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Religion in the classroom

How teachers approach religious topics in citizenship education in a
 diverse classroom

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Master thesis Religion, Conflict and Globalization

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Introduction

On Monday, May 15, 2023, the Dutch newspaper Trouw published an article about tensions between students and teachers in secondary vocational education (van Nuland 2023). These tensions arise because of different opinions on topics such as religion, sexuality, politics, and the big bang theory. The article was based on the research of Kennedy Tielman, who found that more than half of the teachers felt not prepared enough to have difficult conversations about topics such as religion and sexuality with students (ibid.).

However, these tensions because of different norms and values do not only happen at secondary vocational education. Also in secondary schools, clashes in norms and values between teachers and students arise. Especially since 2006, when schools were obliged by law to add citizenship education to their curricula (Willems et al. 2012, 77). In August 2021, the law on citizenship education was adjusted. The goal was to bring more ‘social cohesion’ by bringing new and more clear guidelines for citizenship education (Inspectie van het Onderwijs (2), n.d.). The virtues of justice, tolerance, and solidarity, from the law of 2006, remained important, but were more specified in the law to align with the core values of the democratic constitutional state of the Netherlands (ibid.). These reformulated virtues are: freedom of speech, equality, understanding, tolerance, rejection of intolerance and discrimination, and autonomy and responsibility. However, some of these values can be considered to contradict each other, such as freedom of speech and discrimination. Within these different virtues, religious opinions and ideas of secularity are interwoven. Religious traditions influence the virtues of people, which is the reason they come forward in citizenship education and currently these religious virtues and the clashes between them have received new attention in academic research and media.

In Dutch society the idea is that religion does no longer play a central part in public life. This idea of secularism also moved towards the domain of education, which has led to religious schools declining in number and public schools, meaning schools that teach without religious affiliation, becoming more popular (Jackson et al. 2007, 210). Still, people from different religious traditions meet at schools, which means that teachers are still confronted with discussions which they might not know how to approach. Hence, this research contributes to the debate of religious literacy of lived religion. In this research, religious literacy is referred to as having a basic knowledge of the norms, values, and virtues of different religious traditions present in society that influence the acts of the people from these religious traditions. This basic knowledge of different religious traditions can be used as a skill to understand the different

(religious) backgrounds of students and might help in approaching religious topics with these different backgrounds present in the classroom. So, religious literacy can be seen as a skill to create understanding in a secularized society as the Netherlands.

These norms and values of different religious traditions are relevant for meaning making of topics such as sexuality, gender, migration, education, etcetera. In education, and specifically citizenship education, these norms, values, and virtues come forward in conversations between students, and students and teachers. The goal of citizenship education is to create, among others, solidarity and respect, in which teachers have the role of discussion moderator and role model (Leenders, Veugelers, and de Kat 2008, 158; Willems et al 2012, 81). Hence, I would say the manner in which they handle the norms, values, and virtues of students decides to what extent the goal of citizenship education has been achieved.

The central research question of this thesis is: *How do teachers approach religious topics in citizenship education in a diverse classroom?* To be able to answer this question, I divided it up to three sub-questions. The first sub-question is: *How do teachers view the importance of religious literacy for moderating conversations between students in the classroom?* To know how teachers approach religious topics in the classroom, it is first important to know to what extent teachers feel they have sufficient knowledge about different religious traditions. I suspect the amount of knowledge teachers have, influences their approach towards discussing religious topics in the classroom. Furthermore, opinions of teachers on whose responsibility it is to provide this knowledge offers interesting insights in the passive or active attitude of these teachers towards religion. The second sub-question is *How do teachers manage their own positionality and perspectives on religious topics in the classroom?* To know how religious topics are approached in citizenship education in a diverse classroom, it is important to know to what extent teachers are open about their opinions. In which situations might a teacher tell their opinions and when is it important to keep their own opinion sidelined, and to what extent does their positionality influence their perception of students and their religions? This influences the extent in which students might feel comfortable to show their opinion, which might contrast to the opinion of the teacher. Especially since teachers are themselves role models for the students in their classroom, their positionality and perspective might influence the conversation and the atmosphere in the classroom. The last sub-question is: *How do teachers handle the opinions of students on religious topics?* Students might have opinions that are contrasting the opinions of teachers, or that harm other students in their being as a person, such as not agreeing to their sexuality or gender, or actively discriminating in skin color or religion. Teachers moderate such discussions in which they have to make a decision

how, for example, freedom of religion and non-discrimination are valued against each other. Hence, it is interesting to know how teachers approach different opinions that are not in line with the norms and values of Dutch society, which are the base of citizenship education, or that harm other students in different ways. Especially since the value of freedom of speech and values such as rejection of discrimination and intolerance or equality might conflict in discussions. So, every student has the right to their own opinion, but the goal is to create understanding among each other in the classroom.

The goal of the research is to examine if religious literacy is a useful skill for teachers to apply in citizenship education to successfully moderate discussions between students, and students and teachers, in which religious opinions and topics might come to the center. These questions contribute to the goal by researching how religion is approached in the classrooms of different teachers that have different opinions on their religious literacy. By examining in which way students express their religious/non-religious/secular backgrounds in the classroom, one can research how teachers approach religion in citizenship education in the classroom. The research contributes to the debate of religion in education and will examine if religious literacy could be seen as an important skill to improve the approach of teachers towards discussing religious topics in the classroom.

This research will mainly employ ethnographic methods. It is set at public and Christian affiliated secondary schools in the Netherlands which have participated in the GlobalandXL BASIC or the GlobalandXL PRO projects of organization Cross Your Borders. These projects provide citizenship education through a set of activities that offer a range of conversation topics in which religious ideas, opinions, and perceptions might arise. From February 2023 until July 2023, I was an intern at Cross Your Borders. During this period, I had the opportunity to interview different teachers participating in these projects at different schools in the Netherlands. The schools were not selected by religious affiliation or level of education, which means I conducted research at public and Christian schools and interviewed teachers teaching first to sixth years from pre-vocational secondary education to pre-university education. The only requirement was diversity in backgrounds of the students in the classes. I approach diverse classes as classes in which at least one student has a different religious or cultural background than the others in the class. However, in all classes I conducted research, more than one student was from a different background. At the pre-vocational education classes, the biggest diversity in backgrounds was observed, contrasting to pre-university education, in which diversity in backgrounds was more limited. The diversity in backgrounds between public schools and Christian schools is similar in this research, with both types of schools offering education to all

students, regardless of backgrounds. As a result, the participants offer a broad insight into the field of citizenship education at secondary schools in the Netherlands.

At the morning briefing, in which the participating teachers are informed about the course of the day, I took a moment to tell the teachers about my research, the goal of the research, anonymity, and ask if they want to think about participating in an interview. During the day, the classes play different games in which religious topics come forward. During these games I would walk from class to class to conduct participant observation. Afterwards, I approached the teachers if they would like to participate in an interview. If they agreed, we moved to an empty classroom or office to conduct the interview. By conducting these interviews in these empty classrooms or offices, the participant is offered privacy and anonymity.

The main methods used in this ethnographic research were semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews offer the same base for each interview, while leaving room for extra questions and diving into specific information (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011, 139). In total I interviewed ten different teachers in nine interviews. These teachers were employed at three different schools in the Netherlands. To do no harm to the population, I used informed consent. Informed consent is the right of a participant to freely choose whether or not to participate in a research project. (Boeije 2014, 45; DeWalt and DeWalt 2011, 215). In deciding this, people need to understand the risks and benefits of participating and be aware of their participation in a research project. For this research, I made the decision to work with an information letter and a consent form. In the information letter, all information regarding anonymity, data storage, voluntary participation, etcetera, is explained. In the consent form, the participants need to check a box yes or no as an answer to questions regarding informed consent.

Other methods used in this thesis are small talk and participant observations. Next to the interviews conducted at the projects, I had the opportunity to be present in different classrooms to observe and participate in the discussions that provide useful information for this research. When students were working in groups, or when students were sent on a break, I had the opportunity to talk to the teachers about the recent games and discussions which provides more insights in the approaches of the teachers and classroom relationships that might have influenced the discussions. Before writing information down, I asked the teachers and fellow interns for consent for using their information for my research.

In this thesis, anonymity of the participants and the interns of Cross Your Borders has been guaranteed by removing the names of the participants and interns, schools, and places named in the interviews. As a result, participants cannot be traced back through personal information or information about the schools. All parties involved have agreed orally or in the

consent letter to this level of anonymity. In the conclusion of this thesis, I will reflect more thoroughly on the used methods and the limitations of the research.

My positionality towards the research might have influenced the way in which I view the data. During the interviews and small talk, I have talked about religious opinions of the students and teachers at the schools. I have always been open about how I would consider myself agnostic, and that I am not affiliated with a certain religion to participants who asked. During the transcribing of the interviews, I reflected on the answers of the participants and how my positionality or curiosity might have influenced the way in which I asked a question or how I view the answer of the participant. Sometimes an answer of a participant would be against how I view or approach the research topic, which sometimes stimulated my curiosity, but I always tried not to show my personal opinions or judge their opinions. By constantly reflecting, I hope to have achieved an intersubjective view on myself and the participants of this research.

The upcoming chapters will elaborate on how teachers approach religion in citizenship education in the diverse classroom, in which is focused on if religious literacy could be a useful skill to approach religious topics in citizenship education. The first chapter forms the theoretical framework. The aim of the theoretical framework is to provide an academical background on the debates regarding religion and secularism, which specifies towards education and religious literacy. Next, a description of the context of the research is presented. This research was conducted at the projects of organization Cross Your Borders, which is an organization that provides citizenship education projects on secondary schools in the Netherlands. In this chapter the background on citizenship education in the Netherlands will be provided and an overview of organization Cross Your Borders and the projects of the organization will be presented. This is followed by three chapters based on the empirical data gathered in this research. Chapter three, the first of these chapters, will provide an insight in how teachers feel about their religious knowledge and who they think is responsible for offering teachers the information they need on different religious backgrounds. Chapter four explains how the participants of this research place their own opinions in discussions about religious topics. As a role model, teachers should be aware of their own opinion and how this might influence the conversation or the way students view the discussed topics. Chapter five focusses on how teachers approach the different opinions of students, which might invalidate others in the class or be different than their own opinions. Finally, I will end with a conclusion on the main question in which I will summarize the previous discussed chapters. Added to this will be a discussion part in which I address the limitations of the research and the research methods, which will end with suggestions for further research on the topics of religion and citizenship education.

1. A Theoretical Framework of Religion in the Classroom

To comprehend thoroughly how teachers approach religious topics in the diverse classroom, it is important to understand the role that religious topics have in education. The goal of this chapter is to dive into the theoretical background of religious topics in the classroom with a focus on citizenship education. At first, I will address the secularization thesis which discusses the private/public distinction of religion in society, since for a long time it was believed that religion would disappear from society. This influenced the way in which religion is approached in the social domain, of which the classroom is one. For this reason, I will follow with a theoretical analysis of the secularization of education. Finally, I will address the approach of religious topics in the secular classroom. In this part I will mainly focus on citizenship education as curriculum in which religious topics and discussion about these topics take place.

Secularization

In contemporary society, there are many debates about the public/private distinction of religion (Casanova 1992, 17). However, long before this, there were already thinkers concerned with the philosophy of how life works (e.g., Plato or Aristotle), the philosophy of the existence of God (e.g., Descartes, Kant, Wittgenstein), or apologetic theology (e.g., Aquinas) (Rodrigues and Harding 2008). Religious studies have religion as the object of the study, while it does not engage in the practice of religion (Rodrigues and Harding 2008, 10).

The current topics of religious studies are especially influenced by the idea of the secularization thesis. The secularization thesis revolves around the idea that the role of religion declined in the modern state and moved to the private spheres, because modern capitalist organizations took the functions of previously religious organizations and acted 'as if God did not exist' (Casanova 1992, 18). The idea of secularization originated from the sociological study of religion in the early twentieth century, when sociologists such as Weber and Durkheim were concerned with the decline of traditional religiosity and the development of Western modernity (Cannell 2010, 86). Weber refers to secularization as rationalization (Swatos and Christiano 1999, 212). He explains rationalization as the process of disenchantment of society through 'the spirit of capitalism.' By disenchantment Weber does not mean that people do no longer believe in the mysteries of religion, but that they have become less valued and often have been given a social interpretation (ibid.). Durkheim refers to secularization as differentiation: religious believes are no longer necessary to create cohesion in society, which leads to a division in labor and state and church (Goldstein 2009, 141).

