

If that's the goal, any topic can be sensitive? Estonian teachers' experiences with sensitive issues in history

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Summary

Societally sensitive content is one of the challenges of the teaching profession. In history and social studies, such content is often related to political controversies and painful historical experiences. The present paper reports on a survey among teachers on "Sensitive issues and political interests in history teaching". The survey was part of an international collaborative project "Social psychological dynamics of representations of history in the enlarged European Union" (COST network). The survey focused on sensitive issues in a broad sense, letting the respondents define sensitivity themselves. The teachers were asked closed and open questions to point out and assess possibly sensitive issues encountered during their teaching experience, the reasons for sensitivity and the factors affecting sensitivity. Contextual factors and the respondents' beliefs about history teaching were also enquired about. In Estonia, the web-based questionnaire was made available to fill in either in Estonian or Russian language.

In this paper, we present the findings from the Estonian data. We depart from the research on teaching sensitive and controversial issues in social studies and history teaching, as well as from the social psychology literature about dealing with troubled pasts. We analyse which issues are perceived as sensitive by Estonian teachers and why, which strategies are used for teaching these topics, and what kind of support the teachers need. We also analyse what external factors they perceive as influencing history teaching and discuss how perceiving and teaching sensitive issues may be related to the aims and goals of history teaching that teachers value. We use thematic content analysis of open answers, as well as descriptive statistics. The results are discussed in the framework of multi-perspective history teaching, teachers' autonomy and societal context of history teaching.

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The prevalent reason for sensitivity was the social and political sensitivity of an issue and more particularly, the different perspectives on an historical event by social memory groups and/or in textbooks, Estonian and Russian media and official positions.

The most frequently mentioned issues were, on one hand, current issues such as the refugee issue and on-going wars. The history of Islam as related to terrorism and possibly the refugee crisis, or wars in Ukraine and Syria, belong to this category.

On the other hand, most of the teachers mentioned issues related to Russian-speaking students in their classrooms. In fact, the majority of sensitive topics mentioned by the teachers refer to events and processes related to Russian and Soviet dominance in Estonia.

The following topics prevailed: WW2 (including war crimes, Holocaust; mainly related to Estonia); events in 1939/1940 and/or 1944 (Soviet occupation) in Estonia; The Soviet era; late 1980s; dissolution of the Soviet Union and restoring Estonian Independence; Estonian society since 1991; the position of the Russian speaking minority – and related to this, the Russification policy in the late 19th century and during the Soviet era, as well as the role of Russia or Russians in Estonian history more generally.

The period of WW2 and related events have been the sensitive issues *par excellence* in Estonia – our teachers' responses confirm this. One third of all participants mentioned the time of WW2 in general and an additional third mentioned specific aspects of WW2. Closely related to WW2 are the events of 1939/40 and 1944. Both dates refer to the annexation of Estonia by the USSR. Either of the events or both were spontaneously mentioned by almost one half of the teachers. The more specific aspects mentioned were (1) cruelty, violence, genocide, Holocaust; (2) collaboration (with either side); (3) the meaning of annexation of Estonia to the Soviet Union in 1940 and 1944, and the appropriateness of using the term 'occupation' for this; (4) Estonians fighting in both the Soviet and the German army and the 'relative representation' of this in the textbooks and Estonian public spaces.

The reason for sensitivity often derived from students, their families and communities. Collective memories and general worldviews, as well as direct personal involvement, were mentioned here. For example, the fact that "among students, there are descendants of both those who deported and the deportees, and local people know people from several generations" was mentioned. Students' emotions and cognitive difficulties related to sensitivity appeared when events were emotionally laden or the students' in-group appeared in a negative light. Several teachers also mentioned sensitivity deriving from ambiguousness,

lack of clarity and openness (lack of open, professional discussions), as well as sensitivity deriving from flaws or bias in textbooks.

Interestingly, there were no responses directly and explicitly referring to the teacher as a source of an issues' sensitivity among the open answers – such as personal or family experiences, being unsure about their own position or lack of knowledge. However, an uneasy or awkward feeling was reflected in some of the open responses where teachers explained why and how some issues were sensitive.

In short, our findings highlight the heat of the social and political contexts of Estonian history teaching, and the clear differences between the challenges faced by teachers who work with Russian-speaking students or in mixed Estonian-Russian classrooms, as opposed to Estonian-only settings. The presence of conflicting social and, indeed, political memories in the classroom clearly actualises the potential sensitivity of topics related to the Estonian and Russian common past. However, apart from issues related to the local troubled past, many teachers also mentioned current and global issues, or issues generally related to violence, cruelty, or 'corruption in the world'.

With both kinds of topics, there are no universal recipes as to which teaching strategies might be 'the best' in each particular situation: there may be benefits and disadvantages in both 'smoothing edges', 'taking the risk' or approaching an issue openly. However, as Barton (2009) warns us with regard to issues that are relevant to the students' identities, there are certain issues that students are interested in anyway, and on which they will form their own opinion, whether they learn about it in school or not: if educators avoid those issues, they do so at their own peril.

We can conclude that teaching sensitive issues demands a lot from the teacher – a sense of tact as well as skills and resourcefulness. It is a complicated challenge, but also an intriguing and potentially rewarding one that may open up new professional avenues.

Keywords: history teaching, teachers, identity, sensitive issues, social memory, socio-political contexts of education