Article

Situationality in discussing controversial topics: (When) does controversial equal difficult?

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– Most teachers in the Netherlands do not report difficulty in discussing the most controversial topics. Anti-muslimism, COVID vaccination, and integration of ethnic minorities are perceived as relatively difficult topics to discuss.

– High teacher self-efficacy and school support are related to reported ease in discussing all controversial topics.

– Specific controversial topics are considered more challenging to discuss in diverse classrooms in terms of SES and ethnicity.

– Controversial topics are perceived as more difficult to discuss in vocational educational tracks.

Purpose: This study examines what controversial topics teachers in the Netherlands perceive as difficult to discuss and if and how this difficulty is related to teachers' background characteristics and context characteristics.

Methodology: 1034 secondary school teachers filled in an online questionnaire, and structural equation modelling (SEM) was used to explore the relationships among variables.

Findings: The findings indicate that recent topics with a direct large impact on students' lives and society, like COVID vaccination, are perceived as most difficult to discuss. With more perceived school support and high self-efficacy teachers report more ease to discuss controversial topics. Yet, reported difficulty to discussing controversial topics is also partially context- and person-specific, involving (among others) classroom composition, school subject and teacher's age.

Practical implications: This study can inform the development of subject and context-specific teaching materials and training programs in civic and democratic education.

1   INTRODUCTION

In times of democratic crisis and growing globalisation, Western societies can become increasingly polarised around particular societal controversial topics (e.g., sexual diversity, COVID vaccination). Therefore, the necessity to address polarisation, radicalisation and extremism through education has grown enormously. Indeed, when facing crises, society often looks at education to solve its problems. One of the proposed solutions to deal with polarisation is that teachers discuss controversial and sensitive societal topics in the classroom (Hess, 2009), allowing students to unravel the 'conflict, controversy and complexity' of societal issues (Wood, 2007, p. 42). Researchers point out that students would benefit from a discussion about sensitive societal issues in the classroom because they can learn to embrace other perspectives and practise dealing with disagreements about real-life social, political, and cultural controversial issues (Ho, McAvoy, Hess, & Gibbs, 2017; Pace, 2015). Correspondingly, the new law for citizenship education in the Netherlands states that schools should function as training grounds for democracy (The inspectorate of education, 2024), which means that not only social science teachers, but all teachers should be able to discuss controversial topics.

Unfortunately, current classrooms are reported to lack such critical discussion with previous research indicating that teachers struggle to teach controversial topics or avoid invoking the latter in the classroom (Jovanović & Marić, 2020; Sijbers, Elfering, Lubbers, Scheepers, & Wolbers, 2015; Zembylas & Kambani, 2012). The literature suggests that teachers' experiences depend considerably on their background characteristics and the context in which a controversial topic is discussed (e.g., Misco, 2014, 2018; Oulton, Dillon, & Grace, 2004). However, this previous research is mostly qualitative and often investigates only a limited number of teachers. We lack more large-scale quantitative studies investigating what topics are perceived as either less or more challenging for different teachers in the various contexts in which they teach (Erlich & Gindi, 2019; Gindi & Erlich, 2018). Therefore, we conducted an explorative large-scale study with 1034 secondary teachers in the Dutch context, first exploring what controversial topics are perceived as challenging to discuss. Second, we investigated under what conditions teachers find particular controversial topics difficult to discuss. In the following theoretical framework, we will begin by describing different definitions and approaches to conceptualising controversial issues. Then we present an overview of insights from previous studies to understand what potential background characteristics of teachers and teaching contexts may be related to perceived difficulty.

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2   DIFFICULT-TO-TEACH CONTROVERSIAL AND SENSITIVE TOPICS

There is an ongoing academic discussion on how to theoretically define controversial topics (e.g., Hess, 2009; Ho et al., 2017). For this study, we use a broad and practice-oriented definition stating that controversial topics are topics which arouse strong feelings and divide opinions in communities and societies. However, there is an ongoing debate about what topics should be labelled as 'controversial' as the matter of controversy of particular topics varies depending on the definition and context where the issue is raised (Hand, 2008; Hess, 2009; Journell, 2020). Most researchers prefer to name topics such as the holocaust and terrorism not controversial, but sensitive as these topics are perceived as settled, because there is broad agreement in society that these should be condemned (e.g., Hess & McAvoy, 2015). Most often, controversial topics are perceived as challenging to teach when they are authentic (not hypothetical), contemporary (not past) and reflect ongoing public debates (Camicia, 2008; Larsson & Larsson, 2021). Also, such topics are usually brought up in the media (Misco, 2018). The controversy in topics usually stems from disagreements about issues based on matters of fundamental beliefs or value judgements related to religious, cultural, ethnic and social differences and moral issues (Oulton et al., 2004; Stradling, 1985). And those conflicts can rarely be resolved by appealing to empirical evidence (Hand, 2008; Hess, 2009). Often the most emotionally charged issues are the ones linked to the identity of the students and their families (Barton & McCully, 2007; Wansink et al., 2023; Zembylas & Kambani, 2012). In a previous study, we made a distinction between 'hot' and 'cold' history which we can apply to controversial topics in general (Wansink et al., 2016). The metaphor of 'hot' topic refers to the personal attachment of the person to the particular topic. If the topic is covered in an uncomfortable light, it is difficult for a person to remain emotionally neutral.

From the teachers' perspective, topics become controversial and difficult to discuss if, specifically, students in the classroom hold contradictory perspectives about certain topics, which may raise the degree of tension (i.e. hot topic). Larsson and Larsson (2021) assert that the keyword here is 'emotions', namely an issue that is considered controversial and difficult if it triggers disagreement, which is connected to strong feelings among pupils. Other research has shown that a primary deterrent is fear of charged disagreement in the classroom and backlash from the local community and school administration (e.g., Goldberg & Savenije, 2018). Other reasons why teachers opt not to discuss controversial topics in the classroom range from a perceived lack of instructional time to feeling unprepared and having a lack of knowledge to do so (Journell, 2020; Oulton et al., 2004).

2.1 Situationality in discussing controversial and sensitive topics in the classroom

Several authors have proposed that teachers' experiences in discussing controversial topics are dependent on the context and therefore very situational (Ho et al., 2017; Misco,

2014, 2018; Oulton et al., 2004; Parra et al., 2022). This means that a topic becomes controversial in relation to the social and cultural, institutional, and temporal context in which it is discussed (Wansink et al., 2018). We will briefly present what is already known about how factors related to teachers, students and school environment might influence the perception of difficulty in discussing controversial topics. For the analysis, we will divide the factors into two categories: (1) those related to teacher characteristics; and (2) those related to the teaching context, i.e. where and to whom controversial topics are taught.

2.2 Teacher characteristics

2.2.1 Self-efficacy and subject knowledge

Research indicates a relationship between teachers' willingness to discuss controversial topics and self-efficacy (e.g., Erlich & Gindi, 2019; Pace, 2019, 2021). To ensure good-quality and safe teaching on controversial topics, teachers are expected to be able to create a supportive environment for diverse opinions, lead constructive discussions, manage student emotions, and foster positive relationships with students. Teachers' self-efficacy, in this study defined as a teachers' beliefs in their capability to have a constructive discussion about a sensitive topic, is seen as an important factor in a teachers' decision to start a discussion in the classroom (Gindi & Erlich, 2018). In the context of this study self-efficacy refers to confidence in the ability to: (a) create a safe atmosphere in the classroom and maintain a good relation with the students (Pace 2015; Wansink et al., 2023); (b) lead a substantive discussion on controversial topics (Hess, 2009; Pace, 2021); (c) get students to take each other's point of view in a discussion (Goldberg & Savenije, 2018; Kawashima-Ginsberg & Junco, 2018).

Teachers may experience a decrease in perceived self-efficacy when discussing highly controversial topics or in diverse classrooms (Pace, 2021; Savenije & Goldberg, 2019). Also, teacher willingness to discuss controversial topics can be related to their knowledge and familiarity with the topic (Misco & Tseng, 2018; Wansink et al., 2016). Erlich and Gindi (2019) argue that not only the teacher's content knowledge matters but also their professional identity within particular subject areas, namely pluralistic attitudes and role perception. Teacher experience was also found to influence the ability to discuss difficult topics, with novice teachers finding it particularly challenging to manage sensitive content (Engebretson, 2018; Pace, 2021). At the same time, younger teachers may be more sensitive to societal themes and, therefore, attempt to address them in the classroom (Lynagh, Gilligan, & Handley, 2010).

