"Just imagine..."

Exploring externalized learner-generated images of the past in secondary history education

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Citation for published version (APA):

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Download date: 24 Mar 2021
CHAPTER 6

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

1. INTRODUCTION

History learning can benefit from historical imagination. Constructing a concrete image of the past can support students understand the past, and help them engage with the past (Lee, 1984; Lévesque, 2008). In history education research, imagination activities are often linked to the processes of historical contextualization and historical empathy, which are considered forms of historical thinking and reasoning (Van Drie & Van Boxtel, 2008; Seixas & Morton, 2012). Thus, an image of the past can consist of a reconstruction of historical situations, to create a context for understanding the past, or of the thoughts of historical actors, with the goal of understanding their actions and decisions (Dawson, 2009; Lévesque, 2008; Lee, 1984).

When constructing an image of the past, one can imagine the physical and material environment of the past, for example, the way cities were built and what weaponry the armies used. It is also possible to imagine what people from the past looked like and how they lived, e.g., the clothes they wore and the houses they lived in. To construct an image of individuals from the past and particularly their thoughts and feelings is often referred to as historical empathy (Lee, 1984; Husbands, 1996; Lévesque, 2008). It can comprise of taking the perspective of an actor from the past and imagining his or her motives and emotions within a particular historical context (Endacott & Brooks, 2018).

Although historical imagination can be seen as beneficial for learning history, it also is a challenging effort because students must imagine a world with features and values that were different than those of their own world (Chapman, 2011). Moreover, they need knowledge to build on when constructing images of the past (Collingwood, 1935; Lévesque, 2008). When students use their own prior knowledge together with information given by the teacher, they construct their own images of the past. These images can stay in their minds, as mental models,
or can be externalized in the form of, for example, a written product, a drawing, or an acted product, depending on the task the teacher has set the students (Levstik & Barton, 2015).

Although several scholars have stated that constructing images of the past can promote students’ understanding of historical actions, events and developments (e.g., Endacott & Brooks, 2013; Lévesque, 2008; Lee, 1984; Fines, 2002), we do not yet know what these types of tasks bring to secondary history education in terms of the characteristics and the quality of the produced images. We also do not know much about how students perceive tasks in which they have to produce an image of the past.

This thesis is about historical imagination and, specifically, about student-generated images of the past in the context of different imagination tasks. We focused on writing, drawing and drama activities and explored the consequential images as well as the perceptions of the students completing these tasks.

2. MAIN FINDINGS

In Chapter 2, we explored the types of historical empathy tasks that are used in Dutch textbooks, we analysed cognitive and affective components in the texts students write as a result of an empathy task, and how students perceive empathy tasks in history education.

First, we discerned two main types of empathy tasks in Dutch history textbooks: the ‘First-Person’ type and the ‘Third-Person’ type. In the First-Person tasks, students have to imagine themselves as someone from the past; the Third-Person tasks ask for a reconstruction of the thoughts and feelings of someone from the past. All the textbook tasks asked for more or less the same activities from the students: studying a text or a picture, imagining a situation and finally producing a written product.

Then, we studied 16 students from 4 different schools. All the students attended the havo 3 level (ninth grade, aged 14-16). The students were asked to complete a First-Person written empathy task about the Industrial Revolution in which they had to imagine they were working in a factory and to write a short account of what their day would have been like. The students were interviewed before and after completing this task. Furthermore, we analysed the products the students wrote to explore to what extent cognitive elements, such as the
information from sources and affective elements such as feelings of disgust or fear were present in the accounts.
The results were that all the students used both cognitive and affective elements in their responses. Some students focused mainly on the cognitive elements; no student focused mainly on the affective elements. Most students used the affective elements in their products to illustrate the cognitive elements. Some of the affective elements reflected students’ own judgements of the past or responses from a present-day perspective. When asked about how they had perceived the task, the students reported that they considered empathy tasks useful to help them remember and understand historical information. The students also mentioned comparing the past with the present and imagining other people’s lives as goals of empathy tasks. Based on these results the question arose whether, and if so, to what extent the type of empathy task directs the type of answer of the student. Additionally, the coding of students’ answers in cognitive or affective categories could be refined and the potential learning benefits of empathy tasks further explored.

