



## Learning to Disagree

# Needs Assessment Report

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## 1. Introduction

The project ‘Learning to Disagree’ aims at strengthening students social and civic competences through discussion, debate and dialogue in history and civic education. Against the backdrop of students’ exposure to extremist ideologies, populism and ‘alternative’ facts on the internet it focuses on improving teachers’ capacities to conduct discussions about controversial and sensitive issues in their classrooms. This needs assessment is designed to identify what educators need today in order to help their students to acquire social and civic competences through dialogue, debate and discussion on contested issues. To translate this general idea into more concrete aims, we wanted to find out

- what teachers perceive as being sensitive and controversial issues,
- how often and with reference to which kinds of formats do they practice dialogue, discussion and debate,
- how they assess their students in this context,
- what challenges do they face,
- which teaching approaches do they rely on in order to deal with these challenges.

During our research we talked to many teachers from all parts of Europe. The challenges they reported ranged from students’ apathy to hate speech by extremists. We assume that these different types of ‘classroom dilemmas’ (Stradling et al. 1984) can be found everywhere across Europe though probably to varying degrees and in varying shape. Trying to deal with variation, we will identify different types of controversies, challenges and approaches first in order to clarify the situations teachers face and then classify the strategies they rely on when dealing with these.

## 2. Methodology

The methodological design of the needs assessment is based on strategic decisions taken on two different levels.

Firstly, we opted for a specific mode of triangulation, i.e. of combining qualitative and quantitative methods. As empirical studies on teaching controversial issues in the history and in the civics classroom are still in a state of infancy with the bulk of publication focusing either on discussing theoretical issues or offering practical guidelines, we started with an exploratory

phase trying to identify the challenges, constraints and chances teachers face in their daily practice. Conducting focus group discussions<sup>1</sup> with 33 participants from 25 countries, we almost abstained from raising specific questions but opted for opening up spaces for a loosely structured exchange of experiences among teachers. Only then did we invite teachers to comment on issues discussed in the academic literature. The categories we developed based on the data we obtained in order to distinguish between different types of constraints and challenges as well as between the different strategies the teachers reported to rely on, thus contributed to a further refinement of existing concepts. On the basis of these findings we then developed, tested and refined an online-based questionnaire for a survey in order to measure the distribution of problem-perceptions and preferences for different teaching strategies. In the end, we received answers from 117 participants coming from 26 different European countries.

Secondly, in terms of the recruiting strategies we pursued in gathering qualitative as well as quantitative data, we followed the ‘wisdom of practice’ study approach (Wineburg & Wilson 1988). The teachers participating in the focus group discussions as well as in the survey were contacted with the help of the Euroclio network and can thus be expected to belong to a group of engaged, motivated and experienced pedagogues. This approach appeared to be not only efficient in terms of resources, it also served our primary aims. We were interested in two things: On the one hand, we wanted to get hold of all the problems that may arise when using discussion, dialogue and debate as a means of teaching controversial issues in different types of classrooms. On the other hand, we wanted to explore what kind of innovative approaches creative and inventive teachers apply in the efforts to deal with these problems. With regard to both aims focusing on what can be expected to be good teachers appeared to be a good choice which enabled us “to learn from the possible, not only from the probable” (Hess 2002: 15).

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<sup>1</sup> Three focus group interviews were conducted during a Euroclio workshop in Serbia/Topola (24.3.2018 and on 25.3.2018), four during the annual Euroclio conference in Marseille/France (23.4.2018 and 25.4.2018) All interviews were conducted in English, recorded, transcribed and rendered anonymous. Each interview is assigned a city code and a number (T 1-3 for interviews in Topola and M 1-4 for interviews in Marseille. In addition, interviewees are given number in accordance to their sequence of speaking during the focus group discussions as well as a code pointing to the country they are working in (e.g. I2-Serbia). Finally we will refer to the page number of the manuscript where the statement or the quote can be found. The interviews and the transcripts are archived at the Georg-Eckert-Institute. Upon request and in line with data protection guidelines the authors will provide readers with access to the quoted passages from the interviews.

### 3. Results and implications for the project

#### 3.1 Controversial issues

Controversial issues can be controversial for different reasons. Stradling et al. have introduced a distinction between controversies about disputed facts and controversies about competing sets of values (1984: 2). The former are frequently dealt with in academic research while the latter are in many cases public matters causing division among lay groups (Kello 2016: 36).

The project ‘Leaning to Disagree’ addresses mainly the latter category of controversial issues and defines them as “problems and disputes which divide society and for which significant groups within society offer conflicting explanations and solutions based on alternative values” (Stradling 1984: 2).

