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Discovering the Connection between Learners' Identities and Preferences in History Education

A Case Study of Participatory Action Research at a Bilingual and Multicultural School

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Content:

1. Introduction

1.1. Orientation and research question

The secondary school Wolfert Tweetalig in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, hosts learners of diverse cultural backgrounds. When for research paper three classes (80 learners) were asked how they identified themselves, 28 different identities were reported. 31 learners identified as 'Dutch' only. Other learners identified with other cultural identities (Turkish, Chinese, Cape Verdian, Israeli, Hindu), or with composite identities that reflect a mixed cultural background, such as Colombian-Dutch-Canadian, Yugoslavian-Dutch-European, Dutch-Pakistani, Dutch-Mexican and English-Namibian.[1]

Should this diversity of cultural and ethnic identity amongst learners have consequences for the practice of history education at Wolfert Tweetalig and similar multicultural schools? Literature on the relevance of history as school subject suggests it should indeed. Firstly, learning history as meaningful activity and personal identity are directly related. There is a strong link between personal identity and the individual's perspective on history.[2] Secondly, the history curriculum of the Netherlands and most other countries is designed to have a function in the shaping of a national identity or common historical perspective through education.[3] Lastly, it has been argued by Keith C. Barton that history education can be made meaningless by "ignoring issues of identity – issues that are sometimes dismissed by history educators, but that are of paramount importance for many students."[4] If the strong relationship between history education and identity also applies for the learners at Wolfert Tweetalig, then it makes sense to consult their voice in the design of the history curriculum. The culturally diverse school Wolfert Tweetalig is a suitable place to include the student voice and thus to perform action research on history education in relation to self-reported identities. This could be done through the so-called 'Circles of Proximity Task', a method that is explained later in this introduction. The aim of the Circles of Proximity Task is to gain a better insight in the relation between the learner's identities and their perspectives on history education. If such meaningful relations are indeed visible, it finally might be possible to formulate ideas on history education at this multicultural school in the future years. These ideas and recommendations are formulated in the conclusion of this paper.

The research question for this action research project is: when considering the outcomes of the Circles of Proximity Task', what is the relation between the self-formulated identity of non-Dutch or mixed background learners and the historical topics that they feel most related to, and consequently, which suggestions could be made to improve the relevance

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[1] See figure 3: 'I Identify as…'

[2] Peter Seixas, 'What is historical consciousness?', in: R.W. Sandwell (ed.), *To the past. History Education, public memory, and citizenship in Canada* (Toronto 2006) 14

[3] Arie Wilschut, Dick van Straaten en Marcel van Riessen, *Geschiedenisdidactiek. Handboek voor de vakdocent* (Bussum 2013) 33-34

[4] Keith C. Barton, 'The Denial of Desire: How to Make History Education Meaningless', in: Linda Symcox and Arie Wilschut (eds.), *National history standards. The problem of the canon and the future of teaching history* (2009) 265-282, there: 266

of history education in the context of a multicultural school? Before discussing the results in the next chapters, the remainder of this introduction concerns the explanation and theoretical justification of our method and closes with a further theoretical justification of the research question itself.

1.2 Method: introduction

The Circles of Proximity Task is developed by the authors of this research. However, it was inspired by a task included in Morton's and Seixas' chapter dealing with "Historical Significance", the first of *The Big Six Historical Thinking Concepts*.[5] In this chapter, Morton and Seixas answer the question "How do we decide what is important to learn about the past?", or in other words: how do we decide which events are historically significant? In the task learners produce a sketch in which they include the most significant events, people or developments in the history of the world. They are encouraged to make personal decisions about what they think is historically significant. After the sketches are finished, the sketches are compared and used to help learners realize that judgments of historical significance are based on subjective criteria, and therefore differ from person to person.[6] The Circles of Proximity Task as we designed it is also about the significance of historical events. However, not so much about the significance of historical events for the world, as in Seixas' task, but rather about the significance for the individual learner.

A detailed report on the development of and the choices made for the Circles of Proximity Task follows hereafter. In this part it is firstly described what the Task entailed for the learners. For the Circles of Proximity Task learners between the ages 11 and 16 were provided with an A3-sheet with concentric ellipses or circles. The spaces between the circles were numbered 1 (the inner) to 4 (the outer circle). In the centre of the inner circle was a grey spot. Learners were asked to write their names or draw themselves on it. In this way we helped them envision and feel the desired emotion for the task: that they were in the centre of attention. It was clearly communicated that this task was about their voice and choice. Then, the learners were asked to freely choose twenty historical events, phenomena, actors, or inventions, and put them into the circles - with five topics in each circle. As means of scaffolding, learners were provided with two internet links with timelines, one being the historical canon officially used in Dutch history education, and one being a timeline of world history. However, students were also encouraged to freely use internet to find historical events they felt related to.[7] The more the learner identified with the event, actor or invention, the closer the learner had to put the historical object to the 'I' of the student. For example: a student who wears glasses every day would put the invention of glasses in the inner circle. See for examples of the sheets figure 1 and 2. In adapting Seixas' original task in such a way that it focused on the learners' sense of proximity to self-chosen events, we created a tool

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[5] Andrew Morton and Peter Seixas, *The Big Six Historical Thinking Concepts* (Toronto 2012) 26-27
[6] Ibidem
[7] Timeline on Dutch history: http://www.entoen.nu/en; Timeline on world history: http://www.historiatimelines.com/wp-content/uploads/World-Entire1.jpg For the argumentation behind these choice, see below.