So, secularization, to Weber and Durkheim, was the idea that religion would cease to exist due to the decline of traditional religiosity. However, this linear idea of secularization was not the case (Goldstein 2009, 136). The role of religion in society changed, but religion did not cease to exist. Rather, secular institutions took over the role religious institutions previously had in Western society (Asad 2018, 15). For this reason, Asad pleads for a study of the anthropology of the secular. Asad states that the differentiation between religion and ‘the rest’ of society is not right, rather, the secular in itself is a cultural formation as well which can be studied in the same way as religion (ibid.)

Different thinkers, such as Taylor and Berger were focused on the role of secularism in society. Taylor argues in his book *A Secular Age* (2007) that religion is not only located in the different institutions that were replaced by secular institutions, but also in the ‘social imaginary’ of people (Gallagher 2008, 434). Meaning, people give their own interpretation to their religious beliefs through social interactions with others among them and religious institutions are not needed to facilitate this meaning making of religious beliefs (Casanova 1992, 36; Gallagher 2008, 434). Berger would agree to this. Berger rejects the idea that religiosity in the world is declining. He even states that the world is in some ways becoming more religious than in the past (Berger 1996, 3). In the Dutch context, secularization meant a decline in the public role of religion (Miedema and Bertram-Troost 2008, 126). Religion was no longer a determining factor for the social realm.

So, secularism strives to a separation of state and religion. This does not mean that religion ceases to exist, but that it moves to the private spheres in society. Secularization meant secular institutions replaced religious institutions in society, which caused religion to become more private, since it was no longer seen in public institutions. Schools are such institutions in which the role of religion has shifted. Yet, religion is still present in society and still influencing the lives of people. Hence, religion is still present in social settings, such as schools, which is the focus of this research. For this reason, it is important to focus on the role secularism has in education.

Secularism in Education

In the Dutch context, Schuh, Burchardt, and Wohlrab-Sahr state, secularity explains the situation more clearly than secularism (2012, 378). Secularism refers to the politics of separation between religion and state, while secularity refers to the social struggles and interpretations this separation of state and religion causes. Schuh, Burchardt, and Wohlrab-Sahr split secularity in four different types that each apply to a time period in Dutch history.

Secularism in the context of the Netherlands is highly influenced by different migrant groups with different religions arriving in the country, which created challenges for integration (Schuh, Burchardt, and Wohlrab-Sahr 2012, 357). The different types of secularities are ‘responses’ to problems regarding society for which they offer ‘solutions.’ These problems are: “(1) the problem of individual freedom vis-à-vis dominant social units; (2) the problem of religious heterogeneity and the resulting potential or actual conflict; (3) the problem of social or national integration and development; and (4) the problem of the independent development of institutional domains” (ibid, 358). According to Schuh, Burchardt, and Wohlrab-Sahr, these problems offer motives for an institutionalized distinction between religious and non-religious social spheres.

However, education is an institution which falls between the public, or social, and the private sphere. In the Netherlands, all schools are funded by the state, which would imply they are seen as institutions that should be non-religious. Yet, this is not the case. There are many different types of schools in the Netherlands, but the clearest distinction can be made between public schools, which are schools that are not affiliated with a certain religion and are often seen as ‘secular,’ and ‘special’ schools, which are religious affiliated schools (van Bijsterveld 2013, 32). The distinction between public and special schools in the Netherlands has a long history regarding the fundings of the schools, which is called the *schoolstrijd* or ‘school battle.’

Schuh, Burchardt, and Wohlrab-Sahr argue the first version of secularity was present very early in the Dutch society and stayed dominant until the second half of the twentieth century. This version of secularity is ‘secularity for the sake of accommodating religious diversity.’ The Dutch school battle was from about 1800 until 1920 (Rietveld-van Wingerden, Sturm, and Miedema 2003), hence I state this version of secularity is applicable to the school battle.

At the start of the nineteenth century there barely was a school system in the Netherlands. There was a distinction between ‘public’ schools and homeschooling. In this distinction religion was not named, since there was not yet a clear separation of education and religion (van Bijsterveld 2013, 18; Rietveld-van Wingerden, Sturm, and Miedema 2003, 99). Since 1814 public education became a responsibility of the state, but still in the old definition. With this law, the first distinction between public and ‘special’ schools was made as well. However, this distinction was very unclear, which resulted in many different in-between forms of religious schools (van Bijsterveld 2013, 21). Between 1814 and 1848 there were many different people discussing about freedom of education: should it be allowed, and if, in which form. In 1848 this resulted in an official freedom of education in the constitution (van

Bijsterveld 2013, 31). This was also the first time there was an official clear distinction between public and special schools, in which public schools are the responsibility of the state in which the state decides on the format of religious education, and ‘the rest’ are special schools (ibid.). There was only one condition: these special schools had to fund their own education. This freedom of education is in line with the idea of secularity for the sake of accommodating religious diversity (Schuh, Burchardt, and Wohlrab-Sahr 2012, 362). Different religious groups fought for a freedom of education which resulted in different religious groups being allowed to open their own schools in the country and adjust the education to their religious beliefs.

However, religious groups did not agree to the law that stated they had to pay for their education (Rietveld-van Wingerden, Sturm, and Miedema 2003, 102). A real accommodation of religious diversity would mean an equal right of free education for all different groups. On the other hand, the liberals did not agree to religious schools because this would threaten the national unity (ibid.), and they stated public schools were a ‘neutral space’ in which every worldview is granted justice (Schuh, Burchardt, and Wohlrab-Sahr 2012, 362). Furthermore, the liberals tightened the law which brought sanctions to schools that did not adhere to the qualities of education and school buildings. As a result, the ‘special’ schools had to gather even more funds to adhere to these laws. The protestants mobilized citizens and created in 1879 the first political party (the ARP: anti-revolutionist party) to plead for their cause (ibid, 103). Consequently, the Catholics and Socialists also started their own parties in which the Protestants and Catholics became allies for the cause of education funding.

The law of mandatory education for children in 1901 stimulated the cause of the Protestant and Catholic parties (Rietveld-van Wingerden, Sturm, and Miedema 2003, 103). Parents did not want to send their children to school if that meant they had to pay that much extra for special (religious) schools. More parties were in favor of subsidized education for all because of the argument that every parent should be free to choose a school that is in line with their norms and values, since education is about the upbringing of children (ibid, 103-104). This resulted in a proposed pacification in 1914, which was accepted in 1917. The pacification stated financial equality for public and special schools, freedom of education, and respect for religious direction. So, in education the secularity for the sake of accommodating religious diversity was achieved.

After the de-pillarization, around the 1960s, special schools declined in number of students (Rietveld-van Wingerden, Sturm, and Miedema 2003, 105). A new idea was to open collaborative schools that were focused on worldview formation and identity formation. This development connects to the secularity timeline of Schuh, Burchardt, and Wohlrab-Sahr who

state that from the 1960 secularity transformed to a secularity for the sake of individual liberties (2012, 360). However, in practice the collaborative schools did not work due to contradicting forms of education that exclude each other by law (Rietveld-van Wingerden, Sturm, and Miedema 2003, 105).

In 1968 the *Mammoetwet* ('Mammoth law') was implemented. This law created a complete change in Dutch education, which created the MAVO, HAVO and Atheneum as education levels (Brand, van der Heiden, and Jacobs 2007, 329). Schools had to adhere to certain standards and create education programs to prove their quality. Furthermore, all schools that could prove their quality, became subsidized, which meant equality for special and public education (ibid, 336).

At the end of the twentieth century, the presence of Islam due to migration grew in the Netherlands (Schuh, Burchardt, and Wohlrab-Sahr 2012, 354). As a result, there were new challenges for society and education, which led to the development of secularity for the sake of national integration and development, which could still say to be present in Dutch society. The question is how to approach the challenge of integration, because the new presence of religion in society posed a revival of the debate on freedom of speech and religion in society, but as well in schools (ibid, 367). In public schools there is a 'passive neutrality' towards religion (Jackson et al. 2007, 210), but in the classroom students from different (religious) backgrounds are placed together. As a result, this debate on freedom of speech versus freedom of religion might pose challenges in discussing topics within this 'passive neutrality,' which is often compared to 'secularity,' towards religion.

So, secularity in Dutch society developed from secularity for the sake of accommodating religious diversity to secularity for the sake of national integration and development. It seems like in the past the acceptance of religious diversity was the main focus, while in current society religious diversity is seen as a curse for social cohesion and development, because the attitude towards religion changed. However, Wiering (2020) argues secularity cannot exist without religion.

Wiering (2020) conducted research on Dutch sexuality education in public secondary schools. In his chapter, Wiering refers to Asad's (2003) book in which he argues that religion and secularity are co-constitutive, but also overlapping (Wiering 2020, 25). Wiering explains that secularity needs a counterpart to be able to exist, which is religion. He states that secularization is used to differentiate between the religious and the irreligious in society, or to identify what is religious and what not as a result of this differentiation (Wiering 2020, 26). Linked to the subject of education, Wiering explains that secularism is often used to portray a

kind of neutrality towards religion (ibid), so how religious education brings a religious bias, secular education is supposed to be neutral towards religion. However, in practice this often means religion is a topic that is avoided (Wiering 2020, 26).

Citizenship Education in the Secular Classroom

In different countries around the world, citizenship education became a compulsory part of the education curriculum in secondary schools. At the end of the twentieth century, many ‘Western’ countries became the new home for different migrant groups from Northern-Africa, East-Europe, and the Middle-East (Miedema and Bertram-Troost 2008, 123). The development of citizenship education resulted from a fear that these migrant groups would have a negative effect on the prosperity of the Western countries (ibid). Citizenship was understood in the sense of affiliation to a political community, or a political culture, since the belief was that the identity of a country was embedded in this political culture more than in a specific ethnic culture.

Not taken into consideration was the fact that ethnic and political culture overlap and influence each other (Miedema and Bertram-Troost 2008, 124). Current societies exist of a multitude of cultural traditions, which all influence the political culture in a country and beyond. Citizenship education developed from being focused on national citizenship, to global citizenship (Veugelers 2011, 209). It focuses more on how people live together in the world, which brings the level of moral development in citizenship education (ibid). This new focus also made that the topics regarding citizenship education broadened to encompass cultural, social, and interpersonal levels.

The main goal of citizenship education is to create active participation in society and bring social integration (Veugelers 2011, 212). Yet there are many different ways and opinions on how to achieve this. Veugelers distinguishes three different types of citizenship education (2011, 213). The first one is adaptive citizenship education. This first type is focused on values and virtues such as discipline, integrity, hard work, respect, and responsibility (Veugelers 2011, 213). The teachers teach these values and virtues to the students, which they are expected to apply in their lives without question, because this is the ‘right’ way to apply them (Leenders, Veugelers, and de Kat 2008, 157). The second type of citizenship education is individualizing citizenship education, which is focused on value communication. It strives to create identity development and promotes independence and personal autonomy. With this type of citizenship education, the role of the teacher is more that of a coach that stimulates the learning process of the students (Leenders, Veugelers, and de Kat 2008, 158). The focus is more on individual development than social development. The last type is critical democratic citizenship, which is

focused on social involvement (Veugelers 2011, 213). Critical democratic citizenship does focus on involvement with others in a manner that is in line with the values of a democratic society. Meaning, it focuses on critical thinking and solidarity with others, which is meant to stimulate active participation in society (Leenders, Veugelers, and de Kat 2008, 158; Willems et al. 2012, 80). The role of the teachers is to mediate the conversations between students, but also to actively participate in the process of meaning making of the values with the students. In this process the teacher is also a role model, which should be taken into consideration (Willems et al 2012, 80). The result of the quantitative research of Leenders, Veugelers, and de Kat, on which values are preferred by teachers in secondary education in the Netherlands, showed that most teachers (53%) favored the critical democratic citizenship type (2008, 163). In the contextual framework, chapter 2, I will address the specific case of Dutch citizenship education and the policies connected.