The aim of the study presented in Chapter 3 was to explore the differences in students’ answers when completing a writing task in the first person (“imagine you are in the past”) or in the third person (“imagine someone in the past”) or a task in which such imagination based on historical empathy is not explicitly defined (“imagine how it was”). Furthermore, we investigated the effects of these types of tasks on topic knowledge and situational interest.

Our experimental study was conducted in 12 havo 3 classes (ninth grade, ages 14-16) in seven secondary schools in the western part of the Netherlands. The students worked on a task about Dutch Iconoclasm (1566), a topic which they had studied approximately a year before participating in this study.
Within each class, the students were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: the First-Person Empathy task (86 students), Third-Person Empathy task (84 students), and Factual Recount task (84 students). All the students were given the same picture of a church being raided, a map of where the Iconoclasm took place and three texts providing information about the people involved in the Iconoclasm and the role religion played in 16th century society. These texts included both Catholic and Protestant perspectives. Preceding these sources was a short introductory text to remind the students of the historical context of the
Iconoclasm. In the task, the students were encouraged to use this provided information. We administered a pre-test consisting of short-answer questions to measure students’ prior knowledge about the Iconoclasm. There were no significant differences between the conditions on this pre-test. After completing the task, the students completed a post-test on topic knowledge and a situational interest questionnaire.

To analyse the written accounts the students produced, we developed a coding scheme based on Endacott and Brooks (2013) model for historical empathy. It consisted of categories related to historical contextualization (the use of information elements from sources, prior knowledge, number of incorrect information elements and concrete elaboration), the affective connection (display of emotional elements, display of presentism and inclusion of moral judgement), and the use of (multiple) perspectives (Endacott & Brooks, 2013). Pearson Chi-Square tests showed that the written accounts in the empathy conditions displayed more additional information, far more concrete elaboration and more emotional elements than the accounts in the Factual Recount condition. The students in the Factual Recount condition reproduced more of the given information and explained more perspectives than the students in the empathy conditions. The written accounts in the First-Person Empathy condition contained the fewest historical mistakes. The First-Person Empathy task elicited the most presentism and moral judgements. For topic knowledge and situational interest, we found no differences between the conditions.

Thus, the empathy tasks (both in first and in third person) elicited concrete images of the past by students, more than a factual recount task. The latter seems more useful when recognizing multiple perspectives by students is wanted. Finally, the written empathy task seemed to be perceived by students the same as a regular writing task, leaving room for the question how students would perceive a task aiming at historical imagination with a non-written product.

In Chapter 4 we studied learner-generated images of the past by comparing students’ drawings with students’ written products. We focused on the elements in the image that contribute to the historical plausibility of the image, and the situational interest the students report as a result of a drawing task or a writing task. We also explored the possible role of the students’ processing preference (verbal or visual).
In this experimental study, 151 9th grade students (14-16 years old) participated by completing a drawing task or a writing task on the Roman Forum in Ancient Rome. The students were given a leaflet with images and written sources on the Roman Forum and were encouraged to study this information and use it for a written text or a drawing as an answer to the following question: “imagine you are in the Roman Forum in 200 AD and you look around you, what do you see?” The drawings and written texts were compared with regard to the amount of information from the sources and prior knowledge and the historical plausibility of the image. Additionally, we investigated the effects of students’ preference for verbal or visual processing and asked them to complete a situational interest questionnaire and a questionnaire on their perception of the task. Finally, we interviewed eight dyads consisting of one student from the drawing condition and one student from the writing condition about their products and their thinking processes.

