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Avoidant Pedagogy: Swiss and Israeli Teachers' Handling of Religiously Offensive Remarks in Class[1]

Shahar Gindi
Beit Berl College, Israel

Contact: shaharg@beitberl.ac.il

Abstract: The study examines teachers' positions when presented with a vignette regarding religiously offensive remarks. In-depth interviews were conducted with six Swiss and six Israeli female elementary school teachers. The findings demonstrated that teachers in both countries fluctuated between inclination to say that all opinions were acceptable, on the one hand, and drawing a line in the sand against religious intolerance, on the other. Only three teachers said that they would be clear that the remark in the vignette is prohibited. Teachers' dilemmas in the two countries were similar as were the strategies they chose. Teachers tended to flatten and oversimplify the discourse, considered students' subjective experience as indisputable, and avoided tackling prejudiced comments directly. Many teachers missed an opportunity to expose the power relations in society and to help develop students' critical thinking skills. Teachers' disbelief of students' remarks implies that many do not understand the way racism works or their role in preventing religious intolerance from an early age.
Keywords: Controversial political issues (CPI), Intercultural comparison, Elementary schools, religious intolerance, Racism

Zusammenfassung: Die Studie untersucht die Reaktion von Lehrpersonen, denen eine Szene mit religiös anstößigen Bemerkungen vorgelegt wurde. Dazu wurden Tiefeninterviews mit sechs Schweizer und sechs israelischen Grundschullehrerinnen geführt. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass es in beiden Ländern Lehrkräfte gibt, die alle Bemerkungen für akzeptabel zu erachten, als auch solche, die sich kritisch gegenüber religiöser Intoleranz äußerten. Nur drei Lehrkräfte vertraten die klare Position, dass die Bemerkungen in der Szene verboten sind. Die Dilemmata der Lehrkräfte im Umgang mit den Vignetten waren in beiden Ländern ähnlich, ebenso wie die von ihnen gewählten Strategien. Die Lehrkräfte neigten dazu, den Diskurs zu verflachen und zu vereinfachen, betrachteten die subjektiven Erfahrungen der Schülerinnen und Schüler als unbestreitbar und vermieden es, vorurteilsbehaftete Bemerkungen direkt anzusprechen. Viele Lehrkräfte verpassten die Gelegenheit, auf Machtverhältnisse in der Gesellschaft hinzuweisen und die Fähigkeiten der Schülerinnen und Schüler zum kritischen Denken zu fördern. Die Unbeholfenheit der Lehrkräfte gegenüber den Äußerungen der Lernenden deutet darauf hin, dass viele nicht verstehen, wie Rassismus funktioniert und welche Rolle sie dabei spielen, religiöse Intoleranz von klein auf zu verhindern.
Schlagwörter: Kontroverse politische Themen, Interkultureller Vergleich, Grundschulen, religiöse Intoleranz, Rassismus

1. Introduction

In the literature on Controversial Political Issues (CPI) it has been proposed that topics undergo a "life cycle" wherein they transition from being contentious to eventually achieving consensus, thus ceasing

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to be controversial (Hess, 2009). An illustrative instance is the case of slavery, which was fiercely debated and ultimately became a primary catalyst for the US Civil War. Nevertheless, with the passage of time, the matter was resolved, and its contentious nature dissipated, rendering it non-controversial.

The 21st century has presented a landscape where even the most unconventional notions find resonance within various Facebook communities. Flat earth conventions convene and adherents to hate ideologies form robust communities (Landrum, Olshansky & Richards, 2021). Over the past decade, landmark legal verdicts have been overturned (such as Roe vs. Wade), while societal norms regarding the conduct of public figures have undergone significant transformations (evidenced by figures like Donald Trump). Notably, the routine exposure of the President of the United States making false statements, disregarding expert opinions and scientific findings, and expressing sexist, xenophobic, and racist sentiments has profoundly influenced the discourse surrounding these subjects among students and educators (Geller, 2020). Hence, one could contend that controversial issues rarely die altogether or "settle" in Hess's (2009) terms.
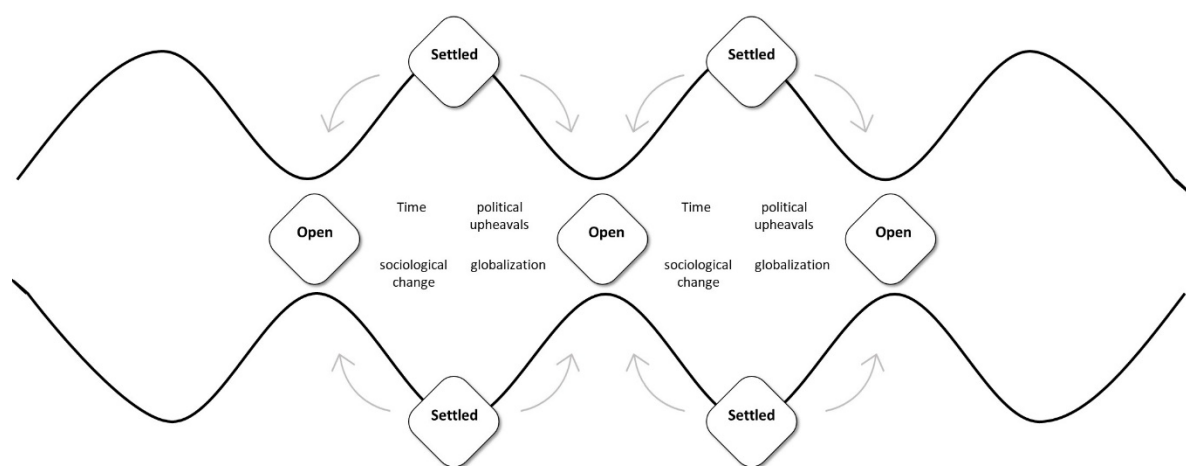