Since one of the main goals of citizenship education is to create social integration of different groups in society, it is necessary that people of different cultural and/or ethnic backgrounds interact with each other. To be able to achieve this, ‘bonding’ and ‘bridging’ are necessary (Veugelers 2011, 214). Bonding refers to the personal necessity to be able to connect to one’s cultural or ethnic group, whilst still being able to keep true to the self (ibid). Bridging refers to the intercultural or interethnic contact to create consideration and solidarity for each other’s backgrounds, with as aim to create social cohesion (ibid). To create a sufficient bridging, it is necessary to learn about each other’s backgrounds and to know how to approach this in an appropriate manner. One’s religion could be a part of this background that needs to be approached appropriately, but how to do this, is not self-evident, especially at schools that consider themselves secular or non-religious.

Discussing Religion in Citizenship Education

One could say that schools are located in between the private and the public domain (Miedema and Bertram-Troost 2008, 125). For this reason, amongst others, it is hard to decide for teachers to what extent they are free to educate according to their educational beliefs or that they need to adjust to the backgrounds of the students in the class. As explained before, religion moved from the public sphere to the private sphere (Miedema and Bertram-Troost 2008, 126), but in citizenship education topics arise that may be associated with religious opinions. Such topics could be the acceptance of different sexualities, abortion, conflicts between groups or countries, clothing styles, holidays, etcetera. The idea of citizenship education is that it prepares the students for encounters with the ‘religious Other’ (Miedema and Bertram-Troost 2008, 127),

but what should the teachers do when this encounter happens in the classroom? This question is even more complicated when the growing religious plurality and diversity is taken into consideration. Many things can be said about how religion affiliated schools approach religion in the classroom, but for the sake of this research, the focus will be on public secondary education.

Most people would consider religious education and citizenship education as two separate subjects. In religious education students are taught about the religious texts and doctrines, and in citizenship education students are taught about values in society and they form their personal identity. However, the two subjects are in many ways interwoven (Miedema and Bertram-Troost 2008, 131). One's religious identity is part of the personal identity, which is focused on in citizenship education. Furthermore, the application of religious beliefs in one's daily life might differ from the doctrines, since the way religion is lived goes beyond the religious texts and doctrines (Ammerman 2014, 190; Bowman 2014, 5; McGuire 2008, 118). Jackson states that to bridge this supposed separation, religion should be represented as a 'cultural fact' (Jackson et al. 2007, 44). By representing religion as a cultural fact, it will be seen as a part of intercultural education, which is part of citizenship education. It creates a positive move towards dialogue between different religious and secular opinions and outlooks which can be used on the level of public debates (Jackson et al. 2007, 45).

However, by seeing religion as a 'cultural fact' and by this as part of citizenship education, the part of teachers knowing how to approach this discussion is still not solved. The teachers in Wiering's research explain that they stay to the 'plain facts' in their classes on sexual education, because there are in their words 'no religious opinions connected to plain facts' (Wiering 2020, 26). These teachers see the 'plain facts' and a secular approach as a form of neutrality towards religion, because secularity is neutral (ibid). However, one could question if not discussing morally loaded topics and religious opinions is neutral. Asad states that the secular itself is a cultural formation which can be researched, which connects to the idea of the embodiment of the secular (Scheer, Johansen, and Fadil 2019, 1). Scheer, Johansen, and Fadil explain how the secular would not exist without the religious, because the two are always intertwined and the secular is dependent on the religious (2019, 3). The secular is something that is felt and practiced in the same lived manner as the religious, which would mean secular 'facts' are biased in the core in the same manner as religious 'facts' are (Scheer, Johansen, and Fadil 2019, 6). So, how can one moderate and participate in discussions when religious morally loaded questions, which are often used in discussions in citizenship education, are avoided by the teachers under the guise of secularism?

One way to overcome the dilemma of discussing religious morally loaded questions is by religious literacy. Religious literacy is often named in conversations about social cohesion, active citizenship, and democratic self-awareness as a tool to address issues in a religious pluralist setting (Ellis 2022, 2). Ellis explains that religious literacy aims to “facilitate, in nonsectarian ways, discussion of religion and religious life in the public sphere” (2022, 3). So, it refers to a literacy of lived religion that is not taught through a certain doctrine and it encompasses different (lived) religious traditions. Conroy and Davis add that there also needs to be a focus on the complexities, contradictions and challenges to have a basic understanding of a religious tradition (2008, 187). Religious literacy declined around the end of the twentieth century together with the rise of secularity (Conroy and Davis 2008, 189). The thought of religion disappearing from society paved the way for education to remove religious literacy from its curriculum, which changed to overall social sciences instead of being focused on religion. However, religion did not cease to exist.

Due to the development of secularity for the sake of national integration and development, there was a revival of the discussion of freedom of speech and religion (Schuh, Burchardt, and Wohlrab-Sahr 2012, 367). This discussion became one of the main topics within citizenship education in the law of 2006 (Willems et al. 2012, 80). Nord and Haynes state that good education should include different approaches and ways of thinking about the different subjects of the curricula (Ellis 2022, 25). Religious literacy is needed for this, and it should be in the form of an ongoing discussion about where one can find the truth, which connects to the idea of critical democratic citizenship (Leenders, Veugelers, and de Kat 2008, 158; Willems et al. 2012, 80). Exposing students to different religious ideas within the setting of education might stimulate students of different (non-)religious backgrounds to see people with other backgrounds and opinions as valid, even when they contradict their own ideologies (Ellis 2022, 28). The ideas of Moore are even more linked to the values of critical democratic citizenship education: Moore explains that religious literacy should serve to enable students to become active citizens that live according to the ideals of democracy and to act as informed moral citizens (Ellis 2022, 33). Shaw even proposes a new form of literacy in citizenship education, namely worldview literacy (Shaw 2022, 3). She states that worldview literacy is more all-encompassing than religious literacy and combines religious education and citizenship education in a way that fits within the norms and values of democracy (ibid). To Shaw, worldview literacy focuses more on the lived reality and diversity in a democracy which goes beyond objective knowledge about religious traditions and includes minority religions and non-religions worldviews (Shaw 2022, 4, 6). Verkerk and Davidsen (2020) go beyond the idea of

citizenship education. They also plead for the importance of religious literacy, but the difference is that they plead for religious literacy as a subject for students to follow in school. Their dream is “for each child to follow good religious education” (Verkerk and Davidsen 2020, 52). By ‘good religious education’ they mean diverse and real education about religion and the changeability of religion. For them, a teacher being religiously literate is the bare minimum to teach about different religious beliefs and what these beliefs mean to students without a religious background and from different religious backgrounds (ibid, 53).

So, many scholars agree it is important to bring religious literacy into citizenship education for it to be a successful way to create discussion, identity development, and social involvement (Conroy and Davis 2008, 187; Leenders, Veugelers, and de Kat 2008, 158; Verkerk and Davidsen 2020, 52-53; Veugelers 2011, 213; Willems et al. 2012, 80). However, except for Verkerk and Davidsen, none of these scholars seem to pose a way in how to achieve religious literacy in citizenship education. Without this skill it will be hard to tackle the new contradictions, taboos, dilemmas, and other challenges that religious traditions bring to citizenship education (Conroy and Davis 2008, 200) and for that reason it is important to research how teachers approach religious topics in a diverse classroom setting.

2. Citizenship in the Context of Dutch Education

To be able to understand how the theoretical framework can be linked to the lived part of the research, namely how the teachers approach citizenship education during their work, it is important to know the context in which this research has taken place. The research takes place in the Dutch field of citizenship education. Hence, it is important to know the Dutch laws and policies involving citizenship education. Furthermore, for this research the organization Cross Your Borders and their activities in secondary (both public and Christian) schools was used as the research field of this research and to approach teachers and start conversations about topics regarding citizenship education and religion. So, it is also important to provide some background information on organization Cross Your Borders.

Citizenship education in the Netherlands

Citizenship education is in the Netherlands, like in many other countries around the world, a compulsory part of education. Since 2006 schools in the Netherlands are obliged by law to add citizenship education into their curricula (Willems et al. 2012, 77). However, for a long time there was no clear view on how schools should approach citizenship education. Schools could decide themselves how to bring citizenship education into their curricula, which brought a wide variety of approaches (Leenders, Veugelers, and de Kat 2007, 155). The only guidelines of citizenship education were that it should enhance the virtues of justice, tolerance, and solidarity (Willems et al. 2012, 80).

Since August of 2021, the law was adjusted to bring more guidelines for and conformity between schools in the Netherlands (Inspectie van het Onderwijs (2), n.d.). The new goal was more focused on 'social cohesion' among the different people in the Netherlands, for which the core values of the democratic constitutional state in the Netherlands are used as a starting point. These values are freedom of speech, equality, understanding, tolerance, rejection of intolerance and discrimination, and autonomy and responsibility (ibid.). In other words, the Dutch approach towards citizenship education is a form of critical democratic citizenship education (Leenders, Veugelers, and de Kat 2008, 158; Willems et al. 2012, 80).

The teaching of the different values connected to the Dutch democratic constitutional state means that the values of schools in the Netherlands cannot be in conflict with these values (Inspectie van het Onderwijs (2), n.d.). In addition to these values, schools are also obliged to teach social competences. However, the way in which the school teaches these core values to the students is still open to interpretation. There are four demands to which the school has to

adhere: citizenship should be goal oriented; citizenship education should be coherent; citizenship education should be recognizable as such; and schools should be able to measure the results of the goals regarding citizenship education (ibid.). These four demands are not concerned with the content of citizenship education, which means teachers have the freedom to decide on their own citizenship content. As a result, the teacher must solve the problem of teaching about the core values of the democratic state, while being in line to the values of the school, and also adhering to the four demands set by the government. Furthermore, they must also take part in citizenship education as a discussion starter, motivator, and moderator (Leenders, Veugelers, and de Kat 2008, 158; Willems et al 2012, 81).

To make sure all demands are adhered to and citizenship education serves the purpose at schools, the inspectorate of education checks the citizenship education curriculum at schools during their regular check-ups (Inspectie van het Onderwijs (1), n.d.). However, in the podcast *Wat vraagt de nieuwe burgerschapswet van scholen?* (What does the new citizenship law ask of schools?) Laurens de Croes, of the inspectorate of education, tells that it is hard to check all the demands set by the government (Inspectie van het Onderwijs Podcast 2021). He explains it is complicated to measure the results of the citizenship education goals, since citizenship education is about values and social competences, which cannot be measured in numbers. Furthermore, de Croes tells that schools in the Netherlands have a hard time handling opinions that are not in line with the ‘core values of Dutch society’ (ibid.). As examples he names ideas of women inferiority or sexuality, or students that have religious opinions that differ from the other students in the classroom. These opinions might oppose the values of equality, by seeing women as inferior, or tolerance, by openly showing intolerance towards people with different sexualities. Teachers have a hard time creating a setting in which students can talk about these opinions and create tolerance by modifying opinions to a certain extent or create a safe space to openly discuss different opinions and respect these differences among each other (ibid.).

So, citizenship education policies in the Netherlands have improved since the start in 2006. However, there are still no clear guidelines, which makes that the values are open to interpretation and the curricula between schools might differ extremely. In spite of that, the inspectorate of education will check at schools if they adhere to the demands set by the government, which brings a form of conformity between schools. Yet, there is still a long way to go. At most schools the results of citizenship education are not measurable, since they involve values and no measurable skills. Furthermore, teachers are not trained in handling differences in opinions and tolerance that are not in line with the values of the democratic constitutional state. Hence, religious literacy can be seen as an important skill for teachers to improve their

knowledge on religious differences and being able to moderate discussions involving religiously shaped opinions.

Organization Cross Your Borders

Organization Cross Your Borders is an organization that tries to help schools to find a fitting format to apply citizenship education in the curricula of different secondary schools in the Netherlands. The organization gave me the opportunity to conduct my research during their projects and allowed me to ask the different teachers helping during these projects to participate in an interview. Cross Your Borders is a foundation established in 2004 that strives to inspire youth to be involved in society and the world (Cross Your Borders 2022b). To achieve this goal, the organization chose to focus on secondary education as the place to teach the youth about citizenship and social issues around the world.