We found that the students in the drawing condition reproduced less information than the students in the writing condition. The students in the drawing condition did not include more information from outside of the sources provided (e.g., from prior knowledge or their imagination) in their product than the students in the writing condition. Nonetheless, the historical plausibility of the images of the Forum that the students produced did not differ between the two conditions. The students in the drawing condition reported a higher level of situational interest than the students in the writing condition. The interviews and the questionnaire on the perceptions of the task showed that the students report drawing to be more difficult than writing and that they believe they have to think harder when drawing because a writing task invites them to copy information. Moreover, when the students in the interview elaborated on their product, they reported a richer image of the past than could be observed in their text or drawing. Furthermore, we found no significant effect of preferred processing style on the historical plausibility of the products or on the students’ situational interest. Finally, we did not find an interaction effect: in the drawing condition, students with a preference for visual processing did not score higher on the situational interest questionnaire than students with a preference for verbal processing. The results of this study show that both drawing and writing tasks can enable
students to process historical information in a way that results in equally plausible images of the past.

The aim of Chapter 5 was to gain more specific insights into the learning opportunities of a drama task aiming at historical imagination in terms of students’ engagement and the construction of an image of the past. One class of 26 havo 3 students (grade 9, aged 14-16) and their teacher participated in this explorative case study. The students completed a drama task in the form of a First Person Empathy task, resulting in a short film clip on daily life in the Netherlands during the Cold War. The students worked in small groups of 5-6 students and were asked to imagine the afternoon of a child during the Cold War. The students were given a booklet with useful sources and background information and the encouragement to explore the internet for additional information. Because we aimed at a detailed view of the implementation of the drama task, our data collection consisted of audio recordings of the teacher, audio recordings of the group work, video recordings of the whole class, classroom observations, group journals, a situational interest questionnaire, individual learner reports, an interview with the teacher, interviews with the students, and the assessment of the produced clips. To analyse the data, we used “pattern watching”, a constant comparison method (Yin, 2009), visiting all the data several times to ensure internal consistency in the findings.

The findings show that both the students and the teacher reported an active and motivated spirit in the classroom during the lessons. The students reported moderate situational interest. The making of the clip in itself proved to be motivational: in the interviews, the students explained that they liked to actively create an image. In regular tasks, they say, they can verbatim copy information from the textbook, whereas this is not possible when producing a film clip. Also the students reported to have learned about the emotions of people during the Cold War.

Although the audio recordings showed that in most groups the group discussions were mostly on-task, the students seemed to struggle to express their ideas in the form of a film clip. The clips that were constructed varied in historical plausibility. The major challenge of the task proved the assessment of the products, because some of the clips were poor in content whereas the students’ talk in the audio recordings and the interviews was more rich. The findings
suggest that a drama task may elicit images of the past, but that these images sometimes only become visible when students can elaborate on them. Therefore, we suggest drama more as an instrument for formative assessment than suitable for summative assessment.

3. GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

Overall, this thesis aimed at answering the following questions:

(1) How do students create an externalized learner-generated image of the past in the context of a writing task, a drawing task and a drama task, and what are the elements that can indicate the quality of such an image?
(2) What are similarities and differences between externalized learner-generated images of the past as a result of a writing task, a drawing task and a drama task?
(3) What are students’ perspectives on tasks involving historical imagination and historical empathy?

We will now address and discuss the answers to these questions.

(1) How do students create an externalized learner-generated image of the past in the context of a writing task, a drawing task and a drama task, and what are the elements that can indicate the quality of such an image?

Figure 6.1 shows the construction process of an externalized learner-generated image of the past. This figure is a synthesis of findings of the different studies presented in this thesis, combined with elements that were part of the coding instruments we used for the analysis of the learner-generated images. We see a student who is provided with a task, consisting of an assignment and a collection of sources with which to work. The student processes this information, selecting what he or she will use, combined with the prior knowledge he or she already has on the topic. In this way, the student constructs a mental image. Then, the student has to translate this mental image into an external image, which, depending on the task, has a written, drawn or acted form. As a result of the task, the student can experience situational interest, and the student has his or her own perspective of the task, e.g., whether the task is useful or what he or she learned from it. The written account, drawing, or film clip resulting from the task can be assessed using various elements related to historical plausibility. Recognized
Figure 6.1. The construction and quality of an externalized learner-generated image of the past.
difficulties in the process are a shortage of prior knowledge, a presentist view of the past, and the struggle to express the mental image in the form of an externalized image.