2.2.2 Teachers' views, beliefs and background

Swennen and Bates (2010) argue that teacher identity, composed of sub-identities,

influences teacher experiences and decision-making. However, more need to be known about how teachers' views and beliefs affect discussing controversial topics (Journell, 2020). Several studies demonstrate that there is a relationship between teachers' background characteristics and their decision-making when navigating complex and controversial topics in the classroom (Conrad, 2020; Hess, 2009; Ho et al., 2017). For instance, it is likely that teachers who are more experienced and/or have received training on how to teach controversial issues will engage more in discussions on sensitive topics (Gindi & Erlich, 2018; Journell, 2022; Misco, 2018). Moreover, teachers' ethnic, religious and racial backgrounds can make it less or more challenging to discuss specific controversial topics, depending on the classroom composition. For example, in a previous study, we found that Muslim teachers were more confident in discussing sensitive Islam-related issues in diverse classes than non-Muslim teachers. Muslim teachers had more knowledge about the topic and seemed to be better able to connect with the students' home situations (Savenije et al., 2022). Research also indicates that often teachers who are more privileged may amplify dominant voices and be less sensitive to marginalised opinions (Jovandović & Marić, 2020; Zembylas & Loukaidis, 2021).

Some teachers may avoid teaching certain topics due to potential threats to their social, ethnic or religious identity (Savenije et al., 2022; Zembylas & Loukaidis, 2021;). This may be done to protect their beliefs from being challenged by the curriculum or students. Teachers often refrain from expressing their views if they conflict with those of the like-minded class and wider community (Conrad, 2020; Engebretson, 2018).

2.3 Teaching context

2.3.1 Ideological diversity among students

Research has found that when discussing controversial topics, teachers' experiences are influenced by student behaviour (Wansink et al., 2023). Friction, intolerant behaviour, and intense emotional reactions from students may lead some teachers to avoid difficult topics (Camicia, 2008; Hess, 2009). Ideological diversity in the classroom, where students bring different narratives, may exacerbate the difficulty of discussing controversial topics (Hess & Ganzler, 2007; Knowles, 2020). Thus, attitudinally heterogeneous classrooms may lead to more discussions if teachers choose to teach controversial topics (Hess & Ganzler, 2007). The ethnic and socio-economic composition of the class may be used to assess ideological diversity and anticipate different perceptions of various topics (Knowles, 2020).

Charged discussions about controversial topics are especially evident when students' identities are involved (Zembylas & Kambani, 2012). Cultural identity-related topics are particularly challenging to teach in multicultural schools (Wansink et al., 2023). In the Netherlands, societal and political topics are observed to be more challenging for teachers when socially disadvantaged students with lower socioeconomic status (SES) and education levels are present (Kleijwegt, 2016; Sijbers et al., 2015).

2.3.2 School environment and community

Research suggests that also the school environment and community can impact the difficulty of discussing controversial topics (Oulton et al., 2004). Teachers may experience resistance to discuss sensitive societal topics in schools where community attitudes differ from those as advised in the national curriculum (Kawashima-Ginsberg & Junco, 2018). A Dutch example is the discussion around sexual education that is criticized by various religious communities in the Netherlands. Therefore, it seems possible that some topics are more difficult to discuss in rural and peripheral communities where anti-multiculturalistic, anti-immigrant, xenophobic and populist attitudes can be more prevalent (Harteveld, Van Der Brug, De Lange, & Van der Meer, 2022; Huijsmans, 2023). Finally, teachers feel safer and more confident in discussing controversial topics if they are supported by their school (Hess & Ganzler, 2007; Lintner, 2018), whereas institutional silence and lack of support can hinder these teachers' willingness to initiate discussions (Jovanović & Marić, 2020).

2.4 Present study

Previous research in general suggests that some teachers find it either easy or hard to discuss particular controversial topics under certain conditions. To our knowledge, large-scale research that investigates whether and how discussing particular controversial topics is perceived by teachers in different contexts is scarce (Gindi & Erlich, 2018). Educational practice will benefit from an up-to-date coherent overview of which controversial topics are perceived as challenging in different Dutch classrooms (Kleijwegt, 2016; Sijbers et al., 2015). Our findings can deepen the scientific understanding of what are the determining factors when describing teachers' experiences in discussing controversial issues. Second, a more nuanced and relevant overview would help to target teaching materials and teacher development training to support certain groups within their teaching context and with regard to specific topics (Ho et al., 2017).

Therefore, the present study aims to answer the following research questions.

1. What controversial topics are perceived as difficult to discuss in Dutch classrooms?
2. Under what conditions do teachers find particular controversial topics difficult to discuss?

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Participants

1034 secondary school teachers in the Netherlands voluntarily participated in this study via an online questionnaire. The teachers in the sample were between 23 and 70 years old (M = 47.5, SD = 11,3), of whom 49% were women and 49% were men (25 respondents preferred not to answer and 1 chose the option "other"[1]). Every teacher had a

specialisation in at least one of the following subjects: geography, biology, history, social sciences and the Dutch language. Based on the Dutch curriculum, it is likely that these teachers have to discuss controversial topics. With regard to faith, 75% of teachers in our sample were non-religious, 23% were religious (2% preferred not to answer[2]). Additionally, 73% of teachers hold left-wing political views (14% right-wing and 13% preferred not to answer[3]). All teachers gave their consent to the anonymised use of their answers on the questionnaire. Teachers filled out the questionnaire in Dutch.

3.2 Instrument and data

A digital questionnaire was developed to document teachers' experiences with controversial topics in Dutch classrooms. The content validity of that questionnaire was evaluated and validated by separate educational experts and teacher judgements (Kimberlin & Winterstein, 2008). We asked 10 educational experts to comment on the questionnaire during an interview as well as asked some teachers to fill in the questionnaire thinking out loud. It is important to note that the data collection took place during the spread of COVID and the vaccination process, which were accompanied by heated public debates (Comiteau, 2020).

Based on the experts' feedback, we revised the introductory text and made items more reader-friendly. Moreover, we changed the order of the questions and moved the questions about background characteristics to the end of the questionnaire, so as not to bias teachers with their positionality. The experts validated the prominence of provided controversies as difficult-to-teach topics nowadays. As a result, in the questionnaire, we inquired about *teachers' perceptions of addressing 13 controversial topics*, *teachers' perceived self-efficacy* on a four-item scale developed for this study, *teachers' background characteristics* and *contextual characteristics*.

3.3 Measurements

3.3.1 Perceptions of difficulty discussing controversial and sensitive topics

For this study, 13 controversial topics that are difficult to discuss in Dutch classrooms were selected (see Table 1). The list of potentially controversial topics was compiled based on previous studies in the Netherlands (Savenije et al., 2022; Sijbers et al., 2015; Wansink et al., 2023) and expert comments during validation interviews. We asked teachers 'What social topics are difficult to discuss in the classroom?' and captured their responses in terms of perceived difficulty for each of these topics on a five-point Likert-scale (with answer options 1 = *very easy*, 2 = *easy*, 3= *neither easy nor difficult*, 4 = *difficult*, 5 = *very difficult*). Teachers also had the opportunity to indicate that they do not discuss a particular topic, or that they do not know how difficult they perceive discussing the topic to be. These responses were coded as missing.

