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DOI

[10.1080/14681366.2019.1566162](https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2019.1566162)

Publication date

2019

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Pedagogy, Culture & Society

License

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[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Savenije, G. M., & Goldberg, T. (2019). Silences in a climate of voicing: Teachers' perceptions of societal and self-silencing regarding sensitive historical issues. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 27(1), 39-64. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2019.1566162>

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Silences in a climate of voicing: teachers' perceptions of societal and self-silencing regarding sensitive historical issues

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the silencing and voicing of sensitive topics in history education from a cross-national and multilevel perspective. In this mixed-method study, we undertook a quantitative analysis of a 'teaching sensitive issues' questionnaire and qualitative analyses of history curricula and teachers' verbal responses. The findings show that most respondents were aware of societal and self-silencing but were also committed to voicing and giving a voice to pupils. Focusing on the issues found to be most sensitive – immigration and Islam – in Germany, Austria, France, Italy, the Netherlands and Israel, the analysis of national curricula indicates a climate of 'voicing' rather than silencing. Analysis of teachers' responses showed strong awareness of the relationship between the sensitivity of the history of immigration and that of Islam and the relationship between pupil diversity and self-silencing on these issues. It appears that, in some cases, apprehension of pupils' voices led teachers to self-silence.

KEYWORDS

Sensitive historical issues; Islam; immigration; silencing; self-censorship; history teachers; cross-national perspective

Introduction

The writing of historical narratives entails deciding what to include and what to omit. Any historical narrative thus leaves particular events, persons or developments unspoken (White 1984). When a particular narrative becomes one of the dominant narratives in a society, these unspoken words can turn into silences. The narrative fits and feeds the moral image of the dominant social group in society (Wertsch 2002). In this manner, collective identities are created by dominant dialogues through the exclusion of other dialogues (Foucault 1969). Silences thus empower those who silence and disempower those who are silenced. Education is one of the contexts in which such silences, consciously and unconsciously, are consolidated and transferred to the next generation (Crowell 2015). This paper discusses silences and the voicing of sensitive issues in history education as perceived by history teachers and as apparent in the history curricula in Germany, France, Austria, Italy, the Netherlands and Israel. We focus, in particular, on two topics that have appeared to be highly sensitive in most countries – immigration

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and Islam – to consider the ways in which historical topics are silenced or represented and how these silences are broken.

Construction of silences

The extent to which silences originate or are created purposefully and whether people are consciously aware of them have been subjects of debate in various disciplines, such as (social) psychology, history, philosophy, and memory studies (Connerton 2008; Logue 2008; Winter 2010; Bar-Tal 2017). Depending on the particular approach and perspective, the construct of silence has been discussed in terms of forgetting, denial, self-deception, memory bias, self-presentation and censorship, to name a few. Within the context of this paper, we consider silences to be socially constructed in groups of people who actively avoid speaking about an issue while simultaneously not wanting to know about it (Zerubavel 2006, 2010). As emphasised by various researchers, these social or political silences and denials are always in some way the product of conscious choices to not know (e.g., Cohen 2001; Connerton 2008; Winter 2010). For example, regimes, social groups and societies can be motivated to silence issues to create a particular image of the national past to strengthen social cohesion, to form an identity or out of humiliation and shame (Connerton 2008). Patriotic aims have, for a long time, been intermingled with the creation of historical narratives (Berger 2017). From the perspective of Social Identity Theory (Tajfel 1982), historical topics can be silenced because the topics pose a threat to the moral image and positive social identity of the group (Bar-Tal 2017). Within social systems, individuals might thus, influenced by group pressure, choose self-censorship to protect the in-group, to avoid external negative sanctions, to protect their self-image, to protect a belief and to protect third parties (Bar-Tal 2017). Further, with regard to experiences of war and violence, particular impulses could motivate the construction of silences. For example, public silence can enable people to mourn and process grief and loss. In some cases, silences are supported by an idea of the privilege of protagonists and are forced upon those ‘who were not there’ and therefore cannot know or judge what happened (Winter 2010). We distinguish this use of the term ‘silence’ or ‘denial’ from the more psycho-analytical use of denial as an unconscious process of blocking information in the individual mind. However, such individual processes of forgetting or denying information are influential in the social constructions of silence (Cohen 2001). Researchers in the field of difficult knowledge have described the strong forces of the mind and society to keep what is difficult in the dark (Pitt and Britzman 2003; Logue 2008). A study by Shadra and Ross (2007) showed that individuals tend to remember less of the negative deeds of members of their group, particularly when they identify strongly with the in-group. Thus, while at the social level, it is a conscious choice to silence an issue, at the individual level, these mechanisms can be influenced by unconscious processes and memory bias.

Silences can be constructed in various phases of the process of making history (Trouillot 1995; Connerton 2008). They are formed in the creation of facts in sources or when these sources are assembled in archives. Later, silences are produced in the interpretation of sources and the making of narratives or in the attribution of significance to these narratives and the events that they include. Although often entangled, these different phases are to be borne in mind when reflecting on silences in history in particular societies and when desiring to break silences. Because of its focus on silences in education, this paper

concentrates primarily on the later phases of silencing. Most teachers principally use, more or less creatively, the narratives crafted for them. They are, however, important actors in the process of attributing significance to these narratives and sources and thus in the making of history and the silences that encompass them (Carretero 2017). In their roles as teachers, they can be considered gatekeepers to the ways in which historical narratives are transmitted to the public, in this case their pupils (Pettigrew 1972; Hung 2018).

Silences in the history classroom

Within the context of history education, silences can be institutionally constructed, as when topics are silenced in the history curriculum or the media by governmental pressure. Teachers might be forced by the government, the curriculum or their school director to maintain silence, or they might opt to ignore and resist the norms of silencing (Brauch 2017). Teachers, however, can also silence particular topics as an act of self-censorship (Evans, Avery, and Pederson 1999), even if the topic appears in the curriculum or does not incur sanctions by society in general. A study of teachers teaching controversial issues in social studies mirrored the motivations for self-censorship discussed above (Byford, Lennon, and Russell 2009). First, teachers might want to protect the image of the in-group by silencing immoral historical actions by in-group members, such as perpetration or collaboration with perpetrators. Second, they might fear sanctions from the school director or pupils' parents when discussing a particularly sensitive topic (Kello 2016). Third, teachers might perform self-censorship to protect their professional self-image, motivated by insecurity about their mastery of the historical topic and the fear that teaching the topic would negatively affect their own and pupils' perceptions of their professional quality and status as a teacher (Crosby 2012). Fourth, teachers might evade topics that could expose pupils' prejudices and extremism because they do not want to provide a stage for these ideas in their classrooms or want to protect pupils who might be shocked by these opinions (Lowe 2015). For example, this motivation might be the case with teachers facing the rise of the populist right in some Western countries (Oonk 2014). Finally, teachers can be motivated to silence a topic to protect their pupils from harmful or offensive information, for example, when a teacher decides not to discuss war atrocities because pupils in the classroom are war victims themselves (Magendzo and Toledo 2009).

Breaking silences in diverse classroom settings

Apart from maintaining silences in history, teachers might also want to break silences. The current focus of history curricula in most Western countries on teaching historical inquiry and historical reasoning could be expected to stimulate critical engagement with the past and open discussion of sensitive historical issues (van Drie and van Boxtel 2008; Seixas and Morton 2013; Goldberg and Savenije 2018). There are two ways of understanding how sensitive historical issues are discussed in the history classroom, and silences are broken (Goldberg 2017). From a psychoanalytic point of view, silenced history would be a difficult history, a collective trauma, which teachers and pupils would rather not discuss or engage with because of the unsettling effect of the trauma. Breaking the silence would then mean to individually and collectively 'work through' the trauma and the process of mourning to overcome it (Britzman 2000; Goldberg 2017).