Figure 1. The dynamics of opening and settling issues

Figure 1 illustrates an alternative conceptualization of the dynamics surrounding the emergence and resolution of issues. Certain topics exhibit a protracted openness, exemplified by the ongoing debate regarding the superiority of Republican versus Democratic values. Diverse perspectives exist on such matters, preventing conclusive determination of superiority or inferiority in educational contexts. Additionally, certain issues vary in perception across different nations; for instance, the debate over a woman's autonomy regarding abortion remains unsettled in some regions while resolved in others. Despite the general consensus against religious discrimination, as evidenced by its taboo status, instances of racism persist within educational settings (Erlich-Ron & Gindi, 2022; Cohen, 2022; Lozano Parra, Wansink, Bakker, van Liere, 2022).

From a critical pedagogy standpoint (Freire, 1996; Kubota, 2014), educators are urged to remain cognizant of societal power dynamics and their influence on dominant narratives. When contentious topics like flat earth theory, slavery, or religious intolerance (the focus of this paper) infiltrate classrooms, teachers grapple with the dilemma of asserting definitive stances versus fostering discussions where divergent viewpoints are ostensibly accorded equal weight.

This study investigates how elementary school teachers articulate their approaches towards addressing Islamophobic remarks made by students. Its significance lies in scrutinizing the educational and pedagogical principles that inform teachers' responses to such incidents. To explore common guiding principles in tackling religious intolerance, we selected teachers from two distinct contexts: Switzerland and Israel. This comparative analysis between a nation historically neutral and one in conflict can enrich our understanding of how educators navigate Islamophobic statements.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Religious Intolerance and Islam

In Western societies, Islam, while not inherently tied to race, frequently becomes subject to racialization (Corrigan, 2020; Kaufman & Niner, 2019; Nussbaum, 2012). This phenomenon manifests in the stereotyping and discrimination faced by Muslims, primarily based on their physical attributes, attire, or ethnic origins, rather than their religious convictions or observances (Karaman & Christian, 2020). Moreover, Muslims often endure racial profiling and surveillance by law enforcement entities, which operate under the assumption that their religious identity poses potential threats to national security (O'Brien & Abdelhadi, 2020).

The portrayal of Muslims in mainstream media and popular culture contributes to the racialization of Islam, shaping perceptions and attitudes towards this religious group. Frequently depicted as exotic, enigmatic, or menacing, Muslim characters perpetuate stereotypes that foster negative sentiments towards Islam and its adherents (Haider, 2020). Moreover, this racialization intersects with other systems of oppression, including racism and xenophobia. Individuals within the Muslim community who identify as Black, Indigenous, or People of Color (BIPOC) often face combined discrimination and marginalization, being doubly marginalized in societal perceptions (Van Brunt, Pescara-Kovach & Van Brunt, 2022).

2.2 Reacting to Volatile Remarks

References to contentious remarks in academic literature are sparse, particularly within primary educational settings. A study revealed that merely around one-third of educators at primary and secondary levels in the United Kingdom are inclined to express their views on racism and endeavor to influence students' perceptions concerning the issue (Oulton, Day, Dillon & Grace, 2004). Similarly, an investigation involving 160 high school instructors in Israel unveiled that the majority encountered instances of homophobic or racist rhetoric from their students (Gindi & Erlich-Ron, 2024). Moreover, a comprehensive analysis highlighted the lack of clear directives for secondary school teachers in Israel, coupled with a sense of uncertainty regarding support for their responses to such situations (Erlich-Ron & Gindi, 2023). Educators express concerns that engaging with these extreme dialogues may result in a loss of control within the classroom, often without recognizing the potential importance and advantages of engaging in discussions of such contentious incidents (Cohen, 2022; Lozano Parra et al., 2022).