that, combined with a questionnaire, enabled us to gather data on the relation between the learner's self-described identity and his or her sense of proximity towards particular historical events.
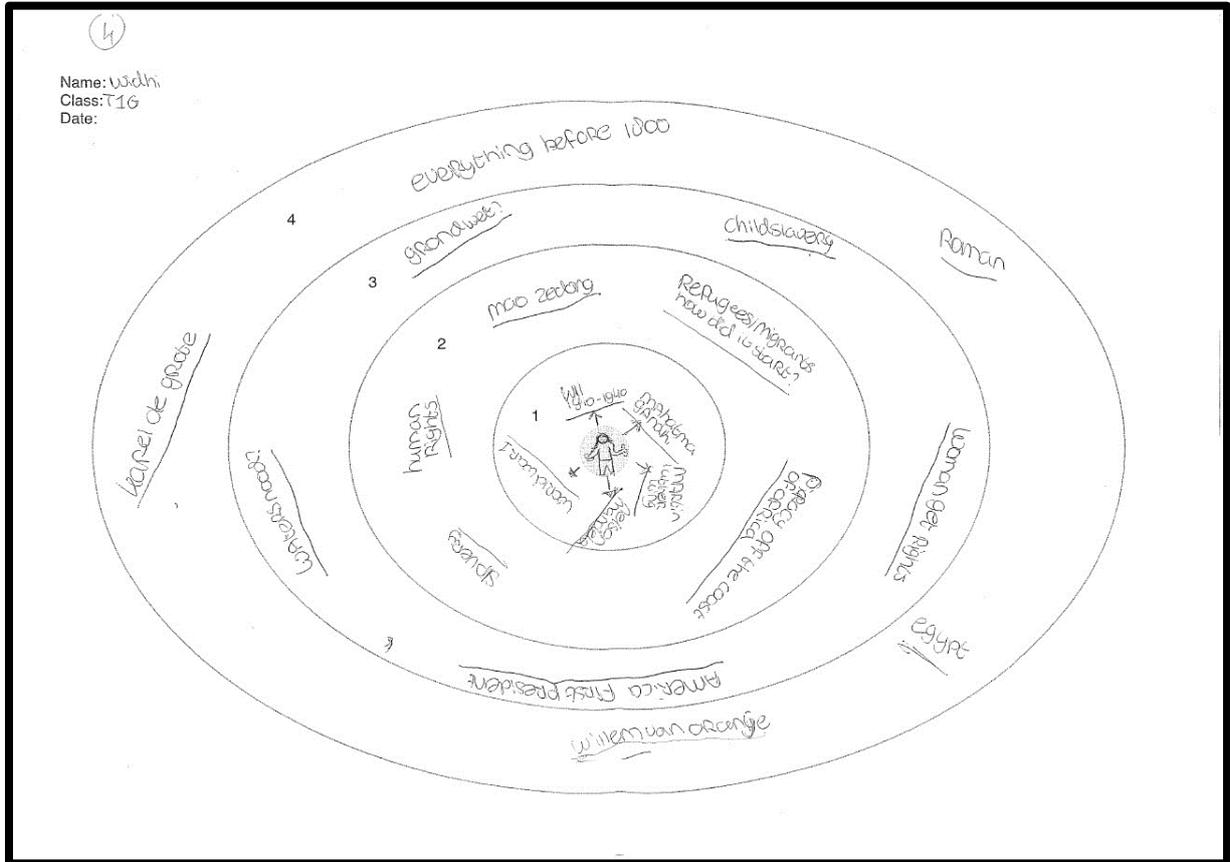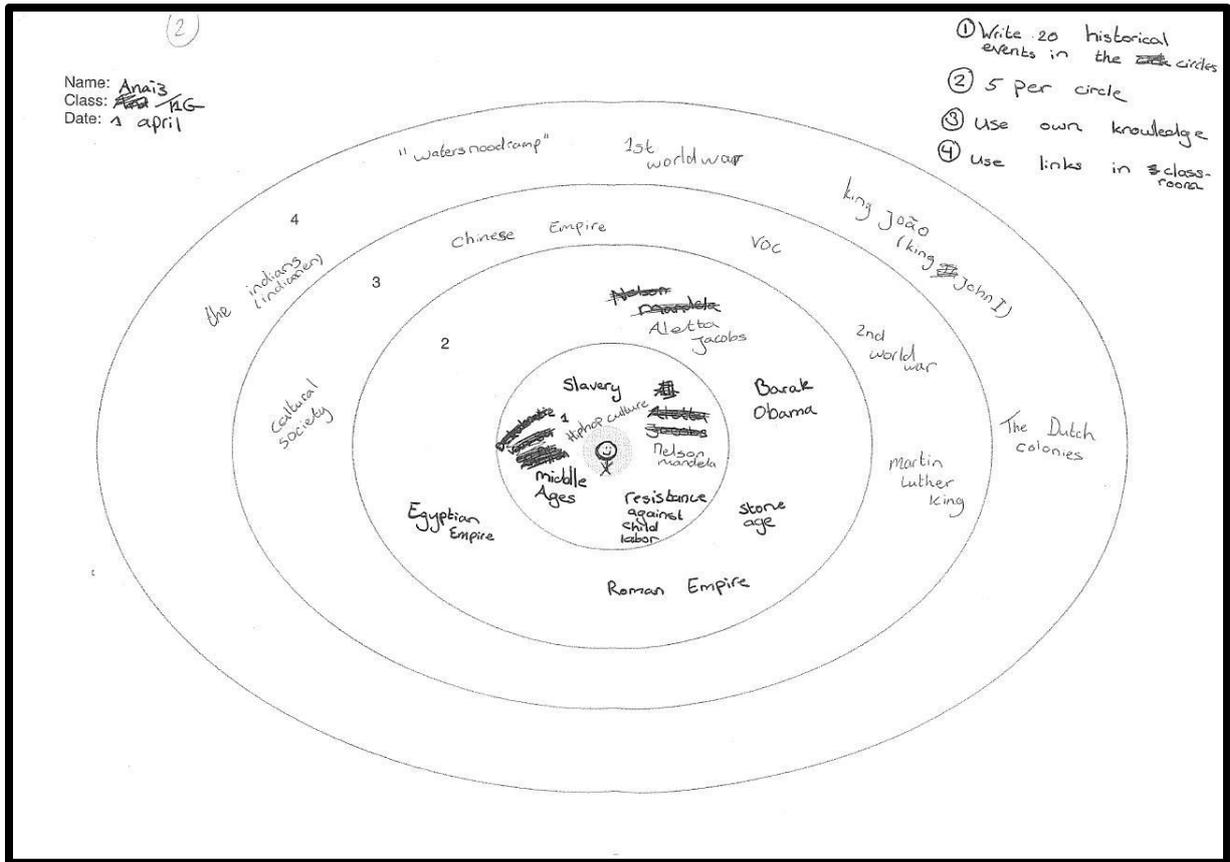

Figure 1

Figure 2

1.3 Method: questionnaire

The next step for the learners was to fill in a questionnaire and to answer a set of different questions with which they justified their choices in the Circles of Proximity Task.[8]

In the questionnaire, learners had to answer the following seven questions:

1. I identify as:
2. Explain why you placed these five events in your *first* circle;
3. Explain why you chose three other events (from circle 2 to circle 4);
4. Take a look at the five events in your *first* circle. Have these events been discussed by your history teacher(s)?
5. Take a look at the five events in your *first* circle again. For the events that have not been covered in class so far: how would you like your teacher to teach about these topics?
6. Did this assignment help you to further discover who you are? Answer with: yes / no / a bit / I don't know, and explain their answer below.
7. Do you think your own answers in this assignment will be taken seriously by history teachers and do you think that your answers will be used by your teacher to improve history lessons in future? Answer with: yes / no / a bit / I don't know, and explain their answer below.

In order of this research to be valid, it was of crucial importance that references of students to identity would be *self-reported.* Therefore, the teacher stressed that the first question (I identify as) could also be left blank, and that any answer would be valid. Further, the teacher exemplified the question by saying: "write down how you feel. Do you feel European, or Dutch, or both, or other, or just human? Every answer is fine. You can also write down nothing, or more answers." From the group of 80 learners, 18 learners indeed gave answers like 'human being', 'animal', or 'just me'. These answers make up the category "other" in figure [NR]. The focus of the questionnaire is on the five events that learners wrote down in their first circle. Questions 2, 4 and five explicitly refer to the events learners listed in their first circle. In retrospect, question 3 was superfluous for the scope of this particular research and question 6 was far-fetched and too abstract to answer for many students. Particular room for the student voice was reserved in questions nrs. 5 and 7. The rationale behind the use of questionnaires within action research is discussed in the following paragraphs.

1.4 Method: Participatory Action Research

This research was carried out in the context of the Leiden University research project 'Focus on learners'. This research project aims to actively seek and include the learners' perspective and voice in order to improve educational practice. A particularly useful method to enable learners to participate in this is through *participatory action research* (PAR), in which teachers and students ideally act as 'co-researchers', with the ultimate aim to make improvements in educational practices. In the following part the theoretical background of participatory action research is briefly introduced. This is followed by a short justification about the application of action research methods in this research paper.

