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### Connecting past, present and future

*The enhancement of the relevance of history for students*

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## Chapter 6

# CONNECTING THE PAST AND THE PRESENT THROUGH CASE-COMPARISON LEARNING IN HISTORY: EXPERIENCES AND VIEWS OF TEACHERS AND STUDENTS<sup>5</sup>

History education frequently aims at developing active citizenship by using the past to orientate on the present and the future. A pedagogy for pursuing this aim is making connections between the past and the present by means of comparing cases of an enduring human issue. To examine the feasibility of this case-comparison approach, students ( $N = 444$ ) and teachers ( $N = 15$ ) who participated in an implementation study conducted in the Netherlands were questioned about their experiences and opinions. Results show that both students and teachers felt that case-comparison in the context of an enduring human issue is feasible and not more complex than the usual history teaching in which topics are studied separately without explicitly making comparisons between past and present, even if some students believed that taking account of episodes from different historical periods concurrently required an extra learning effort. Both students and teachers supported the idea of connecting past and present in history to enhance engagement and meaning making. They suggested a curriculum combining the case-comparison approach with the type of history teaching they were accustomed to. Mixed methods were used for data collection. Implications for further research on case-comparison learning in history are being discussed.

### 6.1 Introduction

It is often being argued that history as a school subject is important because of the academic skills involved and because knowledge of the past may be employed for a better understanding of the present. While academic skills unmistakably have their value in today's information society, application of historical knowledge in 'practical' present-day contexts is a much more complex issue. It requires specific learning activities, especially when dealing with topics much further back in time than contemporary history. If history is to be contributive to the personal development of students and their

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preparation for active citizenship, they should be taught how to use knowledge of the past in their orientation on the present and future. In earlier work, we identified three pedagogical approaches for pursuing this goal: (1) teaching with longitudinal lines describing long-term political, socio-economical or cultural developments, for example, the emergence of national states; (2) teaching with analogies between the past and the present, for example, an analogy between the Roman Empire and the European Union; and (3) teaching with enduring human issues (i.e. issues shared by humans of all times because they are essential to human existence, such as religious beliefs, government, trade, food and sickness) (Van Straaten, Wilschut, & Oostdam, 2016).

In a previous study, we reported on the effects of a large-scale experiment among Dutch senior secondary school students which revealed that history teaching combining the second and third pedagogical approach positively affected students' appraisals of the relevance of history and their valuing of lesson content (Van Straaten, Wilschut, Oostdam, & Fukkink, 2018). During this experiment, students compared historical and contemporary cases of an enduring human issue which enabled them to use the past in reflections on current affairs. Given the fact that this type of teaching is an innovative practice in Dutch history education which may potentially enhance students' estimations of the relevance of history, we wanted to learn more about the implementation of this teaching method. The principal aim of the present study is to investigate the feasibility of history teaching employing connections between past and present by means of case-comparison in the context of an enduring human issue. We questioned teachers and students involved in the experiment about the feasibility of this case-comparison approach, assuming they would be able to give an adequate evaluation of this type of teaching from their own experiences.

## **6.2 Connecting past and present**

People naturally make connections between the past, the present and the future because they are endowed with a memory storing experiences on which actions and expectations are based (Becker, 1931; Kahneman, 2011; Karlsson, 2011). However, this 'existential' historical consciousness does not necessarily imply that the professional study of history has an intrinsic value for people. People's spontaneous relationship with the past must be distinguished from deliberate historical study. According to Oakeshott (1983), serious

historical study implies the 'most sophisticated' attitude one can adopt, 'difficult to achieve', and also highly prone to relapse 'into some other kind of engagement' (p. 28). Lowenthal (2000) contends 'that to fathom history demands effort, and to teach it calls for experience and judgment' (p. 64). Lee (2005) typifies the key principles of the historical discipline as 'counterintuitive' (p. 33), meaning that historical thinking does not always accord with people's usual modes of thought.

These reflections on historical study are confirmed by empirical research showing that students are not inclined to make connections between past, present and future of their own accord (Foster, Ashby, & Lee, 2008; Lee, 2004; Mosborg, 2002; Shreiner, 2014). In England, the project Usable Historical Pasts investigated the extent to which 14- to 16-year-olds appealed to historical knowledge when discussing contemporary issues (Foster, Ashby, & Lee, 2008). Considering the question whether the United States would retain its world hegemony, only 8% of students' responses contained explicit references to the past. In a case study we conducted ourselves, 2 out of 54 ninth-graders used their knowledge of the Cold War to substantiate opinions about the legitimacy of imposing ideological systems with a universal validity claim. It seemed that it never occurred to these students that history can be used for such purpose (Van Straaten, Wilschut, & Oostdam, 2018).

