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Sensitivities in history teaching across Europe and Israel

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ABSTRACT

Teachers of history will sooner or later encounter issues that are met with disbelief, protest, or feelings of discomfort by the pupils. This special issue aims to contribute to the field of research into teaching sensitive and controversial issues in history by integrating historical, educational and socio-psychological perspectives and theories. Using qualitative and quantitative methods, an interdisciplinary group of scholars studied history teachers' perceptions regarding sensitive issues in their teaching in their respective countries: Austria, Belarus, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Israel, Italy, the Netherlands and Serbia. Through cross-country analysis and in depth study of specific cases, it provides insights into the particular issues that are considered sensitive and the many factors at play, such as the individual teacher (his/her skills, knowledge, beliefs and identity conception), the local classroom composition, the national curriculum and national policies.

KEYWORDS

Sensitive historical issues; history teachers; cross-national perspective; teachers' beliefs; social representations; social identity

Teachers of history will sooner or later encounter issues that are met with disbelief, protest, or feelings of discomfort by the pupils. However, wide-scale studies in American and English contexts show that discussion of sensitive or controversial issues is not common practice in history and social studies classrooms (Nystrand et al. 2003; Saye 2013). Teachers have reported avoiding the teaching of sensitive topics because of a lack of time and an already full curriculum, but also because of fear of their superiors' or pupils' reactions, and because of personal ambivalence (Evans, Avery, and Pederson 1999; Kello 2016). Furthermore, teachers frequently report feeling they lacked the expertise – both in terms of content knowledge and for the facilitation of discussion – that is indeed necessary for teaching sensitive and controversial issues (Goldberg 2017; Wansink, Akkerman, and Wubbels 2017).

We use the term sensitive historical issues to refer to episodes in history in which a particular nation played a questionable or contested role. This usually applies to histories rooted in the trauma, suffering and (violent) oppression of groups. The term may also apply to perceived unfairness or harm caused to people by another group in the past (Sheppard 2010). The sensitivity may arise out of conflicts over collective memory and refer to the right way to remember or commemorate a historical figure or event (e.g. Waters and Russell 2013; Seixas and Clark 2004; Savenije 2016). A historical

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issue may also be considered sensitive because of the ways in which teachers and pupils relate to the issue personally based on their perceived identities (Kello 2016; Zembylas and Kambani 2012). Pupils may, for example, support or resist historical agents or topics according to their in-group's current relations with the historical group or issue (Goldberg, Schwarz, and Porat 2008; Savenije, van Boxtel, and Grever 2014). For an elaborate discussion of what constitutes a sensitive historical issue, we refer to Goldberg, Wagner and Petrović (2019, this issue).

Teaching about sensitive issues in history can thus not be isolated from the cultural and socio-political context and may pose different challenges to teachers in different societal contexts (Misco 2012; Goren and Yemini 2017; Goldberg and Savenije 2018; Kello 2016). In Western democracies teaching controversial issues is often seen as an integral part of citizenship education, social studies education, or history education. Even so, present-day political polarisation makes public debate more contentious than ever and discussing a controversial issue may become quite a challenge in these democracies (Camicia 2008; Chikoko et al. 2011; Macdonald 2013). There are also tendencies to deny or falsify history in the service of contemporary politics (Wagner, Kello, and Sakki 2018). In countries that have recently experienced invasion or civil conflict and have different types of regimes, the goals of citizenship education or moral education are often different and may not always be easily aligned with discussing sensitive issues (Ho 2010). Furthermore, authoritarian political systems may not facilitate the open climate necessary condition for the teaching of such issues (Misco 2011; Abu-Hamdan and Khader 2014). Several studies in emerging democracies showed that although teachers were convinced of the benefits of discussing controversies and expressed the desire to do so, their teaching practice was not always congruent with their beliefs because of a lack of confidence and fear of negative responses of pupils or the wider community (Gundare 2002; Mhlauli 2012; Abens 2011). In another context, studies in divided societies such as Cyprus (Zembylas and Kambani 2012), Northern Ireland (McCully 2006; King 2009; Hanna 2017), Israel (Eid 2010; Eini-ElHadaf 2011), and Rwanda (Freedman et al. 2008; Bentrovato 2017) have shown that, although teachers and pupils were willing to teach and learn about controversial issues, pupils had difficulty fully engaging with perspectives other than their own.