In order to find out what history teachers perceive to be controversial issues, we asked them in the survey to name the two or three most controversial issues they discussed in class during the last twelve months. Among the 110 valid answers we identified the following clusters:

- Participants named predominantly *topics from the 20<sup>th</sup> or 21<sup>st</sup> century*; themes from earlier centuries were hardly mentioned, with the sole exception of topics connected to colonialism (12 answers) or religion (6 answers).
- There is a clear preference for *national conflicts*. Participants from 19 out of 26 countries mentioned issues that concern national independence, sovereignty or borders (e.g. Irish civil war, Finish civil war 1918, Cyprus conflict, Yugoslav wars 1990s, Brexit). Some of these issues were linked to challenges of fascism or communism (impact of the Munich Agreement in Slovakia, Soviet occupation of Georgia, Finish-German relations in WWII). 18 named conflicts were from the 20<sup>th</sup> century, 7 from the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
- Controversial issues of a *European or global scope from 20<sup>th</sup> century* concerned mainly wars, genocide and totalitarian regimes: World War I (5), Fascism/National Socialism (10), World War II (12), Holocaust (13), Communism (9) and the Cold War (6).
- Among a broad range of different *contemporary political issues*, topics mentioned by the largest number of participants were migration (17), the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (11), religion (5), terrorism (5), and feminism (5).

These findings are in line with recent research on history education and conflict. Mario Carretero for example stresses that “being recent and national are the main origins of the difficulties for teaching conflicting historical issues” (2017: 353). Challenges involved in teaching the violent history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have so far been discussed with respect to the holocaust, totalitarian regimes and wars (e.g. Meseth et al. 2004). While it is not surprising that recent issues stimulate more often controversial discussions than distant times, the fact that contemporary *political* issues are regularly discussed in the history classroom is good news for a history education committed to critical thinking and to making the past relevant for the present.

### *Implications for the project*

- Our survey results support the topical choices made in the framework of our project. The topic ‘***Borders***’ addresses a central aspect of historical and contemporary national conflicts, ‘***Surviving under pressure***’ deals with the historical experience of totalitarian regimes, the holocaust or wars and ‘***People on the move***’ takes up the current political issue of migration.
- At the same time, these three topics represent different types of controversial issues and thus oblige the project group to offer different strategies designed to tackle them in the classrooms of different societal contexts. The Council of Europe, for instance, distinguishes between long-standing issues such as sectarian divisions between differing groups on the one hand and very recent issues such as growing concern about religious extremism on the other (2015: 14). It argues that both types of issues confront teachers with different kinds of challenges. While the challenge with long-standing issues is to overcome apathy on behalf of the students and to say something new without alienating individuals or groups, the challenge with recent issues is more to find reliable information on the topic.

### 3.2 The role of discussions in history teaching

There is a consensus in the literature that dialogue, discussion and debate do play a significant role in promoting reasoned judgment as well as in enhancing students' ability to take part in deliberations over the common good (Barton & Levstik 2004). Discussions do not only encourage students to make contributions of a higher order by engaging in explanations, justifications and the generation of hypotheses. They also teach them how to deal with multiple perspectives and uncertainty (Van Boxtel & Van Drie 2017: 574).

As we can see from the following table, a large majority of the teachers who participated in the survey has already internalized this message with almost 90% of them conducting discussion at least once a month or even more often.

*Question: How often do you INITIATE discussions in class?*

every week	once or twice a month	every other month	less than four times per year
57%	32,6%	9,3%	1,2%

As we know from empirical studies, frequency is not everything when it comes to practicing discussion. Much depends on preparation and on the choice of formats for conducting them (Hess 2009). Research has for example shown that discussions involving the whole class are frequently dominated by teachers whereas preparing discussions in preferably small groups leads not only to higher rates of participation among students (Husbands 1996) but also to higher levels of reasoning (Van Drie & Van Boxtel 2011, Elbers & Streefland 2000). In order to assess the quality of discussion conducted in diverse European classrooms we asked teachers to rate the following statements:

*Question: Preparing discussion in class...*

	always/often	sometimes/rarely
I let students prepare the topic before the discussion.	48,8%	46,5%
I form small groups before discussing a topic with the whole class.	41,8%	54,7%
I use discussion formats where students take on assigned roles.	26,8%	71%

As we can see, only half of the participants in our survey make regular use of different learner-centered strategies to structure discussions by preparing them individually or in small groups or by assigning roles.

Two further statements teachers were invited to rate were meant to gather information on atmospheric aspects of discussions. The Council of Europe (2018) emphasizes that learning environments are “particularly important for managing difficult dialogues or emotional exchanges and for allowing students to feel confident to voice their thoughts and disagreements.” (24). Focus group participants also reported that they had made good experiences with changing the seating order or even leaving the classroom. Furthermore, they underlined the importance of discussions rules to an atmosphere in which all students feel safe.

*Question: Preparing discussion in class...*

	<b>always/often</b>	<b>sometimes/rarely</b>
We leave the classroom and go to another space within school.	5,9%	87,2%
I agree on rules for the discussion with students.	58,1%	37,2%

Since most participants agree with their students on discussion rules almost always, often or at least sometimes, it can be concluded that they are aware how important procedures assuring fairness and respect during discussions are in terms of creating an enabling atmosphere. Given the practical difficulties it is not surprising that only a minority of 5,9% uses almost always or often other spaces in school for discussions. This might also indicate, however, that most schools do not give much room to the aim of developing a discussion culture when taking decisions concerning the curricula and the architectural design.

