

Dealing with students' perspectives and perceived backgrounds. Teachers' strategies and challenges

Presentation 1

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Presentation 2

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Panel description

The panel explores how history and civic teachers deal with individual perspectives and perceived backgrounds of students. Competence-oriented education aims to make diverse narratives visible to enable orientation and competencies for a diverse and polarized world (Bergmann, 2016; Meyer-Hamme, 2017; Thünemann, 2023). But implementation seems challenging. Diversity is often attributed to migration, which leads to stereotypical views, whereas an explicit reflection of different perspectives seems rare (Albers, 2016; Georgi & Freund, 2022; Sperisen & Affolter, 2020; Yildirim, 2018, 220). Topics perceived as 'sensitive/controversial' are sometimes avoided, for reasons such as perceived cultural differences, emotions or discriminatory remarks (Brauch, Leone & Sarrica, 2019; Elmersjö & Persson, 2023; Raudsepp & Zadora, 2019; Savenije, Wansink & Logtenberg, 2022; Tribukait, 2021). However, from avoidance to explicit contrasting of positions, teachers report different strategies (Hess, 2004; Jovanović & Marić, 2020; Kello, 2016; Kitson & McCully, 2005).

Building on this state of research the panel presents in-depth findings with teachers in the Netherlands and Switzerland. Do they experience learners' backgrounds as resources or challenges? Do they make perspectives visible and how? Which didactic potentials and challenges can be observed? After a brief panel introduction two empirical projects are presented, followed by a reflection by the discussant and finally a discussion with the audience.

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Presentation 1: Teaching the "Yugoslav wars" in a post-migrant society. How teachers in Switzerland deal with perceived backgrounds and narratives of students

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It is not only the successor states of Yugoslavia that still struggle with the legacies of Yugoslav Wars (Euroclio, o. J.; Gashi, 2020; Jovanović, 2022; Jovanović & Bermúdez, 2021; Satjukow, 2020). Even in postmigrant Switzerland the wars have impact to present day, be it 'Balkan' and 'Jugo' stereotypes and discourses of belonging, diverse narratives, or resentments between and against former parties of conflict that partly still exist today (Bürgisser, 2017; Müller-Suleymanova, 2023; Pavić, 2015). At the same time – paradoxically – neither the major society nor members of the so-called 2nd generation seem to have differentiated knowledge about these wars (Müller-Suleymanova, 2022, 2023, 2024).

Competence-orientated history teaching aims to deal with different narratives and orientate in the present (Bergmann, 2016; Körber, 2019; Meyer-Hamme, 2017; Thünemann, 2023). Teaching the Yugoslav wars, taking into account various narratives and relevance to present Swiss society, would therefore be of great importance (Thyroff & Ziegler, 2020). However, Swiss teachers seem to consider the topic as challenging (Dahinden, Duemmler & Moret 2010, 11; Egloff Francisco, 2024; Schlote & Grubenmann, 2020, 194). From other countries it is known that teachers choose different strategies for such 'controversial/sensitive' issues, ranging from avoiding (e.g. out of fear of conflicts and emotions) to some of them explicitly contrasting narratives (Brauch, Leone & Sarrica, 2019; Elmersjö & Persson, 2023; Hess, 2004; Jovanović & Marić, 2020; Kello, 2016; Kitson & McCully, 2005; Tribukait, 2021).

If teachers try to address narratives relevant to learners, further challenges such as *doing difference* (Sperisen & Affolter, 2020) and stereotypes may arise that don't meet the complex self-conceptions of students in a post-migrant society (Dahinden, Duemmler & Moret, 2010; Mey, 2017, 211; Müller-Suleymanova, 2022, 2023; Ritter, 2018). When teaching the Yugoslav wars, teachers meet complex conditions in which family contexts and narratives, constructions of belonging, (mediated) (war) experiences and even (dis)interest in the topic can be extremely different (Müller-Suleymanova, 2023). At the same time they are expected to meet the orientation needs of learners and address diverse narratives, but avoid stereotypes or even perpetuation of conflicts (Drerup, 2021, 98, 102–103; Körber, 2001, 9). To date, there are little insights on how teachers deal with these challenges.

The presentation reports results from a project investigating the role of the Yugoslav Wars in history lessons in German-speaking Switzerland on lower and upper secondary level (Sek I, Sek II).¹ The presentation focuses on interviews with teachers and the question of what role the *perceived* backgrounds and narratives of learners play in lesson planning and teaching, which

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drivers or challenges for teaching this topic the teachers report and which (non)controversial teaching strategies they choose.

