students think or respond? How?

Teacher:

1. How do you feel when teaching about these topics? What do you experience as being sensitive?
2. How do you describe your own knowledge about these topics?
3. What is this knowledge based on?
4. Which information sources do you use in the preparation?

Part 2. Case

Context: a history lesson after an IS attack. The school/class commemorates the victims with 1 min of silence. Two students give alternative responses:

- (a Muslim student): Zionists, Western plot, we are being slandered.
- (a right-wing extremist student): All asylum seekers are jihadis.

1. Is this situation recognizable to you?
2. Would you say that this situation is sensitive? Why?
3. How would you react in this situation? Why that way?
4. Would you cut the students off? Would you do so for all issues? And with all students? What is your limit about what can be said in class?
5. To what extent does this have to do with your pedagogical relationship with the students?
6. What knowledge would you bring to this case?
   a. What is this knowledge based on?
   b. To what extent do you legitimize this knowledge to the students?
   c. How do students respond to this knowledge?
7. What is your own moral judgment/opinion in this case?
   a. To what extent do you express this opinion to the students?
   b. How do students respond to your opinion?
8. To which social identity group do you consider yourself a part of in relationship with this case?
   a. Do you think your students see it that way?
   b. Do you see your students as a part of the same group? And do they, do you think?

Part 3. Validation questionnaire

Present factors of sensitivity found in the questionnaire responses.

1. Do you recognize these factors as important factors that cause a topic to be perceived as sensitive?
2. Can you elaborate on these factors from your own perspective and practice?
3. Do you have anything to add to these results?

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