Taking a theoretical approach, Kubota (2014) examined the difficulties associated with tackling contentious topics in language education through the lens of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1996; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). Kubota emphasized the challenge of balancing perspectives while avoiding teacher bias, all the while recognizing the potential for conservative viewpoints to influence discourse. Proposing a nuanced pedagogical strategy, Kubota suggested integrating affective elements, imagination, and heightened self-awareness alongside a poststructuralist framework to ensure a comprehensive approach that aligns with principles of social justice.

This paper centers on a study investigating religiously offensive comments within the relatively understudied setting of elementary schools. Existing research indicates that racial and anti-racial perceptions start to take shape during early developmental stages (Jensen & Tisak, 2022), underscoring the significance of teachers' influence in shaping students' attitudes within elementary education. Utilizing in-depth interviews, we analyzed the perspectives of elementary school educators when confronted with hypothetical scenarios involving religiously offensive remarks.

2.3 The Research Context

The public perceptions of Switzerland and Israel diverge significantly. Israel often dominates media narratives due to its involvement in the intense Middle East conflict, whereas Switzerland is commonly portrayed as a bastion of political neutrality and peace. However, the actual realities of these nations extend beyond these simplified representations. Despite Israel's media portrayal, the daily lives of its citizens are not solely defined by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, just as the Swiss face their own complexities despite its peaceful image, such as those stemming from the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. Notably, both countries share the uncommon characteristic of mandatory military service, a factor that unites them amidst their contrasting public images.

2.3.1 Israeli Context

During the three-year period leading up to the interviews that were held for this study in 2022, Israel could be characterized as a parliamentary democracy marked by significant political turbulence. Numerous election campaigns ensued, culminating in a political stalemate. Although a government was eventually established in 2021, its tenure was short-lived. The subsequent 2022 elections were marred by a proliferation of racially charged comments from politicians, culminating in a victory for the right-wing. Approximately 20% of Israel's populace comprises Arabs, predominantly of Muslim faith. Tensions between Jews and Arabs stem from the enduring conflict between Israel and Arab nations, as well as the ongoing occupation of Palestinian territories.

In Israel, a centralized Ministry of Education (MOE) is tasked with supervising four distinct public educational streams categorized by religion and ethnicity: Jewish general, Jewish religious, Jewish haredi (ultra-orthodox), and Arab. Elementary schools are usually up to 6th grade and 7th grade students start middle school, although there are elementary schools that go up to 8th grade where the students skip middle school and start high school in the 9th grade. CEO circulars that address religious intolerance do so within the framework of guidelines pertaining to the management of cultural and racial prejudices. The latest circular issued by the Ministry of Education (MOE) in 2022 provides directives for mitigating and addressing racism within educational institutions.

2.3.2 Swiss Context

Switzerland, functioning as a federal republic comprising 26 cantons, each vested with considerable autonomy, boasts a federal constitutional framework distinguished by direct democracy and a consensus-driven policy. Given the decentralized nature of Switzerland's governance, there exists no centralized education ministry per se. Nonetheless, oversight of the educational landscape is facilitated through a division within the Ministry of Economy known as the State Secretariat for Education, Research, and Innovation (SBFI), chiefly entrusted with bolstering the nation's educational institutions, complemented by individual cantons' investments in education.

The educational framework in Switzerland operates under a federal structure where primary schools are divided into lower level (grade 1 to 3) and middle level (grade 4 to 6), and take 6 years to complete. After grade 6 of primary school, the students have two different options. They either pass on to secondary school or change over to baccalaureate school (Gymnasium). Schools adhere to inter-cantonal agreements such as Lehrplan 21 that mandate educators to instill democratic principles within the curriculum, emphasizing a Christian and humanistic approach. Additionally, the curriculum outlines various personal and social skills it aims to cultivate, including the capacity for critical self-reflection and the ability to consider alternative viewpoints alongside one's own beliefs (D-EDK, 2016, pp. 32-33).

According to data from the Federal Statistical Office (2019), approximately one-fourth of Switzerland's population holds non-Swiss nationality. As a response to the shifting patterns of migration, Switzerland

has witnessed the emergence and evolution of processes aimed at delineating boundaries. Notably, in 2009, a constitutional amendment was passed via a national referendum, prohibiting the construction of new minarets on mosques (Traynor, 2009). Within this context, Lehrplan 21, a curriculum framework, emphasizes the importance of enabling students to recognize and challenge stereotypes and biases associated with diverse lifestyles (D-EDK, 2016, p. 302).