Table 1. List and brief description of controversial and sensitive topics in the Netherlands

Topic	Place in curriculum	Context of the topic
Anti-Muslimism	Indirectly as part of general anti-prejudice citizenship education	Some right-wing political parties in the Netherlands use explicit anti-Muslim rhetoric in their election programmes. Savenije et al. (2022) showed this topic was a difficult topic to discuss for history teachers. In 2015, 14% of the teachers found the topic difficult to teach (Sijbers et al., 2015).
Islam-related terrorism	–	The topic became more heated in the context of education after the beheading of Samuel Paty in Paris (Wansink et al., 2021). In 2019, a terrorist attack on the tram took place in Utrecht, the Netherlands, which had a large impact on Dutch society. In 2015, 19% of the teachers found the topic of [Islam-related] fundamentalism difficult to teach (Sijbers et al., 2015).
Integration of ethnic minorities	Structural part of secondary (social science) education	Integration of ethnic minorities and immigration are and have been, among the most controversial issues in Dutch politics over the past two decades. In 2015, 12% of the teachers found the issue difficult to teach (Sijbers et al, 2015).
Anti-Semitism	Indirectly as part of general anti-prejudice citizenship and history education	Research shows that 42% of secondary school teachers witnessed anti-Semitic incidents in the classroom in 2022 (Maas & van Marwijk-Hol, 2023). In 2015, 10% of the teachers found the topic difficult to teach (Sijbers et al., 2015).
Holocaust	Structural part of secondary history education	The Holocaust is a prominent topic in the Dutch societal debate about education. A political concern is that teachers do not dare to teach it anymore (Kossen & Vink, 2023). In 2015, 8% of the teachers found the topic difficult to teach (Sijbers et al., 2015).
Black Pete	–	Saint Nicholas is a debated yearly tradition in the Netherlands in which Saint Nicholas (a white male saint with a mitre and red cape) arrives on a boat with Black servants (black-painted actors), called Black Petes, to give presents and candy to children. The tradition is seen as racist and causes debates in society as well as in the classroom (Wansink et al., 2023).

Topic	Place in curriculum	Context of the topic
Slavery	Structural part of secondary (merely history) education	The discussion around slavery and colonialism is becoming more prominent in the Netherlands in light of decolonisation education. As a significant occurrence, Prime Minister Mark Rutte apologised in 2022 for the actions of the Dutch state in the past (Government of the Netherlands, 2022).
Left-wing radicalism	–	Left-wing radicalism is not frequently a part of the Dutch political debate. However, the AIVD (2022) warns against an increase of left-wing radicalisation in the Netherlands.
Right-wing radicalism	–	In 2015, 15% of the teachers found the issue of right extremism difficult to teach (Sijbers et al., 2015).
COVID vaccination	–	During our research, while the government encouraged vaccination there was societal debate. Research shows that most teachers recognised the controversy surrounding the vaccine and pandemic in general (van den Brink et al., 2021).
Climate change	Structural part of secondary (merely biology and geography) education	Climate change is becoming an increasingly politically heated topic in Dutch politics. At the time of administering the questionnaire, a strong societal divide was observed due to a discussion around a nitrogen quota for farmers.
Sexual diversity	Structural part of secondary (merely biology) education	In the Netherlands, schools are obligated by law to teach students about sexual diversity. However, the acceptance of gender and sexual diversity in school is relatively unsatisfactory (Bucx & Sman, 2014). In 2015, 12% of the teachers found the issue of sexual diversity difficult to teach (Sijbers et al., 2015).
Freedom of expression	Structural part of secondary (merely social science) education	There is an ongoing political debate about what the borders of freedom of expression are, especially after the beheading of Samuel Paty in Paris (Wansink et al., 2021). In 2015, only 2% of the teachers found the issue of freedom of expression difficult to teach (Sijbers et al., 2015).

3.3.2 Teacher and context characteristics

We accounted for various teacher background and teaching context characteristics identified by the literature. Table 2 lists detailed information about the names and descriptions of the variables in our study. To measure *teachers' background characteristics*, we included gender, age, years of teaching experience, ethnicity, faith and political views in the analysis. For *contextual characteristics*, we inquired which subject

the teacher is teaching and the educational track, perceived support from the school to teach controversial topics, the proportion of bicultural students in the school, the proportion of students with low socio-economic status (SES) in the school, the denomination of the school, the size of the municipality where the school is located and the province in which the school is located.

3.3.3 Self-efficacy

To measure teachers' perceived self-efficacy in teaching difficult social topics a four-item scale was created based on the suggestions in the literature about the necessary competences teachers need to teach controversial topics (Council of Europe, 2015; Pace, 2019; Pace, 2021). Teachers responded to those statements on a five-point Likert-type scale (1 = s*trongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *neither disagree nor agree*, 4 = *agree*, 5 = *fully agree*) to reflect the extent to which they can employ the following when discussing controversial topics: (a) create a safe atmosphere in the classroom when discussing controversial topics; (b) lead a substantive discussion on controversial topics; (c) get students to take each other's point of view in a discussion about controversial topics; (d) maintain a good relationship with pupils when discussing controversial topics. Teachers could also choose the "I don't know" option for each of these questions. Those responses were coded as missing.

Operationally, teacher self-efficacy is measured as a latent variable through the use of self-efficacy-related statements. An exploratory factor analysis was used to assess the latent factor structure of the self-made efficacy scale. The factor analysis was performed using the maximum-likelihood extraction method, and an Oblimin rotation was used as factors were expected to be correlated. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure verified the sampling adequacy for the analysis, KMO =.83. Bartlett's test of sphericity $\chi 2$(1040) = 1961.55, p<.001, indicating that correlation structure is adequate for factor analyses. The EFA yielded a four-item measure with a one-factor solution, accounting for 72.3% of the variance. The factor loadings are high (see Appendix A). The Cronbach's alpha coefficient of internal consistency reliability of this measure was satisfactory (α = .87).

Table 2. Description of variables in the present study

Variable name	Description
Perceptions of difficulty to discuss controversial topics	Teacher's perceived difficulty of 13 controversial topics on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *very easy* and 5 = *very difficult*)
Teacher characteristics	
Self-efficacy	A latent variable using 4 items with a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = s*trongly disagree*, 5 = *fully agree*).
Gender	Dummy variable, 0 = male, 1 = female
Age	Teacher's age, continuous variable
Years of experience	Teacher's years of teaching experience, continuous variable

Variable name	Description
Ethnicity	Dummy variable, 0 = Dutch, 1 = non-Dutch. Teacher's ethnicity was determined based on the adapted definitions of the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) in the Netherlands, namely, 1) country of origin is the Netherlands (i.e. 'My parents and I were born in the Netherlands'); 2) country of origin outside of the Netherlands (i.e. 'I and/or at least one of my parents was born either in Europe (excl. the Netherlands) or outside Europe'; Statistics Netherlands, 2022).
Faith	Dummy variable, 0 = non-religious, 1 = religious
Political views	Dummy variable, 0 = left-wing views, 1 = right-wing views. The political views are put into two groups based on teachers voting in the Dutch elections of the House of Representatives in 2021. Because of the small number of diverse political views among teachers, we have roughly divided them into two groups.
Contextual characteristics	
Subject	A series of dummy variables indicating whether the teacher teaches a particular subject or not (i.e. geography, biology, history, social sciences or Dutch), 0 = no, 1 = yes
Several subjects	Dummy variables indicating whether the teacher teaches one subject or several, 0 = one, 1 = several
Educational track (lower)	Dummy variable indicating whether the teacher teaches only in lower educational tracks (i.e. vocational and vmbo), 0 = no, 1 = yes
Educational track (upper)	Dummy variable indicating whether the teacher teaches only in upper educational tracks (i.e. havo, vwo and gymnasium), 0 = no, 1 = yes
Several educational tracks	Dummy variable indicating whether the teacher teaches either only in upper (i.e. havo, vwo and gymnasium) or lower educational tracks (i.e. vocational and vmbo) or in several educational tracks at the same time, 0 = in one educational track, 1 = in several educational tracks
Proportion of low SES students in the school	A continuous variable indicating the proportion of low-socio-economic status students in the school according to the teacher
Proportion of bicultural students in the school	A continuous variable indicating the proportion of bicultural students (students who, in addition to their Dutch background, also have a link to at least one other culture from the country of (one of) the (grand)parents) in the school according to the teacher
School denomination	Dummy variable, 0 = public, 1 = religious
Municipality size	Dummy variable, 0 = rural or town (≤100,000 people), 1 = city (>100,000 people)
Region	Dummy variable, 0 = central (North and South Holland, Utrecht), 1 = periphery (all other provinces)

Variable name	Description
Perceived school Support	Teacher's perceived support from the school on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *not at all* and 5 = *very strong*).

3.4 Data analysis

To answer the first research question, frequencies, means and standard deviations of teachers' perceived difficulty in discussing the 13 controversial topics are presented and compared. For a better understanding of the possible similarities between teachers' experiences about particular topics, first correlations between topics were computed. In our study, we interpret the correlation coefficient values into small (.10), medium (.30), and large (.50) effect sizes (Cohen, 1992).