The goal of Cross Your Borders is split into three parts: national, international, and global. The national part is focused on creating consciousness about our own welfare, but at the same time not forgetting that there are still problems in our society (Cross Your Borders 2022b). The international part is focused on the increasing globalization that brings new challenges and opportunities for collaboration between countries and societies, but for which an open mind is needed. The global part is focused on extreme forms of injustice that transcends the borders of countries and for which people around the world need to work together to work towards a solution. As a starting point to teach about these goals and problems related to these goals, Cross Your Borders uses the Universal Declaration of Human rights and the Sustainable Development Goals to guide their organization (ibid.).

To shape the students into global citizens, Cross Your Borders offers a range of five different projects (Cross Your Borders 2022a). Schools can hire Cross Your Borders to organize these two to four day long projects with the help of interns from many different backgrounds. Through several games that focus on many different national, international, and global topics, Cross Your Borders tries to open the conversation and provide a discussion about these topics (Cross Your Borders 2022a). The focus is not on providing a certain way of thinking about the issues and topics discussed during the problem, but to create a place to talk about these and to provide the students with information to make them think about their own opinion about these topics (ibid.).

This research is specifically focused on two of the five projects of Cross Your Borders, namely the GlobalandXL BASIC and GlobalandXL PRO projects, which can be played in both Dutch and English. During both of these projects the student work in teams to govern an

imaginary country with many problems. In several games, the teams earn money to improve their country. They have to levy taxes, after which they need to divide the taxes over different ministries in their country. After each round the consequences of their choices can be studied and the process starts all over again. Teams do this for four rounds, after which the top three teams of the participating teams of the school will receive a prize (Cross Your Borders 2022b).

In the GlobalandXL BASIC project¹, two games are played in which religious topics will be discussed. The game ‘Detectives’ is focused on refugees and reasons why people flee their country. Two of the reasons that will be discussed are (religious) beliefs and homosexuality. During these discussions, different opinions will arise that offer interesting insights in how teachers approach this discussion and the students. Another game is ‘Ghetto Radio,’ in which the students need to write their own protest song about a preassigned topic, such as hate towards homosexuals, genocide, and war rape. These different topics are often in discussion related to religion and religious opinions about which the class will start a conversation, which the intern supervisor and teacher have to guide. The GlobalandXL BASIC project is mainly focused on opening the conversation and creating awareness among the students about these topics. The teacher offers extra insights in the topics and helps with guiding the conversation, which is a conversation starter for the small talk and interviews of this research.

The GlobalandXL PRO project² is more focused towards making the students think and forming an opinion about the topics. The conversation after each game is for that reason formatted as a discussion for the class. The game ‘Ghetto Radio’ is also played during this project, but gives a more in-depth discussion about the different topics. The difference between the BASIC and PRO projects is that the PRO project has an ‘After Talk’ after each ‘govern your country’ round. These ‘After Talks’ focus on a specific dilemma that each imaginary country has to deal with, such as an aging society, how to approach a refugee crisis, or cultural differences within a country. During these, most often heated discussions arise in which differences in religious opinions might come forward on which the intern supervisor and the teacher have to respond.

¹ The knowledge about the content of the project is based on the information received during the internship, a training about the project, participating as an intern supervisor on the project, and from the people working at Cross Your Borders. For extra information, see <https://www.crossyourborders.nl/glxl-basic-vo>

² The knowledge about the content of the project is based on the information received during the internship, working as an intern supervisor on the project, and from the people working at Cross Your Borders. For extra information, see <https://www.crossyourborders.nl/glxl-pro-vo>

So, these different projects and the games played during these projects offer an opening for participant observation, small talk, and can be used as conversation starters for the interviews conducted for this research. The teachers need to react on the discussions in the class in which many different opinions might come forward, which might be complicated to do without enough knowledge on the different backgrounds of these opinions.

3. The role of religious literacy in the classroom

I am walking around in the classroom. We are playing the game Ghetto Radio³. The students are reading different articles about serious topics, such as homophobia and genocide. Three students, who are not in the same group, are standing together and whispering about something. I walk towards them to see what is going on. In the corner of my eye, I see the teacher of the class listening in as well. One of the three students approaches me: 'Miss, we have a question. Currently, it is Ramadan. According to the Islam, we cannot perform the song in front of the class.' I answer that I understand and ask them to help their teams to write on the song and focus on the discussion afterwards, instead of on the performance. The students seem happy with my answer. Then the teacher shouts at one of the students, who is not wearing a headscarf: 'are you a Muslim as well?!?' The student answers 'yes' while clearly showing discomfort because of the harsh question of her teacher.⁴⁵

This vignette shows one of the several encounters I experienced between teachers and students that show some sort of religious illiteracy. Many teachers participating in the research explained they question their knowledge in different religious traditions and the way in which their students practice their religion. In this case, the teacher seemed to associate Islamic women with the presence of a headscarf. In the class there were many students protesting against the idea of performing in front of the class. Hence, the teacher saw the student as someone who was trying to get out of the assignment under false pretense, because of the absence of the headscarf. This incident was resolved easily by the teacher apologizing and the student being distracted by the assignment. However, in different situations this could have escalated in a discussion.

With the new law on citizenship education in 2021, new values to strive towards were formulated. These values are freedom of speech, equality, understanding, tolerance, rejection of intolerance and discrimination, and autonomy and responsibility (Inspectie van het Onderwijs (2), n.d.). To create understanding, tolerance, and equality, one could state a certain knowledge about each other and each other's religious traditions is necessary. In citizenship education, the role of the teacher is to moderate discussions on different topics and to motivate students to participate in these discussions and formulate their own opinion (Leenders, Veugelers, and de Kat 2008, 158; Willems et al 2012, 81). Hence, my question is *how do teachers view the importance of religious literacy for moderating conversations between*

³ For an explanation of the game, see chapter X

⁴ Encounter during my internship on 03-04-2023.

⁵ To contrast the vignettes to the quotes in blocks, the vignettes are added in italic.

students in the classroom? Religious literacy might offer teachers knowledge on the lived practices of different religious traditions, which students in the class might affiliate to. This way teachers will be able to converse with students about religious practices and discuss the values of citizenship education while being aware of the religious ideas that might influence the opinions on the values (Ellis 2022, 2,3; Shaw 2022, 3,4,6).

The teachers participating in this research have varying opinions on the necessity of religious literacy. Most participants agree teachers in subjects on religion or social studies should have knowledge on different religious traditions:

I'm a teacher, and they can come to me with things, but I do think of the subjects where you go a little deeper into it is more social studies for example, or philosophy of life, they have those too.⁶

P3 is an English teacher who teaches at a Christian school. She herself is a Christian as well. In this quote she explains that students are open to come to her with problems they might experience in school or at home, since she is a health care counselor as well for the school. However, she explains that the in-depth religious literacy should be for the teachers teaching social studies or philosophy of life. Yet, this does not mean to P3 that teachers should not have a certain amount of religious literacy: 'I do think that especially in today's society, and indeed with all the student types we have here at school, it is helpful if you know a little bit about what beliefs are behind a religious belief.'⁷ Even though the school has Christian affiliation, by far not all students and teachers themselves are Christians, P3 explained. They have, for example, Islamic and atheist students and teachers at the school as well. This reflects the growing diversity in the Netherlands through the arrival of many different migrant groups at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century (Miedema and Bertram-Troost 2008, 123). In this quote it is clear that she believes that these religious backgrounds are important to recognize and know about to create understanding of each other in society. So, even though P3 explains that in-depth religious literacy should in schools mainly be for social studies or philosophy of life teachers, in society there should be a certain amount of religious literacy as well.

⁶ Interview with P3 on 10-05-2023. Original: 'Ik ben docent, en ze kunnen met dingen bij mij terecht, maar ik vind wel van de vakken waar je er wat dieper op in gaat is eerder maatschappijleer bijvoorbeeld, of levensbeschouwing, die hebben ze ook.'

⁷ Interview with P3 on 10-05-2023. Original: 'Ik denk wel dat dat zeker in de maatschappij van nu, en met inderdaad alle leerling types die wij hier op school hebben, het wel handig is als je een beetje weet wat voor overtuigingen er achter een religieuze overtuiging zitten.'

Other teachers do not see the necessity of religious literacy for themselves and their subject. For example, P8, who has been teaching engineering for 24 years and who is a mentor to the vocational education VMBO class, told me about his opinion on religious knowledge:

No, I don't have enough knowledge about [different religious traditions]. (...) But look, I teach engineering, not social studies, not religion, I am a mentor and then you get certain things about... a little bit of this comes up sometimes, but I find it much more important for social studies and religion for example.⁸

As P8 states in this quote, during his engineering classes there is no room for discussing religious topics. Engineering is not a subject that is linked to social life or religious traditions. However, during mentor classes, in which students are guided through their academic development and personal or classroom problems, sometimes religiously loaded topics come to the surface. Since mentor classes are about talking about these personal or classroom problems, P8 can imagine why religious literacy could help, but he states the priority should be at teachers teaching social studies or religion. Yet, when there is no religious literacy, how can one discuss these topics in the mentor classes? Especially since citizenship education is not necessarily connected to one subject in schools, but has a wide variety of approaches which transcends subjects in schools (Leenders, Veugelers, and de Kat 2007, 155).

Most teachers, mainly of public schools, have a clear solution for discussing religious topics without religious literacy. Namely, respect. P4 was unsure about the necessity of religious literacy. She has been a biology teacher for thirty years and has seen so many different backgrounds that she stated:

But maybe you don't [have to have knowledge about several religious backgrounds], because you can't know it all... You can't know all the ins and outs of all those backgrounds, I think. So, I think in a public school, you can also stick to being respectful to each other (...).⁹

P4 sees religious literacy as too much to know. Even within most religious traditions, there is a lot of diversity in norms and values. For this reason, P4 states it is impossible to know 'all the

⁸ Interview with P8 on 23-05-2023. Original: 'Nee, daar heb ik niet genoeg kennis over. (...). Maar kijk, ik geef natuurlijk techniek, ik geef geen maatschappijleer, ik geef geen godsdienst en dat kan toch meer... Ja, ik ben wel mentor en dan krijg je bepaalde dingen over... Een klein beetje komt dit wel eens voor, maar ik vind t weer veel belangrijker voor maatschappijleer en Godsdienst bijvoorbeeld.'

⁹ Interview with P4 on 11-05-2023. Original: 'Maar misschien ook weer niet, want je kunt het niet allemaal... Je kunt al die achtergronden niet alle ins en outs van weten, denk ik. Dus ik denk op een openbare school kun je het er ook op houden dat je respectvol naar elkaar toe moet zijn.'

ins and outs.’ Furthermore, when there is respect for everyone, religious literacy is not necessary in public schools, according to most participants working at public schools, since there is a ‘passive neutrality’ towards religion at public schools in the Netherlands (Jackson et al. 2007, 210). However, this passive neutrality does not mean that one’s religious background is not important. Like P4 says, it should be respected, but in-depth knowledge is not necessarily needed. P6 would agree to P4. P6 teaches French at the same school as P4. She explained to me: ‘We just have to respect each other. We have to be able to get through the same door with everybody. And think from love. And that’s actually what I try to impart in my classes.’¹⁰ P6 is a Christian herself. Hence, she finds love for those around you and respect the most important values, more important than religious literacy. If you love the people around you, P6 states, that is the only thing you need to create respect for each other. When this is achieved, religious backgrounds, and for that religious literacy, are not of importance.