From a social-psychological perspective, in contrast, which views silencing as protecting group identity, breaking the silence is a way of challenging or reflecting on the identity of the community. Silence breakers might be people who do not feel threatened by the particular issue. For example, newcomers to the community can bring in new perspectives on the past. They might also feel less identified with the group and therefore less implicated in unflattering historical events, although in some cases, newcomers enjoy lower status and power; hence, they can be more prone to self-silencing (Roberts and Nason 2011; Hayes, Scheufele, and Hüge 2006). Teachers might need to negotiate between different perspectives on the historical significance of particular events or narratives when their pupils of migrant backgrounds bring new points of view into the discussion (Savenije 2016). ‘Veteran’ majority members might also break silences to change the group direction in a positive way in the future (Bar-Tal 2017). Thus, for example, Leone and Sarrica (2017) presented history textbook authors who broke the silence about war crimes committed by the Italian Army during the colonial invasion of Ethiopia (1935–36) as ‘Parhesiastes’ – activists who publicise hard truths in service of their society. Kitson and McCully (2005) referred to ‘risk-taking’ teachers, who view themselves as critical activists and are willing to engage with controversial historical issues to stimulate pupils’ critical awareness and to promote social change.

In several of the countries included in our research project, classroom populations have changed substantially due to immigration trends over past decades (Muenz 2008). This international movement of people has imported new controversies into the classroom. Historical topics that are not controversial in academia or the dominant majority’s public realm could become controversial or sensitive in such classrooms because of the diversity of pupils and the narratives that they bring with them (Goldberg and Savenije 2018). In such diverse classroom settings, the presence of pupils of migrant backgrounds, who bring new voices and new sensitivities with them, can lead to the opposite outcomes of breaking silences, as well as the silencing of previously frequently discussed issues.

On the one hand, a diverse classroom can lead to self-censoring of particular issues by teachers due to fear of heated discussions or the wish to protect a belief or value by denying the existence of contrary perspectives (Brauch, Leone, and Sarrica, [this issue](#)). Consider, for example, the way in which the broad consensus on the importance of Holocaust education and remembrance in Western countries was recently challenged by pupils of Arabic background or Islamic religious conviction (Jikeli 2013). Teachers have reported sometimes avoiding thorough discussion of the Holocaust in fear of pupils’ complete denial of the phenomenon. Among many other things, this denial of the Holocaust completely rejects the history teachers’ value of the historical discipline and the construction of historical knowledge based on evidence. To protect this value, teachers might prefer self-censorship and avoidance of the topic. In this case, the immigrant pupils, by their mere presence, are the reason for avoiding the topic.

On the other hand, teachers and pupils might feel the need to create an inclusive classroom in which all pupils and teachers’ perspectives are acknowledged. Diversity in the classroom increases the number of opinions and narratives among pupils or between the pupils and the teacher (Savenije, van Boxtel, and Grever 2014). This diversity could promote discussion of diverse perspectives and thus, in some cases, can break a silence (Goldberg and Savenije 2018). For example, Indonesian Muslim pupils might call for a more truthful and multi-perspective discussion of the war crimes perpetrated by the Dutch army in the

Indonesian struggle for independence (1945–49). In this way, these pupils become agents in a process of breaking a silence by active interruption. The presence of descendants of immigrants who suffered discrimination could arouse a need for critical reflection on immigration policies among the descendants of local elites (Goldberg, Porat, and Schwarz 2006).

Of course, various factors can impede active interruption by pupils. Pupils might self-censor because they do not want to be perceived as being outside group norms or do not want to offend others (Roberts and Nason 2011; Hyde and Ruth 2002). Furthermore, just as the construction of silences is a collective endeavour, so is breaking them. Silences are only broken when there is someone willing to talk and someone willing to listen or forced to listen because the group of speakers is too large to ignore (Zerubavel 2010). A perceived lack of power is an important constraint to participation in discussion (Roberts and Nason 2011; Hayes, Scheufele, and Huges 2006). A safe and equal learning environment, in which power-free communication and the dominance of the better argument are the norms, is therefore a crucial factor in discussing sensitive issues in the history classroom (Habermas 1987; Virta 2009; Hess 2009; McCully 2006). Moreover, teachers require pedagogical and subject matter expertise to enable the discussions of historical topics from multiple perspectives in which teachers and pupils use contextualisation and source evaluation to ground their arguments in historical evidence (Goldberg and Savenije 2018; Wansink and Savenije 2018). These demands are challenging to meet for secondary history teachers and might discourage them from even trying. Borrowing from organisational research terminology, we can speak of such preconditions as constituting a ‘voice climate’, which is built on participants’ perceptions of safety, legitimacy and self-efficacy (Ditchburn and Hames 2014). Teachers’ perceptions, as well as actual curricular constraints or affordances, may create a silencing climate, or alternately a climate of voicing.

This paper seeks to create more insights into the ways in which history teachers perceive silences around sensitive issues. It also attempts to trace their motivations and approaches to either avoid or broach these topics. We rely on a theoretical approach to silences and voicing occurring at the institutional level (curriculum policy), at the intermediate gatekeepers’ level (teachers) and among audiences and recipients (pupils). The goals of the study are therefore to map, based on teachers’ perceptions and history curricular guidelines, institutional silencing or engagement with historical issues considered to be sensitive. In the next section, we move forward to explore teachers’ dilemmas and choices with regard to silencing or broaching these sensitive issues, with a special focus on teaching goals. In addition, we look for instances in which pupils play a role in silencing or breaking silences about immigration and Islam.

Methods

The data discussed in this article were gathered from diverse sources. We collected data on history teachers’ perceptions of sensitive and silenced historical topics in their countries and their own teaching practices. To contextualise the teachers’ perceptions of two topics dominant in their responses – Islam and immigration – we analysed the integration of these topics into the countries’ curricula. To examine further the issues raised in the questionnaire and to better understand teachers’ experiences in the classroom, we used in-depth interviews with Israeli teachers who were actually teaching sensitive issues.

The curricular examples were drawn from national or federal states' history curriculum guidelines. All guidelines referring to teaching about immigration and about Islam were identified using word searches and were then translated to English. The authors summarised recurrent themes and representation of the topics of 'Islam' and 'immigration'.

The teachers' perceptions we report are based on responses to the teaching sensitive issues questionnaire from 719 respondents across ten countries (Austria, Belarus, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Israel, Italy, the Netherlands and Serbia). The data were collected in 2015 and 2016 as part of an international study of sensitive historical issues (a part of the COST Action IS 1205, 'Social psychological dynamics of historical representations in the enlarged European Union'). As part of this study, the questionnaire was developed and piloted in all of the participating countries (see Goldberg, Petrović, and Wagner, [this issue](#)). The final questionnaire consisted of 15 open-ended questions and 99 closed items questioning the issues that teachers perceive as sensitive, the reasons for this sensitivity, teachers' approaches to teaching sensitive issues and descriptive data. The quantitative data in this paper rely on the teachers' ratings of the sensitivity of various predefined historical issues (item wording: 'As how sensitive have you experienced the issue in your own teaching practice?' (Four-point scale: Not at all, Rather not, Somewhat, Very; and Don't know/Don't remember as a missing value). These issues were chosen for each country on the basis of a pilot survey. We also relied on responses rating the degree of agreement with 12 items representing various history teaching goals (see [Table 1](#) for items).

The qualitative analysis is based on teachers' verbal responses to open-ended questions ('Are there issues (topics) that you have experienced as sensitive in your teaching practice? Please name at least two.' 'How and for what reason is the issue sensitive', 'Please write one sensitive issue that you actually considered teaching but either avoided or felt unsure about', and 'In your opinion, is there any important issue in [country]'s history that is forgotten, neglected in the curriculum or politically discouraged?').