To answer the second research question, a SEM methodological framework (Kline, 2016) with the maximum likelihood (ML) as a default estimator was used. The SEM analyses were conducted in Mplus 8.7 (Muthén & Muthén, 2017). Prior to the analyses, data were checked for several assumptions. First, examination of normal Q-Q plots showed no violations of normality of variables of interest and no multicollinearity was detected. The correlation matrix is presented in Appendix B. Despite the high correlation between age and years of experience, the variance inflation factor (VIF) of these variables was satisfactory for the analysis, so we left both variables in the model. Second, in our analysis, Little's test indicated that the missing data were missing completely at random (MCAR), with a chi-square value of $\chi2(1040) = 1111.93$, $p = .9$. As a result, we opted for pairwise deletion as an appropriate method for handling the MCAR data (Newman, 2014). This approach allowed us to maximize the use of available data.

In the SEM analysis, teachers' background characteristics, contextual characteristics and teacher's self-efficacy scale were included as independent variables and teachers' perceptions of difficulty in discussing controversial topics in Dutch classrooms were included as the outcome variable (see Appendix C). SEM analysis with all independent variables was conducted for each topic separately to determine which variables relate to teachers' experienced difficulty of discussing each particular topic. Fit indexes for all the models were acceptable to good (i.e. CFI >.97 and RMSEA <.04).

While SEM analysis is primarily designed for testing the structure of the model, in this study, it was used to explore the direction and strengths of the relationships among the variables included in the model all at once. For that, we report the level of significance, and regression coefficients in the text. Additionally, we report explained variance per model in Appendix D. The regression coefficients in the SEM models are standardized to allow for comparisons within and between models. Additionally, considering the varying number of data points for each variable (ranging from 77 to 1034) and accounting for the exploratory nature of the study, we reported two levels of significance $p < .01$ and $p < .05$ (Kim, 2015). Considering the potential number of estimations for SEM analysis, the given sample size (N=1034) is more likely sufficient for testing the current model (Wolf, Harrington, Clark, & Miller, 2013).

4 RESULTS

4.1 Topics difficult to discuss

The frequencies, means and standard deviation for teachers' perception of teaching every topic as well as the descriptive statistics for all the measures can be found in Table 3. In addition, Figure 1 presents teachers' reported difficulty in discussing the different topics in detail. In general, most topics are discussed by the majority of teachers, with the most frequently taught topics being Climate change, Sexual diversity, Freedom of expression and COVID vaccination. Left-wing radicalism is the least taught topic, with almost 25% of responding teachers indicating that they do not discuss the topic. The majority of teachers perceive most topics in most instances as relatively easy to discuss; at least four in ten teachers said that they find it easy or very easy to discuss the listed topics. Climate change stands out as the easiest topic, with more than 78% of teachers reporting it to be so (see Figure 1). Other topics like Freedom of expression, the Holocaust, Slavery, Anti-Semitism and Left-wing radicalism are also perceived as relatively easy to discuss. Contrarily, discussions of Anti-Muslimism and COVID vaccination are reported by teachers as the most challenging. Those topics are followed by Islam-related terrorism, Black Pete, Integration of ethnic minorities, Sexual diversity and Right-wing radicalism.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of the variables in the present study

Variable	N	%	Mean	SD
Perceptions of topic difficulty				
Anti-Muslimism	854		2.8	1.08
Islam-related terrorism	883		2.71	1.05
Integration of ethnic minorities	917		2.64	.93
Anti-Semitism	849		2.38	1.02
Holocaust	836		2.06	.88
Black Pete	900		2.7	1.08
Slavery	850		2.23	.95
Left-wing radicalism	753		2.35	.92
Right-wing radicalism	825		2.51	.99
COVID vaccination	980		2.75	1.07
Climate change	998		1.85	.88
Sexual diversity	1004		2.54	1.09
Freedom of expression	983		2.06	.95
Self-efficacy				
SE1: create a safe atmosphere in the classroom when discussing controversial topics	1028		4.27	.72
SE2: lead a substantive discussion on controversial topics	1025		4.16	.78
SE3: get students to take each other's point of view in a discussion about controversial topics	1003		3.89	.86

Variable	N	%	Mean	SD
SE4: maintain a good relationship with pupils when discussing controversial topics.	1025		4.25	.71
Teacher characteristics				
Gender				
Female	505	50%		
Male	504	50%		
Age	980		47.47	11.35
Years of experience	1034		18.12	9.81
Ethnicity				
Dutch	922	91%		
Non-Dutch	96	9%		
Faith				
Non-religious	769	76%		
Religious	241	24%		
Political views				
Right-wing	150	17%		
Left-wing	751	83%		
Contextual characteristics				
Subject				
Geography	146	14%		
Biology	214	21%		
History	164	16%		
Social Studies	77	7%		
Dutch	309	30%		
*Multiple subjects	125	12%		
Educational track				
Only lower	247	66%		
Only upper	127	34%		
Several tracks	660	64%		
Perceived school support	801		3.41	1.06
Proportion of low SES students	786		30.2	20.5
Proportion bicultural students	941		26.3	22.1
School denomination				
Religious	940	91%		
Public	93	9%		
Municipality size				
City	428	41%		
Rural or town	607	59%		
Region				
Central	507	49%		
Peripheral	528	51%		

Teachers who teach multiple subjects teach History & Social Studies (N=56), History & Geography (N=20), History, Social Sciences & Geography (N=11), Social Sciences & Geography (N=7). Other combination of subjects taught occurred less than 6 times, including teachers who also teach Economy, Mathematics, Human and Society, English, French, Philosophy of life.

Figure 1. 'What social topics might be more difficult to discuss in the classroom?'
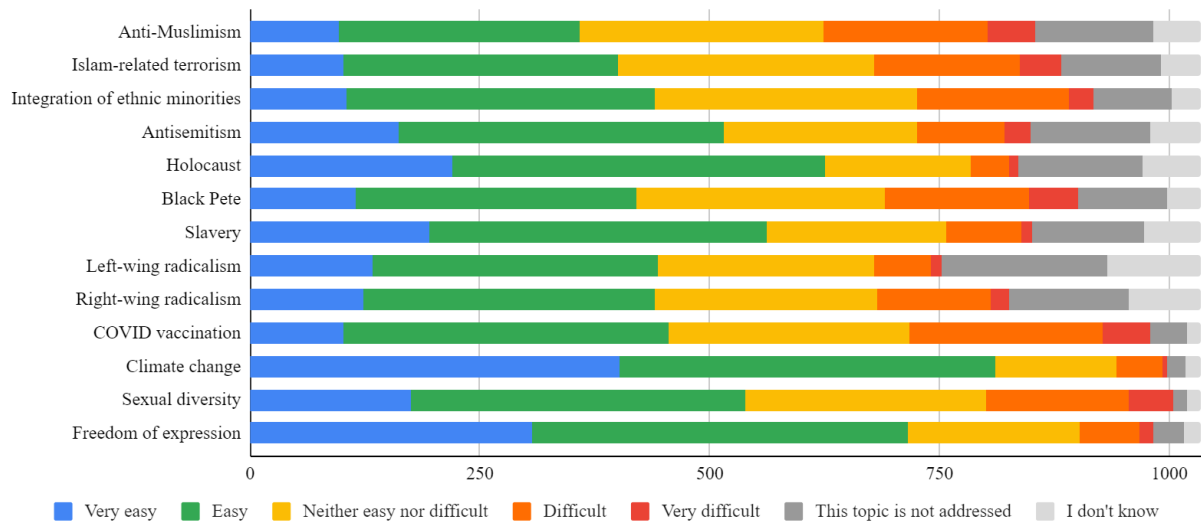
Table 4. Correlation matrices of topics

Topics	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Anti-Muslimism	-											
2. Islam-related terrorism	.67											
3. Integration of ethnic minorities	.63	.66										
4. Anti-Semitism	.6	.61	.49									
5. Holocaust	.46	.57	.48	.71								
6. Black Pete	.44	.48	.53	.36	.32							
7. Slavery	.44	.47	.49	.5	.54	.56						
8. Left-wing radicalism	.49	.54	.54	.5	.5	.43	.53					
9. Right-wing radicalism	.54	.59	.58	.52	.48	.48	.54	.76				
10. COVID vaccination	.35	.36	.41	.31	.3	.39	.3	.37	.41			
11. Climate change	.23	.28	.4	.28	.35	.36	.46	.42	.43	.31		
12. Sexual diversity	.39	.44	.46	.47	.43	.43	.43	.4	.47	.41	.43	
13. Freedom of expression	.38	.47	.51	.45	.51	.43	.55	.48	.48	.34	.43	.48

Note. All correlations are significant, p < .001.