At the same time, a teacher from an International Baccalaureate (IB) school who took part in one of our focus group discussions and who conducts Socratic seminars on a regular basis, gave us a vivid illustration of how effective all these different strategies can contribute to the development of a vibrant discussion culture.

“Now I use Socratic seminars, and so students often are given a text before the lesson. And then they are assigned roles at the beginning. They have to prepare some questions beforehand. And one could be the discussion leader. And the idea is that, they are for example given a text, a primary source. And they read it at home and then they come in class and we sit in a circle and one starts talking about, first of all you could start by saying, "Okay there's a central question I want to ask about a text," but then one says, "Okay, there's a word I did not understand. Can somebody explain that word to me?" And then the discussion starts. And it's

really, I'm just in the background. They moderate each other, they talk to each other, they explain to each other. And at the end we try to come up with a commonly agreed statement or question. So that works really well. Yeah. So, but they are trained in that. So they are trained already from middle school, so they start early onwards with these Socratic seminars.” (M2\_I1-Cyprus)

### *Implications for the project*

- Given the successful implementation of the Socratic seminar, it can be concluded that training in teaching strategies would enable teachers to better prepare and approach discussions. Yet, the example which stems from an international school following the IB curriculum also shows that the development of a discussion culture is a long-term process. Therefore, the individual teacher would benefit from strengthening discussions in the (school) curriculum.

### **3.3 Assessment practices**

The project ‘Learning to Disagree’ works on the assumption that assessment needs to be integrated into teaching and should therefore be planned when a lesson is designed. The focus group discussions indicated that exam formats play a crucial role in the way assessment is conducted: teachers from countries where exams are geared towards historical reasoning are apparently used to teaching and assessing discussion, dialogue and debate to greater extent than teachers from countries where this is not the case. The different concepts of exams were confirmed by the survey in which participants were asked whether exams focus on historical reasoning or on memorizing facts.

*Question: In the centrally-designed exams...*

	<b>strongly agree/ agree</b>	<b>disagree strongly/ disagree</b>
students predominantly have to show that they are able to reason historically.	58,1 %	32,6%
students predominantly have to memorise facts.	64,1%	32,6%

The results can be interpreted in the following way: approximately one third stated that in centrally-designed exams, students do not have to show to be able to reason historically, but obviously, to memorise facts. Another third stated the opposite, that students do not have to

memorise facts, but to show that they can reason historically while the last third said that exams focus both on memorising facts and historical reasoning.

In the focus group discussions participants mentioned general challenges concerning assessment as well specific one in the context of assessing discussion, dialogue and debate:

- Ideally, formative assessment should be used all the time by teachers to know where their students stand in order to improve their teaching. However, assessment is often equated with grading, and even if it is not, the question remains how formative assessment is linked to summative assessment.
- What grading is concerned, a lot of experience is needed to use the existing criteria models flexibly so that, for example, an outstanding answer that goes beyond the standards can be acknowledged.
- Inclusive teaching challenges assessment routines. When some students get support fitting to their needs educators are confronted with the question whether it is fair and possible to assess all students to the same criteria.
- In the context of controversial and sensitive issues, most focus group participants agreed that values and opinions must not be assessed. Instead, the analysis, the argumentation and the use of facts should be graded. It is not always easy to draw the line, however, especially if the learning goals include values such as democracy. Similarly, emotional skills like empathy are sometimes included in the learning goals but can hardly be assessed.

The focus group participants underlined that it is helpful to collaborate with colleagues when assessing students' work. Models including standards, criteria and examples are indispensable, especially for beginners, but the participants pointed out that, in order to apply these models in a meaningful way, they need some scope to use their experience when grading.

### *Implications for the project*

- The lesson plans should be designed for one lesson in order to enable teachers which have to prepare their students for fact-oriented exams to use them in single lessons.
- Since teachers are not always sure how to conduct formative assessment lessons plans should integrate suggestions for assessment of discussion, dialogue and debate.

### **3.4 Constraints**

History teachers show different ways of dealing with controversial issues which range from avoiding to risk-taking (Kitson & McCully 2005, Hess 2009, Kello 2016). If history education can contribute to a pluralistic democratic culture by discussing controversial issues it is crucial to find out what hinders teachers to do so. Therefore, survey participants were asked which of the following list of factors made it difficult for them to discuss controversial issues in class.

*Question: Do the following factors make it difficult for you to discuss controversial issues in class? If so, to what extent would you agree?*

	<b>always/often</b>	<b>sometimes/rarely</b>
lack of resources representing different viewpoints	57%	43,1%
one-dimensional textbooks	51,2%	44,2%
duty of neutrality	51,1%	45,3%
strong nationalism in society	43%	54,6%
political pressure by authorities	36,1%	60,4%
complaints from parents	34%	64%
tight state control over teaching content	33,2%	66,3%
discouraging atmosphere in school	31,4%	62,8%

The results show that a lack of resources representing different viewpoints and one-dimensional textbooks were perceived as the biggest constraints. The access to usable material with multiple perspectives – however commonsensical the approach may be – seems to be an obstacle for many teachers across Europe. Focus group discussions indicated that the problem was more acute in some countries than in others:

- A Greek participant pointed to the fact that all history teachers have to work with the same textbook which contains hardly any perspectives of the ‘other’ side (T2\_I2\_Greece, p. 25).
- A Turkish teacher reported that it is permitted to use other materials than the official textbook but difficult to find alternative perspectives in Turkish (T1\_I1\_Turkey, p. 16) while a French (T1\_I2\_France, p. 19) and a Danish (T1\_I4\_Denmark, p. 19) teacher stated that there are usually a few sources with different perspectives in their textbooks.