It is difficult to establish what is “good” historical imagination. Images of the past are constructions based on evidence (e.g., Lévesque, 2008), but individual additions to that evidence are always possible, provided that they are historically plausible (Endacott & Brooks, 2018; Egan & Judson, 2008). Thus, students’ products can differ profoundly. When working with the students’ products, we found that the images presented in the writing, drawings and clips include the following elements that contribute to its plausibility: (1) physical environment and characteristics of people (what the past looked like; buildings, clothes etc.), (2) actions and interactions of people within their historical context (what people did), (3) motives within their historical context (why people acted the way they did) (4) thoughts and feelings (how people experienced the past). Although we coded the images the students constructed in each task slightly differently, in hindsight we conclude that the elements listed above can be seen as indications based on which the historical plausibility of a learner-generated image can be assessed. However, the ratio between the different elements can vary, depending on the type of imagination that is required. The physical environment and the characteristics of the people were important in each task: the factory (chapter 2), the church (chapter 3), the temples (chapter 4) and old fashioned clothes (chapter 5) were omnipresent. Likewise, a reference to the specific historical context could be expected in all images of the past. This was best seen in the writings about the Iconoclasm, where the Iconoclasm was placed within the context of the Dutch Revolt by the majority of students, and in the clips on the Cold War, in which most students referred to the United states and the Soviet Union. However, the empathy tasks regarding child labour and the Iconoclasm asked for more emphasis on the thoughts and feelings of historical actors, whereas the task about the Roman Forum required a main focus on the physical environment in the past. In the Cold War task students had to balance a combination of imagining thoughts and feelings and imagining what the past – and the people in the past- physically looked like.
The images the students constructed varied considerably in richness and in consistency with historical evidence. The information on the four elements above (physical environment and people, actions and interactions, motives, thoughts and feelings) derived from sources given by the teacher as a part of the task and from the prior knowledge of the students. Some students processed little information from the sources that they were given, or added little information from prior knowledge. Retrieving information from sources or prior knowledge can be a challenge when students experience gaps in their knowledge. This problem can result in an image that is poor in information or that contains incorrect information. Additionally, presentist thinking can result in an image that does not match the historical evidence. However, the images the students produced in the tasks presented in this thesis contained few concrete historical mistakes, such as mixing elements of different times in one product or using (concrete) elements of the present in the product. Factors contributing to a rich image seemed to be the amount of used information, the amount of correct information from prior knowledge, and the presence of information on physical environment and people, actions and interactions, motives and thoughts and feelings.

In the literature, notions of the concrete elements of an image of the past are scarce. It proved necessary to construct new instruments to measure the quality of the images that were produced by the students. For the written products of reasoning tasks in history education, there is choice among various rubrics, instruments and criteria to assess the quality of texts produced by students (e.g., Stoel, van Drie & Van Boxtel, 2017; Monte-Sano & De La Paz, 2012). For empathetic writing and for creative products in the context of history education, these rubrics were not so readily available. Therefore, we designed and tested coding schemes that tried to capture the quality of the learner-generated images. Based on the analyses we performed with these coding schemes on the different students’ products, we distinguished four components that are usable to describe the historical plausibility of an externalized learner-generated image of the past. These elements can be helpful for teachers when assessing their students’ images, and to give students feedback on their images of the past.
(2) What are similarities and differences between externalized learner-generated images of the past as a result of a writing task, a drawing task and a drama task?

When students are asked to produce a written account, a drawing or a film clip, they engage in processing of information from given sources and prior knowledge and construct an image that includes several or all components that we described above (see Figure 6.1). To compare the different types of tasks that are reported in the previous chapters is difficult. The historical topics were not the same, the designs were different, and new students participated in each study. However, the wide range of imagination tasks we discussed invite the exploration of their similarities and differences.