A lack of readily available knowledge may prevent students to link the past to the present, as was put forward by students in the Usable Historical Past project (Foster, Ashby, & Lee, 2008). Students' epistemological beliefs about history are an impediment as well, as they tend to conceive the past as a closed entity of given facts and dates about a world 'out there' which cannot have any meaning for the present because it exists no longer. As Dunn (2000) has put it: 'The key epistemological problem in history education is to figure out how students use their minds to connect their reality to the experience of human beings who are dead and gone' (p. 137). Students have difficulty to grasp the idea that history represents narrative accounts of the past serving contemporary needs and interests. Their inclination to stress the importance of the role of human agents in history impedes their thinking in terms of long-term patterns of alternating change and continuity affecting the present (Barton, 2008; Blow, 2009; Lee, 2005; Sandahl, 2015; Shemilt, 2009). These epistemological beliefs are probably reinforced by the way in which history is usually taught (i.e., through the study of the past as an end in itself, and by high-stake

tests emphasizing the recitation of facts) (Rosenzweig, 2000; Saye & SSIRC, 2013; Stern, 2010). All of this may explain why students, particularly junior secondary students, have unarticulated views on the usefulness of history (Barton & Levstik, 2011; Biddulph & Adey, 2003; Harris & Reynolds, 2014; Haydn & Harris, 2010).

### **6.3 Case-comparison learning in the context of enduring human issues**

Cognitive psychological research has shown that case-comparison learning activities offer more opportunities for knowledge application and meaning making than traditional forms of instruction such as reading and lecturing (Alfieri, Nokes-Malch, & Schunn, 2013; Gentner, Loewenstein, & Thompson, 2003). Through case comparison students discern structural characteristics underlying similar cases thus ‘decontextualizing’ descriptive information into principles that can be applied to understand new cases bearing similarities with known ones, but differing in specific characteristics (Alfieri, Nokes-Malch, & Schunn, 2013; Gentner, Loewenstein, & Thompson, 2003; Salomon & Perkins, 1989). Case-comparison learning involves higher order thinking skills that facilitate knowledge transfer, such as categorizing and inferring (Richland & Simms, 2015). These insights fit well with the benefits of using conceptual frameworks and concept-based instruction for the learning of history (Thornton & Barton, 2010; Twyman, McCleery, & Tindal, 2006).

Case-comparison learning in a curriculum organized around enduring human issues puts students in a position to consider societal phenomena which can broaden their understandings of the present and their awareness of their own values and ideals, thus generating insights which have value beyond school. Research has shown that applicability in ‘real life’ is what encourages students to learn and what they find important in valuing the relevance of school subjects (Brophy, 1999; Eccles, 2004; Frymier, & Shulman, 1995; Tileston, 2004; Martin, 2003; Muddiman & Frymier, 2009; Pintrich, 2003). Active construction of knowledge by relating new information to prior knowledge, which is a core activity in case-comparison learning, nurtures meaningful learning (Narayan, Rodriguez, Araujo, Shaqlaih, & Moss 2013; Novak, 2002). These learning principles are consistent with history education literature, claiming that learning activities aiming at source-based interpretation promote student engagement and provide

greater opportunities for meaning making than activities targeting at memorization and factual recall (Barton, 2008; Barton & Levstik, 2011; Lévesque, 2008; Seixas, 2000).

#### **6.4 Effects of case-comparison history teaching**

In a previous study, we applied the case-comparison learning principles in a classroom intervention dealing with the issue of migration, in particular the influx and reception of refugees in past and present societies. Participants were grade 10 to 12 students ( $N = 444$ ) from two tracks of Dutch senior secondary education (middle level track or HAVO and pre-university track or VWO). In a six-lesson unit (see Table 6.1), these students made explicit comparisons between Syrian refugees arriving in the Netherlands in 2016 and five refugee groups from different historical periods: (1) Protestants leaving the Catholic southern Netherlands for the Protestant north during the Dutch Revolt (16<sup>th</sup> century); (2) Persecuted Jews seeking refuge in the Dutch Republic (17<sup>th</sup> century); (3) Belgians fleeing from First World War violence towards the neutral Netherlands; (4) Germans being expelled from former German territory in Poland, Russia and Czechoslovakia after the Second World War; (5) Cubans leaving for the US after the communist takeover by Fidel Castro in 1959.

Lesson goals and learning activities were directed at seeking similarities and differences between the five historical refugee cases and between each case and present-day refugee issues. Students used a framework of key questions and concepts in order to facilitate comparison activities and the transfer of historical knowledge to present situations and vice versa (Appendix F). In accordance with the theoretical framework described above, we assumed that mirroring the past to the present would stimulate students to make meaning and consequently have a positive effect on their appraisals of the relevance of history. We have defined relevance of history as 'allowing students to recognize and experience what history has to do with themselves, with today's society and their general understanding of human existence' and accordingly distinguished three relevance domains: building a personal identity, becoming a citizen and understanding the human condition (Van Straaten, Wilschut, & Oostdam, 2016).