Other constraints listed by the teachers point to the difficult position they occupy between the state, society and parents:

- 51 % expressed that the duty of neutrality they feel obliged to is an important reason for avoiding controversial issues.

- 36% stated that they were exposed to pressure by authorities. This is surprisingly high share of teachers given the fact that most of the participants came from EU member states with a democratic system.
- A significant minority of 43% mentioned strong nationalism in society which reflects the current European wide trend of nationalist revival.
- Complaints from parents were still mentioned by 34% of the participants.

Three examples from focus group participants illustrate how teachers and at times even students are faced with political pressure exercised either by an authoritarian state or by a nationalist society:

- A colleague from Russia recounted a concrete situation during which a student of hers, who could not but recognize the contradiction between the official knowledge taught and tested in school and the common understanding shared by many people, would openly ask her how he should deal with this contradiction. The teacher explained to us that she felt honored on the one hand by the students' interest in her opinion but rather helpless on the other as she clearly knew he would fail the exam if he would deviate from the standard version. (M2\_I3\_Russia, p. 15)
- A teacher from Montenegro recounted how among all his students the one with the best marks would mention the convicted war criminal Radko Mladic as a role model – apparently acting under the influence of media discourses describing him as a hero and a victim (T2\_I3\_Montenegro, p. 13).
- A teacher from the UK mentioned that right-wing politicians criticize the way the history of colonialism is taught in schools nowadays as undermining national pride. He moreover drew attention to recent trainings on Preventing Violent Extremism which he perceived as being “hugely problematic” because they might be understood as obliging teachers to report on every student who would justify armed insurrections against the state (M1\_I4\_UK, 19).

All examples illustrate that the position teachers occupy between state, society and parents as well as the specific challenges arising from this situation may vary significantly in between different societal contexts. Specific dynamics in a particular class may furthermore have a crucial impact on how these challenges inform every-day practices. Accordingly, there cannot be the one and only way of how to overcome these constraints. Teachers should rather be

enabled to reflect their own position and to choose from a broader repertoire of strategies and approaches when teaching controversial issues.

### *Implications for the project*

- While the overall aim of the ‘Learning to disagree’ project responds to the lack of resources by creating materials with a variety of viewpoints, the language question seems crucial. The translation of the materials would make them more widely usable, as several focus group participants have stated.
- The teacher trainings should focus on the participants’ specific challenges when teaching controversial issues and convey possible approaches.
- In order to strengthen teachers’ readiness to let their students discuss controversial issues, discussion, dialogue and debate should be valued as democratic practice by education policies.

### **3.5 Teaching approaches: setting limits**

In addition to identifying what hinders teachers to deal with controversial issues we asked them about their actual experiences and teaching practices. We wanted teachers to reflect on their teaching approaches on different levels.

First of all, we wanted to get their opinion on the overall rules that teachers set to structure discussions and to define what either they themselves or students are entitled to do. With regard to both themselves and students, the limits can be either strict or broad. Teachers can feel obliged to act as neutral moderators or they may feel the need to let students know what they think. Teachers can decide to listen to students even when they express extreme positions or they can insist on ending discussion as soon as racist or sexist comments are made.

### *The role of teachers*

Looking at the role of the teacher and the limits he or she faces we know from the literature (Stradling 1984: 111f., Hess 2009: 97-110, CoE 2015: 47 f.), that both types of strategies involve risks as well as chances.

Making known the teacher's position comes with several advantages:

- it replaces the guesswork students would be doing anyhow trying to figure out what their teacher thinks;
- as soon as they are in the open, students can discount their teacher's prejudices;
- teachers can maintain credibility by stating their opinion like everybody else in class is supposed to do.

There are of course also potential disadvantages:

- teachers can stifle classroom discussion because students would be afraid to argue against his or her line of thinking;
- other students may feel compelled to oppose the teacher and thus to support a position they do not really believe in;
- finally, students may have difficulties to distinguish between situations when the teacher is purveying facts and situations when she or he is simply offering his opinion.

Adopting the role of an impartial chairperson also has potential strength:

- it minimizes undue influence of the teacher and his biases;
- it gives everyone a chance to take part in the discussion without spending too much thoughts on how to please the teacher;
- and it provides space for questions and arguments the teacher himself did not think of.

Of course this approach also has weaknesses:

- students may find it artificial;
- it can damage the rapport between teacher and class;
- it underlines the power asymmetry between students expected to speak up and teachers rejecting to do so;
- it may reinforce students existing attitudes and prejudices if the teacher does not intervene at all
- and finally the role of a neutral chair may not suit at all the teacher's personality.