These responses were translated into English by collaborating researchers and were analysed for frequency of topics as well as ways of and reasons for silencing or avoidance of topics. The topics were classified both according to explicit titles (e.g., 'History of Islam', 'Immigration') and on the basis of implicit reference ('don't want to discuss Koran', 'because of asylum seekers') by the authors and a research assistant. Recurrent reasons for perceived

Table 1. Binary logistic regression coefficients predicting agreement with the claim 'An important issue in the country's history is forgotten, neglected in the curriculum or politically discouraged'.

| Teaching goal | M | SD | B | S.E. | Wald(1) | Sig. | Exp(β) |
|--|------|------|-------------|------------|-------------|------------|--------|
| Acquiring knowledge | 4.27 | .88 | .02 | .11 | .04 | .84 | 1.02 |
| Learning source criticism | 4.43 | .81 | .33 | .13 | 6.71 | .01 | 1.39 |
| Acquiring discussion and argumentation skills | 4.45 | .76 | .18 | .13 | 1.71 | .19 | 1.19 |
| Internalising democratic values | 4.40 | .87 | -.18 | .11 | 2.57 | .11 | .83 |
| Learning from the past | 4.11 | 1.04 | -.28 | .10 | 8.45 | .00 | .76 |
| Learning critical thinking | 4.69 | .59 | -.03 | .17 | .04 | .84 | .97 |
| Developing their own personal identity | 4.21 | .98 | .18 | .10 | 3.15 | .08 | 1.20 |
| Developing their national identity | 3.41 | 1.53 | .01 | .09 | .01 | .92 | 1.01 |
| Becoming better citizens | 4.07 | 1.17 | .01 | .09 | .00 | .96 | 1.01 |
| Developing patriotism | 2.90 | 1.83 | -.09 | .08 | 1.40 | .24 | .91 |
| Learning to have fun and developing an interest in history | 4.22 | 1.00 | -.09 | .09 | 1.01 | .31 | .91 |
| Developing moral virtues | 3.82 | 1.38 | .17 | .08 | 4.44 | .04 | 1.19 |
| Constant | | | -1.09 | .74 | 2.15 | .14 | .34 |

Note: **Bold** – significant association; the degree of freedom for all predictors' Wald coefficient is 1.

Table 2. Sensitivity rating of the topics of Islam and immigration in all countries.

| Country | Percentage of all verbal responses in country | Relative place in sensitivity rating order | Mean | SD |
|--------------------|---|--|------|------|
| Immigration | | | | |
| Israel | 28% | 3 | 2.24 | 1.16 |
| Austria | 21% | 2 | 2.80 | 1.08 |
| Germany | 20% | 4 | 2.00 | .91 |
| France | 18% | 2 | 2.47 | .98 |
| Italy | 18% | 2 | 3.07 | 1.02 |
| Netherlands | 15% | -* | | |
| Estonia | 10% | 4 | 2.61 | .77 |
| Finland | 8% | 5 | 1.45 | .68 |
| Serbia | 0 | - | | |
| Belarus | 0 | - | | |
| Islam | | | | |
| Netherlands | 43% | -* | | |
| Germany | 38% | 1 | 3.06 | .89 |
| Austria | 26% | 1 | 2.93 | .98 |
| France | 22% | -* | | |
| Italy | 18% | 1 | 3.16 | .88 |
| Israel | 14% | 5 | 1.92 | 1.1 |
| Finland | 6% | -* | | |
| Serbia | 6% | 3 | 2.73 | .99 |
| Estonia | 0 | - | | |
| Belarus | 0 | - | | |

*Relative place in predefined item sensitivity ratings in the country based on the mean rating of the issues. The topics of Islam and immigration were not included as predefined, sensitive historical issues in the final questionnaire in some of the countries based on teachers' ratings of the sensitivity of these issues in the pilot phase. For these countries, relative place and means cannot be calculated. We have included all of the countries in this table because qualitative analysis of the verbal responses to the question showed that, in some of these countries, the teachers considered the topics to be sensitive.

sensitivity of the topic and for evasion of teaching sensitive topics were identified by the first author and then refined in discussion with the second author.

The qualitative analysis centred on the topics rated as most sensitive in closed items and that appeared most frequently as sensitive issues in verbal responses (Islam and immigration). We then focused on countries in which the teachers' rating of sensitivity for these topics was highest (see Table 2 discussed below).

Additional data were collected from in-depth interviews with 25 Israeli teachers teaching sensitive issues and were analysed using Atlas.ti qualitative analysis software. The second author and a research assistant identified speakers' references to challenges related to historical issues and content (as distinct from lexical or logical complexity, for example) and the moral, emotional or political reactions to them. These challenges were then analysed in depth for hesitation to engage with the topic, overcoming hesitation or evasion, and references to immigration or social identity, such as ethnicity and religion.

Findings

Institutionally silenced issues

In response to the open question 'In your opinion, is there any important issue in [country]'s history that is forgotten, neglected in the curriculum or politically

discouraged?', forty-eight percent of the respondents (n = 327 of 677; 42 respondents did not respond to the item) reported that there are issues in their country's history that are forgotten, neglected, or politically discouraged. These responses were often related to the theme of patriotic teaching aims as a predictor of silencing in two ways.

First, teachers mentioned issues wherein the nation failed to live up to its standards even in contemporary terms, such as collaboration with the Germans in the Second World War (the Netherlands, Belarus, Finland, Austria) and the massacre in the enclave of Srebrenica under the failed protection of Dutch United Nations soldiers (the Netherlands). Teachers also referred to issues in which the national in-group is depicted negatively according to present norms, although not necessarily during the historical era in which they appeared, for example, colonisation and decolonisation (France, the Netherlands, Italy) and the unequal treatment of ethnic minorities and women (Finland and Israel). Last but not least were issues with ongoing current implications: the conflict with and position of Palestinians (Israel); and the position of Serbia in the former Yugoslavia and the Balkan Wars (Serbia). Teachers sometimes explicated the relation of silencing to national image maintenance and seemingly patriotic intentions. For example, a Dutch teacher wrote, 'There is too little attention paid to the Dutch role in slavery and the slave trade; the same for the role of the Netherlands in Indonesia because recently we are becoming very nationalistic again and only want to present the positive contributions of the Netherlands.'

Second, teachers pointed to more diffuse instances of silencing stemming from the dominance of particular political perspectives throughout the curriculum. For example, a French teacher explained, 'In general, anything that is not considered the Republican orthodoxy is rejected: it reduces the history of revolutions; we never studied the Paris Commune; the curriculum is full of clichés...'. Similarly, a Dutch teacher wrote, 'There is little attention paid to making pupils aware that our curriculum and our "national narrative" are only constructions to strengthen our identity, partly from above [the government, Eds.], but also because we need it as individuals.' One of the Serbian teachers even wrote that it was not possible for them to reveal what was silenced in the curriculum. These quotes show the relationship between patriotic goals in education in general (rather than the teacher's own goals) and the silencing of particular issues in the curriculum, in the teachers' perceptions. These issues of the political use of history and the presentation of a positive narrative of the dominant national group were much more apparent in the responses about silenced and neglected issues in the curriculum than in the responses about the avoidance of issues.

Self-silencing and ambivalence

Forty-three percent of the respondents (N = 311 of 719) to the teaching sensitive issues questionnaire reported there was an issue that they had considered teaching but either avoided or felt unsure about teaching. We sought to check whether awareness of institutional silencing was related to the individual action of self-silencing. While the frequency of reporting self-silencing among respondents who reported an institutionally silenced issue (46%, N = 150 of 327) was slightly higher than among respondents who did not report an institutionally silenced issue (43%, N = 150 of 350), the difference was

not significant ($\chi^2 = .62$, $p = .43$). Hence, no association was found between awareness of institutional silencing and self-silencing.

The issues that dominated responses from all countries about avoidance or hesitation to teach included Islam and religion in general. Some of the teachers referred explicitly to terrorist attacks by radical Islamists. Several topics were more prominent in particular countries, such as the history of independence and the Russian Empire and Soviet Republic (Belarus); the history of colonialism and colonial wars (the Netherlands and France); the Balkan Wars (Serbia); the 'foibe' massacres during the Second World War (Italy); racism, prejudice and the rise of the extreme right (France and Austria); and immigration and related issues, such as the 'Melting Pot' policy (Israel).

As discussed in detail in the first paper of this special issue, reasons for self-silencing – or hesitating to teach an issue that the respondents reported the greatest agreement with – were related to sensitivity to pupils' feelings and dissatisfaction with the state of historical knowledge or educational (Goldberg, Petrović, and Wagner, [this issue](#)). In the interviews and the responses to the open questions about the avoidance of topics, the aforementioned reasons for avoidance were reflected. The theme of difficulty in addressing pupils' emotions and reactions in the classroom was most apparent in explanations about the avoidance of issues. An Israeli teacher, for example, elaborated:

Sometimes, it could be hard for the teacher. When I worked in classrooms that were very right wing and very racist, what was hard for me is that I teach, let's say, about the birth of the Palestinian refugee problem or the Kufr Kassem massacre, and half the pupils say, 'Oh, great. We should have done that to all Arabs.' So, it's not hard for them; they were happy to hear it. It was hard for me; I didn't know how to speak about it or how to respond.