Still, even though not all teachers agree on the necessity of religious literacy, most of them state they would like to have more knowledge on different religious backgrounds. P9 states the importance of religious literacy for avoiding problems and ignorance. He states:

I think it’s extremely important that there is much more clear information, and it doesn’t even have to be very long or comprehensive, but that there is clearer information about some groups, beliefs, some types of people. I notice that in groups of students in our school and our population, that is sometimes very sadly stated. And because of that, a good number of problems can arise. The ignorance and not realizing, not knowing why another is like that, does like that. A source of problems.¹¹

P9 is a physics teacher that enjoys discussing topics with his mentor class that are not physics related. He explains that after years of teaching physics, he sometimes likes to talk about more loaded topics with his students. However, discussing loaded topics, such as religion, asks of the discussion moderator, which is the teacher in citizenship education (Leenders, Veugelers, and de Kat 2008, 158; Willems et al 2012, 81), to know about the topics discussed. P9 says in the quote teachers often experience problems in the classroom because of a lack of religious literacy

¹⁰ Interview with P5 and P6 on 12-05-2023. Original: ‘wij moeten gewoon respect hebben voor elkaar. Wij moeten door 1 deur kunnen met iedereen. En vanuit liefde denken. En dat is eigenlijk wat ik in mijn klassen probeer mee te geven.’

¹¹ Interview with P9 on 23-05-2023. Original: ‘Ik denk dat t giga belangrijk is dat er veel meer duidelijke informatie, en t hoeft geen eens heel lang te zijn of uitgebreid, maar dat er over een aantal groeperingen, geloven, een aantal soorten mensen, duidelijkere informatie is. Ik merk dat dat bij groepen kinderen op onze school en bij ons populatie soms heel triest gesteld is. En daardoor dat een flink aantal problemen kunnen ontstaan. Het Onwetendheid en het niet beseffen, het niet weten waarom een ander zo is, zo doet. Een bron van problemen.’

with results in ignorance and lack of empathy. This can be seen among students, which P9 explains, but also in contact between teachers and students, like in the vignette at the beginning of this chapter. In the vignette ignorance is shown through the teacher not seeing the student as Islamic, since she was not wearing a headscarf and because of that seeing her religious expression of not wanting to perform as dodging an assignment.

Another situation in which lack of empathy and ignorance can be seen in the story an employee of Cross Your Borders told me:

During drinks after a workshop day at the office of Cross Your Borders, I was talking to a fellow intern and an employee about the involvement of teachers during the projects of Cross Your Borders. The employee explained a situation in which she was a class supervisor for the first time in a long time. She explained that the teacher in her class was in a certain way involved during the project, but only in a way that she wanted to 'be friends' with the students in her class.

'In the game Ghetto Radio, we were discussing the topic of homophobia. There were mainly Islamic students in the class, but also one student who is homosexual.' The employee explained. 'The students who presented the topic explained that in certain countries in the Middle-East, homosexuals might receive the death penalty. Several students said they agree to the death penalty for homosexuals, because, according to them, in the Islam homosexuality is not allowed. I tried to make these students understand the implications of the death penalty, but they did not seem to understand. At this point I was looking at the teacher for help, but she was laughing with the students and not correcting their behavior. It seemed like she wanted to stay friends with the students and not be seen as the 'strict teacher.' As a result, the students did not stop making comments and the homosexual student stayed quiet for the rest of the project.'¹²

The employee explained that she had a hard time handling this situation, because not everyone was respected in this classroom. In this vignette can be seen that the teacher acted ignorant towards the homophobic comments of the students by laughing at their jokes. Furthermore, the classroom no longer was a safe space for all students, since the homosexual student decided to stay quiet for the rest of the project. In this case the ignorance was not towards the religious persons of the group, but in the way the religion was acted on. The employee thought the reason for this was that the teacher did not want to be known as a strict teacher, but also that she did not know how to properly address the comments made by the students. Hence, when I asked the employee about religious literacy, she said she sees the necessity of teachers being religiously literate to properly handling similar situations in the classroom. However, one could

¹² Conversation with a fellow intern and an employee of Cross Your Borders on 24-04-2023.

argue this situation goes beyond being religious literate. The teacher in question might be religious literate, but might lack the skills to properly bring this religious literacy into action by addressing the comments of the classmates and act on the discrimination towards their fellow classmate. So, only with religious literacy, the problem of discussing religious topics in an appropriate manner is not solved.

Opinions on whose responsibility it is to create more religious literacy differ much among teachers. In the interviews I asked the participants if schools have a responsibility to provide teachers with tools to create religious literacy. Most of them answered that the school does not necessarily have the responsibility to create religious literacy among teachers, but that they should offer more guidelines in citizenship education, or tools for creating religious literacy when teachers ask. For example, during the mentor classes. P2 told me about her experience:

Now mentors can kind of decide for themselves what is told in the mentor classes and what we are going to do, but I think if there is a set school program, or certain topics that really need to be covered, doesn't matter when in the year, but as long as it is done, I think that can have a big impact, yes.¹³

She is an Islamic teacher at a school that is Christian from origin. As a child, she went to the same school as she teaches at now and she said that many things changed. For example, the school became more diverse. She sometimes is confronted with discussions or comments from students that need to be addressed. She tells in this quote that the mentor lessons would be a good place to talk it out. Or even address certain topics related to citizenship education before they can cause a problem for the students. To do this, the right tools need to be provided to teachers, such as an open curriculum in which teachers have to address the same citizenship education topics, but in the order they feel is fitting to their class. P6 would agree to the ideas of P2. She states as well that the current curriculum should be more adjusted to discussing religious topics with the class during mentor hours. However, she thinks it would be more helpful to react instead of act:

¹³ Interview with P2 on 10-05-2023. Original: 'Nu kunnen mentoren wel een beetje zelf bepalen wat er in de mentor les wordt verteld en wat we gaan doen, maar ik denk als er een vast schoolprogramma is, of bepaalde onderwerpen die echt behandeld moeten worden, maakt niet uit wanneer in het jaar, maar als het maar wordt gedaan, ik denk dat dat wel een grote invloed kan hebben, ja.'

You notice that when you have two years of mentoring, then you run into certain things. I pick things up the moment I signal them. Because if you cover everything in order, it won't make an impact. It should be a topic that is already discussed among students.¹⁴

So P6 recognizes the importance of mentor classes in citizenship education, but adds to the quote of P2 by stating that topics have to live among students for them to make an impact. She approaches the topics before they blow up, but also once it lives among students. As stated in the quote, experience in noticing when certain topics might arise help in addressing them in the mentor classes. However, not all teachers have this experience, which can bring new problems for teachers that do not know how to approach religious topics in citizenship education.

Other participants state it is the responsibility of the teacher to have sufficient religious literacy. Ideas for creating more religious literacy among teachers that were suggested are, for example, schools funding trainings or offering workshops, or displaying leaflets in the teacher's room to take home. Yet, most participants agree that experience in the classroom is the best way to learn:

I learned [religious literacy] mainly from experience and conversations with students. It's not that I go looking for what really belongs to their culture, because I notice that a Muslim from Syria has a very different religion and culture than a Muslim from Morocco. And one is very religious and the other says yes, I am Muslim but I don't pray or wear a headscarf. So, it really depends on the student.¹⁵

P7 is a geography teacher who is in her classes most confronted with topics such as migration and cultural differences since this is part of the subject, to a certain level. During her studies she practiced with discussing religious topics and learned about the 'five world religions'¹⁶, yet she thinks she has learned most while teaching. As she says, it depends on the student how they live their religion and what they feel comfortable with, which shows how lived religion is portrayed in the classroom. For this reason, she thinks it is really important to discuss the topics with the students and learn from each other in practice in a respectful manner.

¹⁴ Interview with P5 and P6 on 12-05-2023. Original: 'Dat merk je, dat wanneer je twee jaar mentoraat hebt, dan loop je tegen bepaalde dingen aan. En ik ben zo dat ik het oppak op het moment dat ik het signaleer. Want als je alles van hoofdstuk 1 tot en met dat behandelt, dan komt het ook niet binnen. Het moet wel spelen.'

¹⁵ Interview with P7 on 23-05-2023. Original: 'En dat heb ik vooral geleerd uit ervaring en gesprekken met leerlingen. T is niet dat ik zelf ga zoeken van wat nou echt bij hun cultuur hoort, want ik merk toch wel dat een moslim uit Syrië weer heel ander geloof en cultuur heeft dan een moslim uit Marokko. En de ene is heel strenggelovig en de ander die zegt ja ik ben moslim maar ik bid niet of ik draag geen hoofddoek. Dus het is echt per leerling weer afhankelijk.'

¹⁶ By the five world religious are most often meant Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism.

P1 explains that he had to research certain religious practices himself, since he did not know about them and they were not taught about during his studies:

Because it's complicated for me, for example, I did have a student once before who participated in Ramadan. But he was also allowed to somehow make exceptions or something, there was something about that. So, I had no problem with it at all, all these years, and so now I came across it, and here at school it's much more a thing. And then I thought "what's that really like?" And then, indeed, I looked up what is it, how long does it last, why the sugar festival, and so on. (...) Because then I want to adapt, but myself I have... I never had any education in that. And now suddenly experienced it all, because here at school there are many more varieties than I have ever seen.¹⁷

P1 is teaching physical education for almost 28 years. He thinks the reason he was not taught about religious differences was because his studies were such a long time ago, but he does not know if the situation currently has improved. In this quote he explains that he wants to learn about the different religious traditions with which he was confronted at the school he works at. Before, at the previous school he worked at, there were almost no students with a migration background, he explained. At his current school he was confronted with student participating in Ramadan, which influenced his physical education classes, hence he started researching the tradition and learning about it to adapt his classes properly for these students.

So, there are many opinions on religious literacy for teachers in citizenship education. Social studies and religion teachers should have a well-developed religious literacy, but there are many different opinions if teachers of other subjects should have religious literacy as well. However, most teachers do want a more sufficient religious literacy, because they experience problems regarding religious differences in the classroom. Some of these problems can be resolved with respect for everyone in the classroom, but religious literacy is even better, to strive towards understanding, tolerance, and equality. Yet, even though teachers strive towards understanding among students, they are often unsure about how to handle their own opinions in discussions on religious topics.

¹⁷ Interview with P1 on 20-05-2023. Original: Want het is wel ingewikkeld voor mij bijvoorbeeld, want ik had wel eerder ooit een leerling die deed mee met de ramadan. Maar die mocht ook weer op een of andere manier zichzelf ontzien ofzo, daar was wat mee. Dus ik had er helemaal geen probleem mee al die jaren en nu kwam ik het dus tegen en hier op school is het veel meer een ding. En toen dacht ik 'hoe zit dat eigenlijk?' En toen heb ik inderdaad opgezocht van wat is het, hoelang duurt het, waarom dat suikerfeest, enzovoort. (...) Want dan wil ik me graag aanpassen, maar ik heb daar zelf voorheen, ik heb daar nooit iets in gehad. En nu ineens viel ik erin, want hier op school zijn er veel meer variëteiten dan ik ooit heb gezien.

4. The positionality and perspectives of teachers

In citizenship education, the role of the teacher is to be a moderator, but also to stimulate the students to form their opinions on the topics (Leenders, Veugelers, and de Kat 2008, 158; Willems et al 2012, 81). In education, teachers also form a role model for the students in their classes. As a result, many teachers are unsure about how much they can share about their own opinions and values in life with the class. Hence, the second sub-question is *How do teachers cope with their own opinions on religious topics in the classroom?*

Several teachers in this research do not value their own opinion as important in the classroom. They consider their role as informants of educative topics, not as sources for opinions. When controversial topics come forward, most participants say to keep their own opinion to the side:

As a teacher you always have to remain very neutral. Even though you have a certain opinion, you try not to show it, to be very honest. Because you don't want to... Yes, you don't want to take sides actually, so to speak, and that's not the purpose.¹⁸

In this quote, P2 tells that it is not that teachers do not have an opinion, but the aim is to keep their opinions to themselves and stimulate discussion among students without involving their arguments. By taking sides, students might feel like their opinions is worth less than someone else's opinion, which can create an unsafe classroom environment. P1 also values neutrality: 'I manage to do that very neutrally. Without really stating my opinion too clearly, and if I really want to share my opinion, I always say "but that's what I think".¹⁹' Contrasting to P2, P1 does sometimes share his opinion in a classroom setting. However, he tries to explain clearly to the students that it is his opinion and that the students do not have to share this opinion. He adds to this the next sentence: 'I think I'm a lot more adamant in personal life than I am in work.'²⁰ This sentence shows how he does have strong opinions on certain topics that could be discussed in citizenship education, but how he sees the value of a 'neutral' teacher for the students. However, he also shows, in the first quote, that being completely neutral is almost impossible to do. Hence, he tries to keep his opinion vague. Still, how is one able to keep neutral in discussions

¹⁸ Interview with P2 on 10-05-2023. Original: 'als docent moet je natuurlijk altijd heel neutraal blijven. Al heb je een bepaalde mening, die probeer je niet te tonen eigenlijk, om heel eerlijk te zijn. Want je wil... Ja, je wil geen kant kiezen eigenlijk, om het maar zo te zeggen, en dat is ook niet de bedoeling.'