Table 4 indicates that the perceptions of difficulty across all topics are positively correlated, with correlation coefficients ranging from small (r = .22, p < .001) to large (r = .71, p < .001). This suggests a pattern in teachers' perceptions of difficulty: when one topic is considered more challenging, it is likely that other topics are considered similarly difficult. Notably, teachers' perceptions of difficulty in discussing particular topics are related. These include the correlation between the perceived difficulty of discussing the Holocaust and anti-Semitism (r = .71, p < .001). Also, Islam-related terrorism and Anti-Muslimism (r = .67, p < .001), the Integration of ethnic minorities and Anti-Muslimism (r =

.63, p < .001) as well as the Integration of ethnic minorities and Islam-related terrorism (r = .66, p < .001) were found to be strongly correlated.

4.2 Situationality of perceiving topics as difficult to discuss

To explore under what conditions teachers find particular controversial topics difficult to discuss, we conducted a series SEM analyses where teacher background characteristics, teaching context characteristics and self-efficacy were added as independent variables and teacher perception of difficulty to discuss particular controversial topics was included as the outcome variable. All the variables were standardised, which allows us to compare the strength of relations within and between the models. Regression coefficients and significance levels of SEM analysis per topic are presented in Table 5. Since all the variables were standardised, we further refer to regression parameters as effect sizes (Ben-Shachar et al., 2020). It also allows us to compare the independent variables' importance within and between the models. Effect sizes and significance levels of SEM analysis per topic are presented in Table 5.

Additionally, we looked at the explained variance to check how the current set of variables explains the variance of teachers' perception of difficulty to discuss particular topics. We found that the explained variance differed per model (see Appendix D). The explained variance of the difficulty of discussing Climate change (R^2 = 0.09, p < .001) was least, possibly due to the fact that this was found to be a relatively easy topic by most teachers (i.e. as indicated by the small standard deviation). The explained variance for teachers' perceptions about discussing Anti-Semitism (R^2 = 0.232, p < .001) was highest but still remains relatively low, indicating that the independent variables can explain the variance in difficulty to discuss only to a small extent. Further, we report the regression coefficients per each variable separately across all topics (see Table 5). Both significance levels are reported as significant results. Below, we discuss each variable separately.

Also, we assessed absolute model fit using root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) and comparative fit index (CFI). The value of >0.95 for CFI and >0.08 for RMSEA indicate an acceptable range of model fit (Kline, 2016). All models showed a good overall fit on both indexes (CFI >0.97 and RMSEA=0.3).

4.2.1 Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy turned out to be most strongly related to difficulty to teach for 12 topics, with regression coefficients ranging from β = -.17 (p < .01) for Climate change to β = -.33 (p < .01) for Integration of ethnic minorities. Only in the case of Anti-Semitism the effect of self-efficacy (β = -.24; p < .01) is slightly smaller than the effect of the proportion of bicultural students in the school (β = .27; p < .01). For all the topics the relationship is negative. This implies that higher self-efficacy is related to perceiving controversial topics less difficult to discuss.

In addition to this, we find it insightful to also report the correlation of self-efficacy with

other independent variables (see Appendix B), as these results may shed light on the conditions in which teachers feel more competent to discuss controversial topics. Surprisingly, we found that all the significant correlations are very weak, with the lowest being r=-.07 for teacher ethnicity and highest being r=-.14 for perceived school support. This implies that teacher's self-efficacy is mostly independent of the other factors presented in our study.

4.2.2 Teacher characteristics

With regard to teacher background characteristics, teacher ethnicity, faith and political views turned out to be insignificant for all the 13 topics. Gender, age and years of experience are significant in the models for some of the topics; however, the regression coefficients are relatively small. Gender is positively related to most of the topics (regression coefficients ranging from $\beta = .17$, $p < .01$ to $\beta = .1$, $p < .01$). Namely, it is more difficult to discuss Anti-Muslimism, COVID vaccination, Integration of ethnic minorities, Islam-related terrorism, Left-wing and Right-wing radicalism, Slavery and Black Pete for teachers who identify as female than as male. Years of teaching experience related to difficulty to discuss Anti-Muslimism, Left-wing and Right-wing radicalism, Sexual diversity, Black Pete and Freedom of expression (with regression coefficients ranging from $\beta = .17$, $p < .01$ to $\beta = .1$, $p < .05$). This implies that more experienced teachers perceive those topics as less challenging to discuss. Regarding teacher's age, older teachers find it more difficult to discuss about the Holocaust than younger teachers. For Black Pete it is the other way round, younger teachers perceive this topic as less difficult to discuss in the classroom than older teachers. Moreover, older teachers with less teaching experience report that Black Pete is easier for them to discuss in the classroom than for younger teachers with more experience.

4.3 Teaching context characteristics

4.3.1 Subject

History is the only subject that is an insignificant in all 13 models. Other subjects are significant for some of the topics; however the observed regression coefficients are small. With the smallest negative regression coefficients of Geography in relation to Integration of ethnic minorities ($\beta = -.08$, $p < .05$) and with the largest effect of Biology in relation to COVID vaccination ($\beta = -.19$, $p < .01$) and Sexual diversity ($\beta = -.21$, $p < .01$). Teaching biology is related with more difficulty to discuss Anti-Semitism ($\beta = .11$, $p < .05$). Teaching biology and geography predicts lower difficulty to discuss Climate change ($\beta = -.1$, $p < .01$ for both subjects). In turn, teaching social studies is related with more difficulty to discuss Anti-Semitism and Slavery ($\beta = .1$, $p < .01$ and $\beta = .12$, $p < .01$ respectively). And teaching Dutch predicts higher difficulty of discussing Anti-Muslimism, Anti-Semitism, Left-wing and

Right-wing radicalism (regression coefficients ranging from β = .11, p < .05 to β = .12, p < .05). For teachers who teach multiple subjects, Anti-Semitism (β = -.09, p < .05) was perceived as easier, and Climate change (β = .08, p < .05) more difficult, to discuss.

4.3.2 Educational track

Teaching in upper educational tracks does not appear related to difficulty in discussing any of the topics. In turn, there is a small regression coefficient of teaching in lower educational tracks on predicting the difficulty of discussing Anti-Semitism and Black Pete (β = .07, p < .05 and β = .08, p < .05, respectively). That is to say, both topics are slightly more difficult to discuss in lower educational tracks.

4.3.3 The proportion of low SES students in the school

The proportion of students with a low SES background in the school is related to the perception of the difficulty to discuss about COVID vaccination and Right-wing radicalisation in the classroom, with regression coefficients β = .16, p < .01 and β = .13, p < .01, respectively. This implies that both COVID vaccination and Right-wing radicalisation are more challenging for teachers to discuss in schools that have a larger proportion of students with low socio-economic status.

4.3.4 The proportion of bicultural students in the school

The proportion of bicultural students predicts the difficulty in teaching Anti-Semitism, the Holocaust, Islam-related terrorism and Sexual diversity (regression coefficients ranging from β = .27, p < .01 to β = .12, p < .01). It is worth noting that this relation is one of the largest for perceived difficulty to discuss Anti-Semitism and Holocaust topics (β = .27, p < .01 and β = .22, p < .01, respectively). This implies that the higher proportion of bicultural students in the school, the more difficult teachers perceive to discuss the topics mentioned above. In contrast, the higher proportion of bicultural students relates to less difficulty in discussing Black Pete (β = -.12, p < .05).

4.3.5 Perceived school support

Perceived school support is significant for 12 topics, with the regression coefficients ranging from β = -.17, p < .01 for Islam-related terrorism to β = -.07, p < .05 for Climate change. This implies that teachers who perceive receiving school support find it easier to discuss almost all of the topics in this study. The only topic for which school support is insignificant is COVID vaccination.

4.3.6 Denomination of the school and school location

Finally, we looked at the location of the school, as well as its denomination.