In such cases, it seems that the teachers were shocked by their pupils' unabashedly xenophobic reactions. Such reactions, with which teachers feel unprepared to deal, might discourage them from addressing sensitive issues altogether. Another Israeli teacher said:

There always are [difficulties] because I myself have no one clear truth. In effect, generally, when I feel I have no very clear stance on an issue, it makes teaching of this issue very challenging. I think it's good that I don't present a very solid opinion. Naturally, it invites them to form their own opinions...but no doubt, it's challenging for me.

Here, it seems personal ambivalence is the reason for the teacher's inability to say something on the issue. However, this 'lack of voice' seems, in the teacher's opinion, to open a facilitating space for pupils' voices. Hence, this practice might not be silencing at all. Indeed, many teachers responded to the open question on whether there was a particular topic they had avoided, emphasising that they never avoided topics 'as a matter of principle', however sensitive they might be. For example, a Dutch teacher wrote, 'I teach every subject. To conceal facts is lying in my opinion, which diminishes my status as a teacher.' A French teacher wrote, 'I do not have any taboo; on the contrary, it is an opportunity to "undo" (overcome by analysis) prejudices.' An Italian teacher explained that, although she felt very uncertain, especially on the issues of immigration and Islam, there were no topics she would avoid.

Teaching goals, awareness of silence and self-silencing

Previous studies (Bar-Tal 2017; Leone and Sarrica 2017) have intimated that teachers who have strong moral motivations or who strive to promote critical citizenship might be more

aware of societal silencing, as might those who are more versed in the research and disciplinary practices of history. We performed binary logistic regression, using teaching goals to predict the likelihood of teachers' reporting of societal or institutional silencing, which showed significant predictive power (log likelihood = 892.14, Nagelkerke $r^2 = .06$, $\chi^2(12) = 33.04$, $p < .001$). As seen in Table 1, in the whole sample, teaching goals aligned with historical thinking or with moral commitment predicted awareness of silencing, while 'Learning from the past', which might be seen as a more heritage-oriented goal, was associated with denial of silencing.

At the level of the separate countries, the picture was similar. Patriotic, civic and knowledge acquisition goals were associated with denial of silencing, while learning source criticism and developing moral virtues were positively associated with the sense that issues are socially or institutionally silenced. Thus, in Serbia and Israel, the teaching goal 'Developing patriotism' was inversely associated with the claim that important issues are silenced ($B = -1.29$, $SE = .57$, $Wald(1) = 5.19$, $Exp(\beta) = 3.63$; $p < .05$; $B = -1.13$, $SE = .41$, $Wald(1) = 7.53$, $Exp(\beta) = 3.10$; $p < .01$, respectively). A similar effect was found for 'Acquiring knowledge' and 'Becoming a better citizen' in the Netherlands ($B = -.88$, $SE = .38$, $Wald(1) = 5.47$, $Exp(\beta) = 2.41$; $p < .05$; $B = -.82$, $SE = .32$, $Wald(1) = 6.48$, $Exp(\beta) = 2.27$; $p < .01$, respectively) and for 'Learning from the past' in France ($B = -.83$, $SE = .33$, $Wald(1) = 6.43$, $Exp(\beta) = 2.29$; $p < .01$). In Serbia and the Netherlands, the goal of 'Developing moral virtues' was positively associated with awareness of silencing ($B = 1.38$, $SE = .54$, $Wald(1) = 6.49$, $Exp(\beta) = .25$; $p < .01$; $B = .73$, $SE = .28$, $Wald(1) = 6.62$, $Exp(\beta) = .48$; $p < .01$, respectively).

As noted above, teachers' goals and their commitment to societal values or to critical inquiry could also affect their willingness to take stances, by allowing voices or silencing issues. To explore whether and how history teachers' goals affected self-silencing, we performed binary logistic regression, using a host of teaching goals to predict teachers' reports of evading or hesitating to teach a sensitive issue. In the full sample, the one goal with significant predictive power for evasion or hesitation to teach was 'Developing interest in history and learning to have fun with history' (Nagelkerke $r^2 = .03$, $\chi^2(12) = 21.09$, $p < .05$; $B = -.33$, $SE = .09$, $Wald(1) = 12.91$, $Exp(\beta) = .72$; $p < .001$). Thus, the higher that a teacher rated this goal, the lower that the chance was that they evaded issues or was hesitant to teach them. It is not quite clear how the harsh content of sensitive topics aligns with having fun. Therefore, it is more likely that respondents referred mainly to the beginning of the item, that is, to promote interest and a sense of meaning in history teaching.

Looking more closely at the level of the country, we found somewhat different effects. Only in Serbia did the model achieve sufficient predictive strength (log likelihood = 66.33, Nagelkerke $r^2 = .37$, $\chi^2(12) = 23.74$, $p < .05$). Silencing, as indicated by reports of evading or hesitating to teach a sensitive issue, was inversely correlated with the goals of 'Internalising democratic values' and 'Developing pupils' patriotism' ($B = -3.53$, $SE = 1.79$, $Wald(1) = 3.89$, $Exp(\beta) = .03$; $p < .05$; $B = -2.15$, $SE = .97$, $Wald(1) = 4.89$, $Exp(\beta) = .12$; $p < .05$). That is, the more that a teacher was committed to democratic or patriotic teaching goals, the lower the chance that they would opt for silence.

In the full sample, we found that the mean sensitivity rating (averaging all issues) predicted both awareness of silenced issues and reports of evading or hesitating to teach an issue (Nagelkerke $r^2 = .04$, $\chi^2(1) = 19.44$, $p < .001$; $B = .46$, $SE = .11$, $Wald(1) = 18.86$, $Exp(\beta) = 1.58$; $p < .001$ and Nagelkerke $r^2 = .07$, $\chi^2(1) = 40.99$, $p < .001$; $B = .66$, $SE = .11$, $Wald(1) = 38.35$, $Exp(\beta) = 1.88$; $p < .001$).

(β) = 1.93; $p < .001$, respectively). We therefore sought to explore more in-depth societal silencing and self-silencing on the issues that received the highest sensitivity ratings within specific countries. The two issues that received the highest mean sensitivity ratings in the full sample (averaging all countries in which teachers scored them as predefined issues) and that appeared most frequently as more sensitive issues in a country were the history of Islam and immigration. Both were mentioned in verbal responses as sensitive topics or topics that teachers avoided or felt were silenced in society (see [Table 2](#)).

For an elaborate discussion of the next highest rated issues, the Holocaust and collaboration during the Second World War, we refer readers to the fourth paper of this special issue (Raudsepp and Zadora, [this issue](#)).

Immigration as a context and topic of silence and voicing

In addition to being a sensitive historical issue, immigration (or the presence of learners of immigrant origin) was also perceived as the root of sensitivities to other topics as well. As we can see in [Table 3](#) below, the countries in which immigration was more frequently mentioned in teachers’ verbal responses were also those in which the proportion of immigrants was highest. In these countries (Israel, Austria, Germany, France, the Netherlands, and Italy), more than one third of the respondents estimated that at least 15% of their pupils were of immigrant origin.

Our qualitative analyses show a relationship between the sensitivity of an issue and the pupils’ migrant backgrounds in teachers’ perceptions. In their responses to the open questions, teachers referred to immigrant pupils or pupils with immigrant family backgrounds as among the frequent reasons for the sensitivity of an issue, especially in more affluent countries, such as France, Germany and the Netherlands. To examine the different ways in which pupils’ migrant backgrounds played a role in teachers’ perceptions and addressing of sensitive issues in different ways, we now turn to the six countries in our study with populations including a larger number of immigrant inhabitants and in which immigration and Islam were rated as sensitive issues: Israel, France, Germany, Austria, Italy and the Netherlands. Within each country, we first explore whether and how the topics of immigration and Islam appeared in the history curriculum or whether they were institutionally silenced. We then proceed to examine teachers’ accounts of engaging with the topic, hesitating to teach it or evasion and silencing.