When searching for a rough comparison of the different tasks, we can say that, for writing tasks, and in particular the writing tasks without explicit empathy (Factual Recount in chapter 3 and the writing task in chapter 4), we found more copying from the provided information than in the written accounts in the empathy tasks and the creative products. This result might be explained by the fact that written sources can be more easily transferred to a written product. Moreover, most textbook tasks consist of reading a source and then producing a short written answer in which the information from that source has to be used. Thus, students are trained to write answers by copying or paraphrasing information they were given while they are less tempted to add information from prior knowledge or imagination (Yeager & Doppen, 2001). When students must draw or produce an acted product, verbatim copying seems more difficult because of the type of task. However, in the drawing and drama tasks, much of the information from the given sources is visibly used. When students copy, they process the information by choosing which information to use. However, although verbatim copying requires students to select what phrases they will use, it is a limited way of processing the sources. Transforming the given information into a new image can stimulate deep processing (Van Meter & Garner, 2005). In particular, combining verbal and visual elements results in challenging brain activities (Sadoski & Paivio, 2013).

In our studies, the representations of the past produced in the written empathy tasks contained the most additional information, more than the Factual Recount task, the drawing task or the drama task. Both in chapter 2 and chapter 3, the
students reported in their accounts the smells and sounds of the factory and the Iconoclasm, respectively. In these tasks, the students also added emotions such as fear or sadness, and they imagined persons, such as the family members of their protagonists. Apparently, when students must look through the eyes of a person of the past, they start imagining thoughts and feelings, but they also envision the environment of the historical actor. These “extra” information elements from prior knowledge or imagination can enrich the students’ products, making them individual and lively.

Asking for learner-generated images in itself means that there are multiple answers possible. However, a teacher may expect at least an image that is credible in the context of the past. Therefore, you would, for example, expect people in the Roman Forum or a mention of the international politics of the Unites States and the Soviet Union in a film clip on the Cold War. The drama task in chapter 5 resulted in the least plausible images. The clips all showed some kind of bomb drill, but only two of the groups made clear why these drills were necessary. This result may be due to the type of task this was; the students might have been distracted by the group work or at loss for how to depict certain information. In the drawn and written products, most of the products were sufficiently rich in correct information to hold a historically plausible image. However, the amount of information elements was important. In the drawing task on the Roman Forum, some students only drew (or described) the buildings on the Forum. This approach resulted in a poor image because the human elements were missing. In the Iconoclasm task, we observed very rich images because of detailed descriptions of the physical environment (smoke, dust, all kinds of religious ornaments) in combination with mentions of human emotions (fear, anger). Thus, not only does the number of information elements define the historical plausibility of an image but so does the combination of different elements. We found few concrete historical mistakes in the students’ products. An occasional guillotine appeared in the Roman Forum, and some historical actors appeared to have very present-day first names, but on the whole, the students did not seem to mix eras or to describe anachronistic elements. Finally, several researchers have pointed out that the largest challenge for learning activities concerning historical imagination and historical empathy is the presumed inability of students to set aside their own morals and values when
looking at the past (Lévesque, 2008; Lee, 1984; Huijgen, Van Boxtel, Van Der Grift & Holthuis, 2014; Wilschut, 2012). In the learner-generated images in this thesis, we encountered some, though not many, examples of this presentism, notably in the First Person empathy condition of the texts on the Dutch Iconoclasm (chapter 3). Some students expressed judgements in hindsight while writing as though they themselves were present in the past. It is possible that the topic at hand can provide some explanation for this result. The Dutch Revolt is an extensively taught subject in The Netherlands, and there is a tendency to know the good guys from the bad (Kropman, Van Boxtel & Van Drie, submitted). Thus, it is to be expected that the students sided with the protestants, although many students also commented on the atrocities and pitied the Catholics. In both ways, students projected present day values on the past. However, during the various interviews, the students expressed that they were aware of this problem. In the study with the writing task about industrialization (chapter 2), the students expressed in writing how pitiful the factory children were, while during the interview, they explained that maybe, during that time child labour was normal, and we only think it is sad because now we do not have child labour any more. This finding shows that, in conversation, students may be more easily prompted to reason carefully, whereas, in a writing task, they forget to think twice.