Both factors turned out to be insignificant for the difficulty of discussing any of the presented topics in this study.

5 DISCUSSION

Teachers are encouraged to discuss sensitive and controversial societal topics in their teaching to prepare students to become democratic citizens (e.g., Hess, 2009). However, some topics pose challenges for teachers in specific contexts (Ho et al., 2017; Misco, 2018). In this study, we examined which topics secondary teachers in the Netherlands perceive as difficult to discuss and under what conditions.

Overall, most teachers in the Netherlands do not report difficulty in discussing most controversial and sensitive topics. This finding nuances Dutch public discourse in the media that many teachers struggle to discuss controversial topics in general (e.g., Kleijwegt, 2016). We want to note that there might be a voluntary response bias in our sample as the selection was not randomized. It could be that teachers who felt confident to discuss controversial topics were more motivated to fill in the questionnaire. However, our results are in line with previously published research in the Netherlands (Sijbers et al., 2015). Anti-Muslimism, COVID vaccination and the integration of ethnic minorities are perceived as relatively difficult topics to discuss. These findings partially align with previous Dutch research where [Islam-related] fundamentalism, right-wing radicalism, anti-Muslimism, sexual diversity and the integration of ethnic minorities were reported to be the most challenging topics for teachers (Sijbers et al., 2015). Moreover, Table 4 shows that topics such as Islam related terrorism, Anti-Muslimism and integration of minorities are also correlated. This can mean that if a teacher experiences difficulties with one of those topics, it is likely that the other topics also will be perceived as relatively challenging, as all topics are plausibly related to Islamophobia (Hossain, 2017). Not surprisingly, COVID vaccination was perceived as difficult to discuss given its novelty and large impact on society during the time of study. Therefore, we expect that if we were to administer the questionnaire in 2024 the Holocaust and antisemitism, but also anti-Muslimism would be perceived as more difficult to discuss due the Israel-Gaza crisis. This because of the rise of antisemitism and anti-Muslim hatred in several parts of Europe (EU, 2024)

Second, we aimed to find out under what conditions teachers perceive controversial topics as difficult to discuss in the classroom. In line with the literature (Gindi & Erlich, 2018), high teacher self-efficacy is related to reported ease in teaching all controversial topics, suggesting that generally feeling capable of creating a safe environment, organising good-quality discussions, and maintaining good relationships with students goes hand in hand with relative ease in discussing controversial topics.

Another finding is that school support was also related to teachers' perceptions: when teachers reported supportive environments, they are reported more ease in discussing controversial topics. This finding corresponds with Pace (2021), who asserts that school support can make teachers feel safe and encourage them to address difficult societal issues in the classroom. Conversely, a lack of support might leave teachers uncertain and

shake their confidence in discussing the controversial topics (Pace, 2021; Wansink et al., 2023).

5.1   The Situationality of perceived difficulty

While some factors, like self-efficacy and school support, may be more universal, our findings impede making more general statements about contextual factors and teacher background characteristics, illustrating how situational discussing controversial topics can be.

To start, we found that contemporary topics with a direct impact on students' everyday life were perceived as more difficult to discuss. A striking example of such an impactful 'hot' topic is COVID. Given the intensity of the societal discussions about COVID during the period we administered the questionnaire, it is no surprise that this topic is perceived as difficult to discuss. Many of the ingredients of what can make a topic controversial were present: high emotions; media attention; divided groups in society; and ongoing public debate (e.g., Hess, 2009; Misco, 2018).

Other 'hot' topics included anti-Muslimism, anti-Semitism, the integration of national minorities, and Islam-related terrorism; these are topics that can directly affect students' identities and are associated with discrimination and violence (Kleijwegt, 2016; Maas & van Marwijk-Ho, 2023; Wansink et al., 2021). We want to highlight that both Black Pete and slavery are topics that share a common sensitive nature connected with the condemnation of the racial discrimination and colonial past of the Netherlands (Wansink et al., 2023; Wekker, 2016). However, Black Pete is perceived as more difficult to discuss than slavery. We hypothesise that this is because Black Pete is a feast celebrated by almost all Dutch students and discussions around this tradition might affect them all directly. Slavery is highly sensitive for slave descendants, who represent a relatively small group in the Netherlands. Other students might feel that slavery is something of the past and not directly related to their lives (Savenije, Van Boxtel, & Grever, 2014).

Despite heated public debate, some topics appear to remain 'cold' and easy to discuss in the classroom. Climate change is one of these topics. Based on our research, we can only hypothesise why this is the case. Maybe because the immediate impact on students' lives is still quite low. It is also possible that our questionnaire was not nuanced enough, as climate change as a topic might be easy to discuss as it a 'settled' topic, because it is widely agreed upon that climate change is happening (Hess, 2009). However, the issue of how to mitigate climate change can be more controversial. It would be interesting to find out whether climate change is also a cold topic in countries that suffer more from climate change. Freedom of expression is another 'cold' topic, as found both in our study and in previous research by Sijbers et al. (2015).

Table 5. The standardised regression coefficients per topic

Variable	Anti-Muslimism	Islam-related terrorism	Integration of ethnic minorities	Anti-Semitism	Holocaust	Black Pete	Slavery	Left-wing radicalism	Right-wing radicalism	COVID vaccination	Climate change	Sexual diversity	Freedom of expression
Self-efficacy	-.3**	-.29**	-.33**	-.24**	-.23**	-.28**	-.24**	-.26**	-.26**	-.2**	-.17**	-.26**	-.27**
Gender	.12**	.1**	.12**	.01	.07	.1**	.13**	.14**	.17**	.1**	.06	.04	.06
Age	-.08	.03	.003	.04	.11*	-.12*	.02	-.09	-.03	-.1	.05	-.08	-.01
Years of experience	.17**	.05	.02	.06	.04	.12*	.08	.15**	.11*	.06	.05	.14*	.1*
Ethnicity	-.01	.01	-.02	-.02	-.02	.04	.03	-.01	-.06	.02	.001	-.02	-.02
Faith	-.02	.003	.001	-.01	-.05	.03	-.01	.02	.01	-.01	-.02	-.01	.001
Political views	.05	-.01	.05	.003	.03	.000	.06	-.06	-.01	-.03	.06	.06	-.01
Geography	-.05	-.03	-.08*	.04	.04	-.05	-.02	.01	.07	.01	-.1*	-.07	-.03
Biology	-.07	.04	-.01	.11*	.05	-.06	.09	.09	.05	-.19**	-.1*	-.21**	.04
History	-.01	-.07	-.07	-.02	-.03	-.01	-.04	.05	-.05	-.01	-.03	-.03	-.04
Social studies	-.02	-.05	-.04	.1**	.03	-.002	.12**	-.03	.04	-.06	.03	-.01	-.01
Dutch	.12*	.07	.03	.11*	.08	-.05	.03	.11*	.12*	-.01	.001	-.06	-.01
Multiple subjects	-.06	-.03	.01	-.09*	-.1	.05	-.07	-.07	-.04	-.03	.08*	-.07	-.03
Educational track (upper)	-.01	.01	-.01	.03	.01	-.04	.01	.05	.02	-.04	-.03	-.06	-.03
Educational track (lower)	.06	.05	.001	.07*	.03	.08*	.01	.06	.01	.07	.03	.03	.04
Several educational tracks	.03	-.01	.01	-.05	-.03	.06	-.02	-.07	-.03	.06	.04	.08	.04
Perceived school support	-.15**	-.17**	-.16**	-.14**	-.16**	-.14**	-.13**	-.11**	-.14**	-.05	-.07*	-.13**	-.13**
Proportion of low SES students	.08	.03	.09	.03	.07	.09	.08	.08	.13**	.16**	.07	-.08	.06
Proportion of bicultural students	.01	.12**	-.04	.27**	.22**	-.12*	.08	.05	-.01	-.09	-.03	.13**	.08
Denomination of the school	-.05	-.01	-.004	.02	.04	-.02	.04	.06	.06	.03	.04	-.01	.03
Municipality size	.03	.01	-.01	-.01	-.01	-.03	-.01	-.03	-.02	-.01	-.01	.02	-.02
Region	.01	.03	-.03	.001	-.04	.02	-.04	-.03	.01	.02	-.02	.01	-.04

*Note. * Significance at p < .05. ** Significance at p < .01.*

However, the ease of teaching this topic may depend on its combination with more triggering controversial topics, as seen in the intense discussion around freedom of expression following the decapitation of Samuel Paty after showing a cartoon of the prophet Mohammed (Savenije et al. 2022; Willsher, 2020).