The survey results offer a rather mixed picture.

*Question: During discussions...*

	always/often	sometimes rarely
I limit myself to the role of a neutral moderator	62,8%	36%
I let students know my own views	41,9%	58,1%

If we look at these figures, we can see that a majority of almost 2/3 of teachers opted for the role of a neutral moderator, while a minority of a bit more than one third of teachers would rather let their students know what they themselves think about a matter. As there seems to be not much of an overlap between these two camps, we may want to emphasize in line with recent findings (Hess 2009: 9) that there are no wrong or right approaches with regard to this question.

### *Implications for the project*

- In the teaching guides we produce, we may want to encourage teachers to be flexible with regard to the disclosure of their own position, adapting the role they take to the changing needs of different classrooms and the challenges involved in encouraging discussion about different topics.
- Finally, we may want to focus on raising teachers' awareness of the risks and chances involved in both options in order to enable them to engage in risk management.

### *The role of the students*

During discussions, teachers sometimes have to decide whether to listen to students even when they are stating extremist or aggressive views or whether to close the discussion. In some situations, they may face a dilemma. They have to take a decision between two likewise plausible but mutually exclusive options. Do they focus attention on the student who made extremist statements and do they offer him a space to express himself as well as the intellectual guidance he might need? Or do they primarily take care of those students in class who might feel offended or marginalized by extremist statements? In that case, would they inhibit the expression of such statements (Crombie & Rowe 2009: 8)? We wanted to find out how the survey participants normally deal with the dilemma involved and thus invited them to rate the following ideal type strategies:

*Question: When dealing with students that display stereotypical thinking or extremist views...*

	<b>always/often</b>	<b>sometimes/rarely</b>
... I listen to the opinions of the students first – even if they are extreme.	86,1%	13,9%
... I close the discussion if students display racist or sexist prejudices in class.	31,4%	60,4

The answers show a clear preference of participants to listen to students even if their views diverge from the democratic consensus. This item obviously appeals to teachers in their self-conception as educators that help young people to grow up in a difficult world. This role includes trying to connect to students and preventing them from slipping into extremism – maybe from a mere provocative stance or without much thought. The high level of approval might also reflect that, if teachers want to take up controversial issues in their classrooms, they are aware that they cannot start with silencing students right at the beginning and, as a result, push them to self-censorship (CoE 2015: 17). The readiness of teachers to listen to students corresponds with their unwillingness to close discussions if students display racist or sexist prejudices. From what we have heard in the focus group discussions we gather that most teachers would not tolerate such statements but try to challenge the prejudices in most cases. “You need to listen as a teacher to the students and try to make them think”, as one participant put it (T3\_I3\_Hungary, p. 10). The survey results indicate that many polled teachers are ready to go a long way to reach out to students with extremist views. Focus group participants also shared experiences with students that just kept repeating neo-Nazi statements and shut themselves away when they were confronted with other arguments in discussions; still, the teachers would try to open them up, sometimes by organizing voluntary discussions with external moderators. On the other hand, one third of the polled teachers is sensitive to arguments going too far and probably worries about the protection of other students that are offended or marginalized by extremist statements. One focus group participant underlined the importance of the limits of free speech: “And in Denmark we very much uphold free speech. But of course there are things that you cannot say in the classroom. You cannot joke about violence against women. Of course you cannot. So. And I always think that maybe it's not even such a bad thing that I have to step my foot down. Maybe it's not. Because it kind of trains them in, there is a limit. You have to be aware of the surroundings, right?” (T1\_I4\_Denmark, p. 14).

### *Implications for the project*

- The project should take into account that it is the nature of controversial discussions to explore the limits of the freedom of speech. In order to have pedagogical scope it can be necessary to let students express their prejudiced opinions and then engage with them. It seems to be crucial, though, that the discussions rules set up beforehand are not open to contestation. They should be designed in a way to protect students who could become the target of extremist positions.
- Teacher trainings should raise teachers' awareness of how dominant discourses in their respective societies set the limits of what can be legitimately said and what not. At the same time, they should be supported in developing strategies for situations in which students cross these lines. Teachers should also be sensitized to the harm that could be done to students who might be offended and marginalized by such a crossing of lines. They thus should be enabled to balance pedagogical commitment and protection in every situation.

### 3.6 Teaching approaches: encouraging critical thinking, 'battling' stereotypes and creating empathy

On yet another level, we asked for teachers' preferences with regard to three broad types of approaches all of which are rooted in the same tradition of enquiry based teaching while placing emphasis on slightly different aspects.

- The first approach could be described in by now classical terms as *encouraging critical thinking*.
- The second one could be labelled as *'battling' stereotypes* to pick up a catch phrase used by one of the participants in our focus-group discussions.
- The third one could be classified as *creating empathy*, an approach that was already mentioned in the 1980s but is currently rediscovered in studies located at the intersection of history education and conflict transformation.