One of the fundamental ideas behind participatory action research is that learners are important stakeholders in schooling. Learners should be entitled to equity in their education. Children's entitlement to equity in education has been argued for by Susan Groundwater-Smith with explicit reference to human rights in general and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) in particular.[9] Particularly relevant to our research on history education and identity are Groundwater-Smith's remarks on the particular need to entitle children who are in a marginalized position because of their cultural, ethnic or socio-economic background. "In terms of young people in our schools, equity encompasses the right for them to be heard, and that means not only the few who already have the cultural, social and intellectual resources to be visible and audible, but also those who are dealing with difficult and challenging conditions and are often marginalised and silenced."[10] In our case, one could argue that some learners from non-Dutch backgrounds at Wolfert Tweetalig belong to groups that indeed lack the cultural, social and intellectual resources to be visible and audible, or are indeed often marginalised and silenced. Although student participation seems the way to improve education, Verbeek and Ponte have pointed to the fact that student

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[9] Susan Groundwater-Smith, "Concerning Equity: The voice of young people", in *Leading & Managing 17* (2011, 2) 53-54
[10] Susan Groundwater-Smith, "Concerning Equity: The voice of young people", in *Leading & Managing 17* (2011, 2) 54

participation, however, can easily remain tokenistic. Therefore, the authors formulated four criteria from the learner's perspective that make participatory action research more successful. Learners should:

1. understand the goal of the project;
2. know who decides on their participation and why this is so;
3. have a meaningful role; and
4. have free choice to participate in the project, after goal and set-up have been made clear to them.[11]

One could say that participatory action research is based on two aims: the aim of the emancipation of the (marginalized) learner and the aim to improve education. This is reached through improving participation, as explained by two features of PAR mentioned by Kemmis, McTaggart and Nixon:

- the recognition of the capacity of people living and working in particular settings to participate actively in all aspects of the research process; and
- the research conducted by participants is oriented to making improvements in practices and their settings by the participants themselves.[12]

Several guidebooks exist on how to perform action research. Richard Sagor's method, for instance, is rather classical, without much attention to the process of making adjustments to general ideas and plans during the research itself. Also, Sagor's method stresses the improvement of the school as professional organisation, rather than the emancipation of the learners. Sagor states that one should take the following steps in order to follow the action research method: (1) Selecting a focus; (2) Clarifying theories; (3) Identifying research questions; (4) Collecting data; (5) Analysing data; (6) Reporting results; and finally, (7) Taking informed action.[13] Although useful, in this method only the seventh step makes it stand out as action research. In contrast the method formulated by Ponte pays more attention to the process of inserting adjustments during all research stages, be it the exploration, the general plan, or the improvement.[14] Both authors, however, point to the crucial aspects of "triangulation" and "critical friends" for PAR. Triangulation means the active gathering and processing of data and feedback at different places, such as colleagues, learners, teachers, and literature, in order to gain a more balanced and valid result. Critical friends are those with whom the researcher debates his research question, as well as the processing of the data and the implementation of improvements. Critical friends ideally are colleagues without and within the organisation, and all others who are stakeholders of education, most importantly the learners.[15]

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[11] Gijs Verbeek, Petra Ponte, *Participatie in het onderwijs. Onderzoek met en door leerlingen* (Amsterdam 2014) 50; transl. by author.

[12] S. Kemmis, R. McTaggart and R. Nixon, *The Action Research Planner. Doing Critical Participatory Action Research* (Singapore 2014) 4

[13] http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/100047/chapters/What-Is-Action-Research%C2%A2.aspx, last consulted 17 July 2016

[14] Petra Ponte, "Actie-onderzoek als professionaliseringsstrategie voor docenten uitgevoerd en begeleid", in *VELON-tijdschrift 23* (2002, 3) 11-19

[15] http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/100047/chapters/What-Is-Action-Research%C2%A2.aspx, last consulted 17 July 2016, Petra Ponte, "Actie-onderzoek als professionaliseringsstrategie voor docenten

1.5 Our approach of Participatory Action Research

The inclusion of the student voice in action research can be done on different levels, wrote Michael Fielding.[16] He distinguished six levels of development from students as clients to students as change agents:

1. Students as data source;
2. Students as active respondents;
3. Students as co-enquirers;
4. Students as knowledge creators;
5. Students as joint authors; and
6. Students sharing commitment for the common good.

Contrasted to these standards, our approach of action research seems rather unambitious at first sight. After all, we used learners as data source through rather traditional questionnaires, or at most as active respondents. This raises the question to what extend our research actually deserves to be called participatory action research.

It is true that in our approach of action research, learners were not invited to be co-enquirers of direct practical changes in history education. However, we believe that the inclusion of the student voice in our research approach is nevertheless very strong. This is so because our method (task and questionnaire) and our topic (history education and identity) reinforce each other in a double loop. Whereas task and questionnaire may seem teacher initiated, the thematical approach naturally makes the task very much student-centred: it is about who they are as individuals, with their perceived individual identities, preferences, and explanations of these preferences. Also, learners had the chance to suggest concrete lesson ideas in the fifth question. Due to the features of history education and how it naturally relates to individual identity, our approach of PAR was consciously chosen as we wanted to get to know our students better *before* we would try out practical changes in the classroom. Our approach could serve as recommendation for other history teachers planning to perform participatory action research as it reveals valuable knowledge for the teacher that will help him adapt his approach of individual learners and the class as a whole. A theoretical-didactical justification of this is discussed in the next paragraph. For now, we will discuss how we tested and adjusted our method, and how we used triangulation and our critical friends in this process.

We carried out our participatory action research after the steps mentioned by Ponte as far as we thought it helped us reaching our goal. Ponte distinguishes the following steps in PAR: general idea, exploration, general plan, improvements/adjustments and finally: case study.[17] At the stage of 'general idea', we formulated our ambition to make our history education more relevant for learners of non-Dutch backgrounds by acknowledging their historical interests related to their self-described identity, and in doing so to enrich the history

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uitgevoerd en begeleid", in *VELON-tijdschrift 23* (2002, 3) 11-19, Susan Groundwater-Smith, "Concerning Equity: The voice of young people", in *Leading & Managing 17* (2011, 2) 52

[16] M. Fielding, "Patterns of partnerships", in N. Mockler & J. Sachs (eds.), *Rethinking Educational Practice through Reflexive Inquiry* (Rotterdam, 2011), 61-76, cited in: Susan Groundwater-Smith, "Concerning Equity: The voice of young people", in *Leading & Managing 17* (2011, 2) 57

[17] Petra Ponte, "Actie-onderzoek als professionaliseringsstrategie voor docenten uitgevoerd en begeleid", in *VELON-tijdschrift 23* (2002, 3) 11-19

curriculum. Often, however not explicitly in our classes, it is complained about that history education is about 'dead, white males' only. So how could we include the voice of our students in our education? In our phase of exploration, we checked whether our general idea was actually correct. At this stage we used information from literature, colleagues and our own experiences in class to check whether our idea was indeed relevant. By thus using triangulation in formulating our general idea, it became particularly clear from didactic literature that our idea of the relation between identity and history education made sense.[18] Also, from our colleagues and our own experiences, we knew that our learners very much related to history through personal identity. We could draw on examples like a Chinese student voicing her interest in Chinese history in tests about other subjects, a Polish girl referring to her granddad and the Polish suffering during the Second World War, or a Turkish student referring to Istanbul and Turkey every time a map of the eastern Mediterranean was shown in the context of the Egyptians, Greeks and Romans. We were therefore quite sure that the relation between identity and preferences in historical topics could be made visible in our student population. The only way to find out was to actually check this. We wrote down a series of questions to help us explicate what we wanted to know. They were:

- Will students who identify themselves with a cultural or ethnical background, other than "Dutch", have preferences for historical topics that are related to their specific identity?
- Which explicit connections are made by learners between their chosen topics and their identity?
- Which chosen topics stand out in the choice of our students? And to what extend are these topics discussed within the standard history curriculum that is already being taught in Dutch schools?