These findings highlight the importance of considering the 'hotness' or 'coldness' of controversial topics when designing teacher training and approaching these topics in the classroom (Wansink et al., 2016). Understanding the varying degrees of relevance to students' personal lives can inform instructional strategies for discussing controversial topics effectively (e.g., Hess, 2009; Pace, 2021).

Regarding contextual factors, the proportion of bicultural students and students with a low socio-economic status (SES) in the classroom was found to be related to teachers' perceived difficulty of discussing controversial topics. These factors reflect classroom diversity, including ideological diversity, which can lead to charged environments where conflicting perceptions and emotions arise (e.g., Hess & Ganzler, 2007; Pace, 2015). Regarding the proportion of students with low SES, we found that it is relevant for discussing about COVID vaccination and right-wing radicalism. Some research shows that people with a lower income and with lower levels of education tend to have negative attitudes towards vaccination and COVID as well as being more susceptible to misinformation (Yousuf et al., 2021). Similarly, right-wing narratives are often spread among socioeconomically marginalized groups (Missier, 2022). Surprisingly, we found no relationship with school location, despite right-wing attitudes being more prevalent in rural and peripheral areas of the Netherlands (Harteveld et al., 2022; Huijsmans, 2023). The limitations section of our study explores possible reasons for this.

Regarding the proportion of bicultural students in the classroom, we found a relation with teachers' perceptions of difficulty in discussing anti-Semitism, the Holocaust, Islam-related terrorism, sexual diversity, and Black Pete. One reason might be that discussions about anti-Semitism, the Holocaust and Islam-related terrorism (Maas & van Marwijk-Hol, 2023; Wansink et al., 2021) are often directed towards students with different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, which can lead to friction in class. Teachers might find it challenging to handle the tension in such instances (Ensel & Stremmelaar, 2013). This finding is in line with the study by Sijbers et al. (2015), who found that these topics were more challenging to teach in Dutch multi-ethnic schools. Moreover, teachers in the Netherlands, who predominantly have a Dutch background, often lack preparation in culturally responsive teaching to address disagreements in diverse classrooms (Muslih, 2021). Similarly, sexual diversity is reported to be more difficult to teach in multi-ethnic schools (Sijbers et al., 2015). The rejection of homosexuality based on religious beliefs, which can include Islam, poses a challenge for teachers in classrooms with diverse cultures and religions (Sanjakdar, 2013). However, cultural diversity may also reduce the likelihood of debates for certain topics, as we found with respect to Black Pete. In the case of Black Pete, research suggests that in classrooms with high cultural diversity, students

with immigrant backgrounds often hold a homogeneous opinion against the tradition, which might result in fewer discussions (Wansink et al., 2023).

We also found that the perception of difficulty in discussing certain topics varies across educational tracks. Specifically, topics such as anti-Semitism and Black Pete were found to be more challenging for teachers in vocational education (*vmbo* in Dutch). In the case of Black Pete, Wansink et al. (2023) found that white Dutch students from vocational education, who were main proponents of the tradition, expressed positive emotions towards it. Thus, this emotional attachment may contribute to more heated class discussions defending this questionable tradition. Conversely, fewer students in the pre-university track were in favour of Black Pete (Wansink et al., 2023). Regarding anti-Semitism, addressing the topic becomes more difficult in lower educational tracks. Several scholars point towards the number of students with Middle-Eastern family backgrounds and students with low socio-economic status who can express more negative attitudes towards Jews (Kleijwegt, 2016; Maas & van Marwijk-Hol, 2023). However, we should be careful with such interpretations, as there also scholars who point out that Muslim youth should not be seen as a monolithic entity but are divided in their attitudes in relation to anti-Semitism (e.g., Short, 2013).

In examining teacher background characteristics and their perception of difficulty in discussing controversial topics, we found that gender, years of teaching experience, age and subject taught were related to difficulty to discuss controversial topics. Regarding gender, our findings suggest that for 8 out of 13 topics, male teachers report more ease compared to female teachers. Scholars point out that male teachers are generally perceived as more authoritative and having higher self-efficacy, which might allow them to better manage classroom discussions on controversial topics (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Klassen & Chiu, 2010). This may be more evident in cultures where masculinity is prominently associated with dominance (Ouzgane, 2003). However, other studies have questioned the assumptions linking gender to authoritative teaching style and self-efficacy (Bartlett, 2005; Cheung, 2006). Other reasons explaining the differences between gender can be that female respondents might be more prone to express what is difficult, are more self-critical, or more sensitive to the classroom climate than the male respondents (Al-Shibel, 2021; Tannen, 1992). In our study, we found only a weak relationship between gender and self-efficacy, to avoid bias we should be careful with interpreting these findings and that further research is needed to better understand the relationship between gender and teacher perceptions of discussing controversial topics.

Concerning teaching experience, surprisingly we found that, compared to less experienced teachers, more experienced teachers perceive certain topics as more difficult. While one might assume that experience would enhance teaching skills in handling difficult topics, it appears that young teachers, who have received recent pre-service training, may be more aware of these issues and better equipped to educate students about them (Lynagh et al., 2010). However, less experienced teachers may be more hesitant to discuss certain topics, because previous research among pre-service teachers shows that

they can be afraid of losing control of the classroom or lack specific content knowledge about the sensitive topic (Borgerding & Dagistan, 2018; Pace, 2019). We observed that older teachers find the Holocaust more challenging to discuss than younger teachers. This could be because the Holocaust and the Second World War hold more emotional weight and sensitivity for adults, making it a more difficult topic to discuss (Wansink et al., 2016).

5.2 Limitations and further research

Several limitations of this study should be noted. First, our research is based on teachers' self-reports. The sole reliance on teachers' self-reports only provides insights into their perceptions of the difficulty of discussing controversial topics, without providing detailed information on their actual teaching. While teachers in the Netherlands often claim to engage students in discussions rather than relying solely on lectures, research suggests that actual classroom discussions of controversial topics are less frequent than reported (King, 2009).

Second, the questions concerning perceived self-efficacy inquired if teachers thought they could discuss controversial topics in general (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2016). However, self-efficacy can also be conceptualized as a context-bound, situation-specific disposition (von Suchodoletz, 2018). Future research could more delve into this situationally by asking teachers about their self-efficacy for each topic or doing more qualitative research to better understand the situationality of teachers' self-perceptions.

Third, this study captures teachers' perceptions at a single point in time, limiting our ability to understand how recent events may influence their perceptions and how the difficulty of discussing certain topics may vary over time. Conducting longitudinal studies to measure teachers' experiences at multiple time points would provide valuable insights. Moreover, this study primarily focuses on teachers' views. A comparative analysis of teachers' and students' perceptions would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding.

Fourth, prior to the analyses, we ensured the adequate power and careful consideration of the models based on available theory. However, it is always important to consider the complex interrelationships among variables examined through SEM when interpreting the findings. Future research should further investigate these relationships to validate our exploratory findings.

Finally, we did not find a relationship between the perception of difficulty in discussing controversial topics and school denomination, school location or teachers' religious and political views. This may be due to potential under-representation of more radical political views in our sample. The necessary categorization of schools and teachers into broad categories may also have resulted in a loss of nuanced findings. It is important to consider separate groups within the same domain (e.g., religion, political views) in future studies to better understand these relationships.

5.3   Implications

We hope that this study can inform the development of subject- and context-specific teaching materials and training programmes for citizenship education for all teachers focusing on discussing controversial topics. First, self-efficacy and school support appear to be important to foster teachers' willingness to discuss controversial topics. In relation to self-efficacy, it appears important that teachers are provided with the opportunities to train and practise discussing controversial topics. This can be done in more safe environments – for example, during teacher training – before having those discussions in the classroom. In relation to school support, it is essential that school leaders realise the importance of their supporting teachers (see also Journell, 2022). It would be good to do more research on the role of school leaders and how they can offer such support to teachers. Finally, it is wise to design training programmes that are also tailor-made and subject-specific. All in all, it appears that what a constructive approach to discussing controversial topics is, can be very situational; there is no one-size-fits-all approach for this complex issue.