**Table 6.1** Design of the lesson unit in the case-comparison experiment conducted earlier.

	Activities	Explanation
Lesson 1	Demonstrating the key questions framework for case comparison and drawing analogies with the present  Applying the framework to current refugee issues.	Key questions framework: see Appendix F
Lesson 2-6	Comparing five historical refugee cases and using them to reflect on present-day refugee issues.  Two assignment types:  1 Analyzing and comparing refugee cases using the key questions framework.  2 Considering present-day refugee issues by drawing analogies with the past cases.	Assignment examples  [Source: Authorities in Miami issued an informative movie to reduce growing concerns among the population about the arrival of large quantities of Cuban refugees in 1961]  1 Which questions and concepts from the key questions framework can you relate to the concerns of the people of Miami? Choose two.  2 The government appealed to American history to reassure the population. Nowadays, could the Dutch government refer to immigration in Dutch history for this purpose? Explain your opinion.

We developed and validated the Relevance of History Measurement Scale (RHMS), a questionnaire which can be used for measuring students' relevance perceptions in the three domains (Van Straaten, Wilschut, & Oostdam, 2018) (see Appendix A). In order to evaluate the effects of the case-comparison classroom intervention discussed here, the RHMS was administered in a pre- and post-test setting. Set against the results of students following the usual history curriculum ( $N = 289$ ), multilevel regression analyses on the collected data had shown that the intervention positively affected students' appraisals of the relevance of history in all three domains (Van Straaten, Wilschut, Oostdam, & Fukkink, 2018).

## 6.5 The present study

The teaching of history according to the case-comparison approach differs fundamentally from the history education students are familiar with. The Dutch history curriculum requires students to learn frame of reference knowledge encompassing ten historical eras (from 'hunters and farmers' to 'television and computer'), to master historical thinking and reasoning skills and to acquire specifically defined knowledge of historical topics, e.g., the Dutch Republic (1515-1648), the Enlightenment (1650-1848), the Cold War (1945-1991). Subject matter is usually taught in chronological order purporting the acquisition of historical knowledge in order to understand the past. Given the differences between the diachronic case-comparison approach and the history teaching students were accustomed to, we wanted to know whether implementing this approach caused any problems. Therefore, we examined the feasibility of case-comparison history teaching as implemented in our classroom intervention. This examination was guided by the following research questions:

1. According to teachers and students, should history teaching focus on the past as well as on the present in view of school subject relevance?
2. What is the perceived complexity of history teaching focusing on comparing cases of an enduring human issue?
3. Is this way of teaching desirable and feasible according to teachers and students and taking into account the extent to which students use the past to orientate on the present?

For a successful implementation of the case-comparison approach it is important to know whether students and teachers consider linking the past to the present as something that should be pursued in history teaching, also in view of the relevance of history (RQ 1). Because students were used to studying historical topics separately, we assumed that they might have encountered difficulties with the comparison of topics from different periods while simultaneously taking into account time-bound differences (RQ 2). Three indicators were used for examining the feasibility and desirability of the case-comparison approach (RQ 3): students' and teachers' preferences for either case-comparison teaching or traditional history teaching; the extent to which case-comparison teaching encouraged students to use historical knowledge when reflecting on current affairs;

teachers' thoughts on the dilemma of using the past in an analogy with the present on the one hand, and fostering awareness of historical difference and avoiding presentism on the other. (According to Lowenthal (2000), studying generic topics – migration, conquest, slavery – may be useful, but may also impose ‘presentist blinkers’ (p. 70) and impede true historical understanding.)

## 6.6 Method

### 6.6.1 Participants

In total, 460 students and 18 teachers were involved in the case-comparison experiment. For the present study, 444 students and 15 teachers completed our questionnaires. We conducted interviews with 4 teachers and 22 students from different schools located in six out of the twelve Dutch provinces (see Table 6.2 for specifics). Both teacher and student interviewees represented all grades and educational tracks involved in the experiment. The students were interviewed in dyads.

**Table 6.2** Interviewees: teachers ( $N = 4$ ) and students ( $N = 22$ , 11 dyads).

	Middle level general secondary education (HAVO)		Pre-university secondary education (VWO)		Gender		Teaching experience
	Grade 10	Grade 11	Grade 11	Grade 12	Female	Male	
Teacher 1	X				1		18
Teacher 2		X				1	18
Teacher 3			X			1	10
Teacher 4				X	1		28
Students:							Mean age
Dyad 1	X					2	16
Dyad 2-6		X			7	3	17
Dyad 7-9			X		4	2	17
Dyad 10-11				X	2	2	18

### **6.6.2 Data collection and analysis**

Tables 6.3, 6.4 and 6.5 show the instruments used for data collection. After completing the lesson unit and without knowledge of the outcomes of the experiment, the teachers filled out an online questionnaire measuring their expectations of the outcomes and their views on the case-comparison approach. This questionnaire consisted of 12 items placed on a 5-point Likert scale (1: totally disagree; 2: disagree; 3: neutral; 4: agree; 5: totally agree). Items 5-8 were counterparts of four questionnaire items administered to students using the same scale, which enabled us to compare teachers' expectations of the outcomes with the actual experiences reported by students. Item 4 of the teacher questionnaire corresponds to the measurements conducted with the Relevance of History Measurement Scale (RHMS), which revealed, as described in 6.4, that students' relevance perceptions had been positively affected by the case-comparison approach. The 24 RHMS-items are not included in Table 6.3 for practical reasons. For research ends, the teacher questionnaire was not carried out anonymously. Mean scores were calculated for each item. The mean scores of items 5-8 were compared with the mean scores of the corresponding student questionnaire items.