Before we present and discuss the survey results, we will

- provide a rough overview over recent debates on history teaching in order to shed light on the rationality behind each of the approaches,
- illustrate how we translated those general ideas and principles into concrete items for the survey

- and quote some stories teachers told us during the focus group discussion in order to illustrate how the different approaches are inspiring concrete teaching practices.

### *Encouraging critical thinking*

Roughly speaking, the academic debate on how to teach controversial issues evolved in three steps. The very first phase was dominated by the *enquiry based approach*, based on two pillars, on teaching students how to critically assess sources and on drawing their attention to the difference between the past and history. Obviously, this concept was embedded in the disciplinary historical thinking approach and meant to transform history teaching in general, overcoming the ‘romantic’ single narrative approach (Carretero 2017: 347f.). Giving emphasis to mainly two different aspects of multi-perspectivity, researchers were, however, quick to adapt it to the special needs of teaching about controversial issues (McCully 2012).

Exposing students to different views FROM the past and drawing their attention to the fact that different people might have experienced the same events and developments quite differently is expected to do three things:

- to render history more complex (Barton & McCully 2012, McCully 2012),
- to enable students to move beyond the black and white pictures often painted by rival communities (Hedley & Markowitz 2001)
- and to comprehend that presumably natural communities were much more driven by internal conflicts than commonly held stereotypes may suggest (Carretero 2017).

Presenting students with multiple accounts ON the past as produced in and under the influence of present needs, is said to bring about the recognition of the often marginalized voices of minorities (McCully 2012). Tasking students with critically assessing those accounts and drawing their attention to the motives, interests, beliefs and intentions inscribed into them (Stradling et al. 1984), is furthermore assumed to turn them into ‘bias busters’ and to teach them how to distinguish between opinion and fact (Crombie & Rowe 2009).

In the survey we translated the concept into three items asking teachers whether they encourage their students

- to rethink the plausibility of their arguments,
- to research whether their prejudices are based on facts

- and to be aware of the logical consequences of their thinking.

One rather successful example from a history lesson that could be perceived as implementing all three principles was given to us by a teacher from Cyprus (M2\_I2\_Cyprus, p. 16f.). She presented her university students with two competing accounts on the British takeover of Cyprus in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The first account would stress very much in line with hegemonic textbook stories how eager the British were to get hold of Cyprus as the Valley of the Earth wanted by all. The second account would look more into the bigger picture, pointing out that the transfer of Cyprus from the Ottoman to the British Empire was not exceptional at all, but rather took place in a time when the whole European map changed.

As we can learn from this example and from the literature, the whole approach is based on the assumption that, if students gain a deeper factual understanding, learn about multiple perspectives and thus also experience the limits of historical knowledge, they will also change their attitudes towards conflict partners (Bilali & Mahmoud 2017: 85, Carretero 2017: 355). Some empirical research in Israel seems to confirm this assumption by showing that critical disciplinary teaching can indeed contribute to curbing the biasing influences of political affiliations among both Israeli and Arab students (Goldberg 2017). Implied is the construction of a binary opposition between social memory and history as an academic discipline, an opposition supported by many, mainly historians like Nora (1989: 8) and Lowenthal (2000: 68) but drawn into question by some like Wertsch (2002: 20) or Cornelißen (2010). Whereas social memory is suspected of reinforcing unchallenged partisan images of the past, the critical historical approach is credited with casting a dispassionate view on the past.

Critique against the critical thinking approach was raised on three different grounds:

- Some researchers like Michael Zembylas from Greece and Zvi Bekerman from Israel (2008) took issue with the core assumption. They questioned the epistemological divide between history and memory pointing out that both are based on socially conditioned, conscious and unconscious selection, interpretation and distortion.
- Others like Chikoko (2011) argued that an approach that puts too much emphasis on the difference between adequate and inadequate approaches to the past may discourage students from participating in the discussion because they may fear that their teachers would blame them of being biased.
- A third type of critique is built on empirical observations made mainly in Northern Ireland where an enquiry based approach and the clear commitment to expose students

to different views was embedded in the history curriculum as early as 1991. Here several studies (Barton & McCully 2010, McCully 2003, McCully 2012, McCully & Reilly 2017) have come to the conclusion that approaches focusing on the promotion of rational critique alone do not suffice to sever the strong emotional ties students have to particular cultural positions they share with members of their respective communities. Very much in line with these insights, a study from Israel has shown how deeply the way students read and perceive textbook accounts is affected by the political background they and their parents come from (Porat 2004). Researchers have furthermore argued that emotions not taken care of can block or hinder rational thinking (McCully 2003, McCully & Reilly 2017).

These different versions of critique have prepared the ground for the emergence of two complementary approaches.

### *Battling stereotypes*

The first complementary approach would still insist on a rational appraisal of facts and arguments, while adding a bit more of a confrontational stance. Teaching would be tasked with spreading what was called “dangerous memory” (Zembylas & Bekerman 2008). The term was coined to describe a practice of teaching the past that is first of all disruptive to common-sense assumptions by either referring to the suffering of the other or by providing space for heterogeneous stories on the we-group.