(3) What are students’ perspectives on tasks involving historical imagination and historical empathy?
Exploring the perspectives of the students on imagination tasks, we used situational interest measures in every chapter. Moreover, we interviewed students about a written empathy task (chapter 2), a drawing task (chapter 4) and a drama task (chapter 5). We found that, as, e.g., Stevens (2015), Cunningham (2009) and Endacott and Pelekanos (2015) already argued, the students seem to perceive tasks in which they have to imagine the past as a meaningful activity. In all the interviews, the students explained that they thought the act of forming concrete images of the past by imagining the past from the perspective of a person or, as in the drawing task, by imagining a historical situation, to be a pleasant way of engaging with the past. Moreover, the students reported that they felt these kind of tasks are useful for learning history. The students mentioned that they thought they learned many facts during an empathy task
(chapter 2), that they reflect on differences between the past and the present (chapters 2 and 5), and that imagining a situation helps them relate to the past (chapters 4 and 5). The students reported that they felt they got to know people from the past by imagining their thoughts and feelings (chapters 2 and 5). In particular, the students who completed the drama task stressed that they not only learned about what happened during the Cold War but also learned how people emotionally could have experienced this period in time. Although for example Fines (2002) and Levstik and Barton (2015) have suggested that creative products may be easier for some students than written products, in chapters 4 and 5 the students argue that they liked the drawing task and the drama task but that they perceived these tasks as difficult. The creative form of the product forced them to think about the past. In the interviews, all the students explained that, when confronted with writing tasks, they are inclined to copy the information they are given. A drawing task or a drama task stimulates students to consider how the past looked because they have to produce an actual picture. However, in all types of tasks presented in this thesis, students struggled to express their image of the past into an externalized product. Although several scholars (e.g., Cunningham, 2009; Wilhelm & Edminston, 1998) have suggested that imagination tasks are powerful tasks to arouse situational interest, in our study we did not find much evidence for this claim. Only the students in chapter 4 reported that the drawing task aroused slightly more situational interest than the writing task. This result is in line with the findings of, for example, Ainsworth, Prain and Tytler (2011) on drawing in science education. All the writing tasks in chapters 2 and 3 received equally moderate situational interest scores. It appears that the students regard writing tasks as regular pencil-and-paper tasks regardless of whether historical empathy or imagination is involved. Therefore, just the activity of imagining the past does not seem to arouse interest in itself. The drama task from chapter 5 received situational interest scores with the largest standard deviation. This result could be explained by realizing there are some students who truly detest drama and others who love it, as the interviews with the students suggest and as, for example, Stevens (2015) already argued. However, because of the different designs, a comparison of the situational interest scores between the different chapters is hard. The interviews seem to provide more detailed information
about how the students liked the different tasks. The students agreed in all chapters that doing something “different” in the classroom is appreciated. Specifically, for the drama task, there seemed to be a novelty effect seemed strong which, combined with the autonomy given to the students for the group work, was also perceived as pleasant.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TEACHERS

Based on the four studies presented in this thesis, it is not possible to state the guidelines for the selection and implementation of tasks that can stimulate students’ historical imagination. However, some suggestions can be retrieved from the results of the different studies. We encourage teachers to make an informed choice about which type of task they want to use. All the tasks have benefits and constraints, which are listed above. In addition, we will now discuss some recommendations for teachers who would like to work with imagination tasks.

It seems reasonable to recommend that any teacher who would like to work with learner-generated images gives students the opportunity to talk about their own work. As we have seen in chapters 4 and 5, students’ products do not always completely represent their thinking. In the transfer between mental image and externalized image, information seems to be lost. The image we can see in writing, drawing or acting is only a tangible reflection of the image the student constructs in his or her mind. Depending on the students’ ability to express him or herself in writing, drawing or acting, the product, as we see it, may not reflect the entire thinking process of the learning process. That process can only be made visible in conversation about the product and is something to be aware of.