Like the questionnaires, the interviews were conducted after the experiment had been completed and before the outcomes were known to the teachers. To ensure representativeness of data, one teacher from each educational stream participated. The teachers were interviewed individually in about 60 minutes by the first author using the standardized open-ended interview technique, i.e., guided by questions worded and sequenced in advance and corresponding to the research questions themes under examination (Patton 1980). The interview questions were in line with the teacher questionnaire items.

The student interviewees volunteered after a general call from their teachers to participate. The interviews were conducted by the first author using the standardized open-ended interview technique. Students were interviewed in dyads to make them feel at ease and to stimulate response (Frechtling & Sharp, 1997). On average, the interviews lasted 25 minutes.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data analysis was research question driven, i.e., the issues raised by the main questions were used as pre-ordinate categories for collecting and compiling data across respondents (Cohen, Manion,

Morrison, 2007). The analysis comprised six stages: (1) reading the transcripts to get the overall picture thus maintaining a sense of holism of the data; (2) delineating units of meaning relevant to the research questions; (3) clustering units of relevant meaning; (4) counting cluster frequencies in order to discern dominant trends; (5) summarizing dominant trends while noting deviant responses; (6) using verbatim quotes to illustrate clusters and trends (Hycner; 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

**Table 6.3** Measures of the study regarding RQ 1; questionnaires: closed-format with a 5-point Likert scale.

	Teacher questionnaire	Teacher interview	Student questionnaire	Student interview
Past-present connections and relevance of history (RQ 1)	<p>1) In general, students find history more fun when relationships between past and present are being made.</p> <p>2) In general, students find history more relevant when relationships between past and present are being made</p> <p>3) During the lesson unit I noticed that students find history more appealing when current events are involved.</p> <p>4) I think that students have become more aware of the relevance of history because of the case-comparison lesson unit.</p>	<p>Do you think history teaching should focus on the past or on past-present relationships?</p> <p>Do you think that students have come to appreciate the relevance history (more) through the lesson unit?</p>	<p>[Effects of the case-comparison lesson intervention on students' appraisals of the relevance of history were measured with the RHMS questionnaire in a previous study.]</p>	<p>Do you think history teaching should be about the past or about the present and the present?</p> <p>[Effects of the case-comparison lesson intervention on students' appraisals of the relevance of history were measured with the RHMS questionnaire in a previous study.]</p>

**Table 6.4** Measures of the study regarding RQ 2; questionnaires: closed-format with a 5-point Likert scale.

	Teacher questionnaire	Teacher interview	Student questionnaire	Student interview
Complexity of the case-comparison approach (RQ 2)	<p>5) I think students found the case-comparison approach (lessons about an enduring human issue with examples from different times) confusing.</p> <p>6) I think students thought it was difficult to understand the refugee examples because there were many of them.</p> <p>7) I think students found the case-comparison approach more difficult than the history teaching they are used to.</p>	<p>In general, what are your experiences with the lesson unit project? How did it go?</p> <p>Did the key questions framework work as planned?</p>	<p>1) Lessons about topics from different times are confusing.</p> <p>2) In the refugee lessons, there were so many different topics that it was difficult to understand them.</p> <p>3) Teaching a theme with topics from different times (like in the refugee lessons) is more difficult than the history teaching we are used to.</p>	<p>In general, what are your experiences with the lesson unit project? How did it go?</p> <p>You compared refugee groups from different times including the present. Did you find this method more difficult than the usual method?</p> <p>Did you find the key questions framework helpful?</p>

**Table 6.5** Measures of the study regarding RQ 3; questionnaires: closed-format with a 5-point Likert scale.

	Teacher questionnaire	Teacher interview	Student questionnaire	Student interview
Desirability and feasibility of the case-comparison approach (RQ 3)	<p>8) I think students preferred the history teaching they are used to instead of history teaching according to the case-comparison approach.</p> <p>9) The case-comparison approach is feasible in middle level and pre-university senior secondary education (grade 10-12).</p> <p>10) The case-comparison approach is also feasible in lower middle level and pre-university junior secondary education (grade 7-10).</p> <p>11) I intend to use this approach more often in my lessons.</p> <p>12) This approach should be part of the national history examination.</p>	<p>Do you think this pedagogical approach is feasible in secondary education?</p> <p>What would you do differently the next time you apply this approach?</p> <p>Theoretically, comparing past and present can be viewed as problematic. What is your view on this?</p>	<p>4) I prefer history teaching in the way of the refugee project instead of history teaching we are used to.</p>	<p>What do you prefer: the history teaching according to the method of the lesson unit or the history teaching you are used to?</p>

## 6.7 Results

### 6.7.1 Past-present connections and the relevance of history (RQ 1)

According to the questionnaire results, the teachers quite strongly believed that, in general, students experience more fun and school subject relevance when past and

present are being connected in history class (see Table 6.6). Somewhat less strongly, and with more difference of opinion, they also reported to have noticed during the course of the experiment, that students found history more appealing as soon as current events were involved. Contrary to the outcomes of the experiment, which positively affected students' relevance perceptions, the teachers had no high expectations about this.

