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Confronting conflicts

history teachers' reactions on spontaneous controversial remarks

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Confronting conflicts:

history teachers' reactions to spontaneous controversial remarks

Sometimes, things don't go to plan. Current events come into the classroom, especially the history classroom. How should students' responses to current affairs be dealt with there? How should students' desire to voice their opinions be handled if their opinion is unpopular. What if the student is simply wrong? How far can moral relativism be acknowledged, explored and scrutinised in the history classroom, when the topic under discussion is controversial and urgent?

Working in the Netherlands and Belgium, Wansink, Patist, Zuiker, Savenije and Janssenswillen have developed and refined ways of doing this. In this article they provide an overview of researchers' thinking on the issue, and clear strategies and guidelines for what a history teacher might do to ensure that any unplanned discussion is, at least, respectful, engaging and rigorous.

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After the terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015, all schools in the Netherlands were asked to commemorate the victims with one minute of silence. What would you have done if, a few minutes before the commemoration, a pupil in your class had stood up and said he would not be silent as the attacks were all part of a conspiracy?

This article is meant to contribute to the growing body of knowledge about discussing controversial historical issues in history education. *Teaching History* has a long tradition of publishing articles about controversial topics in the classroom.[1] These articles sometimes originate from experiences of authors living in divided societies, for example Northern Ireland.[2] In many other Western countries, such as the Netherlands and Belgium, the debates about segregation and integration have become both more polarised in public debate and increasingly apparent in the classroom. In the light of the recent terrorist attacks (Paris, Brussels, Berlin and London), and the increased polarisation in Europe, we noticed that that there is a growing need for practical knowledge and models of how to deal with these types of topics in the classroom. What would you do if one of your pupils framed a terrorist attack as a conspiracy theory, or if a pupil seemed to sympathise with some of the motives of the terrorist?

Teachers can benefit from previous research investigating the teaching of controversial topics. Much of this research focusses on long-standing, well-known controversial topics such as the Arab-Israeli conflict. With such well-established topics, teachers either have enough time and existing materials to prepare very thoroughly or else they can avoid the topic altogether. In this article, we will focus on spontaneous reactions of pupils in the classroom arising from:

- recent events in society, such as terrorist attacks, and
- unexpected controversial remarks by pupils.

Controversial pupil remarks can shock teachers. The situation in the classroom can become quite tense. In the Netherlands and Belgium teachers are expected to teach pupils essential competences of democratic citizenship, such as open-mindedness, tolerance, perspective taking and critical thinking, and must respond appropriately in such situations.[3] The professional nurture of such citizen competencies can come under pressure in stressful and potentially unsafe moments in the classroom. In our work in teacher training we have noticed that teachers can experience these moments as difficult. They can feel unsure and sometimes even incapable of acting in the 'right' way. They find it difficult to determine what, exactly, the 'right' way even is.

This article is based on our experiences as teachers, teacher educators, and researchers in an urban multicultural context in Amsterdam and Utrecht in the Netherlands and Antwerp in Belgium. We will first discuss the definition of a controversial topic and attempt to describe those topics which can cause conflict in the classroom in the Netherlands and Belgium. We will then discuss two

Figure 1: Examples of ground rules for discussion

1. Acknowledge that opinions are often not right or wrong, but merely different.

2. Do not interrupt the speaker.

3. Support your views with evidence and examples.

4. It is okay to criticise what was said, but not the person expressing the opinion.

5. Listen and speak with the same respect you would like shown to you.

Source: www.socialstudies.org

scientific theories that can help teachers understand some of the classroom dynamics when unexpected events occur during a lesson. Furthermore, based on previous research, we will point out that conflicts can develop through several stages. We argue that these stages need to be taken into account when discussing different teacher reactions. Finally, we provide a model that can help teachers to reflect on the possible consequences of pupils' reactions in the classroom.

We think it is important that teachers are aware of the way their own experiences and norms affect the way they deal with controversies in the classroom. Therefore, self-reflection by teachers on their own beliefs and values, which can influence the way they address and interact with pupils both individually and collectively, is crucial in considering how they will react to controversial remarks in the classroom.