This collaborative research aimed to uncover the perspectives of teachers in Switzerland and Israel regarding religiously offensive remarks potentially encountered in their classrooms. Central to the investigation was the primary inquiry into teachers' stances when confronted with instances of religious prejudice.

Switzerland and Israel were chosen as the research contexts for their distinct historical and geopolitical backgrounds, offering unique perspectives on addressing Islamophobic remarks in elementary schools. Switzerland, known for its neutrality in international conflicts, presents a context where cultural diversity and tolerance are emphasized. The country's multicultural policies and commitment to promoting peaceful coexistence make it an intriguing setting to examine how educators respond to Islamophobic incidents (D-EDK, 2016, pp. 32-33).

Conversely, Israel's complex sociopolitical landscape, marked by longstanding conflicts and religious tensions, provides an opportunity to explore how educators confront Islamophobia amidst a backdrop of historical and contemporary religious discord (Traynor, 2009). By juxtaposing these contrasting environments, the study aims to uncover common guiding principles that transcend cultural and geopolitical boundaries, offering valuable insights into effective pedagogical strategies for addressing religious intolerance in diverse educational settings (Traynor, 2009).

3. Method

3.1 Participants

The sample consisted of six Swiss and six Israeli elementary public-school teachers. They were all women who had graduated within 10 years of the interviews. They all taught grades 5 or 6 (about 11-13-year-old students). The Israeli teachers were all White Jewish, five of whom taught in the secular stream and one in the religious stream. The Swiss teachers were all White, and while we did not ask directly about religious affiliation, three of them spoke about being Christian, of different denominations. Table 1 presents the sample characteristics.

3.2 Research Tools

The research team developed an interview framework that could be adapted to suit the nuances of both cultures. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in Hebrew and German, tailored to the specific contexts of each country. The data utilized in this study predominantly centers on a vignette presented to educators in both nations. In this vignette, participants were exposed to a scenario whereby they overhear a student saying that 'Islam is bad' and were asked:

1. If you were the teacher in this class, how would you react to a situation like this?
2. How would you deal with the students' emotions in this situation?
3. How would you yourself feel in a situation like this?
4. If the students were to ask you about your religion or what you think of Islam, what would you say?
5. Now imagine that a student was to say, "This is a Jewish/Swiss state, and the Muslims should be grateful that they are allowed to live here." How would you react?

Table 1. Sample characteristics

| Pseudo-nym	Nation-ality	Age	Years since graduation	Years of teaching experience	Years of knowing the class	Teaching discipline	What subject do you feel most confident to teach
Ms. Ruf	Swiss	28	5	5	2 months	All subjects for except sports, arts and crafts and French	All
Ms. West	Swiss	27	4	4	4	language, Math, music, physical education, media and technology	Math
Ms. Walter	Swiss	28	7	7	2	Social sciences, Humanities, Arts, languages, Math and science, Technological studies, music	German
Ms. Sommer	Swiss	28	4	4	1	All subjects except Textile and Technical Design, Visual Design and English	Math
Ms. Spörri	Swiss	25	3	3	1	Social sciences, Humanities, Arts, languages, Math and science, Physical education, Technological studies	Math, English
Ms. Hauser	Swiss	26	4	4	2 months	All subjects except English	Drawing, PE, German, math, French
Alona	Israeli	35	1	1	1	Geography, Israeli Culture, Bible, Hebrew	1. Hebrew, Bible
Lihi	Israeli	27	1	1	1	2. Hebrew, Science, Life Skills	3. Science
Lirit	Israeli	45	1	1	1	Hebrew, Science	4. Science
Miriam	Israeli	29	4	4	3	5. Science, math and Hebrew	6. All
Sara	Israeli	28	4	4	3	PE	7. PE
Shula	Israeli	43	10	5	1	English	8. English

3.3 Data Analysis

The interviews were conducted in the teachers' native languages (German/Hebrew) and subsequently translated into English. Upon receipt of the transcripts by each country's team, clarification queries were exchanged to facilitate cultural mediation concerning various interview topics. Subsequently, the interviews were uploaded to the ATLAS.Ti qualitative analysis software. A conceptual thematic analysis approach was employed for data analysis, offering the flexibility to incorporate both inductive and deductive analytical orientations (Braun & Clarke, 2022). All instances of religiously prejudiced remarks, alongside teachers' purported responses and their associated rationale, were identified within the raw data. The coding used bottom-up codes as well as top-down codes, the latter indicating a certain pedagogical approach. Primarily, it was assumed that ignoring racist remarks (avoidant pedagogy) is not good pedagogical practice, and that remarks that are made in front of the whole class should be addressed in front of the whole class (Ahmed, 2019). Following this coding, evidence pertaining to the teachers' stances regarding handling religiously prejudiced remarks was pinpointed. In the ensuing phase, codes were formulated through a continual process of comparing and contrasting textual elements. Finally, these codes were iteratively extracted to delineate overarching themes through a constant process of data scrutiny and analysis (Creswell, 2012).