Table 3. Percentage of immigrants in total population and main countries of origin in 2015.

| Country | %* | Main countries of origin |
|-------------|-----|--|
| Israel | 23% | Morocco, Ukraine, Russian Federation, Romania, Ethiopia, United States of America, Iraq, Poland |
| Austria | 19% | Germany, Serbia, Turkey, Bosnia and Herzegovina |
| Germany | 14% | Poland, Turkey, Kazakhstan, Russian Federation, Turkey, Romania, Czech Republic, Italy |
| France | 12% | Algeria, Morocco, Portugal, Tunisia, Italy, Spain, Turkey, Germany |
| Netherlands | 12% | Turkey, Suriname, Morocco, Indonesia, Germany, Poland |
| Italy | 10% | Romania, Morocco, Albania, Ukraine, Germany, China, Switzerland, Republic of Moldova, Philippines, France, India |
| Finland | 7% | Former USSR, Estonia, Somalia, Iraq, former Yugoslavia |
| Estonia | <1% | |
| Serbia | <1% | |
| Belarus | <1% | |

*Foreign-born population: all persons who have ever migrated from their country of birth to their current country of residence. This includes persons born abroad as nationals of their current country of residence, such as in former colonies (OECD 2017; United Nations 2015).

Israel – a silencing of the privileged?

Immigration appears in the Israeli history curriculum in various stages of twentieth century Jewish history since, in this period, most of world Jewry was involved in immigration. Furthermore, Israel is essentially an immigration country, and all its Jewish citizens trace their origins to immigrants from the diaspora. However, the more sensitive period of immigration represented in the history curriculum is the period following the establishment of the state of Israel. Although all Jewish Israelis should be considered immigrants, and most European-Jewish family histories contain a period of flight from persecution, poverty and challenging adaptation, the period is not similarly sensitive to all ethnic groups. The topic is considered highly sensitive due to the collective memory of discrimination against Jewish immigrants from the Middle East, a focus of ongoing controversy (Goldberg, Porat, and Schwarz 2006). Questions regarding the legitimacy and utility of immigrant absorption policies, such as Israel's 'Melting Pot' policy of cultural integration, feature prominently in the mandatory matriculation curriculum (Ministry of Education 2014). Since approximately 40% of Israel's Jewish citizens and pupils are of Middle Eastern or African descent, discussing the topic of the maltreatment of their ancestors poses a constant challenge. That Jewish Israeli teachers (n = 98) rate it as the second most sensitive topic reflects this challenge.

As a teacher of Jewish European descent noted, 'If there are "Mizrahi" [Middle Eastern descent] pupils in the classroom, there's a fear they will be offended by the claim in the textbooks that the government did not act out of discriminatory intentions [in the immigration policy].' Another teacher who identified as Ashkenazi (of European descent) stated that 'pupils found it hard to discuss the topic with me because they view me as "Ashkenazi" and repeatedly said, "you'll never understand" when discussing historical events of Mizrahi immigrants' protests.' In a single case, a teacher referred also to Ashkenazi immigrants' sensitivities: 'when discussing historical immigration absorption policies, the immigrant pupils from the former USSR note that they feel excluded, but the class debates whether this feeling stems from their own aversion of integration or from the government and society's attitudes.' In the interviews, in rare cases, a teacher noted that immigrant background could impact teaching in diverse directions:

In the 11th grade, they study immigrant absorption and the deprivation of Mizrahi immigrants...it's sensitive because most of them are Mizrahi, so it arouses anger. On the other hand, sometimes they actually identify with the other side, saying, "why are they [immigrants cited in sources] such cry-babies. The state was in a bad situation; it was hard to absorb immigrants", and even if they are all Mizrahi, the class splits. Through this, we also reach current affairs, like discrimination against Jewish-Ethiopian immigrants, with which many pupils contend.

A teacher in a lower working-class neighbourhood in a large town in Israel shared his unique challenge:

Only children of work immigrants and refugees populate the school I teach in...the veteran Israelis all walked out. So, teaching history and civics draws you into very challenging realms with pupils, half of whom are not citizens at all and would never be. Imagine them studying the repatriation of the Jews in the time of the second temple or in modernity...

In both cases, teachers mention working with immigrant children as also offering the potential for a fresh outlook on immigration history. An immigrant background

enhances pupil identification with historical immigrant figures and their assumptions of understanding their feelings. However, teachers also related to the great challenge posed by learners' actual or perceived marginalisation and deprivation and the emotional outbursts accompanying the study of immigration. Since teachers' and pupils' identities and, in some cases, the differences between them were perceived as major factors in this sensitivity, it is difficult to thoroughly discuss together the processes of discrimination and exclusion at the core of the issue. It is worth noting that a somewhat unexpected pattern of silencing appeared here. While pupils belonging to the marginalised groups claimed almost an exclusive right to voice, teachers are hesitant and even tend to silence the narrative of the dominant group. Thus, they downplayed the institutional perspective (of immigration policies as necessary measures), unless a pupil from the underprivileged group broached it. Although immigration as a topic had a different place in European curricula, the sensitivity surrounding the topic showed a somewhat similar picture.

France, the Netherlands, Italy, Germany and Austria – silence breached by 'the other'

Immigration appears in the French history curriculum as part of the 'decisive changes in society in the latter half of the 20th century', within the framework of 'a Republic being rethought [une République repensée]'. This framing is at once both open minded and implicitly problematic since it implies that immigration changed the original or true nature of French society and polity, 'opening a political debate'. Further, because of the placement of immigration as an issue among many at the very end of the curriculum, there is a low likelihood of teaching it. However, an overwhelming majority of French teachers (90%, n = 78) reported teaching the topic every year. This finding, along with half of the respondents viewing the issue as somewhat or very sensitive (36% and 13%, respectively), hints that it is a topic bringing teachers into constant engagement with sensitive issues.

Indeed, examining French teachers' verbal responses, we find that more than one quarter of them referred to immigration or immigrant backgrounds in their explanation of the reasons for issue sensitivity. In most cases, it was not the historical issue of immigration that teachers viewed as sensitive. Rather, teachers pointed to the effect of immigrant backgrounds on the sensitivity of topics which often seemed to have no direct relationship with immigration but bear on beliefs related to immigrants' identities (which teachers described using terms such as 'Muslims', 'Turks', and 'Arabs'). More frequent were references in teachers' responses to the difficulty that pupils coming from Muslim countries have in discussing Islam historically and their negative reactions to studying the Holocaust and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. French teachers also noted pupils of Turkish origin's reactions to the teaching of the Armenian genocide during and in the aftermath of the First World War as a source of difficulty. Some teachers reported conflicts with pupils' family memories, and sometimes pupils denied the genocide altogether. Decolonisation appeared to pose a challenge both to pupils of North African origin and to those who were descendants of French expatriates of the colonies (*Pieds Noirs*).

The Dutch history curriculum and the Dutch teachers' responses (n = 82) with regard to the issue of immigration resembled the French case in several ways. The topic of

immigration appeared at the end of the curriculum in the second half of the twentieth century and is entitled 'The development of a pluralist and multicultural society' (Wilschut and van der Kaap 2013). As in the French curriculum, this approach could be perceived as open, but at the same time, it bears the implicit idea that immigration caused the development of a new society and Dutch identity from the 1950s onwards. However, the Netherlands was built on immigration flows, and approximately 98% of its inhabitants are of migrant descent. Nevertheless, in the curriculum, the topic of immigration comprised only the arrival of guest workers and their families in the second half of the twentieth century, immigration following the decolonisation and independence of Indonesia, Suriname and the Antilles, and European migration after integration into the European Union.