These findings are supported by the teacher interview data. The interviewees strongly argued the importance of linking the past to the present for meaning making and engaging students, but were cautious in their assessments of the efficacy of the case-comparison approach in this respect. One teacher expected small effects because of the relatively short duration of the intervention (6 lessons). Two teachers abstained from bold predictions, although they had noticed that the lessons had grabbed the attention and interest of their students.

**Table 6.6** Teachers' experiences and expectations of their students' perceptions on past-present relationships and relevance of history, in general and pertaining to the case-comparison experiment ( $N = 15$ ); mean scores and (standard deviations) on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = totally disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neutral; 4 = agree; 5 = totally agree).

1) In general, students find history more fun when relationships between past and present are being made.	4.33 (.49)
2) In general, students find history more relevant when relationships between past and present are being made.	4.27 (.46)
3) During the lesson unit I noticed that students find history more appealing when current events are involved.	3.67 (.98)
4) I think that students have become more aware of the relevance of history because of the lesson unit.	3.07 (.70)

Most student interviewees strongly believed that history teaching should encompass both past and present. Three main motivations can be deduced from their elaborations on this issue, which are listed below, illustrated with quotes.

(1) Linking the past to the present enhances personal interest, benefit and engagement in learning history. Students made it clear that history should be connected to their own

lives in order to have any meaning and that connecting the past to the present is an appropriate way to accomplish this.

I think people are more interested because they recognize things. If you only do history, most find it less interesting. I think it's a bit more fun when the present is also involved (female, grade 11, middle level track).

History should focus on both past and present. I do not really think I can use a lot of what happened in the past. You know a bit more about how things came about, but I do not think my life would be much worse if I did not know anything about history (female, grade 11, middle level track).

You see that history can be used for what we do now and then there is more importance to it. When you open the regular textbook and read something about prehistoric times, then you do not have that kind of oh... this applies to how I live now (female, grade 11 pre-university track).

I certainly think [history should be] about the present and the past, because sometimes they say what's the point of history. I think that for many people history will [no longer] be dusty like 'this happened 2000 years ago' . . . it gets a bit more animated (female, grade 12, pre-university education).

(2) Linking the past to the present supports learning and understanding. Students not only referred to a better understanding of the present but also of the past, as is indicated by the first two quotations below. It seemed that in learning history, it helps students to make connections with current affairs they can identify with.

If you can compare [the past] with recent developments, you also understand the past better (male, grade 10, middle level track).

It may be useful if we compare a few things with the present to understand them better. I think it is easier to understand than if you just read it in a book (female, grade 11, middle level track).

I do not really care what kind of king has been stabbed to death in the 13th century . . . If it is more up-to-date, you remember it better and you want to know more about it (male, grade 10, middle level track).

(3) Linking the past to the present allows orientation on the present and the future. Students' responses varied from drawing morally laden lessons from the past to a better understanding of contemporary problems and reflecting on future developments in this respect.

If you compare, and then consider what you can do with it, then it makes a difference in the future, that history will not repeat itself if something bad has happened (female, grade 11, middle level track).

It means that you are going to compare it with nowadays, how it can be done better, that you also have to act the way they did (male, grade 11, middle level track).

You need the past to understand the present. For example, the Enlightenment affected the present, just like the First and Second World War. I think you should certainly make a connection with things from the past that caused what we are experiencing now, perhaps even will experience in the future (male, grade 12, pre-university track).

You learn to understand the present better, you can better understand today's problems by looking at examples from the past (male, grade 12, pre-university track).

There were some students, most of the lowest (middle level) track, who preferred teaching about the past only and who did not favor making connections with the present. They argued in different ways, for example by saying that the past bears 'nicer topics, such as the Romans', or by stating that it was useless to bring in the present because history tests only focus on knowledge of the past. One student saw no use in connecting past and present because the present was all too well known: 'I think you know what it looks like now and what you can do with it now'. Another student questioned the whole point of studying examples of historical refugee groups in the context of current refugees issues, as 'you do not notice anything anymore of the examples from the past'. The latter two comments illustrate students' naïve epistemological beliefs about history as described in section 6.2, such as the idea that the past is fixed and 'gone' and therefore cannot have any connection with the present.

### 6.7.2 Complexity of the case-comparison approach (RQ 2)

Table 6.7 shows the outcomes of the teacher questionnaire and the corresponding items in the student questionnaire with regard to the complexity of the case-comparison approach.

**Table 6.7** Teachers' expectations of their students' views on the complexity of the case-comparison experiment and actual students' views; mean scores and (standard deviations) on a 5-point Likert scale (1: totally disagree; 2: disagree; 3: neutral; 4: agree; 5: totally agree).