Important to repeat here is that we were only researching the link between history education and personal identities, not new lesson approaches as such. By making the link between history and personal identities visible first, a formulation of advice on basis of these results could only be a next step. We thus developed our first 'general plan', the Circles of Proximity Task, that we discussed beforehand with some of our critical friends, being this time the co-students at the ICLON and colleagues in the research group at Wolfert Tweetalig, presided by Menno Vaas. After this, we tested the Circle of Proximity Task in a small group of nine volunteers from the first and second TVWO forms. During the first round we let them fill in the Circles of Proximity Task according to the procedure earlier described. We then individually interviewed them on their motives and wrote down what they said.

During the testing phase we were observed by researcher Ben Smit who also functioned as critical friend in the evaluation afterwards. Our task seemed promising because the learners clearly liked having the agency in selecting historical topics. They also clearly enjoyed the personal attention and our sincere interest in their choices. Also, our hypothesis about the link between self-described identity and historical topics was directly confirmed by at least three students in this group. We got learners choosing Srebrenica, Mahatma Ghandi

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[18] See paragraph 1.6 for an overview of these arguments

and a Turkish war, thereby explicitly referring to their Serbian, Indian and Turkish family-backgrounds. As result, the test phase made us really enthusiast to perform the Circles of Proximity Task in a larger group. In discussion with critical friend Ben Smit, we concluded however that interviewing all learners would be too time consuming. As solution for this we adjusted our general plan and we created the questionnaire as substitute for the interview. In talks with Smit we also concluded that we should create more space for the student voice in our action research by adding question 5, in which learners are invited to make suggestions for lesson ideas about their chosen topics.

After thus having passed the stages of a general idea, exploration, a general plan and making adjustments, we were ready to execute our Circles of Proximity Task and questionnaire in a larger group of learners. This time the group was 80 learners in total, spread over four classes: two first form VWO classes, one second and one fourth form VWO class. We selected these groups because we knew them personally as we taught them ourselves. We expected that a group of 80 learners would give us enough data to create a reliable and valid impression of the Wolfert Tweetalig population of VWO students. Their age ranged from 11 to 16. From literature we know that these year groups are significant in terms of identity development.[19] That was an additional argument for selecting these groups.

Even during the execution of our research we kept making adjustments. Initially, the learners from TVWO2 were asked to do the task at home in their own time and thus fully voluntarily. This, however, resulted in a disappointing results as half the class did not turn in their tasks. Therefore, we decided to use the history school hours to allow the learners to work on the task and the questionnaire in school time. Although we were cautious to follow Verbeek's and Ponte's four criteria for successful student involvement, it must be admitted here that student participation was thus not entirely voluntarily because the students had to do the Circle of Proximity Task during regular school hours reserved for history.[20]

The results of the task and questionnaire are discussed in the next chapter. In the coming paragraph the theoretical-didactic justification of our research topic is further discussed.

1.6 Theoretical-didactic justification

The aim of this paragraph is to further substantiate the scope of our research with the use of the relevant literature. It will be made clear why our research question is spot on, and relevant for the field of history education.

In the didactic literature of history education, it has been repeatedly stressed that it is crucial to acknowledge issues of identity in class. This is not only important to keep students motivated, but also for society at large. "Ignoring issues that arise from students historically grounded identities may", according to Keith Barton "leave them susceptible to the divisive

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[19] Wim Slot, Marcel van Aken (red.) *Psychologie van de adolescentie* (Amersfoort 2015) 130-131, 143-145

[20] Gijs Verbeek, Petra Ponte, *Participatie in het onderwijs. Onderzoek met en door leerlingen* (Amsterdam 2014) 50

use of history that they encounter outside school."[21] This is particularly meaningful in a multicultural school, where conflicting views on historical events (slavery, Armenian genocide, the Holocaust) are likely to be present. Further on he continues: "Rather than asking students to deny their own interests and perspectives, educators should seek to deepen and enrich students' ability use history in a variety of contexts and for multiple purposes."[22] It is exactly this learning process that we want to trigger with use of the knowledge gained from the Circles of Proximity Task. The task will also contribute to the students' better understanding and valuation of the relevance of history as school subject, especially concerning the central idea of history as source of personal identity, as formulated by Barton.[23]

Our hypothesis that learners are primarily interested in history relating to their personal identity is supported by a comprehensive Europe-wide research called *Youth and History* executed in the 1990's. Despite its age, we do name it here because it comprised over 300.000 learners in more than thirty European countries and has thus been an unprecedented comprehensive research. These learners were aged 14, 15 and 16 years and thus partly similar to the learners participating in our research. In answer to the question "How interested are you in the following types of history?", 'family history' scored highest out of eleven categories, with an average rate of 4,02 in a scale from 1 to 5. Among the Dutch students in this research, family history also scored highest, although lower than the European score, with an 3,45.[24] In this survey, the Dutch students scored lower in their ratings of appreciation on most aspects. It underscores the need to design history education by involving them as stakeholders of it.

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, the scope and the method of this research reinforce each other. This is not only the case with 'identity', but also with 'agency'. The method of this research has been to give the students a voice, and hence agency as stakeholders of education. Peter Seixas included agency as one of the seven second order concepts that history education should teach learners to work with. Firstly, because "notions of 'agency' structure our sense of how possible it is for particular people or particular groups to shape and reshape the course of events in history, as they come up against the structural constraints that have been handed down from the past". Secondly because 'agency' "raises the question about students' understanding of their own place in history, their own sense of themselves as historical agents (thus as citizens)."[25] In this quote we see how 'agency' and 'identity' naturally relate to each other, and how they form the key to make history education

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[21] Keith C. Barton, 'The Denial of Desire: How to Make History Education Meaningless', in: Linda Symcox en Arie Wilschut (eds.), *National history standards. The problem of the canon and the future of teaching history* (2009) 265-282, there: 265.

[22] *Ibidem*.

[23] *Ibidem*, 275, 278, Arie Wilschut, "Heeft het geschiedenisonderwijs toekomst? Het curriculum in het licht van de voorstellen van de commissie-Schnabel", *KLEIO 57:4* (2016) 14

[24] M. Angvik and B. von Borries, (eds.) *Youth and History. A comparative European Survey on Historical Consciousness and Political Attitudes among Adolescents* (Hamburg 1997), quoted in: Arie Wilschut, Dick van Straaten and Marcel van Riessen, *Geschiedenisdidactiek. Handboek voor de vakdocent* (Bussum 2013) 86

[25] Peter Seixas, 'What is historical consciousness?', in: R.W. Sandwell (ed.), *To the past. History Education, public memory, and citizenship in Canada* (Toronto 2006) 19

both meaningful and empowering. From other didactic literature we know how crucial 'agency' or self-determination is in establishing intrinsic motivation among learners.[26]

To conclude this section, it suits to say that our research and its theoretical foundation matches the identity and aims of the organisation we work for, the Wolfert Tweetalig. As bilingual school, Wolfert Tweetalig commits itself to the goals written in the Common Framework for Europe Competence (CFEC).[27] According to this CEFC, students are, amongst other things, supposed to become "well-informed European citizens, that obtain relevant knowledge about Europe and the rest of the world, who are able to process and evaluate this knowledge, and who can act accordingly."[28] We expect that our research will lead to the inclusion of historical topics, otherwise untold, that touch on the broader history of Europe as a whole. In this way the history department contributes to the goals of internationalization that Wolfert Tweetalig committed itself to.