Precisely as in the French case, the Dutch teachers mentioned the pupils' migrant background as a reason for sensitivity in relation to the Holocaust and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Armenian genocide and the decolonisation of, in this case, Suriname, the Antilles and Indonesia. Typically Dutch-sensitive topics in which teachers mentioned the pupils' migrant backgrounds were the history of slavery and the Dutch slave trade. For example, a teacher wrote:

Pupils with a Surinamese/Antillean background sometimes value a different perspective or emphasis than what I think is the most fruitful for historical understanding. At other times, it seems more like the past is perceived to be embarrassing, both for people from the former colonies as for native Dutch people.

One quarter of the Dutch teachers mentioned the topic of migration, refugees or a multicultural society as a sensitive topic in itself but often referred to pupils' backgrounds as well. One teacher explained:

The being different of migrants, their different religions, the way they take their place in public space were topics of discussion in these cases. At a school with a strong Christian profile, some pupils and some colleagues as well easily think in terms of us and them. In particular, the great diversity of reactions and their sharpness led to strong discussions. Sometimes, emotions also played a role.

In Germany and Austria, two countries recently facing unprecedented rates of immigration, twentieth century immigration is part of the history curriculum. In both countries, the topics of immigration are set within the general topics of globalisation and social change. It is interesting that, in Germany, immigration of non-Germans is set along with but marked apart from the mass (forced) immigration of ethnic Germans following the Second World War. The topic 'Migration in Bavaria' includes '[German] refugees and displaced persons, "guest workers", Russian Germans, asylum seekers', and it refers to the 'successes and problems of integration in different areas'. This focus places immigration in the context of traumatic upheavals and societal challenges (Staatsinstitut für Schulqualität und Bildungsforschung München 2017). Even more telling is that, in Austria, where part of the history curriculum is set by law, the official edict instructs teachers to relate history teaching to 'pupils' life experience', such as the 'experience of migration'. Thus, the curriculum itself assumes the relevance of the issue to pupils' identities. This belief is in line with recent changes to the curriculum that include the competence to orient oneself historically in present and future society (Kühberger 2015). It is therefore not surprising that this reference to immigration history is made in the context of the warning that 'Controversial issues in history and politics are equally controversial in teaching',

demanding teachers to 'make sure that pupils can maintain a critical-weighting distance'. These instructions demonstrate a tension between relevance (attachment to a subject) and distance, possibly echoing official anxiety about the effects of engaging with sensitive issues (Bundesministerium für Bildung 2008).

A similar tension between relevance and distance was found in the Italian history curriculum. Immigration is not mentioned specifically as a topic, but the issue is included in the curriculum as one of the themes of migration and the red thread of 'relationships, conflicts and exchanges between peoples around the Mediterranean Sea and the rest of the world' (Cerini et al. 2012). However, this curricular guideline is accompanied by the warning that the current context of Italian multi-ethnic and multicultural society might change the historical discipline into a tool to represent different identities and thus harm its scientific character. The curriculum emphasises the need for historical inquiry and critical reasoning and presents these skills as enabling confrontation and dialogue about the complexity of the present and the past between different elements of a multicultural and multi-ethnic society.

In line with the careful addressing of the topic of immigration in the curricular guidelines, Austrian (n = 49) and Italian (n = 59) teachers rated immigration as the second most sensitive topic. More than one third of the Austrian teachers referred to immigration (or anti-immigrant politics) as a sensitive topic in their verbal responses, and a similar proportion gave as the main reason for the sensitivity of issues that there were immigrant pupils in their classrooms. Thus, a teacher pointed out that teaching about the Balkan wars of the 1990s is sensitive since there are 'pupils with migration backgrounds from this area' in the classroom and that discussions of immigration 'are conducted very emotionally, as the xenophobia of the [native Austrian] pupils comes through.' Another teacher reported that teaching about expatriation and expulsions is sensitive since 'many pupils themselves were affected or are children of sufferers, [making] personal reference' to the issue. Italian teachers explained that the topic of Italian emigration was sensitive because of the connections with current immigration to Italy. Several respondents referred to xenophobia among pupils. For example, a teacher wrote, 'The theme of emigration/immigration has often brought to light stereotypes, fears and feelings of intolerance experienced by pupils in their families and in their local context', and another teacher remarked:

Also concerning immigration, there are in these areas, especially among the electorate of *Lega Nord* [right-wing anti-immigration party], clichés, slogans, fears and deeply rooted prejudices. Dealing with the history of migration from, in, and to Italy, from the late nineteenth century to the present day, provides a nice 'common thread' through the history program, and it is definitely a sensitive topic. The research approach in family micro-history allows pupils to discover that they are almost all descendants of at least one 'migrant'.

In all European cases, pupils' and teachers' backgrounds (migrant versus non-migrant) are the main reasons for sensitivity on the topic of immigration. This contested cultural identity is also more or less implicitly interwoven in the curricula as rendering immigration problematic as a phenomenon. Pupils of Arab background (regularly equated with Muslim pupils, although the two are not synonymous) are mentioned as the reason for teachers to avoid topics and silence sensitive issues. What often underlies this avoidance is teachers' fear of immigrant pupils' reactions to the dominant national narrative or of

majority pupils' reactions to pupils of migrant background. It is notable and somewhat ironic that, although Israel is a Middle-Eastern state, and Mizrahi Jews were the first immigrants and earliest Jewish natives, sensitivity surrounding immigration appears to replicate the European pattern. Jews of European descent form the model for the native Israeli Jew, against which Jewish immigrants from Muslim countries were measured and found lacking. The latter are considered to be irrationally sensitive, ungrateful and disgruntled. It is worth noting that, in Israel, as in the European countries, the presence of immigrants from Muslim countries (or their descendants) appears to be disruptive also for the teaching of another sensitive topic: the history of Islam and its relations with other religions.

Islam

Unlike most of the sensitive issues, which are usually modern historical events that present an unflattering image of the nation and threaten positive in-group identity, Muslim history is quite removed from the present, nor does it necessarily harm group image. As with the topic of immigration, the topic of Islam is mainly mentioned as a sensitive issue because of the presence of Muslim pupils in the classroom and in society in general. It is not the historical topic itself that is sensitive but the way in which pupils relate the historical events and historical actors to particular social groups and to conflicts between them in the present. All five European countries show a similar picture of the history curriculum and teachers' perceptions.

Islam was the topic that appeared most frequently as the most sensitive (in Austria, Germany and Italy). It was also the topic that featured most frequently in teachers' open questions in the Central and Western European countries (43% in Dutch, 38% in German, 26% in Austrian, 22% in French, 18% in Italian and 14% in Israeli teacher samples; see [Table 2](#)). As noted above, Islam was also one of the topics that teachers noted to be sensitive due to learners' identity. This sensitivity was often attributed to pupils' immigrant background since many of these pupils or pupils' parents come from Muslim countries (according to estimations in 2016, in Germany, Austria and the Netherlands, approximately 6 to 7% of the population is Muslim, in Italy, almost 5%, and in France, almost 9%).

The topic of Islam and of interreligious relations appears in the curricula of all of the researched countries except Italy. The main two periods in which it features in the curricula are the rise of Islam and the crusades (Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale 2015, November 26; Ministerium für Bildung, Jugend und Sport des Landes Brandenburg 2010; Ministry of Education 2014; Wilschut and van der Kaap 2013). Additionally, Islam is mentioned when presenting the rise of the Ottoman Empire or the evolution of global terrorism over the last two decades (Amtsblatt des Ministeriums für Kultus, Jugend und Sport Baden-Württemberg 2016). As an exception, the Italian history curriculum does not mention Islam explicitly and only prescribes the larger theme of 'the rise and evolution of religious feelings and norms' (Cerini et al. 2012). In all other countries, the founding of Islam and its expansion receives critical-historical coverage. The topic falls under teaching goals and competencies such as 'Beliefs and respect for the religious' focusing on 'Forms of intercultural and interreligious dialogue'. For example, the Dutch primary education history curriculum touches upon the constitutional right to freedom of education (the freedom to fund schools

based on a particular religion or belief) and the 'Koran schools' that pupils attend over the weekend (van Oostrom 2008). This curriculum also describes the increased building of mosques in Dutch cities from the 1950s onwards and the resistance to it. However, in all countries but the Netherlands and Italy, most of the teaching hours refer to the Muslim empires and the prolonged conflict between them and the European-Christian countries. The height of conflict is emphasised in the descriptions of the crusades and the Ottoman westward expansion.