Controversial topics in the Netherlands and Belgium

In general, controversial topics serve as a setting for studying conflicting views and multiple perspectives in the classroom. Conflicts are part of life and inherent to democratic society. In interpersonal contact, conflicts are unavoidable. Differences of opinion can be rational, ideological or emotional, and in most cases these factors will overlap. In this paper we focus on those controversies that create disputes between social groups with (partly) different values that can arouse strong feelings and divide classrooms, communities, and society in general.[4] Writing about controversial issues cannot be isolated from sociopolitical and cultural context; there might be different challenges for teachers in different societal contexts.[5]

Several studies in the Dutch and Dutch-speaking Belgian context have reported that teachers sometimes feel insecure about teaching controversial issues.[6] In some cases, teachers avoided teaching these issues. A recent study conducted among 82 Dutch history teachers, teaching in different societal contexts, investigated which topics they perceived as controversial in their lessons.[7] The most frequently mentioned topic was 'differences and conflict between Islamic and non-Islamic people'. More specifically, the study showed that teachers especially struggled with the sensitivity

related to current conflicts in society regarding Islamic extremism (terrorist attacks, ISIS, Islamic fundamentalism) and the radical response to it by right-wing politicians and pupils. Teachers had difficulties with teaching these topics because they were afraid of fierce pupil reactions and they did not want their pupils' feelings to get hurt. Very importantly, teachers felt unable to reach pupils with radical political and/ or religious perspectives so as to enable them to discuss these perspectives in an open dialogue.

Teacher expertise and controversial topics

It is well known that teaching about controversial issues is difficult. To do this successfully teachers need to combine various types of expertise. Before engaging with pupils in discussing a specific controversial topic, in general, teachers want to feel confident about their expertise. Three types of expertise are particularly important, namely:

- classroom management expertise;
- expertise in subject matter;
- pedagogical expertise.[8]

First, because addressing contrasting perspectives can generate fierce discussions in the classroom, it is important that teachers are able to create a stable and safe learning environment.[9] Therefore, it is important to establish codes of conduct or classroom rules regarding the ways in which pupils should behave when there is disagreement on an issue. In the Netherlands we recommend teachers to follow the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and to use Article 1 of the Dutch Constitution, which states:

All who are in the Netherlands are in equal cases treated equally. Discrimination because of religion, belief, political opinion, race, gender or on any ground whatsoever is not allowed.

We are aware that this article can create tensions with Article 7 in the Dutch Constitution which states the right of *'freedom of speech'*. Therefore, in our teacher education programs we advise teachers to establish ground rules for discussion in

Figure 2: Simplified version of Craig's Iceberg Model
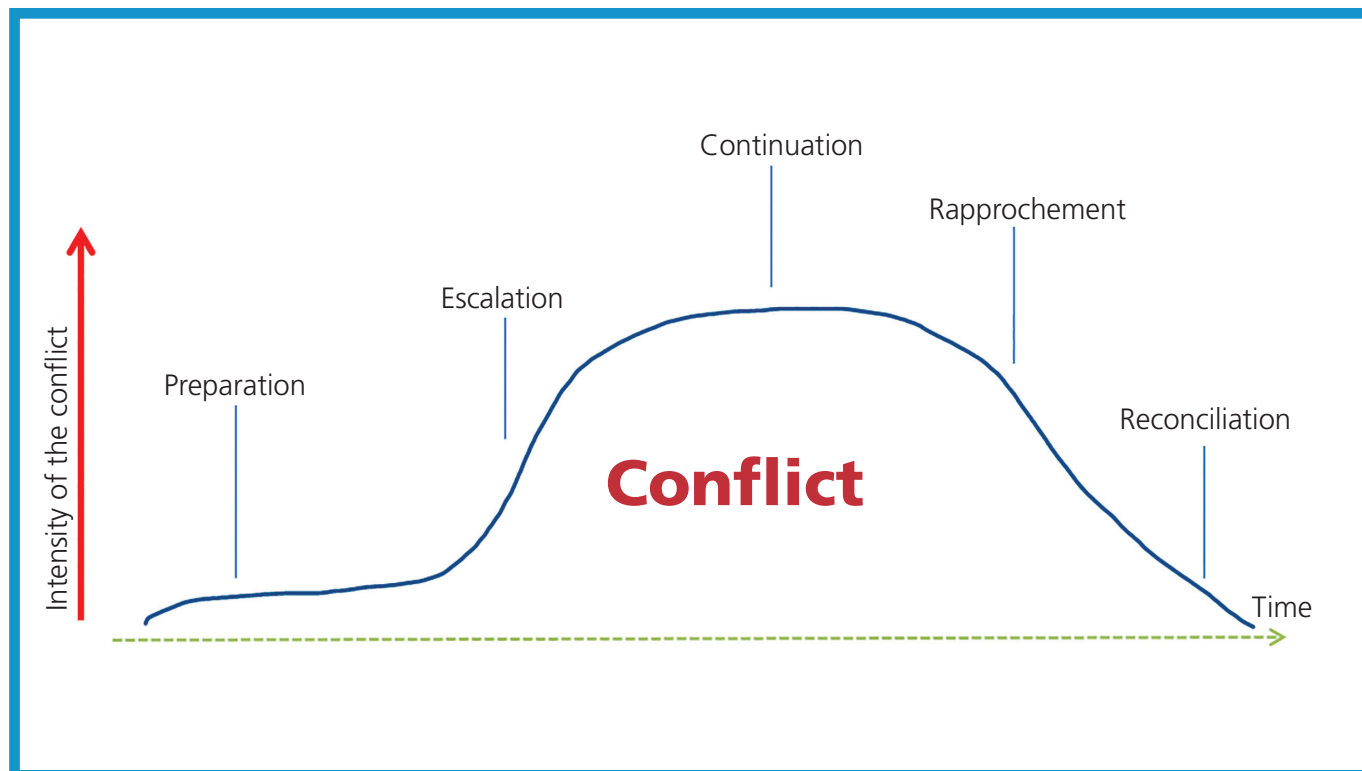
co-operation with the class (see an example of ground rules in Figure 1).[10] The second area of expertise that facilitates discussion of different perspectives is subject matter knowledge and insight in pupils' cultural backgrounds. Knowledge of the topic and the pupils' backgrounds gives teachers confidence to address difficult moral questions or to address different perspectives.[11] Finally, teachers also need knowledge about instructional strategies to guide pupils' emotions, but also actively to promote open-minded thinking and critical thinking.[12]