2. Test results

In this chapter we discuss the outcomes of the Circles of Proximity Task and the questionnaire. After that, we try to answer our research question: when considering the outcomes of the Circles of Proximity Task', what is the relation between the self-formulated identity of non-Dutch or mixed background learners and the historical topics that they feel most related to, and consequently, which suggestions could be made to improve the relevance of history education in the context of a multicultural school?

2.1 Self-described identities and self-made connections to chosen historical events

The results show a group of learners with a large variety of (multi-)cultural backgrounds. In reaction to the question 'I identify as', out of 80 students in total, 31 learners answered the question with 'Dutch', 19 learners fell in the category 'other' or non-specified, while 30 learners gave a specific cultural identity other than 'Dutch'. As shown in figure 3, we found 28 different self-described identities. Apart from 'Dutch', 'European', and 'Turkish', all other identities appeared only once, and seventeen learners identified with two or three different cultural backgrounds, naming themselves with a composite identity. Some examples are: 'Colombian-Dutch-Canadian', 'French-Indonesian', 'Yugoslavian-Dutch-European', and 'South-Korean-Dutch'. In most of the mixed cultures-cases, the students first mentioned 'Dutch' (for example: 'Dutch-Pakistani', 'Dutch-Mexican'), and then a second cultural identity. In some cases, it was the opposite ('Chinese-Dutch', 'Moroccan-Dutch').

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[26] J. Brophy, "Self-determination theory of intrinsic motivation: meeting students' needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness", in: *Motivating students to learn* (New Jersey 2004) 190-195
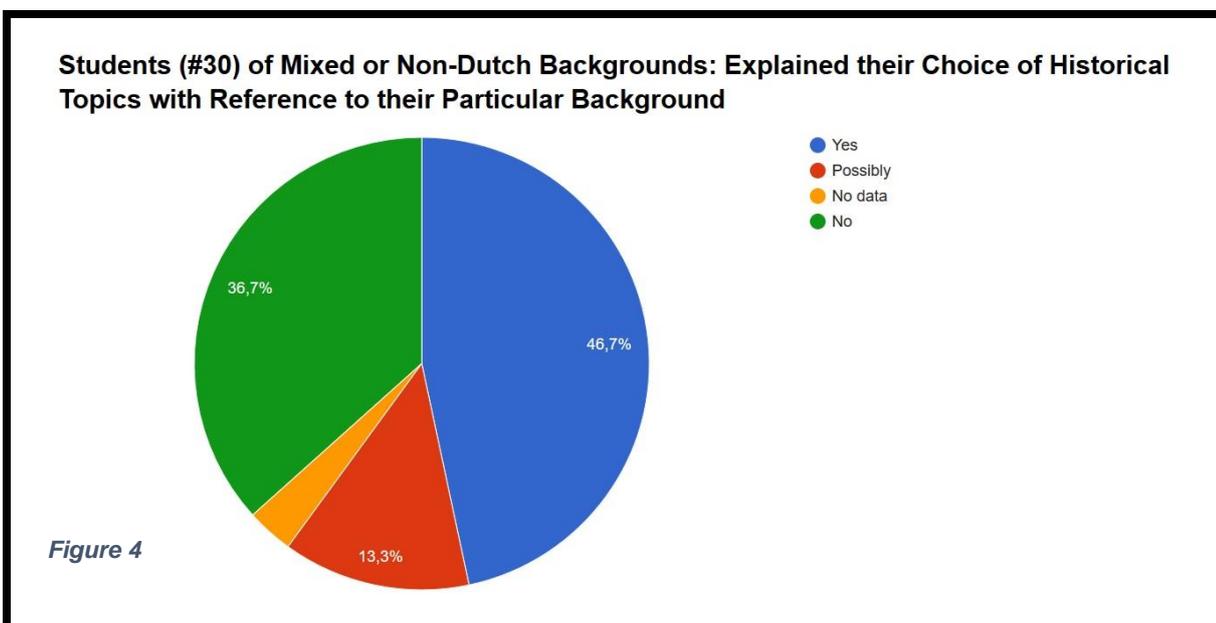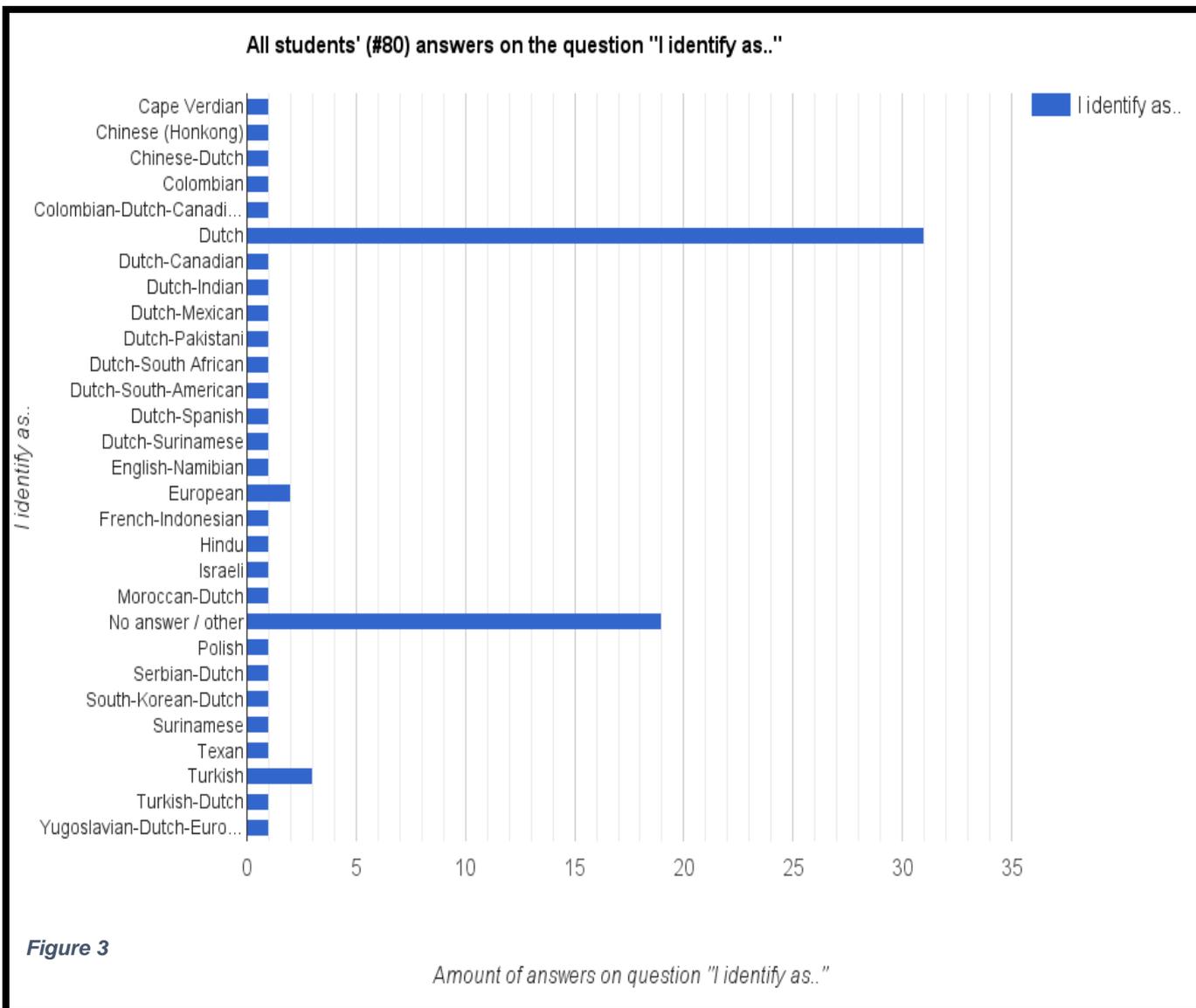
[27] The CFEC has been defined to build a bridge between competences and school practice. Schools that use these CFEC- guidelines, acknowledge the idea of a "European citizen", and see it as their mission to prepare their students for further studies and work in Europe."; in:
https://www.epnuffic.nl/bestanden/documenten/common-framework-for-europe-competence-cfec-nl.pdf.

