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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2223-0386/2024/n31a20>

The role of teachers in handling controversial topics in the classroom and the challenges they entail are crucial for the education and development of students. Classrooms, whether German or South African, particularly history classrooms, are not isolated spaces but sites where teachers and students inevitably confront uncomfortable and conflicting “truths” about contentious societal issues. Teachers are responsible for creating a familiar and dynamic learning environment that encourages students to actively learn, think critically, and engage in deeper discussions on (historical) topics. In November 2023, a virtual exchange between pre-service history teachers from the universities of Leipzig and Pretoria facilitated discussions among students about their respective history education, focusing on dealing with controversy in teaching. During these meetings, whether in international small groups or a virtual seminar, we as students were able to discuss our experiences regarding institutional and individual approaches to handling controversy from an international perspective.

A historical fact should always be presented from multiple perspectives in history classes, as only then can the different views and positions become visible to students. These differing views and positions provide the breeding ground for controversy in history classes. In particular, Klaus Bergmann has influenced German history didactics by emphasizing the intertwining of controversy within a conceptual framework of multiperspectivity and plurality, significantly contributing to making this framework a fundamental core of normative principles for historical learning in schools. Terminologically, Bergmann distinguishes these three concepts as follows: Multiperspectivity in history is evident both at the level of historical sources, which were involved in a historical event thinking, acting, and suffering, and at the level of historians’ representations of these sources. The differing representations of a historical event lead to controversy in historical scholarship. Plurality is constituted in the views and judgments about a historical event formed through students’ engagement with multiperspectival testimonies and controversial representations (Bergmann, 2004: 66). From this, it can be deduced: To challenge, promote, and test thinking, familiar boundaries should be transcended, and things should be continually viewed from different perspectives. Through this departure from familiar positions and

thought routines, in the back and forth of searching and testing, comparing and evaluating, we are called upon to unlock reality and orient ourselves in the world intellectually.

In the exchange with fellow students from South Africa, it quickly became evident that the principle of controversy is attributed a similar significance in its definition. Furthermore, across countries, we shared many experiences in dealing with controversy in history teaching and the questions and challenges associated with addressing controversial topics. What makes a topic controversial? How can we appropriately consider the diversity of perspectives involved? How should we navigate between the claim of neutrality conveyed by an instructor and personal viewpoints? And especially: How do we deal with the influence of “emotion” on handling controversial topics, as teachers often struggle to moderate controversy when emotions are strong and vehement? We could not provide answers or problem-solving strategies. Still, we could identify some of the causes: lack of resources, inadequate training, time constraints, and uncertainty on the part of teachers proved to be common obstacles. As often is the case, this is a (seemingly international) structural problem. These hurdles can lead to a certain degree of avoidance tendencies for teachers. Overall, there is a certain discrepancy between the theories studied at university and teaching in the real world for both German and South African students. This is a concerning conclusion, in my opinion.

In both Germany and South Africa, the likelihood of controversies and tensions significantly increases when a series of prescribed topics are addressed. In the Saxon curriculum used in schools in Leipzig, these include the period of National Socialism and the Holocaust, as well as German division and reunification. Especially the latter two topics may have a different potential for controversy, particularly in the “new federal states”, as these topics are often closely linked to personal family histories or experiences from the immediate environment and thus exert a certain (often emotionalizing) influence on the identity constructions of adolescents. In South Africa, controversial topics include race theories in the 19th and 20th centuries; apartheid and African nationalism and the National Party’s assumption of power in 1948; civil society protests in the 1960s-1980s and the introduction of democracy in South Africa and the country’s efforts to grapple with its violent past. Among the topics mentioned here, all in one way or another, deal with race (Wassermann & Bentrovato, 2018: 85). The South African educational landscape includes both private and government schools, as well as both former black and former white schools, the latter encompassing both all-white and mixed-race Afrikaans classes and mixed-race English classes. Although none of these student groups directly experienced apartheid, the vastly different experiences of their families are deeply rooted in this past,

which still casts a long shadow in contemporary history classes and is an integral part of the historical consciousness of these younger generations. Therefore, teachers must teach a diverse class of learners, including the descendants of those who either suffered under apartheid or benefited from it. Often, as our South African classmates shared with us and as emerges from Wassermann and Bentrovato's research (2018), (prospective) teachers feel unequipped to handle these tensions, fearing possible racial blame, so several prospective teachers perceive the diversity that characterizes many of their classes as a particular obstacle to meaningful teaching regarding historical thinking. Such avoidance strategies manifest a black-and-white binary in South African history teaching, which continues to influence how institutions, prospective teachers, mentor teachers, and learners relate to history and to each other (Wassermann & Bentrovato, 2018).

Therefore, the manifestation of controversy as a teaching principle for history education appears all the more urgent. To successfully initiate discursivity and multiperspectivity, to break entrenched thought patterns, to independently assess historical facts, and to embark on a willingness to change in a (democratic) society, engagement with a topic, even if it seems tense, must be initiated as genuine engagement. One final thought should be mentioned in conclusion: Adopting multiple perspectives fosters an awareness of possibilities. The world in the mind should be able to be thought of as one of several possibilities. Reinhart Koselleck and Jürgen Kocka spoke in this context about the development of an awareness of possibilities in historical thinking. This does not mean, of course, simply "ignoring" historical events and their societal impacts over time, but rather forming a basis for belief in the changeability and shapeability of the world and, thus, educationally speaking, for participation in society as a goal of schooling. In the end, for me, the support and preparation of prospective teachers for conflicts are necessary to meet the challenges of teaching in a complex, heterogeneous society.

References

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