4. Limitations

The scope of this investigation was constrained by a small sample size, comprising 12 elementary school educators from two countries. Consequently, the findings cannot be extrapolated to encompass the full spectrum of pedagogical practices across diverse global contexts. Notably, the Israeli subset exclusively consisted of Jewish instructors, with no representation from the Muslim demographic in either locale. This inquiry, albeit multifaceted, was executed across two national landscapes, each characterized by unique historical contexts and attitudes towards racism and Islam. Importantly, both interviewees and interviewers were from the dominant societal groups within their respective nations, potentially constraining the breadth of insights garnered. Moreover, the translation of interviews into English prior to analysis, while undertaken diligently, may have inadvertently obscured certain nuances. Lastly, it warrants acknowledgment that participants responded to a hypothetical scenario, thus precluding direct examination of their reactions to actual instances of religiously offensive remarks.

5. Findings

The initial theme identified from the data was the dilemma of intervention. Specifically, educators faced the choice of whether to address or disregard statements such as "Islam is bad." In instances of intervention, two contrasting themes emerged: 'drawing the line in the sand' on the one hand and 'all opinions must be heard' on the other, as illustrated in Figure 2. The former theme emphasized educators' assertion that prejudiced remarks concerning religion are unacceptable, while the latter reflected a willingness to engage in dialogue regarding religious intolerance. Embedded within the latter theme was an implicit acknowledgment of the 'supremacy of emotions and the subjective experience' suggesting a reluctance to challenge students' emotional responses. Furthermore, additional themes encompassed 'the Teflon fantasy', and 'disbelief in student statements'. Several strategies were also identified: 'clean strategies: oversimplifying, flattening, and avoiding the core issues, and 'reflective questions in a class discussion'.

Figure 2.
Teacher's tug of war facing Religiously offensive comments
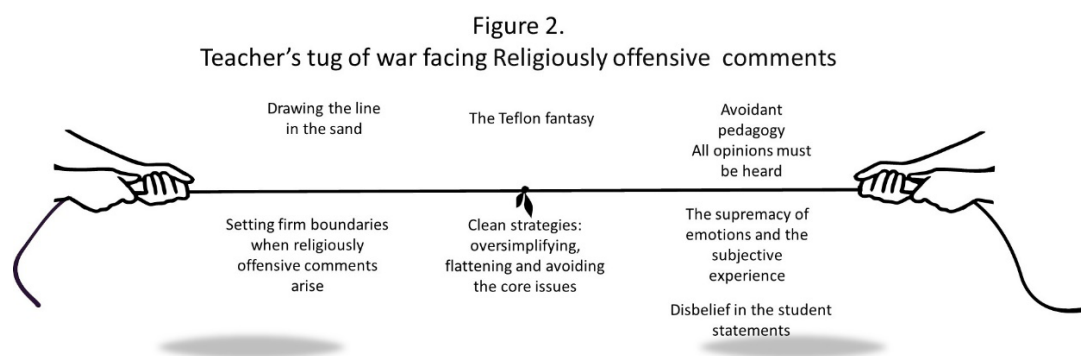
5.1 The Decision to Intervene

Analysis of the teachers' interview transcripts revealed that all[2] twelve educators from both countries would not entirely overlook religiously offensive remarks. Each teacher affirmed their commitment to intervening should a religiously offensive remark transpire within their classroom. Implicitly, they deemed such statements as transgressions of the acceptable boundaries of discourse, thus warranting immediate action. Consequently, these educators eschewed the practice of "avoidant pedagogy" in its extreme form, wherein sensitive or controversial topics are entirely circumvented or neglected. Nevertheless, their responses implied a degree of "avoidant pedagogy" – a tendency to shy away from sensitive or controversial religious topics unless absolutely necessary. While they would not ignore an overt instance of religious insensitivity, their pedagogical approach likely involved circumventing or minimizing discussions that could potentially lead to such incidents.