According to teachers' impressions, these representations of Islam in the curriculum appear to arouse opposing emotional reactions, dependent on pupils' backgrounds. On the one hand, members of the (predominantly Christian) majority group tended to react with hostility to engagement with Muslim culture and religion. The issue spurs associations with fundamentalist Muslim terrorism and current debates on Muslim immigrants' integration, exposing pupils' xenophobic views. For example, an Italian teacher explained, 'The birth of Islam [is sensitive] because of the different sensitivities in the families of pupils regarding the relationship with Islam (for some families it is unacceptable to say that Islam was a tolerant religion in the Middle Ages)', and another wrote, 'For many pupils, Islam is synonymous with terrorism, and there are no tools to let them know the position of moderate Muslims.' On the other hand, among pupils of Muslim and especially Middle-Eastern background, the presentation of Islam and the Muslim empires as the main antagonists in violent conflicts with European nations positions these minority pupils in an uncomfortable position of being identified with threatening external forces. An Austrian teacher described the impression that studying Islam created an equation of the 'Conflict between Christians and Muslims with the relationship of "native" children and children with a migration background.'

Furthermore, critical-historical discussions of Mohammed and the founding of Islam were sometimes perceived as an assault on pupils' religious sentiments. As a German teacher explained, Islam is sensitive, 'especially for Muslim pupils, because they are not used to dealing with that topic rationally. They are emotionally involved, and sometimes there are very different opinions within their families than in school.' Another teacher reported that, concerning the meeting of the Christian and Islamic worlds, 'it became obvious how pupils are influenced by current affairs, the media coverage of topics and the values of their families. Therefore, objective discussions often were not possible.' A French teacher noted that teaching of Islam and of the Crusades was sensitive in classrooms with Muslim pupils due to differences in opinions among pupils and fear of hurting pupils' feelings.

In the Dutch context, a recurring theme in the data was that teachers related the sensitivity of the topic of Islam explicitly to current conflicts in society with Islamic extremism (terrorist attacks, ISIS, Islamic fundamentalism) and the radical response by right-wing politicians and pupils. The sometimes rather problematic relations between Muslims and non-Muslims in society were not included as a topic in the history curriculum, but teachers and pupils brought them into the discussion, triggered by other historical topics or recent events, such as the attack at the office of the weekly paper *Charlie Hebdo* on 7 January 2015. It depends on the courage of the teachers and the pupils whether these issues are silenced in the history classroom (see also Brauch, Leone, and Sarrica, [this issue](#)); several teachers noted that they had avoided discussion of them.

Compared to the European countries, Israel has the largest Muslim minority (more than 20% of Israeli children come from Muslim, Arabic-speaking families), but its schools are segregated according to language and religion. Thus, the sensitivity of teaching about Islam does not usually stem from fear of hurting the feelings of Muslim pupils in the classroom or of their anticipated reactions. In the context of protracted conflict and escalating interreligious tensions, Jewish Israelis harbour growing anxiety and hostility towards Muslims, which they project also onto historical Islam. As a teacher remarked in an interview; 'You plan to teach the birth of Islam, and the initial good relations that Mohammed had with the Jewish tribes. So, a day after a terror assault, it would not be a good lesson; it will immediately arouse emotions.'

A few Jewish teachers noted the hostile reactions of Jewish pupils to studying the topic as a sign of sensitivity, reporting encounters with 'violent and racist expressions of hatred and anger, lack of understanding of the importance of studying this history.' Another teacher noted that the issue aroused 'reservations and anxiety, some pupils claiming that there is no reason to study the topic or that it shouldn't be taught in Israel, that Judaism forbids learning about Islam and, of course, about the Koran.' However, she qualified these reactions as 'characterising mainly the beginning of teaching about the topic.' Nevertheless, it seems that quite a few teachers did not even begin teaching the topic. Although it is a mandatory unit at middle school level and was not considered one of the most sensitive issues in Israel, more than third of the Jewish-Israeli teachers reported not teaching about Islam. Hence, a topic not silenced in the history curriculum was silenced by a significant portion of teachers.

When teachers managed to overcome their hesitations about teaching the topic, they reported more positive outcomes. The Israeli middle school history curriculum emphasises the strong intercultural relations between Muslims and Jews in the Middle Ages. It highlights Muslim tolerance towards Jews through comparison with concurrent Christian persecution and the various examples of cross-fertilisation in culture, philosophy and religion. Pupils analyse the parallels in religious principles, as well as the acceptance of Jewish community leaders in Muslim courts in medieval Spain. These commonalities can arouse a sense of shared identity between Jews and Muslims. A teacher described the use of primary sources to arouse this sense of shared culture: 'I show them the writing of a Jewish Rabbi (religious leader), and it is Arabic in Hebrew letters, and he uses Muslim concepts. It opens up minds.' Another teacher referred to his own family heritage, saying, 'My grandfather is an Arab in this respect, right, a Jew, but speaks, reads and writes Arabic, listens to Arab music, his culture is Arab.' He applied this hybrid perspective when teaching about Islam to a classroom consisting mainly of Jewish pupils of Mizrahi - Middle-Eastern descent: 'The moment I told them half my family is "Arab", they got to thinking of their own families.' This consideration helped to overcome the pupils' initial opposition to studying about Islam: 'And when we studied about Arabs and Islam, they said, like, "OK, that is the realm my family came from, there might be something more than the conflict, interesting things, things important for us to know".' This sense of shared or hybrid identity could also be quite threatening in a context of ongoing conflict, making it a source of sensitivity in itself.

Discussion

This paper discusses the silencing of topics in history education, focusing in particular on the ways in which the issues of immigration and Islam are taught or avoided in Germany, Austria, France, Italy, the Netherlands and Israel. The findings show that our respondents are aware of silences in history education and their own roles in this silence as well. Almost half of the respondents mentioned silenced issues in the history curriculum, and a slightly smaller proportion reported avoiding or feeling unsure about teaching an issue. Teachers explained institutional silencing as stemming from the political use of history and the presentation of a positive image of the dominant group or of the state for patriotic purposes. This situation has been described in previous studies (Connerton 2008; Bar-Tal 2017). In parallel, the quantitative analysis showed that teaching aims related to moral and critical thinking were associated with awareness of silencing, while aims related to patriotism were associated with denying that sensitive issues are silenced. A possible interpretation would be that institutional silencing is 'transparent' to the more patriotically oriented, who identify with the benevolent representation of the nation and do not want to know about a silenced issue (Zerubavel 2006, 2010). Hence, contrary to some of the previous research on denial and silencing (Cohen 2001; Connerton 2008; Winter 2010), it is difficult to interpret the lack of action against societal silencing as a conscious act. As one teacher hinted, teachers cannot know that the issues are silenced, echoing the idea that, at the individual level, ignoring uncomfortable historical events could be part of unconscious defence mechanisms fuelled by societal norms (Pitt and Britzman 2003; Logue 2008). This tendency might also be the reason why teachers who upheld critical teaching goals were more likely to report societal silencing. An explanation could be that the moral-critical motivation might help to overcome the inherent tendency to deny unflattering issues and ignore their silencing (Leone and Sarrica 2017).

Consequently, we might have expected that critically or disciplinary oriented teachers, who were more aware of institutional silencing and of the choices made in reference to sensitive issues, would be more able to note and report cases in which they consciously applied self-silencing. Conversely, according to previous research (Kitson and McCully 2005; McCully 2006; Leone and Sarrica 2017), we would expect the more critically oriented teachers to react to societal silencing, to act as silence breakers, and to report less self-silencing. However, there was no significant relationship between critical teaching goals (or their seeming opposite – patriotic goals) and self-silencing or between awareness of societal silencing and reporting of individual silencing. An intriguing finding indicated that self-silencing stems from a more complex set of motives. It might also be that, due to the image of history as a critical-thinking discipline (Seixas and Morton 2013; van Drie and van Boxtel 2008), teachers universally report commitment to critical and democratic goals, lowering the predictive force of such reports relative to actual behaviour.