[28] *Ibidem*, 2.

From figure 4 it becomes clear that from the 30 learners with mixed or non-Dutch backgrounds, 46,7% explicitly referred to their background when explaining their choices in the questionnaire, while in 13,3% of the cases a connection could possibly be made, but was not explicit.

In conclusion, we can say that in this group of Wolfert Tweetalig learners, there is indeed a significant amount of learners who identify themselves other than only Dutch. From this group, more than half explicitly or implicitly refers to their background when explaining their choice for historical events. The expected connection in our classes between identity and history education at Wolfert Tweetalig is made visible.

All students' (#80) answers on the question "I identify as.."

Figure 3

Amount of answers on question "I identify as.."

Students (#30) of Mixed or Non-Dutch Backgrounds: Explained their Choice of Historical Topics with Reference to their Particular Background

Legend:
- Yes
- Possibly
- No data
- No

46,7%
13,3%
36,7%

Figure 4

2.2 Identity-related historical events

18 learners explicitly or implicitly made the connection between their self-described identity and their choice of historical events, creating 22 remarks (some learners gave different explanations for different events.) When learners made an explicit link between identity and the choice of historical events, in more than half of the cases this was done by referring to family history. As shown in figure 5, in some cases (13,6%) the connection was that the learners felt personally shaped by their family history. In most (40,9%) the connection was my referring to grandparents and / or parents. 18,2% of the chosen events were explicitly linked to nationality and / or ethnicity. Both personal interest and / or personal visits of historical sights and religious related topics made up 13,6% of cases.
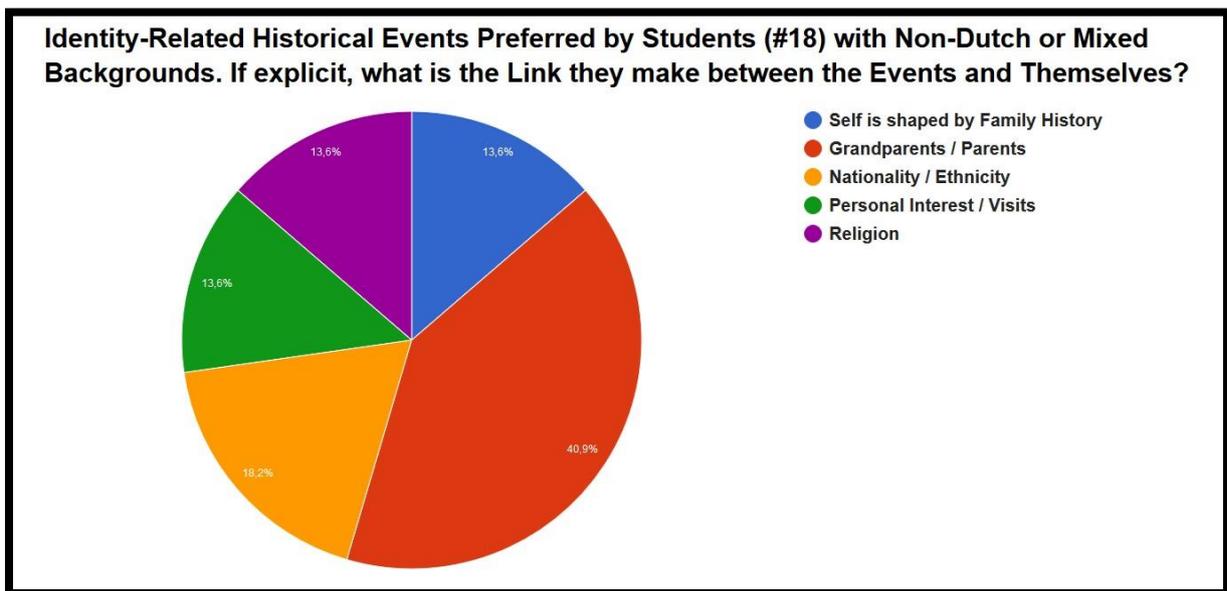

Figure 5

According to Barton, "when studying social and political events, [learners] are drawn to the impact of those events on individuals."[29] Some of our learners indeed mentioned the history of their (grand)parents in the context of larger historical events. Some explanations of students about their family histories were:

- "My parents and grandparents come from Hong Kong. If the 2nd world war against Japan never happened my parents maybe never been born";
- "Mao Zedong had influence on my father when he was younger. I would like to know why…";
- "My mother is Colombian and the Spain people took all the gold from the indians and killed their leader";
- "Ik heb voor WW2 gekozen omdat mijn oma en opa dit hebben overleefd, als ze het niet hadden overleefd leefde ik niet";

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[29] Keith C. Barton, 'Research on students' ideas about history', in: Linda Levstik and Cynthia Tyson (eds.), *Handbook of Research in Social Studies Education* (New York and London 2008) 239-258, there: 245.

- "I chose this event because my father grew up with Apartheid and l am very exposed to modern day racism. Discrimination is something l want to change in the world. / I chose this event or rather this person because Nelson Mandela inspired people and stopped Apartheid. He tried to fight peacefully but when it didn't work he traded his robe in for army clothing. Nelson also went to jail for 27 years and only then was the Apartheid law lifted";
- "[The Balkan War] relates to my life because many family members have experienced it and it still is much alive";
- "Because I am Mexican, and in Mexico they had Maya's (I don't know if there are still maya's) and I would like to know more about it".

These results confirm the learners' prime interest in family history, similar to the results of the *Youth and History* research.[30] Learners at Wolfert Tweetalig are most interested in those topics that directly relate to their own family history, and thus to their personal identity. This is at least the case for the students with a mixed or non-Dutch background. For this research, we did not investigate the scores of the students who identified themselves as 'Dutch'. Finally, these results reveal the wide range of perspectives on history that is present at Wolfert Tweetalig. Also, its reveals the endless possibilities to improve education through opening up to the student voice.