5.2 Drawing a Line in the Sand

Only three teachers presented with the vignette expressed their intent to firmly oppose such remarks. Shula, an Israeli instructor, drew a parallel between this stance and safety regulations concerning children. She likened the necessity for teachers to address such comments to parents' obligation not to permit behaviors that jeopardize children's physical well-being:

> I would first say that we don't say things like that… it's like the kid who sticks his hand in the socket – it's 'no' first, and then we'll try to break down this whole issue of stereotypes, generalizations… it is something we'll talk about, but first it starts with saying unequivocally that this is not something we can say.

Shula's stance places her firmly on the opposite end of the spectrum from avoidant pedagogy. She asserts that religiously intolerant comments cannot be disregarded or sidestepped; instead, they must be addressed head-on. Similarly, Ms. Walter, a Swiss educator, demonstrated an unequivocal stance against religious intolerance. She was unambiguous in her assessment that the statement suggesting Muslims should be grateful to reside in Switzerland was offensive:

> Look, that has no place here in our class at the moment, that's not possible, I want us to talk about that again later on in pairs. I don't think I'd start a discussion in class about it now, I think I'd just say that doesn't belong here; and then I'd talk to that child again afterwards. I think I would interrupt that.

Lirit (Israeli) was unwavering that the statement, "This is a state for Jews and Muslims should be grateful" would be unacceptable. She said she would draw the line but not start a discussion:

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[2] 'Few' teachers refers to 2-4 teachers, 'most' refers to 8-11 teachers, all refers to all 12.

I might say that I'm sorry to hear that this is his opinion, because I don't support hate of any kind and toward any religion or person, regardless of their ethnicity and opinion, and that's it – I wouldn't get into that.

Overall, 'drawing the line in the sand' was a minority opinion compared to the notion that all opinions must be heard.

5.3   All Opinions Must be Heard: The Supremacy of Emotions and the Subjective Experience

Teachers that embraced this view argued that when navigating the complexities of religious intolerance, it is imperative to recognize the significance of emotions and subjective experiences in shaping perspectives and fostering empathy within discourse. This pedagogical practice reflects a degree of avoidant pedagogy, suggesting that overtly challenging or contradicting strongly-held subjective views, especially those rooted in emotions or personal experiences, could provoke defensive reactions and impede productive dialogue. Ms. Ruff (Swiss) demonstrated this position: "You can always be bothered by something, that's what I would tell the children; you can have this subjective opinion, but then it's been objectified, so to speak…. it's okay if you're feeling this right now…. I think [you should] give space to the emotions in that moment because, yes, this child is feeling them, and you can't forbid them to have the emotions."

Miriam (Israeli) also mentioned how important it is to acknowledge the students' emotions: "[The students need] a lot of support, make them feel like it's okay to feel fear, it's okay to feel the way we do. We just need to see how we act about these emotions, check that we don't impulsively react out of those emotions." Acknowledging the students' emotion is undeniably of great value, but taken to an extreme, this relativistic approach leaves little room for discussion.

It can be educational for teachers to demonstrate that a diversity of opinions exists, but perhaps under the guise of open discussions – the pendulum has swung in the direction of avoidant pedagogy. Ms. Spori (Swiss), for example, does not denounce the "Islam is bad" statement, and encourages an intellectual discussion of the question of whether Islam is good or bad: "I [would] intervene and ask: You said that Islam is bad. Is it? Then [I would] listen to what the child is saying and ask: Why do you think Islam is bad or what makes you think it is?"

5.4   The Teflon Fantasy

Ms. Spori (Swiss) demonstrated what we call the 'Teflon fantasy'. She would like to Teflon-coat the class discussion, so no hard feelings emerge, and the discussions do not get awkward: "One wants to express oneself in such a way that no one is hurt, and no one feels attacked". When teachers teach facts, they may hurt students who believe otherwise. When one teaches about Germany in World War II, students of German heritage may be hurt. When the students learn about the establishment of the State of Israel, it may hurt a Palestinian student. Learning about evolution may hurt students of certain religious backgrounds. Thus, the Teflon fantasy provides a rationale for avoidant pedagogy, avoiding direct challenges to intolerant views, and risking enabling the perpetuation of prejudiced perspectives.

Sarah (Israeli) explained that she, herself, avoided talking about politics because it might jeopardize her relationship with the students, and she wanted her students to be able to have discussions free of tension: "It's good to speak your mind, it's important, everyone has their own beliefs and opinions…. they should speak up, voice what they think, but in a respectful way… I usually avoid getting into these discussions because it often gets disrespectful, and I don't want to fight with my friends."