¹⁹ Interview with P1 on 10-05-2023. Original: 'dat red ik wel om dat heel neutraal te doen. Zonder echt te duidelijk mijn mening, en als ik echt mijn mening wil dragen dan zeg ik dat er wel bij van 'maar dat denk ik''

²⁰ Interview with P1 on 10-05-2023. Original: 'Ik denk dat ik in het persoonlijke leven een stuk stilliger ben dan in het werk.'

about social topics in citizenship education in which the goal is to have students form their opinions? Especially when students pose strong opinion, or only one side of the dilemma is addressed by the students?

In a conversation with a teacher at the end of a project, the topic of sharing different sides of a dilemma came forward:

At the end of the project, I approached the geography teacher that was supervising the class. 'I really enjoyed the discussions today! Everyone was participating so nicely!' He answered that he felt the same, but that normally this is not the case with this class. One student often has really strong opinions that creates an unsafe environment, but he was not present today. I asked him, since he is a geography teacher, how he approaches this, and his own opinions, in his subject. He stated that he tries not to show his own opinion, but does let know that he has an opinion. Furthermore, he tries to highlight different sides of the topics discussed, to try to make everyone feel validated in their opinion.²¹

As shown in this vignette, by highlighting the different sides of a dilemma, students that do not feel comfortable sharing their opinion can still be validated. Their opinion is to a certain extent addressed by the teacher because they share the side that is not addressed in the opinions of the other students. He explains as well how this is extra important in cases in which extreme opinions are shared and other students might be attacked in their being. By sharing this different side, the pressure of this extreme opinion is reduced, which makes the environment safer. P3 would agree to the geography teacher in the vignette. P3 explains how a teacher could contribute in opinion formation, namely by sharing different perspectives of the dilemma discussed without stating one side is better than the other: 'Look, with certain social things, (...), I always try to show them the different sides of a dilemma.'²² Yet, as a requirement, P3 explains that one has to know about the topic to be able to show the different side of the dilemma. She is a Christian herself, so she feels comfortable showing the different sides of Christianity. But on the topic of child marriage in Pakistan, which she at a certain point had to discuss with the class, she felt like she did not know enough, so she skipped that topic.

Still, sometimes teachers would like to share some of their life experience with their students. They might think the students could learn something from their stories or want to share their experiences as a way of bonding. P6, a Christian teacher who also participates in religious conferences and communal religious experiences, explained to me that she one time

²¹ Conversation with a teacher at a project on 14-04-2023.

²² Interview with P3 on 10-05-2023. Original: 'Kijk, bij bepaalde maatschappelijke dingen, (...) Ik probeer ze altijd wel de verschillende kanten van een dilemma te laten zien.'

made the mistake to share too much of her own experiences with the class: a student was frightened by the supernatural experience she shared with the class, which resulted in nightmares for the students and an angry phone call from one of their parents for P5. She shares a wise lesson with me and the other teacher participating in the interview:

So, you always have to be careful, especially with anything to do with religion or faith, to make that discussable in class. And even if the conversation comes up and you get questions, watch what you answer. Don't expose too much of yourself.²³

Understanding is still important, and for this personal experience is sometimes necessary. However, when someone is in a role model or authority position, like a teacher, people might be more likely to see that experience or situations as the only truth and do not reflect on what is being said. Furthermore, in this example, the religious conversation referenced to has to do with supernatural experiences. P6 explained that the student became scared because of the experience she shared, which shows that not every student is capable in dealing with or understanding of supernatural experiences. Hence, she states that one should be aware of how much they share about their own experiences. Like P6, P3 also told me she sometimes has a hard time deciding what she can share with the class and what she should keep to herself. She explains:

I would certainly like to know for myself a little more clearly what you... Sometimes I have doubts about what you can and can't say or something, that I think... What I said, I don't show off my faith, but sometimes things do come up that I think 'I would like to share this with them,' but of course my opinion is then also tinged by my philosophy of life.²⁴

P3 is a Christian as well and sometimes would like to tell her students about some lessons she learned through her religion, but she does not want to impose her religion on her students. Especially since there are no clear guidelines in what one is allowed to share about their own religion and when something can be seen as too imposing. The reason this quote is extra interesting, is the fact she teaches at a school with Christian affiliation, which could mean that

²³ Interview with P5 and P6 on 12-05-2023. Original: 'Dus je moet altijd uitkijken, zeker met alles wat religie en geloof te maken heeft, om dat bespreekbaar te maken in de klas. En ook al komt het gesprek erop en krijg je vragen, kijk uit met wat je antwoordt. Geef niet te veel van jezelf bloot.'

²⁴ Interview with P3 on 10-05-2023. Original: 'Ik zou zeker zelf wel iets helderder willen helpen wat je... Soms twijfel ik van wat kan je wel en niet zeggen ofzo, dat ik denk... Wat ik zei, ik loop niet met mijn geloof te koop, maar soms komen er wel dingen op waarvan ik denk 'ik zou ze wel dit mee willen geven', maar mijn mening is dan natuurlijk ook getint door mijn levensovertuiging.'

Christian norms and values are extra respected. However, since there are many students of different backgrounds at the school, she decides differently. She decided that students can always ask her about these things, but she will not share them with the class without asking.

Both these participants want to indirectly create religious literacy by sharing stories about how religion played part in the happenings of their lives, but do not want to impose their religion on the students. Yet, religion plays a large part in their daily life, on which they might base certain decision and form opinions. So, the dilemma in sharing experiences through lived religion and imposing religion on students plays a part in the teaching of citizenship education for these Christian teachers.

In some cases, it could also be extra important to keep your own opinion as a teacher or to alter the way to share this opinion, because this opinion differs too much with the class. This connects, for example, to the case of P6 and expressing one's religious values to a class in which the class does not share her supernatural beliefs, only the other way around. In some classes, students share certain norms and values, for example through a shared religion, or the norms and values of a village. When a teacher comes in and shares their experiences that contrast these norms and values, problems might arise in respect and understanding. This is what happened during a project at which I was the project manager:

Together with the project assistant I am enjoying my lunch after the other interns went back to their classes, until one of the teachers approaches us. She tells us that during the game Detectives, there were some problems in her class. The intern who is supervising her class has strong opinions on human rights and equality for everyone. They were discussing reasons people flee a country and one of the students had to draw homosexuality as a reason to flee. The teacher explained that afterwards, during the discussion, the intern came on strong and accused society of being homophobic in a class in which more than half of the students are Islamic.

The teacher explained that she was shocked by the lack of adaptability of the intern to a class in which over half of the students have a different view towards homosexuality than the intern does herself. To the teacher, adaptability is one of the most important skills of a teacher, especially in discussing sensitive topics such as homosexuality. Even when you have a strong opinion on a subject, she states, you have to adapt to the class to some extent to keep the peace.²⁵

In this vignette, a teacher explains the importance of adaptability. Between the lines one reads that adaptability and peace in the classroom is, to the teacher, more important than showing

²⁵ Conversation at a project with the project assistant and a teacher on 25-05-2023.

one's opinion on different topics. However, to the intern, equality is the most important value which they want to share with the class. The teacher views this conflict of values between her and the intern as ignorance of the intern, because she felt the intern attacked the students with her value of equality. According to the teacher, the ignorance of the intern towards the background of the students in the classroom caused the environment to become unsafe for the possible different opinions of the Islamic students. So, to her, even when a teacher has an opinion they want to share, it is important to consider the backgrounds in the class to adapt your approach to address this opinion. Adaptation is also an important asset of a discussion moderator, which teachers are in citizenship education. A good discussion can only exist when the moderator is able to see both sides of the story and give them both enough attention, even when the moderator themselves agrees more to one side (Leenders, Veugelers, and de Kat 2008, 158; Willems et al 2012, 81).

Still, to have proper discussions in the classroom, students need to feel comfortable talking about different topics, among which sensitive topics and topics on which strong opinions exist. These discussions can be held without the opinion of the teacher or by sharing both sides of the dilemma. To do this, most participants agree, one thing is essential: mutual respect between students and students and the teacher. P10, an art teacher that likes to philosophy, explained to me: 'I am not so much expressing my own opinion directly, more of in general of everyone is equally worthy at this school and everyone counts equally.'²⁶ To P10 respect is the main base of his opinions, which implies that the opinions he has are focused on equality in society. In school this translates to every person counts as the same, regardless of one's background, which are the values of citizenship education. However, one could question if not knowing one's background can create understanding, which is another value of citizenship education. To P10, there is no discussion possible on this opinion of equality. So, the idea is not that his opinion is important, but that equality and respect should be the basic premise of classroom discussions on citizenship education topics. P5 would agree to this: 'Students absolutely do not have to share my opinion. That's just it, everyone is entitled to their own opinion, but it has to be within the bounds of respectfulness.'²⁷ P5 just started teaching last September and for this reason does not have many experiences with discussing sensitive topics. Yet, he has learned from the few encounters he had with students. Mutual respect is the core

²⁶ Interview with P10 on 23-05-2023. Original: 'Ik geef niet zozeer m'n eigen mening direct weer, meer van in z'n algemeenheid van iedereen is op deze school evenveel waard en iedereen telt evenveel mee.'

²⁷ Interview with P5 and P6 on 12-05-2023. Original: 'Leerlingen hoeven absoluut niet mijn mening te delen. Dat is gewoon zo, iedereen heeft recht op zijn eigen mening, maar het moet wel binnen de grenzen van het respectvolle blijven.'

from which he approaches discussion with students currently. P4 would agree to this as well. In her mentor classes she does give her own opinions, because these are based on mutual respect as well:

I do give my own opinion in, but I do make it clear that that is my own opinion. But my opinion is that I think everybody should be able to be themselves. That of course does make it easier than when... if that would not be your opinion, then of course you have to discuss it differently.²⁸

To P4, mutual respect means being able to be yourself in the classroom. When everyone can be themselves, respect follows naturally. She also addresses that being able to share this opinion only works when this really is your opinion. When a teacher values people differently, she explains, they need to address certain discussions differently as well because they need still need to pay respect to every student and opinion in the classroom. However, students might have strong opinions that are not based on mutual respect as well. The role of the teachers is to do something in these situations, but how to do this in a good way is not always clear to teachers (Inspectie van het Onderwijs Podcast 2021).

²⁸ Interview with P4 on 11-05-2023. Original: 'ik geef ook wel mijn eigen mening daarin, maar ik maak wel duidelijk dat dat mijn eigen mening is. Maar mijn mening is wel dat ik vind dat iedereen zichzelf moet kunnen zijn. Dat maakt het natuurlijk wel makkelijker dan wanneer... als dat niet jouw mening zou zijn, dan moet je dat natuurlijk wel anders bespreken.'