A key feature of this approach is thus the determination to preselect on purpose those facts and stories for classroom discussion that are likely to do two things at the same time: to catch students by surprise and to battle stereotypes. As a result, researchers assume, students would not only be involved emotionally but also pulled out of sheer routines dictating them to either rehearse the same old stories they grew up with since childhood or to stage the ‘enlightened’ position they feel their teachers are expecting from them.

In the survey we translated the concept into three items asking teachers whether they would:

- challenge their students’ lack of knowledge on minorities,
- confront them with the wrongdoings of the we-group
- and with the impact of stereotypes on minorities.

Illustrative stories we heard during the focus group discussions helped us to construct these items.

- A teacher from Macedonia pointed out, that he often uses a ‘strategy of shocking’ and provoking his students in order to make them a ‘bit softer’. As they often think that their ethnic group is better than others he would give them examples ‘where the others are better than us’ like a famous Roma box champion or an Albanian Nobel prize winner (T2\_I4\_Macedonia, p. 31).
- A teacher from Greece mentioned a colleague of hers who showed his students a film shedding light on the atrocities committed by Greek freedom fighters during their fight against the Ottoman Empire in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (T2\_I2/Greece, p. 17).
- A teacher from Serbia who stated right in the beginning that she is always ‘for a good fight’ in order to prevent her class from ‘having a nice nap’, recalled a lesson during which she first tasked her students with collecting all the stereotypes they could think of against Albanians, just to ask them in a second step whether they would like to stay in a country where people are thinking about them that badly if they happened to be Albanian themselves (T2\_I5\_Serbia, p. 36).

### *Creating empathy*

The second alternative to the critical thinking approach again starts with the observation that, what is most lacking, is curiosity on behalf of the students to *really* get to understand the perspectives of the other. From the perspective of researchers who have studied history teaching in Northern Ireland (McCully 2003, 2005, 2012, McCully & Barton 2010), this lack of curiosity is reproduced by a type of history teaching that avoids provoking emotional reactions. In order to make a difference, they argue, teaching should leave the ‘comfort zone’ in which texts are supposed to speak for themselves. Teachers should explicitly aim to engage students emotionally because people need to be encouraged to care first, if they are expected to take the considerable effort to understand another person (McCully 2012).

Though coming from a different background, Goldberg (2017) arrives at similar conclusions. Having explored how Arab and Jewish students in Israel respond to differently composed teaching units on the Jewish-Arab war of 1948 and the birth of the Palestinian refugee problem, he comes up with the interesting finding, that both groups probably due to their different positioning in the Israeli society benefit to varying degrees from different strategies. Whereas

a critical thinking approach had the biggest impact on Jewish students encouraging them to accept responsibility for wrong-doings of ‘their’ group, the more emotional dual-narrative approach proved to be more effective with the Arab students. Apparently, members of the dominant group benefit from an impartial, academic approach. But members of the marginalized minority seem to need recognition first, before they can embark on the risk to rethink the partisan stories they grew up with.

In the survey we translated the concept into two items asking teachers whether they would:

- help students to understand the other position,
- draw attention to achievements of marginalized/excluded group

It is probably not by chance that one of the illustrative examples we got during our focus group discussions for an approach aimed at raising empathy came from a Danish teacher who had spent a technical visit to Northern Ireland. Coming home to Denmark, she exposed her students to a video that was made in Northern Ireland showing a Protestant and a Catholic girl switching school uniforms for a day. As these uniforms clearly function as markers of religious identity, the girls felt rather uncomfortable when they took a walk in their home town together. In the words of the teacher from Denmark, both girls “were trying to put themselves in the other person's shoes and see what more or less their lives are like.” To her students, she continued, this exercise in empathy set in motion a thorough process of critical self-examination as they were asking themselves whether they do the same as the spectators in the film, judging and making assumptions about other people based solely on how they look. (T1\_I4\_Denmark, p. 27)

### Discussion of the survey results

	always/often	sometimes/rarely
Rethinking plausibility of arguments	79%	21%
Researching whether prejudices based on facts	77,9%	20,9%
Drawing attention to logical consequences of thinking	75,6%	22,1%
Confronting students with the impact of stereotypes on minorities	73,3%	25,6
Challenging students' lack of knowledge on minorities	65,1%	32,6%
Confronting with wrongdoings of one's own group	52,3%	43%
Helping students to understand the other position	87,2%	12,8
Drawing attention to achievements of marginalized/excluded group	50%	38,4%

Looking at these figures, we can see that all three types of approaches receive more or less the same approval rates from the teachers we polled. We take this as an indicator that there is a lot of overlap, meaning that one and the same teacher may encourage critical thinking, create empathy or opt for a more confrontational approach, depending – maybe – at times on the composition or atmosphere in class or on the mood of the teachers and at other times on the topic at stake.