In order to avoid heated discussions, teachers may embrace the Teflon fantasy almost to the point of contradiction, Ms. Spori (Swiss) quibbled not with the idea that "Islam is bad" but only with the way

the idea was expressed: "You can say something is bad, but how can you say it in a different way, so that you don't judge it or say it in such a way that it offends anyone else?" Sarah (Israeli) described a similar approach:

> We're open to [different] opinions. There's a way to say things, there's a way to be respectful … [You could say] "I don't like Islam", don't say "Islam is bad". Or "I don't get Islam", "I have a negative association when it comes to Islam" – there are plenty of ways to say it a bit more pleasantly, this is what I would highlight.

This way of avoidance is by talking about how the students make offensive utterances, rather than talking about the essence of tolerance. The teacher sends a message that prejudice is acceptable, and just needs to be presented in the right package.

5.5 Disbelief in the Students' Statements

Teachers, both Swiss and Israeli, often refused to believe that students actually understood what they were saying. Not wanting to believe that their students were prejudiced, teachers made excuses, insisting that students' apparent attitudes were inauthentic and resulted from external influences.

Ms. West (Swiss) made excuses for the hypothetical student who said, "Islam is bad." She added that if there were a Muslim student in class, she would talk to him and explain that the offending child "…didn't really think about how he said it, maybe he didn't mean it that way…maybe he didn't really understand something." Ms. Hauser (Swiss) also denied that students understood what they were saying: "If someone said Islam was bad, I wouldn't get emotional [about it]. There are so many things that kids say … and don't quite understand what's behind it… I can't get so emotional about [just] any nonsense."

Alona (Israeli) was so appalled by the idea of one of her students saying that "Arabs should be grateful to live in Israel" that she doubted such a thing could occur: "These things don't come up with the subjects I teach, and at these ages, too, I think, it doesn't come up. It's not as likely to happen." Lihi (Israeli) acknowledged that racist statements were common but exonerated the students, instead blaming parents for the hypothetical "Islam is bad" statement: "These are things that we hear, he probably said it because he heard it… I think that if a child says it, he probably heard it at home." Lirit (Israeli) agreed: "Why does he think [Islam] is bad? It must come from a political issue, something he heard at home … obviously." Ms. Sommer (Swiss) voiced a similar idea: "I would first ask why the child thinks that. I'd want to find out if something happened somehow. Although I would tend to say that maybe statements like that are more likely to come from parents and then get passed on." And Ms. Walter (Swiss) suggested that, rather than reflecting a genuine belief, the "Islam is bad" comment could simply be a provocation: "I have the feeling that a child who says this in such a way wants to provoke somehow, wants to wait for my reaction, wants to wait for the reaction from the other children, and actually knows that I have a different opinion."

5.6 Clean Strategies: Oversimplifying, Flattening and Avoiding the Core Issues

One of the most common ways that teachers reported addressing racist claims was to dismantle generalizations, but the way it was done tried to defuse the charged socio-political context. For example, Miriam (Israeli) equated the response in the vignette to social misbehavior despite the stark differences between the charged Jewish-Arab relations and social relations in class:

> Even in our class we have children who sometimes behave in a way that is unpleasant to other children, or we could have a kid at school who says something offensive, does that mean their entire class did that or are like that?

While this strategy has many merits, it can be argued that it avoids the core issues of racism and religious intolerance, and teachers have the option of making a value statement about those practices. Addressing the importance of embracing diversity and avoiding generalizations were also strategies to avoid direct mentioning of racism, prejudice or religious intolerance. For example, Ms. Ruff (Swiss) danced around the "Muslims should be grateful" statement, and avoided characterizing it as prejudiced, saying that "we are all lucky to be allowed to live here; Switzerland is a super state." Ms. West (Swiss) also dodged this bullet. She affirmed the value of diversity but likewise skirted the issue of prejudice: "Hey, wouldn't that be very boring if we were all exactly the same?"

Several teachers used a clean strategy of flattening the differences, and ignoring the emotional baggage that comes with ingroup-outgroup relations. For example, Ms. Walter (Swiss) flattened the differences between religions: "We all believe in roughly the same thing and the core of everything is a little bit similar." Lihi (Israeli) followed suit, and said that all social groups were the same and each had its extremes: "I kept explaining that this was the extreme… Judaism, too, has its extreme [side]". By dodging the issue of prejudice, this approach risks absolving the prejudiced remarks and softening reality's rougher edges.

Lirit (Israeli) bypassed the substantive conflict by reducing it to a matter of friendship: "I can say that everyone has a different opinion, and we don't have to be friends, but we do need to have respect." Miriam (Israeli) also emphasized human similarity, and avoided addressing the difference between being a Muslim and being a Buddhist in Israel: "I would aim to make the point that it is okay to have a country with other people rather than Jews only. Muslims, too, but also Christians, atheists, Buddhists, and whoever [else] should be accepted, because religious faith is not something that creates the person, we're all people."