The conversations regarding what students mean by which element of their products are very valuable starting points for learning, as, e.g., Ainsworth, Prain and Tytler (2011) suggested for drawings in the domain of science education. Examples of topics on which students and teachers can reflect during an imagination task or afterwards are the richness of the product, historical questions the task raises, how the student uses the sources/given information, and, in discussing the images of different students, why different images can all be plausible. The latter is interesting when teachers want to enhance students’ understanding of historical narratives and representations as interpretations of
the past (Munslow, 2016).
We have seen that students rarely made historical mistakes when working on our empathy or imagination tasks. Therefore, we urge teachers not to fear too much ahistorical fantasy in the products of their students when they give students this type of task to complete. However, because students tend to judge the actions of people from the past when working on the First Person empathy task, we recommend explicitly addressing – before the task (e.g., Huijgen, Holthuis, Van Boxtel & Van De Grift, 2017) or in a debriefing (cf. Havekes, Van Boxtel, Coppen & Luttenberg, 2017) – the differences between the past and the present in terms of values and morals.
Finally, the aim of imagination tasks can be to stimulate students to ask questions about the past, for example, when they are confronted with gaps in their knowledge or to correct misconceptions that become visible in the students’ products or in the discussion about the products. Imagination activities can be used at the beginning of a lesson series about a certain topic, aiming at discovering images students already have, or during a lesson series to correct images or elaborate on them. Although it is very common in education to assess students’ products, one can doubt whether products resulting from historical imagination are suitable for (summative) assessment. Following Endacott and Brooks (2018), we think that using imagination tasks as a tool for formative learning by debriefing the task in a classroom discussion, in small groups or individually, may be more rewarding than summative assessment. We have seen that products that consist of a combination of elements from given information and elements from prior knowledge or imagination are the most rich, but the images students report (whether in writing, drawing or drama) vary considerably. Therefore, it is not easy to rank such products from “good” to “better”. However, the elements of a historically plausible image are presented in fig 6.1: physical environment and characteristics of people (what the past looked like; buildings, clothes etc.), actions and interactions of people within their historical context (what people did), motives within their historical context (why people acted the way they did), thoughts and feelings (how people experienced the past) can be helpful for teachers when they evaluate the products of imagination tasks.
5. LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

First, because of the different designs of the studies presented in this thesis, we have to be cautious with overall conclusions. Findings from a semi-experimental study cannot at once be compared with those of a case study. Therefore, the overall findings have to be seen as indications or similarities between the different studies that stand out. The choice to approach this research on imagination tasks from various angles has, in general, brought a broad view and guidance for further thinking and research.

Another limitation of the research as presented in this thesis is the explorative character of the studies due to the limited conceptualization of the processes and the quality of learner-generated external historical images in the literature and the limited availability of research instruments to analyse these processes and the quality of the images. Additionally, in the first and last study, there were only a limited number of participants. Because of this limitation and because of the focus on one specific age group, we cannot propose conclusions that are applicable to all students in (Dutch) secondary education. We do not know whether our results also hold for older or younger students or whether the academic level of the students is a factor to consider. Moreover, the choice of (historical) topic can be a factor in the failure or success of an imagination task. The topics tested in this thesis (child labour, Iconoclasm, the Roman Forum, daily life in the Cold War) are not very sensitive topics for most students. These topics are quite concrete and tangible as well, and the (fictional) historical actors were children. It could be possible that other topics prove to be less suitable for students to empathize with or to draw or dramatize. Moreover, other topics can result in other products, learning processes or students’ perspectives. More research is needed to explore the affordances and constraints of imagination tasks on different topics.