Social identity theory

A widely promoted approach of controversial topics is to discuss multiple perspectives on the specific topic.[13] An underlying expectation of this approach is that an exploration of different perspectives is a valuable and necessary way for pupils to find mutual understanding of different cultures and to become responsible and tolerant democratic citizens in the present. Within this approach, the ability to take the perspective of someone else is considered an important aspect of tolerance. Tolerance, according to Verkuyten and colleagues, means:

On the one hand, there is what one sincerely believes is true and right, but on the other hand, one must be able and willing to try to understand the perspective of other groups.[14]

Previous research indicates that when teaching history from a multi-perspective approach, pupils (and teachers) find it is easier to understand somebody else's perspective when a (historical) topic is perceived as cold history (that is, the teacher or pupil does not identify with the topic). When the teacher or pupils identify themselves with a topic, their willingness to take another person's perspective can decrease.[15] However, several other studies

by Barton and McCully, Goldberg and Ron, and Savenije and De Bruijn, have shown that pupils' attitudes towards other perspectives when studying controversial historical topics can be dependent on the teaching approach and learning activities.[16] Both a critical inquiry approach and an empathetic narrative approach seem to have positive effects on pupils' use of history and historical sources in a multi-perspective way.[17]

In order to understand pupils' attitudes towards perspectives other than their own, when it comes to controversial topics, it is helpful to consider the ways in which pupils position themselves in social groups. According to social identity theory, individuals construct the idea of themselves and the other by positioning themselves and others within a social categorisation system.[18] Pupils can feel themselves belonging, for example, to a specific football team, cultural group, region or/and religion. Moreover, people strive to maintain a positive social identity largely from favourable comparisons that can be made between the in-group and the out-group. It is important for history teachers to realise that historical narratives serve as resources of identity, as specific narratives can help members of a certain group achieving a positive image, while another group can perceive the same (historical) narrative as a threat to their social identity.[19] When a positive image of a pupil's in-group is threatened by unfavourable (historical) evidence, this can lead to a 'cognitive closure' and rejection of the evidence. For example, Epstein showed that African-American and European-American adolescents constructed conflicting beliefs regarding the credibility of secondary historical sources about slavery.[20]

Mortality salience theory

Social identity theory is related to a further theory known as mortality salience theory. We introduce mortality salience theory here because it provides a way of guiding teachers in