Teacher questionnaire items	Teachers ( <i>N</i> = 15)	Corresponding student questionnaire items	Students ( <i>N</i> = 444)
5) I think students found the case-comparison approach (lessons about an enduring human issue with examples from different times) confusing.	2.60 (1.24)	1) Lessons about topics from different times are confusing.	2.59 (1.04)
6) I think students thought it was difficult to understand the refugee examples because there were many of them.	2.53 (0.99)	2) In the refugee lessons, there were so many different topics that it was difficult to understand them.	2.47 (0.95)
7) I think students found the case-comparison approach more difficult than the history teaching they are used to.	2.80 (1.08)	3) Teaching a theme with topics from different times (like in the refugee lessons) is more difficult than the history teaching we are used to.	2.43 (0.92)

Their estimates closely approximate the actual findings in the student questionnaire, with the exception of the last question (7), to which the students' answer indicates that they found the comparison approach even less difficult than their teachers expected.

The data from the student interviews corresponded with the questionnaire outcomes. In general, students reported no difficulties with the case-comparison approach, arguing, for example, that the lesson unit focused on one specific theme illustrated by similar and therefore comparable examples, which facilitated learning and comprehension. One student was ambivalent on this issue:

It is a bit ambiguous. On the one hand I find it very chaotic, that you always go from one era to another, but on the other hand you really stick to one subject . .

. The fact . . . that you also have to think what was very different in that time and what was normal, made the subject complicated. For example, the Southern Netherlanders in 1500 . . . had very different things to deal with than the Cubans. So you always had to take the situation into account . . . that made it a bit chaotic. But I like sticking to one subject (female, grade 11, pre-university track).

These remarks are in line with considerations of two grade 12 pre-university students who suggested that the case-comparison approach might be more difficult than regular history teaching:

Boy: You have to make more connections yourself instead of having it typed out for you and . . . you simply read it in chronological order.

Girl: You have to make more effort indeed.

Boy: Yes, you always jump from one time to another, so you have to find out for yourself, oh, that's the same and those are the differences, so that development is going on. Instead of it all being spelled out for you.

Girl: I also think that, when you really have a very long time span, it becomes increasingly difficult to separate things.

*Q: What do you prefer, this type of history teaching [...] or history teaching in the way you are used to?*

Boy: I prefer this way, but I do not think I am the average history student. I am very good at history and I also find it all interesting, that's why I liked this approach. But I think most other students would say that they just want it to be spelled out for them and to have it very easy.

Girl: I agree. I think that a combination of both [approaches] would be fun. So that you sometimes have to do a theme, one or two each period, and for the rest you get the usual history lessons.

Both teacher and student interviewees indicated that the key questions framework (see Appendix F) supported the analyzing of sources and the case-comparison learning activities. Students found working with the framework's categories helpful, because, as one put it:

You can then decide what you need to look at, politically or economically. . . . Without being aware of it, you dig deeper into things, because you look at

different sides. You split the topic in different aspects and that helps (female, grade 11, pre-university track).

According to two pre-university students and one pre-university teacher, using the framework became too easy in the end and therefore too much of a routine job.

### 6.7.3 Desirability and feasibility of the case-comparison approach (RQ 3)

In spite of teachers' expectations regarding students' preference for the case-comparison approach, students did not clearly prefer this approach to the usual history teaching (see Table 6.8). Student interviewees were divided on this issue: some preferred the regular teaching because of the chronological ordering of events while others preferred the case-comparison teaching because the thematic approach provided structure and offered them opportunity to find out things for themselves. Remarkably, students from both 'camps' used 'variety' as an argument. In general, students proposed to combine both types of history teaching, suggesting that the regular curriculum could serve as a base for thematic case-comparison learning.

**Table 6.8** Teachers' expectations of their students' preferences for the case-comparison or current history teaching and actual students' views; mean scores and (standard deviations) on a 5-point Likert scale (1: totally disagree; 2: disagree; 3: neutral; 4: agree; 5: totally agree).

Teacher questionnaire items	Teachers ( <i>N</i> = 15)	Corresponding student questionnaire items	Students ( <i>N</i> = 444)
8) I think students preferred the history teaching they are used to instead of history teaching according to the case-comparison approach.	2.60 (1.06)	I prefer history teaching in the way of the refugee project instead of history teaching we are used to.	2.68 (1.07)

Feasibility of a pedagogic approach not only depends on whether it is deemed 'doable' by teachers and students, but also on the extent to which it realizes its aims. Therefore, we examined to what extent case-comparison history teaching triggered students to reflect on the present. When asked about the merits of the case-comparison approach as applied in the lesson unit, students elaborated on similarities and differences between the five historical refugee groups and present-day refugees in the Netherlands. They

implicitly used the key questions framework to describe differences between past and present refugee issues, for example by stating that the cultural dimension - language, religion, habits – is more dominant nowadays than it was in the past. One student stated:

Well, people very often use the argument that we have to shelter refugees because we used to do that in the past; in the past it did not go wrong and that's why we have to do that now. But if you then look at the [cultural] differences between refugees, formerly the Belgians in 1914 and now from Syria . . . people do not really look at that aspect, they just think it used to be okay so why would it go wrong, and they do not take those other interests into consideration. I think that's why [history] helps (male, grade 12, pre-university track).