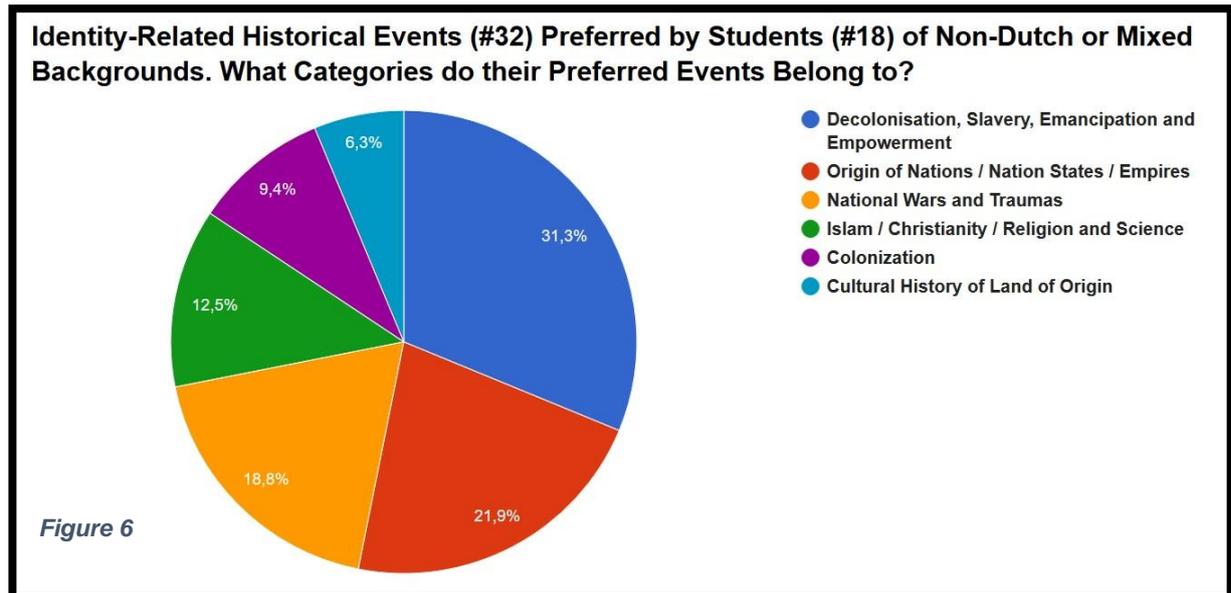## 2.3 The selected events in categories

Based on our data analysis, we have distinguished several general topics in which we subdivided our students' choices (see also figure 6):

1. *Decolonisation, slavery, emancipation and empowerment* (e.g.: Gandhi, Apartheid, Nelson Mandela, Surinam and the Dutch Antilles, and slavery);
2. *Origins of Nations / Nation States / Empires* (e.g.: Fall of Constantinople and the Ottoman Empire, independence of Surinam, Mao Zedong, Romans in Spain, and the founding of Israel);
3. *National Wars and Traumas* (e.g.: Balkan wars, war in Lebanon, October War, Srebrenica, WWII in Europe and Asia);
4. *Islam / Christianity / Religion and Science* (e.g.: Darwin, Jesus, and the start of the Islam);
5. *Colonization* (e.g.: East India Company, The Conquista, the relation between United Kingdom and Hong Kong);
6. *Cultural History of Land of Origin* (e.g.: the Mayas and Qin King).

Obviously, for some events there is overlap in categories. The 'independence of Surinam', for instance, is now placed in the category of 'Origin of nation states', whereas it also belongs to 'Decolonisation'.

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[30] Angvik, M., Borries, B, von (eds.) *Youth and History. A comparative European Survey on Historical Consciousness and Political Attitudes among Adolescents* (Hamburg 1997), quoted in: Arie Wilschut, Dick van Straaten and Marcel van Riessen, *Geschiedenisdidactiek. Handboek voor de vakdocent* (Bussum 2013) 86

Identity-Related Historical Events (#32) Preferred by Students (#18) of Non-Dutch or Mixed Backgrounds. What Categories do their Preferred Events Belong to?

Legend:
- Decolonisation, Slavery, Emancipation and Empowerment
- Origin of Nations / Nation States / Empires
- National Wars and Traumas
- Islam / Christianity / Religion and Science
- Colonization
- Cultural History of Land of Origin

31,3%
21,9%
18,8%
12,5%
9,4%
6,3%

Figure 6

From figure 6 it becomes clear that historical events related to 'decolonisation, slavery, emancipation and empowerment' have the prime interest of non-Dutch or mixed background learners. This categories comprises nearly a third of the cases. If we add the category of 'Colonization' to it, both categories together form 40,7% of the cases. This clearly reveals that colonial history, slavery and the era of decolonialization are the prime interest of non-Dutch and mixed-background learners and should therefore be given due attention in class.

The next categories that can be clustered are 'Origin of nations / nation states / empires' (21,9%), 'National wars and traumas' (18,8%), and 'Cultural History of Land of Origin' (6,3%). Together they make up 47% of the cases, and they reflect the strong interest of the learners in the land of origin of their parents or grandparents. This expression of stakeholdership should, we strongly believe, also be acknowledged in class. A striking difference between our results and those from *Youth and History* is that in our research the category 'Origin of nations' ranked second, whereas it was least popular in the *Youth and History* results.[31] This might be due to the fact that learners from non-Dutch or mixed-backgrounds are more interested in stories of origin than 'regular' Dutch learners, due to their family's background of immigration.

Last category is 'islam / christianity / religion and science', comprising 12,5% of the cases. From paragraph 1.4 it became clear that an important idea behind PAR is to give voice to those learners "who are dealing with difficult and challenging conditions and are often marginalised and silenced."[32] The great interest of learners in 'decolonisation, slavery, emancipation and empowerment', may reflect the learners' wish to be heard on these issues, especially in history education.

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[31] Wilschut, Van Straaten and Van Riessen, *Geschiedenisdidactiek,* 83-86.
[32] Groundwater-Smith, "Concerning Equity: The voice of young people", 54

2.4 Learners' lesson ideas and trust in change

Question 4 and 6 in the questionnaire gave space for learners' voices on lesson ideas and trust in change. These were the questions:

> 4: Take a look at the five events in your first circle again. For the events that have not been covered in class so far: how would you like your teacher to teach about these topics?
>
> 6: Do you think your answers will be taken seriously, and do you think that your answers will be used by your teacher to improve history lessons in the future? Answer with yes / no / a bit / I don't know, and explain your answer below.

Not all participating learners did manage to answer these questions. This was largely caused by a lack of time. Thirteen learners answered question 6, and no one gave and explanation. Two learners answered 'no'. One 4VWO girl who answered 'no' here was generally sceptical about the acknowledgement of her stakeholdership in education. On question 3 (Have your events been discussed by your history teacher?), she answered "No, China is not in Europe, so nobody bothers". To continue with question 6; five answered 'yes', four wrote 'I hope so', one replied with 'possibly' and another with 'I don't know'. Despite the low response, we see here that the trust in change is not firmly established by the learners, as only five answered with 'yes'. Neither are learners cynical about change, regarding the only two 'no'-votes. The replies of 'yes' and 'I hope so' confirm that learners are open for changes in education, especially when it means their voice is acknowledged. One girl from 4VWO was particularly sceptical on the present situation. When asked '

Only seven learners shared some ideas of how the topic(s) of their choosing could be covered in class:

- "Telling the story from both side the Indians and the people from Spain." This quote comes from a learner who identifies as 'Colombian', and who wants to learn about the time when 'Spain took all the gold from the Indians'.
- One learner, who identifies as 'English-Namibian', and who wants to learn about slavery, Nelson Mandela and Apartheid, suggested: "Creative exercise / explain everything in a clear way".
- "You could tell about how they became independent." This was a suggestion of a learner who identifies as 'Hindu-Surinamese', and who wants to learn about the independence of Surinam and the East India Company.
- "Talk about Yugoslavia and the split of it and all the things like executions and mass murders. It's the modern version of WW2." This is a quote from a learner who identifies as 'Yugoslavian-Dutch', and who hopes that the Balkan War will be discussed in class.
- One learner, who identifies as 'Turkish', and who hopes that the fall of Constantinople, the start of Islam and the Ottoman Empire will be discussed in class, but isn't sure whether it will, suggested: "We could learn about different religions in a lesson so not only the start of Islam".