Figure 3: Reaction-reflection quadrant – model devised by Wansink and Patist
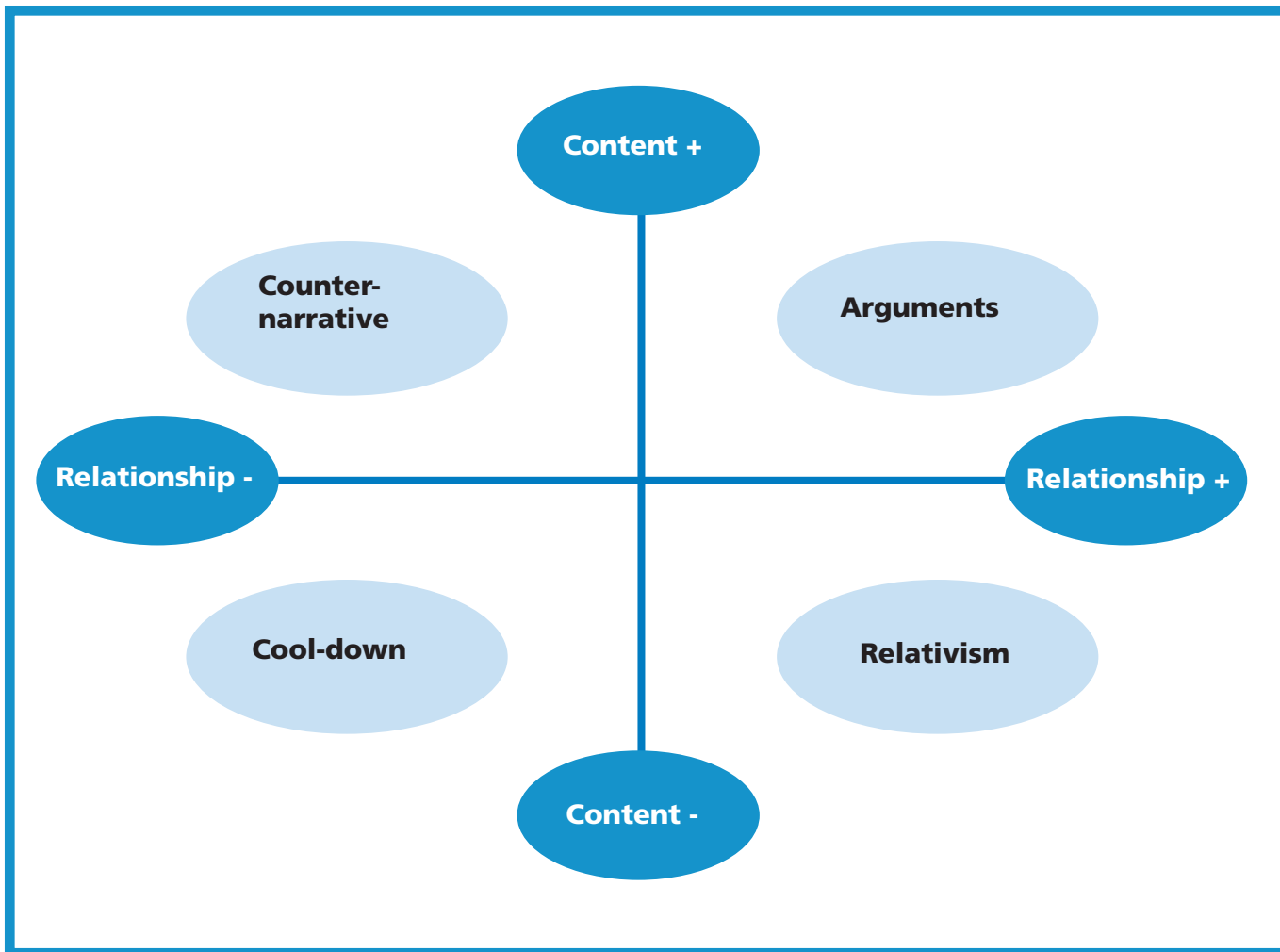
handling instances that relate to terrorism, which we discuss later in the article. Mortality salience theory states that people want to avoid anxiety that derives from knowledge of the inevitability of death.[21] From a psychological perspective, when confronted with a terrorist attack, people are confronted with a vulnerability (death) that cannot be controlled. This is because a terrorist attack can happen anywhere, causing fear among citizens.

Mortality salience theory states that when people have to manage their anxiety, they seek reassurance. This increases their faith in the validity of their own cultural world-view and can lead to rejection of other cultures. In relation to terrorist attacks this can lead to less favourable attitudes and stereotype thinking about Muslims (i.e. guilt by association) and multiculturalism. Mortality salience theory and social identity theory partly explain certain experiences often described by teachers concerning difficulties they face immediately after a terrorist attack: due to intense emotions, such as fear, anger and sorrow, it often is difficult to discuss multiple perspectives directly after a terrorist attack, especially in multicultural classes.