In general, students were impressed by the large numbers of Belgians who arrived in the Netherlands in the autumn of 1914 (about one million refugees on a total Dutch population of 6.2 million). It made some of them trivialize concerns about the allegedly large numbers of people seeking shelter in the Netherlands in 2016 and prompted them to raise questions about the present situation:

There were actually a lot of refugees in the Netherlands [1 million Belgians in 1914]. They said we stay here, we are going to work here, and when the war is over we go back again. I thought that was a good reason, that they were here and went back again. Then I . . . wondered very much if refugees think so nowadays. We know that we are getting refugees, people talk about them like they are a herd of animals . . . that's how it's talked about. But there is no real talk about whether they ever want to go back or whether they stay here permanently. That is not told. On social media everyone has an opinion, while nobody actually knows anything. Maybe they just want to go back. We do not know that. (grade 11, pre-university, female).

Not all students dwelled on past-present analogies so extensively. Straightforward conclusions were drawn as well, for example by stating that history always repeats itself – what applied to refugees in the past still applies to refugees today – without regard to time-bound differences.

Based on their experiences, the teachers strongly believed that history teaching according to the case-comparison approach is feasible in the two highest tracks of senior secondary education (Table 6.9). They intended to apply this approach more often and

advocated inclusion of case-comparison in the examination program. The teacher interviewees' remarks were in line with these outcomes. The teachers found the approach feasible for their students, but suggested that next time they would spend more time on comparison activities by reducing the number of historical examples, by using the key questions framework strictly for comparing cases (and not for analyzing individual texts) or by augmenting student-centered learning activities such as discussion and deliberation.

**Table 6.9** Teachers' views on the feasibility of the case-comparison approach ( $N = 15$ ); mean scores and (standard deviations) on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = totally disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neutral; 4 = agree; 5 = totally agree).

9) The case-comparison approach is feasible in middle level and pre-university senior secondary education (grade 10-12).	4.53 (.52)
10) The case-comparison approach is also feasible in lower middle level and pre-university junior secondary education (grade 7-10).	3.60 (.83)
11) I intend to use this approach more often in my lessons.	3.87 (.74)
12) This approach should be part of the national history examination.	4.00 (.59)

The teachers interviewees considered the case-comparison approach as complementary to the traditional way of history teaching and were not inclined to exchange one for the other. As in the extant curriculum frame of reference knowledge is taught in junior secondary education and repeated recursively in senior secondary education, they argued to focus on case-comparison learning in senior education and on reference knowledge learning in the junior stages. They saw obstacles for the implementation of the case-comparison approach in junior secondary education, for example junior students' preoccupation with historical details, but also felt that application was worth trying. One teacher said:

Children are quite capable of seeing differences and similarities. Whether they are capable of discerning long-term processes and have sufficient power of abstraction . . . of course not, but if you do not confront them with [the case-comparison method], and think they are ready for it as soon as they are senior students . . . I do not believe in that (male, middle level track).

We asked the teachers what their thoughts were on the compatibility of the case-comparison approach and the axioms of academic history. They were fully aware of the tension between studying the past on its own terms – acknowledging the ‘otherness’ of former times – and the tendency to generalize inherent in analogical reasoning, which might give cause to presentism. However, this dilemma would not refrain them from using the method as it appeared to be a good way to make history meaningful for students. As one teacher explained:

I think you need to deal with this [tension] in a nuanced way. Some people talk very easily about a kind of cyclic history and say that everything repeats itself. . . . I find that very dangerous. On the other hand, constantly emphasizing that all past events are unique makes the subject completely meaningless. You can say that [emphasizing uniqueness] teaches students that everything is not always the same, but I think this is a very poor learning outcome. . . . I think you have to indicate that things are unique, but that certain aspects are not unique at all. That people’s behaviors were not strange at all, because they are also manifest today and will also occur in the future. I find that very useful teaching principles (male, middle level track).

## **6.8 Conclusion and discussion**

It should be noted that the views and experiences discussed in this article relate to lessons about migration and integration, current topics at the moment the experiment took place. This calls for further research to see whether application of the case-comparison approach with other topics would lead to similar results. The teachers volunteered to participate in the experiment, which may have increased selection bias in the sense that they might have had a positive view of history teaching aiming at past-present analogies. Taking these limitations into account, the findings of this study provide useful insights into the implementation of this type of teaching in the context of an enduring human issue.

With regard to the first research question whether history teaching should focus on the past as well as on the present, it can be concluded that both students and teachers preferred history education that includes the present as well. The teachers argued that relating the past to the present generally enhances student engagement and allows students to recognize ways in which history can be relevant. However, contrary to the research outcomes of our previous study, the teachers did not expect large positive effects of the case-comparison experiment due to, as one teacher put forward, the short duration of the intervention. This seems to be in accordance with their plea for including the case-comparison approach in the existing curriculum and their recommendation to spend more time on comparison activities and less time on source text analysis.