- There seem to be only two exceptions to this general rule. With 50% of the votes, the item “*Drawing attention to achievements of marginalized/excluded group*” polled worse than the other ones. We can only speculate here about the reasons, but one explanation could be that some teachers reject such a deliberate effort at lauding the other because it may reveal too much of a patronizing attitude. This would resonate well with the common idea that one should not reduce marginalized groups to their role as victims of exclusion but rather stress their capability to act.
- The second item that received significant less approval than the other five is the idea *to confront students with the wrongdoing of one's own group*. Some teachers may perceive this approach as colliding with the idea that teachers as servants paid by the state are obliged to be neutral. The participants' reserve could also be explained by teachers' experience-based psychological knowledge that it is easier for students to first become aware of their own traumatic feelings and then empathize with the ‘other’ before they are able to challenge the ideological truth of their own in-group (Zembylas & Karahasan 2017: 33).

Summing up, the results of our survey confirm an interesting statement made by Johnson in 1998 already. On the basis of his experience with teaching anti-racist education in Australia, he would abstain from arguing in favor of either a rational or an emotional approach. He would rather point to the advantages and disadvantages involved in both of them. If teaching does not address feelings, he argues, it runs the risk of being ignored. According to his observations, in such a setting students would furthermore frequently try to please their teachers instead of expressing their real opinions. However, if emotions dominate, he continues, students may well turn out to retreat into what he calls ‘tribal positions’. During our focus group discussions a teacher from the UK came to a similar conclusion. Looking back at his experience with what may go wrong in a history or politics lesson when you try to engage your students in discussing controversial or sensitive issues, he formulated a convincing pledge for a flexible approach adapted as much as possible to the specific challenges that come up in class:

“You have to decide based on your knowledge of the children what's going to be best. But what it boils down to is that teenagers usually are not very good at having debates or discussions that lie in the middle of the spectrum from ‘outright angry disagreement’ to ‘very, very staged, formulaic, boring debates’. So I tried to set debates up in my history lessons and they would often end up just quite boring. Because everyone really sort of agreed on everything anyway, because they were only debating because I told them to debate. And you wouldn't necessarily get much value from it. Then at the other end of the spectrum is when they really disagreed, and it would go kind of out of control and you would not get the learning you wanted to get, and instead you'd just get a room of angry and upset children who then go and complain to their parents or whatever. And the difficult thing for teachers, I guess, whether they're starting teachers, or whether they are very experienced teachers, is knowing your groups well enough to feel confident in allowing a debate to happen in the middle and to just kind of nudge it back to get us into the middle.” (M1\_I4\_UK, p. 13)

### *Implications for the project*

- Translating these insights into conceptual ideas that could guide our work on the teaching materials that we prepare in the course of the project, we would recommend to offer a variety of approaches for all source materials switching on purpose between tasks and set-ups that either primarily encourage students to engage in critical thinking, or irritate them in the common-sense-assumption they bring with them to class or create empathy with others.

- When designing learning outcomes for single lessons plans we may want to put emphasis alternatively on different “competences for democratic culture” as outlined in a conceptual model by the Council of Europe (2017) and displayed on the four wings of the butterfly model (CoE 2017: 38). At times we may want to focus on values and attitudes and at other times on cognitive skills and knowledge.
- The survey indicates that many teachers have a repertoire of teaching strategies that allows them to react to emotions in the classroom. However, given the constraints participants mentioned with regard to controversial and sensitive issues and the dominance of the disciplinary approach, we assume that many teachers would benefit from trainings that help them to develop fresh ideas on how to deal with emotions in the classroom.

## 4. Conclusion

Our research allowed us to identify different types of controversial issues as well as respective challenges and approaches from a broad diversity of experiences that were reported to us by teachers in focus group discussions. These experiences also sensitized us to the importance of the situational context. In line with Stradling et al. (1984) and Hess (2009) we emphasize that there is no one right way to help students to acquire social and civic competences through dialogue, debate and discussion on contested issues.

Since we had the privilege to talk to committed and experienced educators we were able to identify a range of strategies how to deal with controversial issues, some of which involve emotional approaches while others focus on reason. The survey points to the dominance of the critical thinking approach which is an integral part of history as an academic discipline. Furthermore, schools are institutions where emotions should be restrained, rational approaches should be opened up and social interaction should be guided by mutual respect – all of which is crucial to render schools safe spaces. Both the disciplinary and the institutional contexts encourage teachers to rely on rational approaches to controversial issues which can be helpful in some situations but may not appeal to students in others. Dealing with controversial issues teachers face the dilemma that meaningful discussions depend on the exchange of rational arguments but to a certain degree also on participants’ emotional involvement.

Generally, we would like to take account of this dilemma by underlining two points. First, if discussions are planned, the preparation should be as careful as possible. Students should

prepare the topic individually or in groups, a teaching strategy should be chosen, rules should be agreed on and the room should be set up to fit the strategy. All this should create an atmosphere where fairness prevails, students feel encouraged to speak their mind and a discussion culture can develop. However, this kind of rational set-up might not always work. If emotional discussions spring up spontaneously, students express extremist opinions or shut themselves away, teachers have to take the emotional level more than usual into account. Therefore, we believe that teachers, secondly, should be better enabled to deal with controversy by reflecting and, if necessary, broadening their repertoire of strategies. While these challenges are not completely new for educators, they have gained a new quality in a world where established facts are publicly contested, conspiracy theories are promoted and nationalist resentments are refuelled by populists.

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