Temporal development of conflicts

Colin Craig, a conflict mediator working in areas such as Northern Ireland and the former Yugoslavia, has developed a model to show how conflicts can mature in different temporal phases.[22] Based on the work of the Dutch philosopher Bart Brandsma, we present a simplified version of this practical model in which five, rather than the original seven, different phases of conflict are distinguished.[23] The model is depicted in Figure 2 and consists of two axes. The horizontal axis represents time and the vertical axis represents the intensity of the conflict. The five different phases of conflict are preparation, escalation, continuation, rapprochement, and reconciliation.

The first phase of conflict is 'preparation'. Conflicts can grow slowly or rapidly, but there is always a period of frustration creating growing tension before the conflict escalates. Because conflict can grow without visible or audible signs, teachers are not always aware of this phase. However, when a teacher is able to identify a particular frustration they still have the chance to make contact with the pupils and to estimate the intensity of their frustration. In the second phase, 'escalation', the conflict becomes visible. During the phase of escalation, teachers' and pupils' emotions can become very intense. The phase of escalation is directly followed by the phase of continuation. It is important to realise that the intensity of emotions can continue over time and that during the phase of continuation people involved in the conflict are likely to invest in opposition rather than in rapprochement.

During this phase, it is possible that the emotions of the people involved in the conflict will hinder their critical

Figure 4: Relativism – how to start the conversation

To help teachers in the classroom start a conversation after a controversial remark, we will shortly describe a pedagogy which Jaap Patist developed after the attacks on 11 September. This approach is in line with what Goldberg and Schwarz have called the empathetic dual-narrative approach: it facilitates mutual affirmation but does not directly stimulate critical thinking.

Step 1:
Draw a circle in the middle of the white-board. Pose that the circle represents that which we know.

Step 2:
Then draw two smaller circles as shown. Point out that from either perspective you can only see half of the bigger circle.

Step 3:
Tell the class that the person on the left will perceive his or her 'truth' as the number six, influenced by his or her vantage point in time and place. The person on the right will perceive his or her 'truth' to be the number nine, because of his vantage point.

Step 4:
State that in order to see both side of the circle people have to communicate about their perceptions and acknowledge that perceptions are influenced by one's vantage point.

Step 5:
Finally, introduce the theme you want to discuss with the class. Then ask the class about their perceptions of the theme and write these around the circle.

Position in time and place

'Truth'