A further limitation is the small scale of the tasks. The duration of the tasks was one lesson (with the exception of the drama task, as presented in chapter 5). This was a deliberate choice because our aim was to provide insights into the types of tasks that resembled the common practices and tasks that are easy to implement. Therefore, within the tasks, there was no opportunity to explore complex historical situations in depth. Furthermore, because the tasks primarily focused on constructing an image of the past and were so short, they were less suitable
for exploring the acquisition of knowledge yields. Moreover, the main aim of empathy tasks is that that students understand the actions of historical actors (e.g., Huijgen, Van Boxtel, Van Der Grift & Holthuis, 2014; Stevens, 2015). In this thesis, we focused on the construction of an image. If, and if so, how that image helped students understand the past, we only briefly touched upon in the interviews in chapters 2 and 5. More research is needed to investigate the outcomes of imagination tasks in terms of historical knowledge and understanding.

Finally, the explorative nature of this research also includes that the measurement instruments we used were mostly of our own design. Except for the situational interest questionnaire (used in chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5) and the style of processing preference scale (used in chapter 4), all the instruments were used here for the first time. Measuring learner-generated images of the past was a challenge, and the instruments used for this thesis are a starting point for further developing more tested and refined instruments. In particular, the ratios between the components a historically plausible image can contain (i.e. physical environment and characteristics of people, actions and interactions of people within their historical context, motives within their historical context, thoughts and feelings) should be validated in further research. Additionally, the components should be tested in other contexts and with other topics to be further refined.

Research tends to produce more questions than answers, and this thesis is no exception. Due to the exploratory nature of the different chapters, several themes for further research present themselves. We propose further research on the design of imagination tasks, the (im)possibilities of the use of these tasks with regard to certain topics and audiences and assessment in terms of historical knowledge, understanding and thinking results.

First, more research is needed to establish design principles for creative tasks involving historical imagination, such as drawing and drama tasks. For written empathy tasks, Harris and Foreman-Peck (2004) proposed some design principles, particularly offering students sufficient contextual knowledge and ensuring that the task truly stimulates taking an historical perspective. However, especially for tasks such as the drawing and the drama tasks, it would be interesting to gain more insight into how to phrase and manage creative products
in the context of history education and how to support students while working on such a task. Special attention could be given to embedding the imagination tasks in the curriculum for preparatory lessons and debriefing activities. Second, in line with the need for more design principles, the assessment of tasks concerning historical imagination can be subject to further research. It could be worthwhile to test and refine rubric instruments in which the whole learning process is captured, such as the one used in chapter 5, as well as to refine the coding schemes as proposed in chapters 2 and 3, which focus on just the products. The role of prior knowledge, creative skills and the group processes could be examined as a part of the assessment procedure. Furthermore, we barely measured the learning results of the tasks we explored. We therefore propose research in which it is possible to focus on the long-term effects of working with historical imagination in the classroom. Third, we suggest further research on the historical topics that are suitable for a task that stimulates the construction of concrete images. In history education, teachers report “hot” and “cold” topics (Wansink, Akkerman & Wubbels, 2016), i.e., topics that arouse more or less controversy or intense affective reactions. It would be interesting to explore to what extent teachers think imagination tasks can be used for these topics, such as the Holocaust or slavery. Additionally, the topics used in this thesis were quite tangible and concrete. Further research could show how imagination tasks work for more abstract topics, such as nation forming or politics. Finally, tasks stimulating students to construct concrete images may not be suitable for all students. For some special educational needs students, for example, drama tasks, or empathy tasks, may be too demanding. All of these issues are worth exploring.

FINAL REMARKS

Thinking back to Rick and Daan and all the other students I have worked with - teaching them or researching them for this thesis - I recognize that all students construct basic images of the past in their minds. Capturing and enriching these images is a difficult yet rewarding matter. Some of the tasks presented in this thesis may at first summon misconceptions or ill-advised images. Nevertheless, only when we know about these images that are constructed in the heads of our students can we work with them. Teachers can add information to
counterbalance or correct, and students can elaborate and reflect on their own images. In this way, a picture of the past can be built together. This thesis can be seen as a call for stimulating students to construct their own images of the past, for finding ways to capture these images, and for using them when teaching history.