

TEACHING CONTROVERSIAL AND SENSITIVE TOPICS IN DIVERSE CLASSROOM: TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVE

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PROBLEM

INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT: growing populism, radicalization, expectations for education (UN, UNESCO, OECD, CoE).

ESTONIAN CONTEXT: growing diversity, importance of education system, issues related to schools with Russian as the main language of instruction (TIMSS, PISA), the general aim of teaching history (identity building *versus* inquiry-based teaching).

CONTROVERSIAL AND SENSITIVE TOPICS (CST): Specific to historical culture, in Estonia related to 20th century topics (IIWW), sensitivity influenced by many aspects (social memory, master narratives). CST teaching and learning influenced among other aspects by epistemic cognition (EC).

Previous studies indicate, that teachers' EC influences students' EC, Teachers' declarative epistemic beliefs and practices can be contradictory, and without deliberate epistemic awareness, teaching of controversial topics can lead to cognitive bias and a naïve, relativistic or subjectivist understanding of history. There is a lack of studies analysing EC and CST in practice.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND (see references): CST (Stradling, 1984; Gross & Terra, 2019) EC and epistemic beliefs (Chinn & Reinhart, 2016; Murphy & Alexander, 2016), EC in history (VanSledright & Magguoni, 2016), epistemic conflict (VanSledright & Burkholdt, 2019), epistemic climate and the importance of teachers' (contextual) knowledge (Buehl&Fives, 2016; Muis et al, 2016; Hess, 2005; Kello, 2016), historical thinking skills (Seixas, 2017) and conceptual change (Carretero et al 2013).

This research is supported by the Estonian Ministry of Education and Research project RITA-RÄNNE and Tallinn University Center of Excellence in Educational Innovation funds.

RQ

RQ1. Which topics are controversial for teachers in multicultural society?

RQ2. What is characteristic to history teachers' EC regarding history and teaching history?

RQ3. How does teachers' EC influence the use of methods and strategies when teaching CST?

METHODS

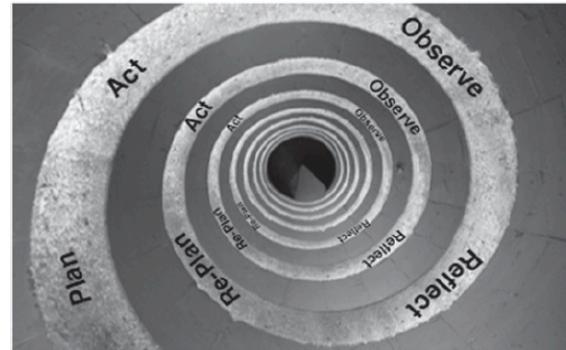


Figure 1. The spiral of critical action research. (Kemmis et al, 2014)

Main strategy: critical action research with design-based research elements.

Sampling technique: purposive intensity (12 expert teachers).

Data collection: semi-structured interviews, lesson observations, teachers' diary entries, class descriptions, two lesson plans about CST and teachers' explanations for their used methods, relevant recorded memos from six meetings.

Data analysis: Qualitative data analysis is inductive, using thematic analysis and three-level coding.

FINDINGS, DISCUSSION

RQ1. CST from the perspective of teachers: Not only 20th century topics, such as Estonian independence in 1918, the Estonian War of Independence in 1918, red and white terror during the War of Independence, the Estonian republic during 1920–1940, the authoritarian regime of Konstantin Päts, II WW, holocaust, mass deportations and repressions, the Gulag, Estonian loss of independence in II WW, the Soviet Era in Estonia, dissidents in Estonia during the Soviet Era, the collapse of the Soviet Union, Singing Revolution in Estonia, but also current topics, such as Putin's Russia, US foreign politics, democracy and freedom, radicalization and nation and nationalism.

RQ2. Teachers' views on history differ (our common story about the past *versus* inquiry about the past) and can have different epistemic lenses depending on their specialization or prevailing historiography during the studies. Declaratively empathize in teaching history the importance of inquiry-based learning, critical thinking skills and multiperspectivity. In case of CST use historical thinking skills such as work with primary sources and historical perspective taking. In practice, the epistemic climate of classrooms differs and is context dependent.

RQ3. Teachers EC influences their practice and methods, teachers believing in more certain knowledge don't recognize changes in CSTs or don't acknowledge, that CSTs exist and teach them from multiple perspectives formally. Teachers' EC about history seems to be in concord with their practice (but not with declarative statements about teaching history).

- ✓ From teachers' perspective CSTs are still strongly connected with the Russian speaking minority in Estonia, it differs from students' perspective.
- ✓ Teachers' EC about history is rarely reflected, more self-reflection would be needed, utilizing for example critical action research. Regarding the teaching of CSTs the complexity and ambiguity of knowledge and different sources of knowledge could be empathized.
- ✓ Teacher knowledge is complex and interconnected, in case of CSTs contextual knowledge seems to be highly important.

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