We should note that, contrary to what might be expected (Bar-Tal 2017), the issues considered most sensitive were not institutionally silenced. Rather, Islam and immigration, for example appeared – in some cases quite prominently – in the national curricula that we surveyed, in all of the countries in which the topics were considered highly sensitive. Our findings show that, in many ways, the respondents in our study

participated in the societal processes of breaking silences, which are assumed to be quite rare. They realised the potential of history curricula to promote critical reflection on the present by acting as ‘parrhesiates’ (Leone and Sarrica 2017), deliberately addressing issues that they expected to be sensitive for their pupils. Contrary to reports in previous studies on the tendency of teachers to act as censoring gatekeepers (Evans, Avery, and Pederson 1999; Hung 2018; Pettigrew 1972), many teachers explicitly positioned themselves in a ‘gate-opener’ role of adding potentially uncomfortable perspectives to the national narrative in the history textbooks. Teachers affirmed their independence and, contrary to previous studies (Byford, Lennon, and Russell 2009), did not report self-silencing due to protection of the national image, nor did they refer to fear of sanctions (Kello 2016). They expressed the wish to create an inclusive classroom in which nuanced discussion of various opposing perspectives would be possible.

That a sensitive topic such as immigration was not silenced, in addition to the presence of pupils of immigrant descent who apparently frequently did not remain silent either, was considered a central cause of sensitivity, leading at times to teacher self-silencing. Thus, contrary to the assumption that societal silencing leads to self-silencing (Bar-Tal 2017; Evans, Avery, and Pederson 1999), it appears that a climate of ‘voicing’ (Ditchburn and Hames 2014) might also be a cause for teachers’ silences. Teachers gave varied reasons for hesitating to broach or deciding to evade an issue, thereby silencing their opinions and views. Foremost among these reasons were apprehension of pupils’ reactions, which could be interpreted as fear of pupils voicing narratives and breaking silences. In this respect, even fundamentalist or xenophobic stances might be an instance of pupils raising their voices and breaking the ‘industrial peace’. Thus, if the aim to render the teaching of history interesting is indeed a predictor of choosing not to avoid sensitive issues, teachers who chose this option might at times achieve more of their goal than they opted for. Indeed, sensitive and controversial issues can serve as stimulators (Hess 2009), but stimulated discussion can expose extreme views. Recent studies have discussed the possibility that teachers fear providing a stage to anti-democratic and discriminatory perspectives when allowing discussion of sensitive topics in their classrooms (Lowe 2015; Oonk 2014). Our findings confirm this idea. As quantitative data showed, in at least one country (Serbia), self-silencing was associated not only with a commitment to developing patriotism, as might be expected, but also with the aim of internalising democratic values. Verbal responses showed teachers’ concern about allowing pupils to voice racist views in reaction to sensitive issues, possibly for fear of legitimising such views. This finding reminds us not only that silencing can be opposed to democratic participatory citizenship. The act of opening a topic to discussion and giving voice can itself be a double-edged sword in terms of promoting a democratic, inclusive climate, at times leading to the opposite effect. Thus, teachers can become caught in a vicious circle in which they fear that broaching sensitive issues would break the inclusive communicative preconditions needed for discussing such issues (Habermas 1987; Virta 2009; McCully 2006).

With regard to our focal topics of immigration and Islam, the results show that there are many similarities in the way in which the topics are part of history curricula, especially among the European countries, as well as the reasons that the teachers gave for the sensitivity of the issues. For both topics, it is not the historical topic itself

that seems to be sensitive. Rather, it is the way in which the pupils relate to historical events and associate historical actors to particular social groups and to conflicts between them currently. The main reason for avoiding or silencing these issues is the presence of minority pupils of migrant, and in most cases Muslim, background who might feel threatened by a critical rendering of their ethnic group or religion. Nevertheless, according to teacher reports, members of the majority also found these issues threatening, especially when the depiction of the 'other' was positive, opening the potential for boundary crossing and identity diffusion. Since teachers sometimes structured teaching to expose even majority members' immigrant origins, such diffusion might have been imminent. This prospect poses a social-identity and group-status threat mainly to privileged groups (Tajfel 1982).

Teachers seemed to avoid these sensitive issues mainly to prevent intensification of (the idea of) a clash between majority and minority pupils. In doing so, they protect the belief in peaceful coexistence and the image of the in-group as being tolerant to newcomers and people of different cultural and religious backgrounds (Bar-Tal 2017). In some cases, it appeared that teachers who were members of the majority group were subjected to silencing, like those 'who were not there'. Their pupils of minority descent viewed the teacher as unentitled to voice an opinion on sensitive historical issues pertaining to the minority. This belief seemed like the underprivileged upholding the privilege of those who 'were there' against the teacher's privileged professional authority (Winter 2010). It is an interesting inversion of the relationship of power and participation in discussions found in previous studies (Roberts and Nason 2011; Hayes, Scheufele, and Hüge 2006).

Furthermore, various teachers' responses contrasted 'the objective nature of the historical discipline based on historical evidence' with the way in which pupils sometimes would dismiss these rules for engaging with history. Teachers viewed pupils' religious convictions and identities as sources of emotional reaction and cognitive bias, leading to irrational rejection of conflicting information and reliance on sources (family, peers, internet, Koran) that were, according to the teachers, invalid. These perceptions demonstrate the difficult relationship that secular history teachers have (at least in Europe) with the religious epistemic authority of Muslim pupils. Thus, although teachers are open to critical perspectives and facilitate giving voice to excluded groups, they find it difficult or unnecessary to voice and expose to criticism their own construction of knowledge. Therefore, they rarely question their own sense of what is objective and where to find knowledge, but they do dismiss the sources and epistemic authorities to which Muslim pupils adhere. One could question whether teachers' willingness to discuss sensitive issues includes a discussion of their own fundamental principles of truth finding as well. In this realm, the traditional relationship of power to participation (in setting epistemic norms) seems to persist.

When considering the mechanisms of the silencing of issues in history education, we should however bear in mind the limitation of this study in discussing silences as they are practiced. As the results have shown, our participants were often willing to denote what is silenced in society in general or in history education in particular. Nevertheless, as members of the same society, they were unaware of some of the silences that are maintained, limiting our view of which issues are silenced exactly

and why. One could argue that the issues underlying the sensitivity of the topics of both immigration and of Islam are not as openly discussed as one would expect. Given the teachers' conviction that history education is highly suitable to engagement with sensitive issues and their historical backgrounds, they might be driven to overemphasise their commitment to teaching. We must also assume a certain self-selection bias in our sample with an overrepresentation of teachers interested in teaching about sensitive historical issues. Moreover, the study sheds little light on what teachers actually do in their classrooms to break silences and discuss uncomfortable truths. For this purpose, we refer to the study by Brauch, Leone, and Sarrica (2019) presented in this special issue. Further research is needed to discover how the objectives and ambitions of the teachers in our study translate into practice.

Implications for practice

To manage pupils' defensive reactions, we believe that teachers could turn an obstacle into an opportunity when teaching about immigration. Using an affirmation approach – discussing the pupils' immigration histories and acknowledging their families' suffering – teachers could increase pupils' willingness to learn about topics or perspectives that they could otherwise reject (Goldberg 2017; Čehajić-Clancy et al. 2011). Additionally, since the sensitivity of some issues lies not in their historical details but in their perceived relevance to the present, critical work with analogies could prove useful (McCarthy Young and Leinhardt 2000; Straaten, Wilschut, and Oostdam 2016). Teachers could make explicit the unconscious comparisons to the present and disentangle relevant from irrelevant frames of reference. The sensitivities seem to arise out of differences and conflicts between social groups and the unequal socio-economic and cultural positions of these groups in current societies. Teachers seem hesitant to broach the relationship of these contemporary tensions to the historical processes that they teach, such as the Crusades, European imperialism, the decolonisation wars and European interference and warfare in the Middle East. As we have shown, these topics often are part of the history curriculum and taught in history classrooms, but they are treated in isolation from their implications and relevance to current contexts. Exploring the consequences of such historical events and processes for the current political, social and economic relations and inequalities in societies and the world could get to the heart of the sensitivities of the topics discussed in this paper.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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