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ENDNOTES

1, 2, 3. These answers were coded as missing

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD STATEMENT

This study is approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty Public Governance & Management, Utrecht, The Netherlands.

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Bjorn Wansink is associate professor at educational science at Utrecht University in the Netherlands. His research interests center on civics and history education, multicultural education, critical thinking, sensitive topics and peace education. He is also a teacher trainer for the European Association of History Educators in (post)-conflict countries.

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APPENDIX A

Table A1. Standardised factor loadings of the self-efficacy scale

Item	Factor 1
SE1: create a safe atmosphere in the classroom when discussing controversial topics	0.84
SE2: lead a substantive discussion on controversial topics	0.81
SE3: get students to take each other's point of view in a discussion about controversial issues	0.75
SE4: maintain a good relationship with pupils when discussing controversial issues	0.76

APPENDIX B

Table B1. Correlations of variables in the present study

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
1. Self-efficacy[a]	-																				
2. Gender	.15*																				
3. Age	-.08*	-.11*																			
4. Years of experience	-.09*	-.13*	-.01																		
5. Ethnicity	-.07*	.03	.11*	.06																	
6. Faith	-.03	-.02	.02	-.06	.48*																
7. Political views	.01	-.06	.03	-.03	-.02																
8. Geography	.04	-.1*	-.01	.1*	.03	.03	-.21*														
9. Biology	.07*	.001	.06	-.04	-.05	-.07*	-.18*	-.22*													
10. History	-.12*	-.12*	-.06	.05	-.01	.07	-.12*	-.15*	-.12*												
11. Social studies	-.06*	-.05	-.01	-.04	-.01	.01	-.26*	-.33*	-.28*	-.19*											
12. Dutch	.05	.3*	.04	-.03	.04	-.02	-.15*	-.19*	-.16*	-.15*	-.24*										
13. Multiple subjects	-.01	-.14*	.06*	-.02	-.01	.04	.01	.03	-.02	.06	-.01	-.07*									
14. Educational track (upper)	-.01	.6	-.02	-.01	.1*	.8*	-.15*	.02	-.15*	.07*	.08*	.13*	-.21*								
15. Educational track (lower)	.03	.02	-.03	.02	-.08*	-.02	.08*	-.15*	.02	-.15*	.07*	.08*	.13*	-.21*							
16. Several ed. tracks	0.03	-.06	-.02	.07*	.04	.03	-.02	.13*	.04	.1*	.06*	-.06*	-.07*	-.5*	-.74*						
17. Proportion of low SES students	.05	.05	-.1*	.09*	-.07*	-.04	-.02	-.13*	-.02	-.08*	.03	.08*	.12*	-.15*	.45*	-.3*					
18. Proportion of bi-cultural students	.1*	.06	-.05	-.08*	.05	.07*	-.04	-.06	-.02	-.06	-.07*	.11*	.06	-.07*	.26*	-18*	.61*				
19. School denomination	.01	.07*	-.02	-.05	-.08*	.05	.07*	-.04	.04	-.1*	-.01	.09*	-.02	.02	.05	-.05	-.01	-.03			
20. Municipality size	-.01	-.001	-.04	-.06	.08*	-.04	-.07*	-.01	.002	.01	-.02	.04	-.04	.06	-.09*	.04	.002	.25*	.03		
21. Region	.02	-.01	-.01	-.04	.06	-.04	-.06	.05	-.02	-.002	-.02	-.05	-.05	.05	-.03	-.03	-.03	.28*	-.04	.09*	
22. School support	-.14*	-.001	.04	-.002	-.07	.09*	.08	.004	.05	-.02	-.01	.002	-.002	.04	.03	-.05	-.05	-.07	.01	.05	.04

Note. [a] Self-efficacy is an average score. * Significance at p < .05

APPENDIX C

Figure C1. Model of SEM analysis of teacher perception of difficulty discussing controversial topics
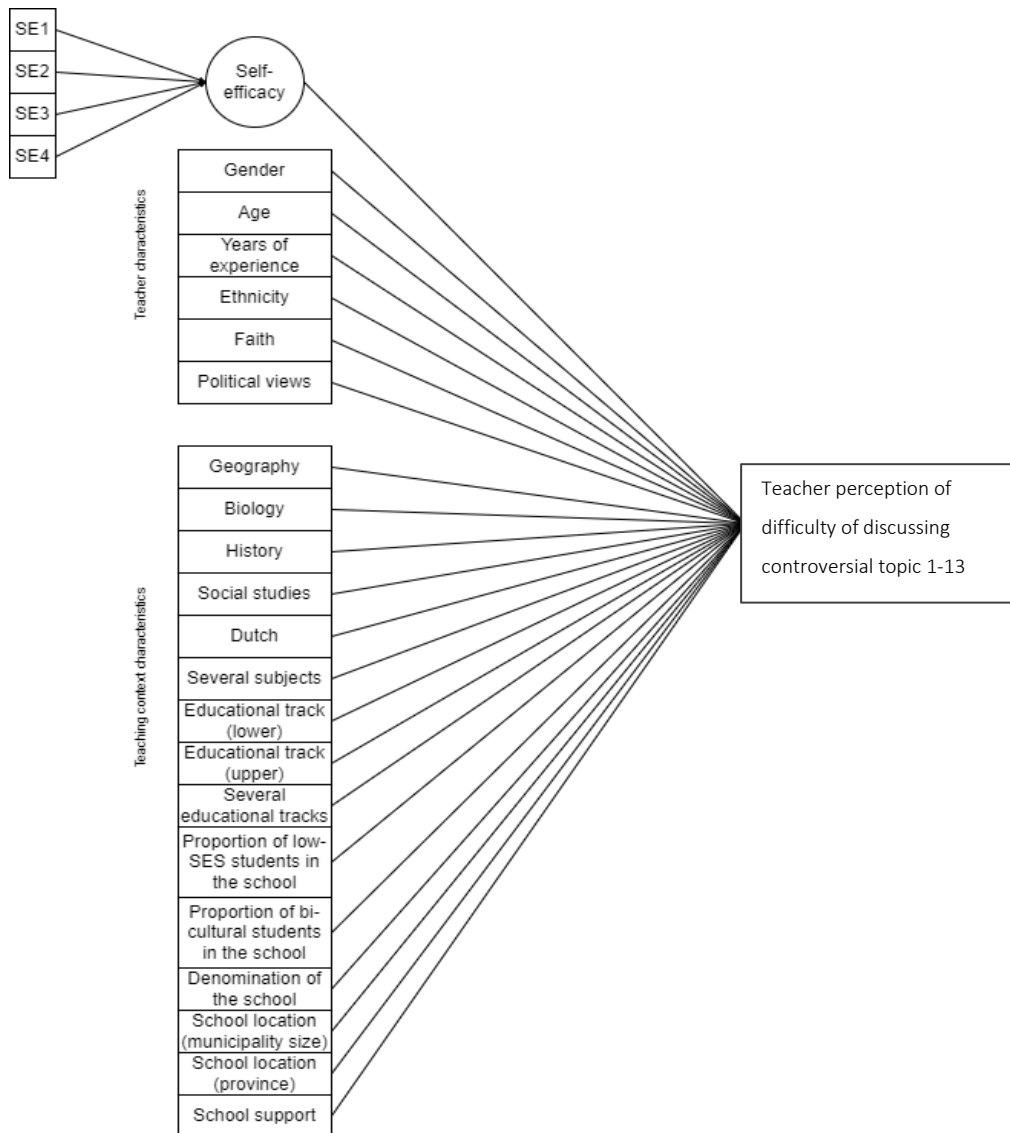
Note. The model is examined for each topic separately.

APPENDIX D

Table D1. Explained variances of the different models per controversial topic

Topics	R^2
1. Anti-Muslimism	.21
2. Islam-related terrorism	.23
3. Integration of ethnic minorities	.21
4. Antisemitism	.23
5. Holocaust	.23
6. Black Pete	.15
7. Slavery	.17
8. Left-wing radicalism	.21
9. Right-wing radicalism	.21
10. COVID vaccination	.12
11. Climate change	.08
12. Sexual diversity	.2
13. Freedom of expression	.16