Position in time and place

Communication
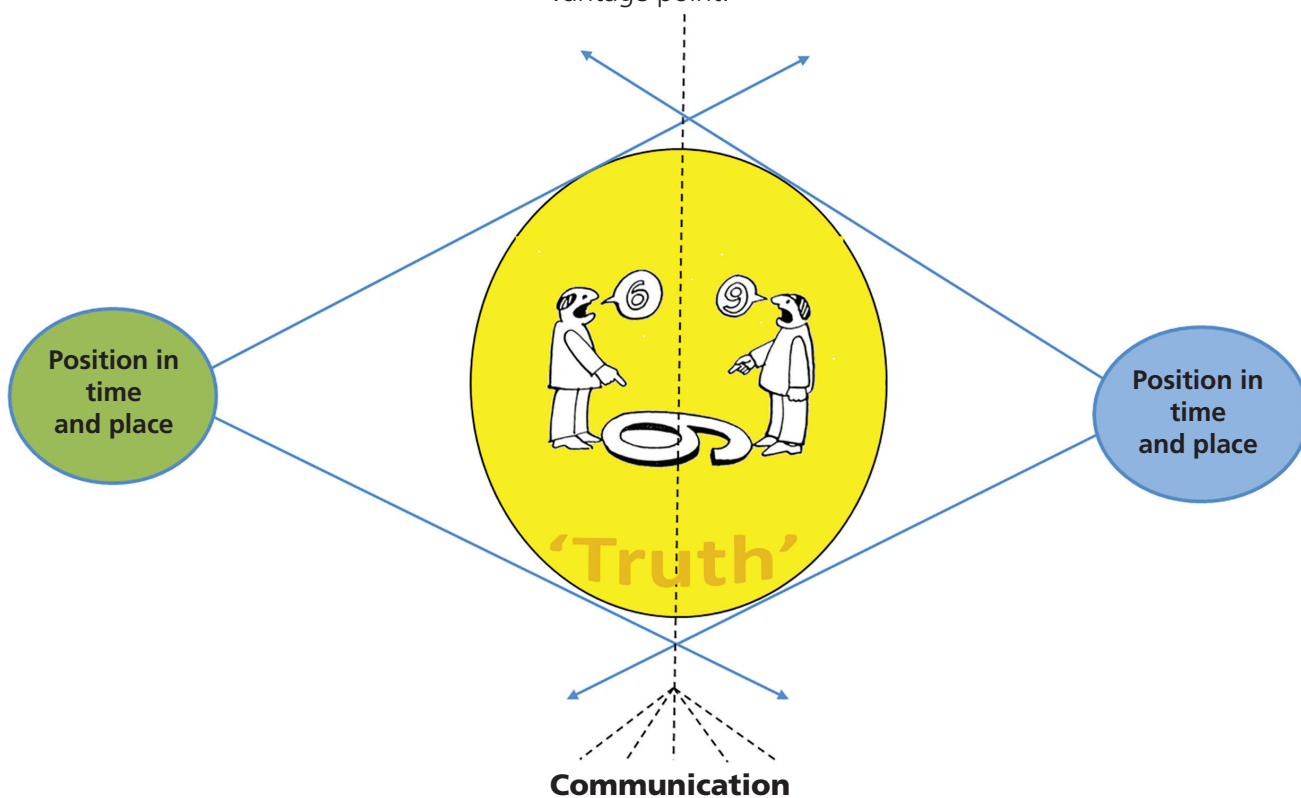
investment of different perspectives and conflicting sources. However, according to Brandsma, in every conflict, after a period of time people gradually invest less energy. This creates opportunities to go to the phase of rapprochement. During this phase, the intensity of the emotions is lower, and people are more open for listening to each other. A pedagogy of multi-perspectivity becomes possible and the deeper layers of the conflict can be discussed by critical investigation. However, during the rapprochement phase, emotions can become tense again, meaning that the conflict might heat up once more. The final phase in conflict is the phase of reconciliation in which

both parties trust each other again and can live co-operatively. It should be noted that this phase is not always achieved.

Categorising teachers' reactions to a controversial remark

On Monday 16 November 2015 at noon, all schools in the Netherlands were asked to fall silent for one minute to commemorate the victims that had fallen during the co-ordinated terrorist attacks in Paris on 13 November. During this attack, 368 people were injured and 130 people lost their

Figure 5: Tips for identifying a strong argument

A strong argument:
1. addresses the rational argument instead of the person.
2. is based on facts rather than assumptions.
3. doesn't give the impression that there are only two possibilities when there may be more.
4. doesn't appeal to emotion, tradition, popularity or patriotism.
5. doesn't avoid responsibility by placing blame.
6. doesn't present a caricature of a person or group.
7. Doesn't rely on an extreme example to justify a position.

lives – 89 of them at the Bataclan Theatre. At the start of the day, at a secondary school in a medium-sized city in the south of the Netherlands, a teacher instructed her class to keep silence for one minute. After the instruction, one pupil, who according to the teacher had an Islamic background, said he did not want to keep silence. The teacher was surprised by this reaction and asked for his reason. The pupil responded fiercely and emotionally that he did not agree with the commemoration because, according to him, the attacks were a Zionist and American conspiracy against Muslims. When looking at this situation in terms of the five stages of conflict, we propose that this pupils' reaction can be seen as the start of the phase of escalation.

This example served as a case-study that in-service teachers discussed in a workshop about dealing with controversial issues in the classroom during an academic teacher training programme for history and social science teachers. The programme involved three authors of this article – Wansink as workshop leader, Savenije taking notes and Janssenswillen as participant and observer. Approximately 40 teachers participated in this session, at the start of which the teachers were divided into small groups and asked to discuss and collect examples of tense situations in their classrooms. After collecting these examples, the entire group of teachers chose the case described above as a focus for further investigation.

First, the introducer of the case was given the opportunity to explain to all teachers the situation in more detail, but she did not reveal her reaction after the pupil suggested that it was all a conspiracy against Muslims. Afterwards all the teachers were given the opportunity to ask clarifying questions to the teacher who introduced the case. Next, in small groups, teachers discussed how they would react if this happened in their own classroom. Finally, the different potential reactions were collected and summarised. Subsequently, the session leader placed the different potential teacher reactions into the model shown in Figure 3.