This special issue complements these existing studies by focusing on various European countries that offer an interesting and urgent context for studying the teaching of sensitive issues in history. International movement of people into Europe from the 1950's onwards has imported new sensitivities into the classroom. Historical topics that may not be considered to be controversial in academia or the public realm become controversial in such classrooms because of the diversity of pupils and the narratives that they bring with them. In many aspects these narratives will not only differ, but sometimes also grossly contradict European canons of history enshrined in school knowledge. A clear example of this process is found in dealing with colonial pasts (Nieuwenhuysen and Pires Valentim 2018). In various European countries, (descendants of) immigrants from former colonies of these countries have urged for a perspective change in the historical narratives about the colonial past. While, for example, the Dutch colonial history used to be narrated within the context of the Golden Age from the perspective of international trading by Dutch companies, recently, pressed by post-colonial migrants arriving from the 1970s onwards, attention has shifted to include the

perspective of enslaved persons (van Stipriaan 2007). Still, one of the primary sensitivities surrounding this history is the extent to which it is acknowledged by the dominant native community and is included in historical representations in schools and museums (Oostindie 2009).

While some of the educational research on sensitive issues was inspired by theories of trauma and personal vulnerability (Sheppard 2010), sensitive issues always reflect intergroup and power relations within a society as becomes clear in the example above. Social psychological research indicates that social representations of the past are vital in forming a group's identity and consequently also affect intergroup relations (Liu and Hilton 2005; Psaltis, Carretero, and Čehajić-Clancy 2017; Wagner, Kello, and Rämmer 2018). It is known that high status and majority groups have an interest in denying the existence of inter-group conflict while low status and minority groups have an interest in emphasising the existence of conflict. Similarly, teacher perception and (re)presentation of potentially sensitive issues may depend on their own and their pupils' position in the society (Kello 2016; Klein 2017). Critical engagement with the past may threaten group esteem, arousing aversive emotions such as collective guilt and shame, which may lead to evasion or rejection of 'difficult knowledge'. Acknowledgment of past harm-doing may, however, also be seen as coming to terms with the past and restoring the moral image of a group (Leone and Sarrica 2014). Understanding these mechanisms is important in order to pursue a better understanding of why discussing sensitive issues in teaching practice is difficult to realise.

Using qualitative and quantitative methods, an interdisciplinary group of scholars launched a research project on sensitive issues in history teaching in their respective countries: Austria, Belarus, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Israel, Italy, the Netherlands and Serbia. The project was part of the framework of the EU-funded COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology) project on 'Social Psychological Dynamics of Historical Representations in the Enlarged European Union' (IS1205).¹ The research that is reported in this special issue aimed at identifying the particular issues that history teachers experienced in class as well as the reasons the teachers identified as being responsible for an issue's sensitivity. Furthermore, we studied the methods teachers used for meeting such problems and solving conflicts within their classes, what they thought about revealing their personal historical and political standing or not, and how this related to their epistemic beliefs about history as well as the goals they saw in history teaching in general.

This special issue aims to contribute to the field of research into teaching sensitive and controversial issues in history by integrating historical, educational and socio-psychological perspectives and theories. Through cross-country analysis and in depth study of specific cases, it provides insights into the particular issues that are considered sensitive and the many factors at play, such as the individual teacher (his/her skills, knowledge, beliefs and identity conception), the local classroom composition, the national curriculum and national policies, as discussed by Goldberg, Wagner and Petrović. The comparative approach, cross-country and within country, reveals the contextualised nature of the sensitivity of issues and the ways in which issues are dealt with. Teachers' dealing with the sensitive historical issues are examined closer from an epistemological perspective (Sakki and Pirttilä-Backman) and by studying classroom strategies, including best practices, for dealing with such issues that may range

from complete avoidance to using elaborate pedagogical approaches, specifically designed for the particular topic (Brauch, Leone and Sarrica). Furthermore, two papers focus on specific historical issues that appeared to be dominant in our data: WW2 and the Holocaust (Raudsepp and Zadora) and Islam and immigration (Savenije and Goldberg). The first in-depth study about the Holocaust revealed a relatively new aspect of teaching sensitive historical issues: an aesthetisation towards the violent past which can lead to a banalisation and even legitimisation of violence. The second paper about Islam and immigration elaborates on the theme of (self)silencing in relation to sensitive historical issues. Although these issues seem to be voiced more than silenced in the researched countries, the paper also shows that teachers' fears of pupils' voices led them to self-silencing. These insights are of interest to the curricular reflections of teachers, curriculum developers and policy makers. They reveal specific aspects of individual as well as collective historical consciousness as important social conditions shaping historical learning in the 21st century.

Note

1. http://www.cost.eu/COST_Actions/isch/IS1205.

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