The sampling follows the principle of theoretical sampling (Kelle/Kluge 2010, 47–49) along different contrast lines. Firstly, upper and lower secondary teachers are contrasted, for whom different curricula, textbooks (Thyoff, 2020) and teacher education suggest different approaches (Jovanović & Marić, 2020). Based on earlier research (e. g. Sperisen & Affolter, 2020) it is secondly assumed that the *perceived* diversity of classes (perceived connections to (Ex-)Yugoslavia) is decisive for the approaches taken by teachers. Thirdly, teachers with and without own biographical and familiar connections to (Ex-)Yugoslavia are included, as it is known that personal involvement can be both obstacle or driver in the treatment of certain topics and selection of strategies (Jovanović, 2022, 138; Kello, 2016; Mantel, 2017). For analysis we use structuring qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz, 2016), identifying teaching goals and strategies, ways of dealing with perceived students' backgrounds, as well as drivers or obstacles for teaching of this topic considered by the teachers. At the conference, first results from approximately eight contrasting cases will be presented.

The project provides topic-specific insights and, at the same time, addresses fundamental questions that teachers face also with respect to other conflicts. Be it the wars in Israel and Ukraine or increasing polarization in Western societies: controversial positions, questions of belonging and emotions affect teaching and force teachers to find context-specific solutions (Drerup, 2021, 115–116) that will be enlightened and discussed in this presentation.

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Presentation 2: Discussing controversial issues in the civics classroom: giving space to students' diverse backgrounds

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In times of polarization, a key citizenship skill is the ability to engage in dialogue with people who hold different views. This study is based on the premise that schools can help students develop this skill by including discussions of controversial issues in civics classes. Like other researchers (e.g., Flensner, 2020; Sætra, 2021), we build on Stradling's (1984) definition of controversy. He states that issues in the classroom are controversial when "[...] society at large (or the local community, or even the school itself) is clearly divided, and for which different groups offer conflicting explanations and advocate conflicting solutions based on alternative values" (Stradling, 1984, p. 121). Because these issues often intersect with students' identities, their backgrounds can serve as valuable sources of knowledge in classroom discussions.

Giving students a voice based on their backgrounds could increase opportunities for marginalized students, as these students often have the lived experiences when it comes to sensitive issues such as race, ethnicity, and poverty (Ngo, 2006; Tatum, 1997). Teachers' acknowledgment of the value of students' backgrounds when discussing controversial issues in the classroom can contribute to students' feelings of validation. At the same time, it can help students better understand the perspective of their peers.

However, research suggests that while teachers use a variety of strategies to address controversial topics (e.g., Hess, 2004; Kello, 2016; King, 2009), they do not always intentionally create space for students' backgrounds. One possible explanation for this reluctance is to avoid provoking strong emotions and exposing social divisions among students. Previous research shows that students are aware of their identities and the discomfort that may arise from participating in a discussion (Parker-Shandal, 2023). This tension poses a significant dilemma for educators.

To better understand this dynamic, this study explores the practices of teachers who actively engage students' backgrounds and examine the rationale behind their approaches. We have defined background broadly in order to recognize the dynamic ways in which students may perceive their own backgrounds (Irizarry, 2007; Kiang et al., 2010). We explore how teachers and students define background themselves, ranging from characteristics such as socioeconomic status, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality to personal experiences that have shaped a student (such as living abroad for a period of time, caring for a sick family member, or performing top sport).

This study addresses the following research question: How, why and for what purposes do civic education teachers give space to different aspects of students' backgrounds during classroom discussions about controversial issues? The research takes a qualitative approach, involving in-depth interviews with teachers. We constructed a purposive sample of six so-called pioneer teachers who perceived themselves as consciously addressing students' backgrounds in classroom discussions or were identified by other teachers or teacher educators as experts in this area. The participating teachers were diverse in terms of gender, age, teaching experience, ethnic background, and urban/rural school location. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. We conduct thematic analysis, following the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke

(2006), to identify, analyze, and report on patterns (themes) within the data. Atlas.ti is used to facilitate the coding and organization of the data.

The preliminary findings of the study will be presented during the panel presentation. The results suggest that teachers have diverse goals and values, resulting in different approaches to incorporating students' backgrounds into the classroom. Teachers' reflections on and dilemmas regarding their practices will also be addressed. These findings will expand the theory of discussing controversial issues in the classroom by conceptualizing teachers' recognition of the value of students' backgrounds. In this way, teachers' practices, strategies, and considerations related to teaching controversial issues (e.g., Hess, 2004; Kello, 2016; King, 2009) can be better understood. The results of this study will be used to create and implement educational materials that can support recognition of the value of students' backgrounds. These materials will be used in future teacher professionalization to support teachers in creating more inclusive and engaging classroom discussions.

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