The reaction-reflection quadrant

The model shown in Figure 3 was developed in order to categorise different teachers' reactions to conflicting perspectives in the classroom. It consists of two axes that, when combined, distinguish four quadrants. Each quadrant represents a teachers' possible reaction to controversial pupil's statements.[24] The horizontal axis represents the effects on the relationship of the teacher with the pupils and runs from 'weakening the relationship' (negative) to 'strengthening the relationship' (positive). The vertical axis represents the content of the teachers' reaction and runs from 'discussing no content' (negative) to 'discussing content' (positive). We will use the teachers' input during the workshop that we described above to illustrate how the quadrant works. We have noticed, however, that the quadrant can be applied to multiple cases as a way of thinking about possible teachers' reactions.

The cool-down quadrant

During the teacher workshop we discussed the case about the pupil who believed the attacks in France were part of a conspiracy against Muslims. The participating teachers proposed possible teacher reactions to this tense classroom situation. We will now describe the proposed teachers' reactions categorised into the 'cool-down' quadrant. Several teachers said that they would remove the pupil from the classroom in order to de-escalate and retain order, but also to create time for themselves to think about how to handle this particular pupil utterance. According to our model, this teacher strategy focuses neither on strengthening the relationship with the pupil, nor on discussing the content of their statement. These reactions can therefore be placed in the cool-down quadrant. In this situation, the teachers' fear was one of 'over-heating' the classroom climate and losing control. They feared strong emotions would become polarised, igniting hostility between pupils. In relation to the previously described temporal phases of conflict, this fear of escalation is understandable because during the phase of escalation and the phase of continuation emotions can be very intense. By removing the pupil, the teacher indirectly communicates a norm to the other pupils in the class, which might help to retain order and peace in the classroom and may strengthen the relationship with the whole class, enabling a less tense discussion of the controversy with the remaining pupils. The relationship with the removed pupil is disturbed, however, and has to be restored after the lesson.

Presenting a counter-narrative quadrant

Some teachers said, during the workshop, that their first reaction and emotion would be immediately to present a counter-narrative to convince the pupil that their perspective is not correct. The ingredients of such a counter-narrative would be based on rational and historic specific criteria for handling evidence and building arguments in order to undermine the idea that the terrorist attack was a Zionist conspiracy. This teaching strategy is based on logical reasoning, yet we suggest that directly presenting a counter-narrative may also disturb the relationship with the pupil because the teacher dismisses the pupil's perspective immediately, resulting in a potentially damaged relationship between teacher and pupil. During the phase of escalation, the emotions of the pupils might conflict with the teacher's approach that is (presented to be) rational (but often also very emotionally driven). This approach will eventually increase the polarisation between the pupil and the teacher. Therefore, these reactions could be placed in 'counter-narrative' quadrant. Because emotions can be intense during the phase of escalation, we think that this emotional dimension is particularly important to reflect on, leading us to the quadrant of relativism.

Everyone is right: the relativism quadrant

A third type of strategy the teachers mentioned was for the teacher to ask the pupils to express their emotions and to write down their position and arguments. In this manner, the teacher focuses on strengthening relationships by taking the pupils' perspectives seriously. The teachers that proposed this strategy said they would make sure the perspective of the pupil that made the controversial remark, and also the perspectives of the other pupils in the class, were listened to carefully. This approach is intended to avoid harm to the relationships between pupils and teacher. We argue that this approach can be a first step towards making contact between the different perspectives. This is because it gives everyone an opportunity to describe their own emotions and arguments.[25]

We note, however, that providing a stage for such arguments can unintentionally increase the credibility of false claims, such as the conspiracy theory about the terrorist attacks in Paris. To avoid confrontation with the pupils, the teacher does not give much attention to providing evidence for the arguments. This approach might generate misconceptions and epistemological or even moral relativism. Such an approach is therefore in danger of failing to stimulate critical thinking. However, in relation to the previously described model of phases in conflict, this first step might be necessary to move to the phase of rapprochement in order to take the step towards argumentation in a later phase.

Quadrant: questioning and arguments

During the workshop about dealing with controversial issues in the classroom, several teachers stated that in case of controversial utterances of pupils, they started by making an inventory of all the different pupil perspectives.