- "Learn about the faith", wrote one learner, who identifies as 'Texan', who "believes in Jesus", and who wants to learn about Jesus and Darwin's theory. Also, she wrote down that she is sure these topics will be discussed in class.
- "With powerpoints so we can learn better without it is more difficult for us", was a suggestion written down by a learner who wants to learn about the Fall of Constantinople, and who identifies as 'Turkish'.
- And finally, one learner who wants to learn about slavery and who identifies as 'Dutch-Surinamese', wrote: "I think you could tell us how it went and were slavery was the mist or something and why was er slavery and who get the idea to make slavery".

When looking at the suggestions given above, we could make the following observations: three learners made a rather 'classical' suggestion, by suggesting the teacher could "tell about" or "explain" their topic; one learner suggested a more interactive learning activity ("talk about"); two learners gave a learner-focused suggestion, suggesting they wanted to "learn about" a certain topic. One learner referred to the use of PowerPoint to support the learning process; two learners suggest the teacher should discuss their topic from two or more perspectives (e.g.: "Telling the story from both side the Indians and the people from Spain", and: "We could learn about different religions in a lesson so not only the start of Islam"); and finally, one student suggests "creative exercises". Based on these observations, we could make two careful conclusions. First, the students' voices show different views on how history lessons are or should be taught in school: either learner-focused or taught frontally, or both. Secondly, two learners show a certain degree of historical thinking by suggesting comparative exercises for learning about their chosen topics.

The combined results of our research suggest several opportunities for history education in which the learners are acknowledged as stakeholders and in which their interests and suggestions are embraced. To test such new forms of education lies outside the scope of this research. However, we believe that the results of this research will inspire history educators to consult their learners at the start of the school year, to open up to their perspectives, and to act upon it. That is, at least, what we are planning to do.

3. Conclusion and advice

Considering the outcomes of the Circles of Proximity Task, what is the relation between the self-formulated identity of non-Dutch or mixed background learners and the historical topics that they feel most related to, and consequently, which suggestions could be made to improve the relevance of history education in the context of a multicultural school? In this research, we found a strong and clear relation between the self-formulated identities and preferred historical topics of non-Dutch or mixed background learners. Often, learners made an explicit connection between their self-described identity (e.g. 'Turkish', or 'Chinese') and historical topics that they felt closest to (e.g. 'the fall of Constantinople', or 'Mao Zedong'). When asked for explanation, many learners referred to their identity as reason for their choice.

Through the Circles of Proximity Task and questionnaire we found that at Wolfert Tweetalig, more than a third of the learners identify themselves with a different or mixed background, other than "just Dutch". More than half of this group referred to this background explicitly or implicitly when they were asked to explain their selection of five historical topics they felt close to. This confirms the literature on the subject, which argues that issues of identity and history education belong to each other and should not be ignored or separated. If learners made an explicit link between their identity and choice of historical events, in more than half of the cases this was done by referring to their family history. This, too, confirms the existing literature on the subject. Another strong point of reference by learners was the history of the country of origin. When we categorised the events listed by the learners as closest to them, the category 'colonisation, decolonisation, slavery, emancipation and empowerment' was most popular, comprising nearly three quarter of the listed events. Examples of included topics are Mahatma Gandhi, Apartheid, Nelson Mandela, Surinam and the Dutch Antilles, slavery, the East India Company, the Conquista, and the relation between the United Kingdom and Hong Kong. Another large cluster of interest comprised the histories of the land of origin, divided over the categories 'origin of nations / nation states / empires', 'national wars and traumas', and 'cultural history of land of origin'. Examples of named topics here are the fall of Constantinople and the Ottoman Empire, the independence of Surinam, Mao Zedong, the founding of Israel, the Balkan wars, the war in Lebanon, the October War, Srebrenica, WWII in Europe and Asia, the Mayas and Qin King. The strong interest in the origins of nations (in contrast to the *Youth and History* results) might be due to the fact that learners from non-Dutch or mixed-backgrounds are more interested in stories of origin than 'regular' Dutch learners, due to their family's background of immigration.

The learners' trust in possible change of education based on their stakeholdership is neither fully negative, nor fully established by the learners we consulted. This leaves room for improvement. The learners' own lesson ideas were diverse, ranking from rather teacher-centred options to learner-focused approaches and with some signs of historical thinking.

On basis of our research, which suggestions could be made to improve the relevance of history education in the context of multicultural or bilingual schools? It is important to bear in mind that the participants of this PAR were VWO-learners at a bilingual school. A different context might give different results. However, the strong connection between identity and preference for historical topics is likely to exist in most classes, especially because the literature is very clear in this matter. After this research, some crucial insights stand out. The first concerns the benefit to the teacher's professionality. The Circles of Proximity Task helped us to get to know our students much better than we did before, and it made us plan to repeat this task with other classes. This is an actual improvement in our future practice as history teachers, a real contribution to our professionalism. Regarding the immense importance for history education to acknowledge identity and personal history, we advise others also to perform this task or a similar simplified one as starter of the year.

The second advice concerns making visible the existing interest in history already present in the classroom. Our research revealed which topics in history education really matter to non-Dutch or mixed background learners and which they prefer to speak about in class. These categories are likely to apply for other multicultural schools, too. Good teaching starts with noticing. Only when a teacher is aware of the manifold (mixed) cultural identities present in his classroom, he or she can plan the history lessons accordingly and consult his learners as stakeholders of education.

A pressing practical question is whether it is actually possible for history teachers in multicultural learning environments to cater for all different cultural backgrounds in an in-depth manner? This, indeed, would be a great challenge. However, considering the results of this action research project, it would be extremely rewarding to offer the learners the opportunity to delve into their topic of choice and to write an essay about it, or create another product that does justice to the general goals of history education. This would also make a good example of differentiation, too. This would be our third advice. The fourth is that we advise teachers to think which parts of the curriculum could get more attention in class, after consulting the learner voice. Especially in year 1-3 this is possible. An overall positive result of addressing topics that students strongly relate to, is that the learners' feeling of agency and their idea that history is a relevant and identity-shaping subject, is likely to increase.

Because we found that students do not make too many suggestions for different lesson approaches, we finally suggest that the teacher should take a strong lead in stimulating the students' agency in history class. This might seem contradictory, but a successful inclusion of the student voice requires a good mentor, ready to orchestrate into meaningful education those things that the class puts in. As shown in this research, the learners' historical interests are often concrete, heartfelt and relating to their own stories. It would indeed be a missed opportunity not to include those in history education.

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