5. Handling the opinions of students

Stimulating students to form their opinion on different topics talk about this to create freedom of speech, equality, understanding, tolerance, rejection of intolerance and discrimination, and autonomy and responsibility are the main goals of citizenship education (Inspectie van het Onderwijs (2), n.d.). However, students do not always have opinions that are based on respect, equality, and understanding. Teachers are supposed to moderate these discussions and teach about what certain opinions mean for the student and the people around them, which is not always easy to do. In practice it turned out teachers do not know how to approach situations in which students have many different opinions for different reasons (Inspectie van het Onderwijs Podcast, 2022). Also in this research, all participants explained they find it hard to address the, sometimes extreme, opinions of students. Hence, the third sub-question is *how do teachers handle the opinions of students on religious topics?*

When students bring extreme opinions to the table, by the participants most often defined as opinions that attack other people in their being, several participants want to deescalate the situation as quickly as possible. P9 considers himself a direct person who applies this directness in his conflict resolving methods: ‘Always solution-oriented and in such a way solution-oriented that it is also fast. No things that take a month.’²⁹ When there is an extreme opinion in his class, P9 tries to find a solution for working together in a respectful manner as soon as possible without starting a big conversation with the class. In this way the focus can be on other topics or opinions without them harming people and the attention will not be on this extreme opinion for a long time. P6 would agree to this: ‘The moment a nasty comment is made, briefly, firmly, don't accept it. Because the bigger you make it, the bigger the discussion often becomes.’³⁰ When such a comment is made into a huge ordeal, the attention moves to that comment and the student making the comment. P6 wants to prevent this by directly addressing the student that made the comment and explaining why they should not. The nasty comments she refers to are comments that devalue the lives of others.

Discussions are good, especially for opinion formation, but not when an opinion is just posed to insult others. For this reason, P9 and P6 want to cancel out these opinions fast and efficiently. For many teachers quickly cancelling out nasty comments made by students is not

²⁹ Interview with P9 on 23-05-2023. Original: ‘Altijd oplossend gericht en zo oplossend dat t ook snel is. Geen dingen die een maand hoeven te duren.’

³⁰ Interview with P5 and P6 on 12-05-2023. Original: ‘Op het moment dat er een nare opmerking wordt gemaakt, kort, krachtig, niet accepteren. Want hoe groter je het maakt, hoe groter de discussie wordt vaak.’

a skill they had starting as a teacher. At least, this was the case for P5 who has not yet that much experience teaching as most of the other participants. In our interview he told me openly: ‘

I still sometimes had a bit of a tendency to start discussions in class if I disagreed with the student. Or what a student said. But I'm trying to teach myself not to do that, because that just takes time and energy, so it's better to do that later.³¹

P5 learned from experience in front of the class that not every comment is worth addressing in-depth. Sometimes, when a student makes a controversial comment, P5 wants to discuss this comment with the student. However, he explained that this takes time and energy, which better can be used for teaching his subject.

However, in citizenship education, the time is created to discuss certain opinions. Hence, sometimes teachers do choose to discuss these comments to show the students that certain opinions are not appreciated in the classroom. During a project that I was coordinating, one of my fellow interns came towards me at the beginning of the break. He knew what my research topic was and told me that in his class a situation had happened that I might want to talk about with the teacher of his class. At the end of the break, I had the opportunity to talk to the teacher. She explained the situation to me:

During the game detectives intern N³² called upon a student to draw a reason people would flee their country. When the student saw the reason he had to draw, he gave intern N a death glance. It turned out he had to draw homosexuality. Afterwards during the discussion, we talked about the penalties different countries have on homosexuality. The student in question explained that he agreed to the death penalty on homosexuality, because according to Christianity people are not allowed to engage in sexual relationships with people of the same sex. Niels asked him if he would still agree to this if one of his best friends would be homosexual, and he would. At this point the teacher intervened. She called the Bible a fairytale book and said the opinion of the student was ridiculous.³³

In this vignette the example is shown of a teacher that did not accept the comment made by the student. The intern that was teaching the class about refugees tried to discuss the opinion of the student. He tried to show the other side, but that did not seem to help to alter the opinion of the

³¹ Interview with P5 and P6 on 12-05-2023. Original: ‘Ik heb soms nog wel een beetje de eigenschap gehad om in de klas de discussie aan te gaan als ik het niet eens was met de leerling. Of wat een leerling zei. Maar dat probeer ik mezelf af te leren, want dat kost alleen maar tijd en energie, dus dat kan je beter later doen.’

³² For the privacy of the interns at Cross Your Borders, the names will not be stated.

³³ Situation on 18-04-2023. Explained to me by intern N and the teacher involved

student. The teacher did not agree to the opinion of the student, so she intervened. At the end of the conversation the teacher asked intern N if he found she overreacted. She explained she finds it difficult to approach such situations and to keep her own opinion out of the conversation, especially when the opinions of students might harm the other students in the classroom. In this situation the teacher very clearly devaluates the opinion of the student, which was formed through his religion. As a result, the teacher no longer was a moderator in the discussion, but she showed her own opinion and possibly created an unsafe environment for the student in question (Leenders, Veugelers, and de Kat 2008, 158; Willems et al 2012, 81).

P10 also feels the need to explain to students when certain opinions are not appreciated in the classroom. In doing this, he tries to focus on equality:

If I do have the idea that children are being discriminated against, or that some nasty remarks are being made, that have to do with ethnicity, then I always make work of it, you know, we don't say that here, we don't do that, we all deal with each other in such a way that every person is equally valuable, so you don't make a distinction.³⁴

In this quote, P10 explains he wants everyone to be able to be who they are. He expects his students to respect each other and be tolerant. Hence, when someone makes a remark that harms someone else's identity, even when it is a general remark, he gets involved. In getting involved he explains why everyone is allowed to be who they are and why the comment made is not acceptable. In the Netherlands everyone is allowed to be who they are, but in practice there is still room for improvement of this value. P10 tries to bring this value to his students by stating that the students in his class that have different opinions on equality have to adjust themselves to respect this value. P1 would apply the same strategy to extreme opinions of students, but he explains to me why some teachers might find this hard to do:

And some people would find it more difficult to act on it, because then you also touch, the person who says it, of course also says it from a certain opinion. If, for example, it is a Muslim who says something about homosexuality, that is quite complicated. Because you come right down to their Muslim identity, because for that person, that's the way to practice it, their faith. So that's kind of complicated. However, you have to

³⁴ Interview with P10 on 23-05-2023. Original: 'Als ik is wel het idee heb van dat kinderen gediscrimineerd worden of dat er een vervelende opmerkingen gemaakt wordt, die zeg maar te maken hebben met etniciteit, dan maak ik er wel altijd werk van, weet je wel, van dat zeggen we hier niet, dat doen we niet, wij gaan hier allemaal zo met elkaar om dat ieder mens even waardevol is, dus je maakt geen onderscheid.'

say something about that, because it ... we let it be free. We are in the Netherlands. This is how we do it.³⁵

In this quote, P1 explains that talking about a certain religious tradition becomes complicated when a teacher does not adhere to that religion, but has to say something about that religion. By doing this, he feels like a student might feel attacked in their religious identity. Still, he thinks it is important to address when comments are not appreciated. So, to P1, religious literacy might offer the knowledge to approach situations in which extreme religious opinions are stated, but this does not mean that every teacher is a credible source for the students. He can understand that other teachers might have similar experiences in their subject, especially since he, and he expects others as well, had no education in how to address religion and adapt to religious traditions in his subject. However, we do live in the Netherlands, so he as well states that students themselves also have to adapt to a certain extent to the Dutch norms and values on which is focused in citizenship education.

If a student and a teacher share the same (religious) background, it might be easier to find common ground when extreme opinions are stated in the classroom. Yet, the situation still has to be approached in a respectful manner that offers room to talk. During my internship I was observing a classroom discussing the topic 'homophobia.' A student explained that he agreed to the Saudi-Arabian death penalty on homosexuality because homosexuality is, according to him, forbidden in his religion, the Islam. An Islamic intern was moderating this discussion and saw this conversation as the perfect opportunity to explain some Islamic values to the student:

Shocked by the answer of the students I looked towards fellow intern C³⁶. She stood confident in the back of the class and asked the student: 'what does our religion say about approaching others?' The student answered that the Islam states that you always should approach others with respect. 'And is it to us to decide about someone else's life?' Intern C continued. 'No, it is not,' the student answered. Intern C thanked the students for his answers and explained to the class: 'Even though you do not agree to someone's way of life does not give you the right to decide about their life. We need to have respect for each other despite of our differences.'³⁷

³⁵ Interview with P1 on 10-05-2023. Original: En sommige mensen zouden het moeilijker vinden om er dan op in te grijpen, want dan kom je ook gelijk weer... degene die het zegt, zegt het natuurlijk ook vanuit een bepaalde overtuiging. 'Als het, ik noem maar iets, een moslim is die iets zegt over homoseksualiteit, dat is best ingewikkeld. Want je komt gelijk aan het moslim zijn, want voor diegene is dat de manier om het uit te oefenen, het geloof. Dus dat is wel ingewikkeld. Maar daar moet je iets van zeggen, want het... wij laten het nou eenmaal vrij. We zijn in Nederland. Dit is hoe we het doen.'

³⁶ For the privacy of the interns at Cross Your Borders, the names will not be stated.

³⁷ Observation during the game Ghetto Radio on 14-03-2023.

This vignette shows how the Islamic intern wants to change the student's perception on homosexuality in the Islam, but how she does not want to just tell him. By asking questions and letting the student think by himself, the student reasons through his own knowledge of his religion. As a result, the student saw the logic behind his own reasoning which changed his opinion. During the break after this situation, I explained to the group interns present at the project that I found it amazing how intern C approached the situation and how she respectfully approached the student in such a difficult situation. She explained that in her studies of applied psychology she learned how to approach such difficult situations and that she had the advantage of a shared religion.

So, a Christian teacher can explain something about Christianity to a Christian student in the same way that an Islamic teacher can explain something about Islam to an Islamic student. Yet, when a Christian or atheistic teacher explains something about Islam to an Islamic student, regardless if the information explained is true or false, the student might experience this explanation as an attack on their religion or at least as not credible. Hence, as P1 would say and what I observed during participant observations, religious literacy could be a tool to understand the opinions of students, but one needs to be careful in using religious literacy as a tool to alter or shift a student's opinion through religious knowledge.

Another reason religious discussions might be hard to moderate in the classroom is that these opinions are not always the opinions of the students themselves. For example, P3 explains: 'Sometimes someone puts a very extreme opinion on the table, consciously too, then the conversation doesn't get much further either. That's a pity then.'³⁸ In the case of P3, a student of hers does not share the opinion they are stating, but they want attention. By stating an extreme opinion, students in the class might react to this or the teacher present might say something about this. This is also something that has occurred in several classes I observed during my research and other teachers also stated. P3 explained further: 'the way [the extreme opinion] was brought up in the class brought only laughs. That doesn't move the conversation forward.'³⁹ So, the student in her classroom who made that comment or shared that extreme opinion created a disturbance which caused the seriousness of the topic was disregarded and the conversation stranded.

³⁸ Interview with P3 on 10-05-2023. Original: Soms legt iemand een hele extreme mening op tafel, bewust ook, dan komt het gesprek ook niet veel verder. Dat is wel jammer dan.

³⁹ Interview with P3 on 10-05-2023. Original: 'de manier waarop dat gebracht werd in die klas bracht alleen maar lachers op. Daarmee komt het gesprek niet verder.'

Sometimes students share opinions that are not theirs, but their parents'. P10 and P8, among others, experienced students sharing their parents' opinions on different occasions. P8 explains: 'Yes, there are few houses, you hear then, you know, you often hear the parents talking. You hear that, of course. And then I sometimes explain things.⁴⁰' Students in secondary education have most likely no clue about the house and job market, but they do share opinions related to these markets regarding 'foreigners' or refugees. P8 explains in the quote that these opinions are most likely discussed at home, which the students copy from their parents and share at school. As the next question I asked P8 if these students notice they are talking about their classmates when they speak of foreigners and refugees. According to P8, they do not, because 'that's different.' To de-escalate the situation, P8 tries to explain to his students what the real situation is so they can try to base an opinion around those facts. P10 experiences similar situations:

Although I must say that sometimes you can really see in children that they, so to speak, an opinion that is proclaimed at home, that they also share this in school. But of course, it is logical, how many adolescents of thirteen, fourteen, fifteen years old have either no opinion at all or no idea at all about this and very often talk about what is being ventilated at home during the evening meal.⁴¹

P10 explains as well that he notices when a student shares an opinion that is not really theirs, but their parents. According to him, these students have no opinion of their own yet, which is why they share their parents' opinions. Furthermore, P10 does nuance that this 'opinion' of the parents is probably something that is ventilated at the dinner table, so that it could be something that is said out of frustration and not the 'real opinion.'