For students, the need for linking the past to the present stems from three rationales: (1) the fulfillment of personal interest and personal engagement (2) connectedness to the present as a means to better understand historical subject matter, and (3) the use of the past to orientate on the present and future. The first two reasons correspond to a considerable amount of studies indicating that stimulating personal and emotional engagement enhances connectedness to the past and facilitates the learning of history, in particular regarding ‘distant’ topics which cannot easily be connected with students’ own life (Barton & Levstik, 2011; Dunn, 2000; Endacott, 2005; Rosenzweig, 2000). Differences in age and educational level may have played a role with regard to the second reason; the students who thought relating to the present was as an aid for learning about the past came from the lower grades and the lower track. These students were quite preoccupied with ‘learning the facts’ to comply with curriculum demands and to perform well on history tests. They found connectedness with the known a more profitable learning method than reading historical texts, which complies with cognitive learning principles about the importance of integrating new knowledge with prior knowledge and experiences outside school (Narayan, Rodriguez, Araujo, Shaqlaih, & Moss, 2013; Novak, 2002).

With regard to the third reason, many students argued in a way which Rösen (2004) has called ‘exemplary’, meaning that historical events are conceived as precepts that should guide decision making in the present, which is a common mode of how people deal with the past (Chapman & Facey, 2004; Lowenthal, 2004; MacMillan, 2008). In doing so, some students were focusing on similarities between past and present, thus

disregarding time-bound differences, which stems with previous research on the use of historical analogies in the classroom (Boix-Mansilla, 2000) and is also in line with students' strong inclinations to make sense of history from a presentist perspective, causing them to pick chunks from the past that bear familiarity with the present or fit their personal beliefs (Blow, 2009; Lee, 2004; Lowenthal, 2000; Wineburg, 1999). Age and educational level differences may have played a role here as well, as the students concerned were from lower grades and the lower educational track, whereas students from the highest educational level were reflecting on the relationship between past, present and future in a more generalizing manner, also to learn from historical examples, but less so in the sense of simply copying the past.

Regarding the second research question (the complexity of the case-comparison approach), the results of this study show that students in general did not encounter difficulties with case-comparison teaching, which was in line with teachers' expectations. The use of the key questions framework may provide an explanation for this outcome, because students found the framework helpful for comparison activities. However, there were some students who suggested that case-comparison learning is a complex endeavor as studying cases from different periods implies taking into account different historical contexts and trying to avoid anachronisms. As these students were from the highest educational track and students from the lower grades and the lower track did not report any difficulties, it is tempting to relate student views on the complexity of the case-comparison approach to their level of historical consciousness and historical thinking, because insights into these domains calls for some degree of maturity (Maggioni, Van Sledright, & Alexander, 2009; Lowenthal, 2000). This possible interplay between historical consciousness and case-comparison learning needs further investigation. Educating disciplinary thinking may foster student abilities to elaborate academically valid analogies between past and present. Vice versa, applying the case-comparison approach in history teaching provides ample opportunities for strengthening students' historical thinking, because comparing past and present events involves thinking about change and continuity, cause and effect and other so-called meta-concepts which heuristically underpin the historical discipline (Van Drie, & Van Boxtel, 2008).

Three indicators were used to examine the third research question concerning the feasibility and desirability of the case-comparison approach. Students showed no clear

preference for the case-comparison approach compared to history teaching they were accustomed to, which was in line with teachers' expectations. Both students and teachers suggested to combine these two curriculum approaches by using overview reference knowledge as a base for teaching about analogous cases from different times, including the present. The teachers were aware of tension between the need to encounter the past on its own terms on the one hand and the inclination to generalize and the lurking of presentism if the past is subjected to a comparison with the present on the other. However, they argued that history becomes meaningless to students if connections with their own world fail to materialize. This viewpoint is widely echoed in history education literature. For example, Barton & Levstik (2004) state that drawing analogies between past and present is navigating between the strange and the familiar, leading to insights that probably do not arise when past and present are studied separately. According to Boix-Manilla (2000) 'understanding the past does not ensure understanding the present [...] it triggers informed questions and hypotheses that only a careful exploration of the contemporary world can resolve' (p. 413). The latter was illustrated by questions about present-day refugee issues raised by students when they learned about the comparatively huge amount of Belgian refugees arriving in the Netherlands in 1914. Here, the case-comparison approach allowed students to take a position in the current refugee debate, which is indicative for the intended efficacy of this method.

Students' elaborations of past-present analogies varied in depth and sophistication, ranging from straightforward copying of past actions as 'lessons for the present' to the use of the past as a mirror for reflecting and questioning present-day realities. It has not been the aim of this study to teach students how to make qualitatively sound comparisons, but future research may focus on the depth of students' analogic reasoning, especially in order to see if they only have an eye for similarities or also take into account differences between the past and the present.

Based on the experiences and views of teachers and students, our overall conclusion is that implementation of the case-comparison approach in view of an enduring human issue is practically feasible in senior secondary education. It provides opportunities for systematically making connections between past and present, which meets students' needs in terms of learning and engagement and allows them to recognize the relevance

of history. These are important yields for educators and policy makers who strive for history education that is meaningful and motivating to students.