These simplifications are on the spectrum of avoidant pedagogy. They inhibit students' ability to understand a complex reality, and contribute to categorical thinking. By dealing with prejudice in this way, teachers may end up enhancing it, since prejudiced thinking thrives on oversimplification.

5.7   Reflective Questions in a Class Discussion

Respondents from both countries said they would react to the statement and inquire about the student's attitudes, the intentions motivating the statement, and the sources of the student's statement. For example, Ms. Ruff (Swiss) said: "I would go to the group and say that I had heard [someone say] that Islam is bad, and I would ask why and what this statement was based on… I think it is also important to know why the child said this or why he or she came to this supposed knowledge… Then I would maybe discuss it briefly in that group [to elicit] contrasting knowledge, opinions, prejudices. But I would definitely bring it up with the whole class."

Most teachers we interviewed said they would open a discussion with the whole class. Sarah (Israeli) said: "I'd respond for sure, if I heard something like that, there's no way I wouldn't. First, I'd ask the kid who said that… If he's the kind of kid who might be embarrassed by that, I might talk to him privately, but it is important to do it in front of everybody because he said it in front of everybody."

6.   Summary and Conclusions

The findings point to a "tug of war" teachers experience between drawing a line against religious intolerance and their belief that all opinions must be heard and discussed, which leads them to avoidant pedagogy (see Figure 2). Teachers are torn by the conflicting desires to take a firm stance against intolerant remarks while also upholding the principle that all perspectives should be voiced and deliberated upon. This conflict results in teachers being pulled toward the practice of avoidant pedagogy, which

was found to be much more prominent among both Israeli and Swiss teachers than drawing a line in the sand.

The 'avoidant pedagogy', trickles into many discussions of controversial political issues (CPI) that teachers face. Teachers are influenced by the concepts of the relativity of truth and the supremacy of subjectivity. The result is a reluctance on the part of teachers to argue with what students feel and apparently believe. The thesis in this paper is that this avoidant pedagogy may have a detrimental impact on students' critical thinking.

Citizens are expected to be socially-minded and to exercise critical thinking skills. Teachers' submission to the supremacy of subjectivity, hinder the development of students' critical faculties, and diminish their opportunities to exercise critical thinking. It also has the disadvantage of giving students the false impression that all thoughts are created equal, and all opinions are acceptable, including religious intolerance (Andreotti, 2011; Kubota, 2014).

From a critical pedagogy perspective (Freire, 1996), when volatile remarks are uttered, teachers can take the opportunity to expose the power relations that underlie the narratives that students hear and those that they do not (Kubota, 2014). Mainstream school knowledge is often presented as neutral and objective, but it reflects the perspective of dominant groups, while issues related to discrimination and oppression are often avoided or treated as too contentious to address in a classroom setting (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017).

Teacher positionality may have also influenced why they did not consider religious intolerance to be a non-negotiable issue. On the one hand, none of them legitimized statements such as "Islam is bad", but their lack of decisiveness may have had to do with their being part of the dominant, hegemonic group. While our interviewees were elementary school teachers, their attitudes were consistent with our findings about secondary school teachers as well (Erlich-Ron & Gindi, 2022). Such postures of disbelief, however, are incongruent with the developmental literature on comprehension, with research showing that prejudice begins taking shape in preschool (Jensen & Tisak, 2020), and that racism develops through seeming innocuous and unintentional ways whereby people treat others according to the ethnicity or religion (Gillborn, 2005).

Teachers' tactical withdrawal from making value assessments contributes to the illusion of educational invulnerability, perpetuating the notion that learning can occur without encountering discomfort. However, this perception is far from accurate. Our reality is characterized by a spectrum of experiences, encompassing both strife and camaraderie. Avoiding meaningful engagement with conflict and opting for superficial treatment undermines effective educational methodologies.

Teachers' responses to religiously intolerant remarks should also be understood within the context of teachers' hesitancy regarding confronting controversial political issues in general. (Erlich-Ron & Gindi, 2023). Much research has shown the teachers tend to avoid explosive issues of fear of parents' responses (Fernández, 2020), ruining their relationship with the students, and that they will not be backed up by the principal or the ministry (Hess, 2009; Gindi & Erlich-Ron, 2018).

It should be noted that this study was conducted among elementary school teachers. Perhaps they felt, more so than secondary school teachers, a need to protect their students from the ugliness of the world. Nonetheless, education begins at an early age and racism develops gradually over time (Roberts & Rizzo, 2021). The teachers in our study made excuses for students, both real and hypothetical. When teachers believe that students do not really believe the things they say, they miss an important opportunity to confront religiously offensive ideas at an early stage, and to nip dangerous processes in the bud.

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