In the previous two paragraphs, the extreme opinions of students were not meant or not the 'real' opinions of the students. However, sometimes students share an opinion to which teachers might not agree, is the real opinion of the student. P9 has experienced such a situation in his classroom:

⁴⁰ Interview with P8 on 23-05-2023. Original: 'Ja, er zijn weinig huizen hoor je dan, weet je wel, je hoort vaak de ouders praten. Dat hoor je natuurlijk ook. En dan leg ik wel eens dingen uit.'

⁴¹ Interview with P10 on 23-05-2023. Original: 'Al moet ik wel zeggen dat je soms echt bij kinderen kan zien dat zij, zeg maar, een mening die thuis verkondigd wordt, dat ze dat ook wel in de school wel neerleggen. Maar natuurlijk wel logisch, hoeveel pubers van dertien, veertien, vijftien jaar hebben natuurlijk of zelf helemaal geen nee, geen beeld daarover en praten wel heel vaak na wat er thuis natuurlijk op tafel even geventileerd wordt tijdens de avondmaaltijd.'

There was a boy in my class this morning who made some sweeping statements with a certain opinion that I thought actually you are on the edge friend, but I left it as it was. He too is entitled to such an opinion. Yes, even though I totally disagree, but still.⁴²

To P9 the statements of the students were ‘on the edge’ of respectfulness. Another teacher might have made the call to say something about the student’s statement, but he let it be. Later on, P9 explained, the student made another statement with which he did cross the line. At that moment he did intervene and explained why that opinion was not accepted in his classroom.

In the end, the goal of citizenship education is to stimulate students to form opinions on different topics, while still adhering to the values of the Dutch democratic constitutional state (Inspectie van het Onderwijs (2), n.d.). This form of critical democratic citizenship means that students have the right to state their opinion, as long as this opinion does not harm others in their right to live, even when a teacher might not agree to this (Leenders, Veugelers, and de Kat 2008, 158; Willems et al. 2012, 80). Yet, this balance in opinions being harmful or not is complicated, and as a result, intervening or not is a difficult and subjective decision to make for a teacher. For this reason, it is important for teachers to have a certain extent of religious literacy. Through citizenship education, students learn about different backgrounds, opinions, and ways of reasoning, and through religious literacy, teachers have access to better tools in moderating the discussions about the different topics of citizenship education and will understand the viewpoints of students from different backgrounds more easily.

⁴² Interview with P9 on 23-05-2023. Original: ‘Er was vanochtend een jongen uit mijn klas die een aantal verregaande uitspraken deed met een bepaalde mening waarvan ik dacht eigenlijk zit je op het randje vriend, maar ik heb het toch zo gelaten. Ook hij heeft recht op zo'n mening. Ja ook al ben ik het daar totaal mee oneens, maar toch.’

Conclusion and Discussion

Using an ethnographic perspective, I examined if religious literacy can be a useful skill for teachers to apply in citizenship education to successfully moderate discussions between students, and students and teachers, in which religious opinions and topics might come to the center. I analyzed the way teachers of secondary education perceive religious literacy as necessary or not, the way in which they handle their own opinion, and the manner in which they approach the opinions of the students in the classroom. The gathered data combined with the theory analyzed in this thesis, helped to answer the central research question: *How do teachers approach religious topics in citizenship education in a diverse classroom setting?*

This thesis revolves around the public/private distinction of religion which is explained with help of the secularization thesis (Casanova 1992, 17). In the Dutch context, secularization meant that religion was no longer a determining factor for the social realm, because it moved to the private realm (Miedema and Bertram-Troost 2008, 126). This also caused a change in schools: some schools that were previously religiously affiliated became public schools, which means they have a passive neutrality towards religion (Jackson et al. 2007, 210). Yet religious schools are still present in the Netherlands. Furthermore, students and teachers themselves might still adhere to a certain religious tradition, which might come forwards in citizenship education in the classroom. Religious practices are applied in daily life and opinions on social topics, which are discussed in citizenship education. Religious practices go beyond religious doctrines and practices, which is called ‘lived religion’ (Ammerman 2014, 190; Bowman 2014, 5; McGuire 2008, 118).

This research contributes to the debate of secularism in schools. I focused on citizenship education in the Netherlands, which is based on a new policy, applied in 2021 (Inspectie van het Onderwijs (2), n.d.). Religion is still an important factor in the way people see the world and live their life. However, by far not all teachers have experience or education in approaching religious differences and religious topics in the classroom, which was also explained by several participants in this research. So, within answering the research question, I argue that even though most teachers try to approach religion and religious topics in a respectful and non-discriminatory way, religious literacy could be a tool that offers teachers extra help in moderating discussions and understanding different opinions.

In the first empirical chapter, the question was *how do teachers view the importance of religious literacy for moderating conversations between students in the classroom?* Moderating conversations and discussions are a big part of citizenship education for teachers (Leenders,

Veugelers, and de Kat 2008, 158; Willems et al 2012, 81). In these discussions religious topics and opinions might come forward. Most teachers saw the importance of a certain level of religious literacy for approaching conversations in which religion comes forward in the classroom. However, the in-depth knowledge should be for the philosophy of life, religion, and social studies teachers at the school. Some teachers try to approach the different (religious) backgrounds in the classroom through mutual respect, and other disregard the backgrounds or act ignorant towards them. Yet, all participants explain they find their religious knowledge insufficient and would like to learn more about different backgrounds in their classroom. According to the participants, this can be achieved through more clear guidelines on discussing such themes or schools funding workshops on religion. So, teachers view religious literacy to a certain extent as important in discussing religious topics, although really in-depth knowledge is not necessary for all teachers, according to the participants. Respect is the most important factor in approaching religious topics, more than religious literacy, but still, they would like to improve their religious literacy.

Next, the focus was on the opinions of the teachers and how they cope with this in the classroom. The participants tried not to share their own opinion bluntly with the students in their classroom. They tried to prevent consciously and unconsciously taking sides. Some participants stated their opinion is not necessary in the discussions. Mutual respect is, to them, more important than sharing one's opinion. Others do sometimes want to share something they had learned, for example, through their own religion, but they had to be careful not to share too much about themselves. Sharing different sides of a dilemma was also considered important by some participants. In this, the side of the dilemma they showed was not necessarily the side they agree with, but rather the side not posed by the students in the classroom. So, teachers approach the class with a sense of neutrality in which mutual respect is the most important. If they want to say something about a certain citizenship topic, adapting to the class is necessary. However, adaptation is only possible when one knows what to adapt to, which, again, shows the importance of religious literacy.

The last empirical chapter is about how teachers handle the opinions of students on religious topics. As explained before, most teachers stated they have limited religious literacy and would like to learn more about different backgrounds in their classes. These different backgrounds come to the center when different topics of citizenship education are discussed. All participants agreed that every student is allowed to share their opinion, but they should not harm other students. In the classrooms of most participants, equality is more important than freedom of speech. When a harmful comment is made, some participants take the time to

explain why this comment is not allowed in the classroom. Others want to eliminate the comment as quickly as possible without spending too much attention on it. However, none of the teachers refer back to the Dutch constitution or human rights, which is the base of citizenship education. It is not always clear if these comments from students are the real opinions of these students or if they are just said to create a commotion or if the students copy the opinions of their parents. Hence, it is also not always clear what the motivation is behind an opinion, especially when they are formed through religion.

To conclude, teachers approach religious topics in citizenship education in a way that everyone should be respected, regardless of your background. In discussions, the opinion of teachers is not the base, often it is not even shared. Yet, different sides of a dilemma should be posed to help with opinion formation and understanding. When mutual respect is achieved in the classroom, religious literacy is not necessary, according to the participants. This counts as well for the opinions of students. They are entitled to their own opinion, as long as this opinion does not harm other students in the classroom. However, the teachers in this research do explain that they would like to improve their religious literacy to better understand the lived religion of the students in their class. Hence, religious literacy could be said to be an important skill to understand the diverse backgrounds of the students in the classroom which helps with addressing certain citizenship topics in a respectful manner in citizenship education. Teachers themselves most often approach religious topics in citizenship education in a respectful manner to all without necessarily referring back to certain religious traditions, because mutual respect is the most important value in the classroom.

Due to limited time and limited interest of teachers at secondary schools in the Netherlands and the schedule of projects of Cross Your Borders, I was only able to conduct ten interviews at three different schools across the country. Since the teachers participating in this research worked at only three different schools, the use of examples and differences in approaches were limited. This does not mean the information gathered is not sufficient or all encompassing, but interviewing teachers from more schools would possibly have added more interesting data. Furthermore, two of these schools were Christian affiliated and one school was a public school. The addition of an Islamic affiliated school and/or schools that have a different teaching approach, such as Dalton or Montessori, could have offered a broader population for the research.

For conducting the interviews, I tried to create a safe environment in which we would not be disturbed by moving to an empty classroom and starting with two introduction questions to smoothen into the interview. Religion could be considered a sensitive topic to discuss, hence

a careful approach is necessary. However, at some occasions we were disturbed during the interview, which could have resulted in the participant not feeling safe to answer freely. I tried to overcome this by resetting the attention to the interview after the interruption and summarizing the previous answer to continue the conversation. Other teachers did not want to leave the intern alone in the classroom, which resulted in me conducting the interview in the back of the classroom. The teachers involved explained this did not matter to them, but it could have influenced the way in which they answered the questions asked.

The participant observation and small talk data does result from projects at many different schools in the Netherlands. During almost all the projects I was present at, I could observe the classroom and converse with the teachers present, which offered many insights and the base for the semi-structured interviews. However, these observations and conversations were all within the setting of a Cross Your Borders project at the schools. It would have been interesting to come back to some of the schools in a 'normal' week of classes and observe the ways in which the teachers approach religion in their subjects or conversations with students. Hence, a comparing study of citizenship education in goal-oriented projects, such as the projects of Cross Your Borders, with 'normal' education could be an interesting topic for further research.

Finally, my position in the research could have influenced the way in which the participants felt safe sharing their opinions on religion and approaching religion with me. As said in the introduction, I have always tried to be open about my religious affiliation when asked about this by the participants. I have tried to react without opinion to the information the participants provided me with and to not share my opinion on religious topics and manners of approaching religion. However, completely neutral a person can never be. During the data analysis, I repeatedly reflected on my own position in the research, and during the writing of the empirical chapters I continuously took a step back to review if I did not show what I wanted to show or thought I read between the lines instead of showing what has really been said. By this continuously reflecting I tried to come as close to objectivity as possible in the analysis of this research.

In this research, many teachers suggested there should be workshops or other formats of training for teachers to improve their religious literacy. However, for teachers that do not teach social subjects, training on religion is limited. For further research it could be interesting to explore ways in which teachers can improve their religious literacy. Furthermore, different participants stated they want more guidelines in how to address certain religious or other sensitive topics in the classroom. In the mentor classes, in which citizenship education topics

are often addressed, there are often no clear guidelines in which topics should be addressed in what way. So, researching a proper way to address citizenship topics in mentor classes could add to the field of citizenship education in academics. Finally, this research is focused on the perspective of teachers. These teachers all have to deal with students of different backgrounds that have many different opinions in which I ask if they feel like they are (religiously) literate enough to approach these different backgrounds. It would also contribute to the debate of religious literacy to conduct this research from the perspective of the students. Do the students feel like their teachers know enough about their religious backgrounds to help students to understand each other properly? By researching this, the ways in which teachers can be helped in improving their religious literacy will also become clearer, since the students have a better view on what their teacher needs to learn about their background.

To end this thesis, I want to refer back to the article of Kennedy Tielman with which I started in the introduction. Tielman found that more than half of the teachers felt not prepared enough to have difficult conversations about topics such as religion and sexuality with students (van Nuland 2023). In a different interview, he explained he experienced this himself when he was the only student with a migration background in his class: ‘I noticed that the teachers knew little about my background and that made me less able to rely on my cultural frame of reference (Ooninx n.d.).’ So, if you are a teacher yourself and you are doubting the importance of religious literacy, try to imagine yourself in their position and find a way to improve your religious literacy. Not only for yourself, but also for your students.

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