By first collecting all perspectives, the teachers wanted to provide a space for pupils to express their emotions and arguments. Subsequently, the teachers discussed the different perspectives based on disciplinary criteria for inquiry and reasoned argument. For example, they discussed concepts such as fact and opinion, representativeness, and reliability. The teachers' idea behind presenting disciplinary criteria was to create an opportunity to evaluate the pupils' opinions and arguments. Aspects of what we perceive as good arguments can be found in Figure 5.[26] Additionally, teachers hoped that by shedding light on different perspectives and arguments of the pupils in the classroom, pupils would be encouraged to re-evaluate their position in response to their classmates' perspectives and arguments that were different from their own. We suggest that the teachers who mentioned this strategy in the workshop were focusing both on content and on strengthening the relationship with their pupils. Therefore, we placed these reactions in the quadrant 'arguments'.

We want to note, however, that this questioning strategy in a tense classroom situation can have its drawbacks. When taking into account our scrutiny of the model in action and the assumptions of social identity theory and mortality salience theory, we suggest that teachers should keep in mind in which phase of the conflict they start with analysing the different pupils' arguments. If the assumptions of social identity theory and mortality salience theory are correct, it is very likely that during the phase of escalation pupils want to be strengthened in their stereotype ideas and in-group values.

This means that discussing multiple perspectives in this phase of the conflict can be counter-productive, and can even lead to more polarisation and confirmation of stereotypes. Intense emotions stimulate simplistic information processing and limit pupils' willingness to take someone else's perspective. Even during the phase of continuation, discussing different perspectives might be very difficult for some pupils. These emotions should be recognised and acknowledged first, before engaging with the critical evaluation of different pupils' perspectives. We do not mean to say that all emotions should be worked through in the classroom, but they do need to be acknowledged in the presence of the pupils. Only then might pupils be willing to listen to each other and to discuss each other's arguments. When looking at the model, the conflict is then in the phase of rapprochement or reconciliation.

Discussion

In this article we have tried to combine two different schemas, Colin Craig's model of different phases in conflict, and our own reaction-reflection quadrants. Both schemas have been developed as practical tools to help teachers in dealing with conflict. In tense situations such as described in our case-study, teachers have little or no time to think thoroughly about how to react as there are many things happening simultaneously. We think therefore that teachers can benefit from training and reflection. The integration of both models can help to problematise the various advantages and disadvantages of different types of teachers' reactions over time. Reflection will enable teachers to take a proactive approach in teaching controversial issues and reduces the risk

of being overthrown by pupils' responses. Moreover, our short introduction of social identity theory and mortality salience theory might help teachers to better grasp what is going on in their classrooms.

The above examples show that depending on the phase of the conflict, different reactions by teachers might be appropriate. It is a difficult task for teachers to directly assess the situation and to choose the most appropriate reaction. In a split second, teachers have to take into account all the consequences of their reactions. This is made even harder by the fact that teachers will often also have strong emotional reactions. Nevertheless, despite the fact that different teachers' reactions are possible, it is always important to invest in a good relationship with the pupils because this is a precondition for discussing controversial issues.

An important aspect for teachers to keep in mind is that, depending on the phase of the conflict, emotions can hinder both pupils' and teachers' rational thinking. Such rationality is essential for critical thinking and for the willingness to understand someone else's perspective. Still, we propose that in the face of fake news and ethical relativism, discussing content and argumentation should go further than relativism, as not all perspectives are equally epistemologically valid or morally desirable.

Finally, it is important to note that teachers' actions in dealing with controversial issues are guided by emotions as well. During our conversations with teachers, we often heard that they deliberately did not want to be explicit about their own perspectives. They strove for a 'value-neutral' position and showed a willingness to discuss all different perspectives (relativism, in Figure 3). However, when they were confronted with controversial perspectives of pupils in the classroom, they often immediately presented a counter-narrative and limited the perspectives that were tolerated.

We believe that teachers are engaged in what we refer to as 'normative balancing', floating and doubting between transferring values (i.e. imposing their own values) and value communication, (i.e. discussing and interpreting different values).[27] Depending on whether or not teachers felt their own values were at stake, based on their level of emotional or moral engagement with the issues, teachers focused on discussing different perspectives (relativism or argumentation) or concentrated on transferring absolute values and imposing their own values (cool-down or counter-narrative). We propose, therefore, that when they are confronted with conflicting perspectives in the classroom, and preferably beforehand as well, teachers should be encouraged to reflect on their own identity, moral, and educational beliefs and on how these play a role in their reactions. During these confrontations, teachers will become more aware of their values and of their own perceptions of truth.

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