

# dismantling myths and teaching controversial issues in conflict-affected societies: insights from Cyprus

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In this short piece we argue that although theoretically in times of war and protracted conflict, it is particularly crucial for teachers to engage with controversial issues, doing so in praxis is fraught with ethical, practical, political, contextual and emotional dilemmas and challenges. Informed by our research on and teaching of the Cyprus conflict (and the associated peacebuilding process) as a controversial issue itself, we posit that merely replacing ‘war education’ with ‘peace education’ can fail at best and be counterproductive or solidify essentialist positions at worst. Instead of focusing primarily on replacing one form of knowledge with another and on developing fixed skillsets as part of peace education manuals, we argue that meaningful engagement with difficult conversations requires new modes of being that can only materialise through long-term processes of self-reflection, affective engagement and enactment of critical pedagogies. Here, we focus on three such pedagogies, namely, ‘pedagogies of discomfort’; ‘pedagogies of desecuritisation’ and ‘pedagogies of empathy’.

Keywords: Cyprus, divided societies, History education, peace education, teaching controversial issues

War is horrible! This the dark world knows to its awful cost. But has it just become horrible, in these last days, when under essentially equal conditions, equal armament, and equal waste of wealth white men are fighting white men, with surgeons and nurses hovering near?

Think of the wars through which we have lived in the last decade [1910s]: in German Africa, in British Nigeria, in French and Spanish Morocco, in China, in Persia, in the Balkans, in Tripoli, in Mexico, and in a dozen lesser places — were not these horrible, too? Mind you, there were for most of these wars no Red Cross funds.

The cause of war is preparation for war... (W.E.B Du Bois, 1920)

The sheer number of war-related injuries and deaths in 2022, be it intrastate war in Myanmar, Ethiopia and Yemen or interstate war as the Russian invasion of Ukraine, is a stark reminder that Du Bois’ writing is just as pertinent and compelling today as it was when it was written a century ago.

Writing his first of three autobiographies – *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil* – in 1920, the African-American sociologist and peace activist was referring specifically to the political implications of slavery and racism, namely hatred, murder and war, highlighting the unequal treatment of war victims depending on the colour of their skin as well as the cause of war which he

identified as the imperialist ‘conquest...among the darker peoples of Asia and Africa...not for assimilation and uplift, but for commerce and degradation’ (1920). Although one may be forgiven for detecting unequal representations of war-related injury and suffering across different parts of the world today, for the purposes of this short piece we would like to focus on the latter part of this extract: Du Bois’ portrayal of ‘preparation for war’ as being the cause of war. Two questions arise from this premise: firstly, what is the role of education in preparing youth for war and secondly, if the cause of war is preparation for war, and logically following from this, ‘the cause of peace is preparation for peace’, then how can we best prepare youth for peace in pedagogical ways that cause no harm?

The first question has been thoroughly addressed over the past two decades, illustrating how education, and in particular history education, can raise the risk of political violence through the use of myths, stereotypes, demonisation and hatred of the Other, selective memory, nationalisation of trauma etc. (e.g. Bush & Saltarelli, 2000; Davies, 2004; Gallagher, 2004; Lange, 2012). In fact, Putin’s ‘rewriting of history’ (Ioanes, 2022) has brought to the fore the dangers of abusing and distorting history to defend political agendas and justify violence that destabilises global peace and security. In the rest of this paper, we focus on the second question i.e. the why and the ways in which some critical pedagogies, namely, ‘pedagogies of discomfort’, ‘pedagogies of desecuritisation’ and ‘pedagogies of empathy’, can contribute to an education about and for peace. We do so by drawing from our research on Cyprus, South Africa, Israel, Northern Ireland, US, and Australia over the past two decades and primarily from our experience and teaching of the Cyprus conflict (and the associated peacebuilding process) as a controversial issue itself. We first present hurdles and challenges that teachers have reported facing based on our research on peace education and then provide some ways in which these could be navigated and negotiated in ways that effectively dismantle myths and allow constructive discussion of controversial issues in the classroom.

Controversial issues can be defined as topics that entail strong opposing views and invoke highly sensitive (emotional) responses (Stradling et al., 1984). Their divisive nature i.e. their ability to divide public opinion ought to be perceived not as a threat, but rather as a defining element, which when purposefully approached within the framework of citizenship and human rights education, can help bolster students’ abilities to engage in and learn through deliberation and to be more tolerant – to agree to disagree – essentially contributing to democratic competences (Hess, 2009; Kerr & Huddleston, 2015). As Hess puts it:

While there is a plethora of reasons why political tolerance and democracy go hand in hand, the most obvious is that a society without political tolerance is likely to enact policies that deprive some people of their right to influence the political agenda and to have an influence on what is decided. That is, there will be no political equality. And absent political equality, there really is not a democracy. (2009, p. 17)

Controversial issues are sometimes part of wider and long-standing public debates regarding religious, ethical or political beliefs and can affect both the individual and the social level. They become controversial because they involve different starting points (in space and time), different basic levels of viewing the world (worldviews) but also different political, social or ethical values and religious beliefs. This is why often societal discussions of controversial issues involve a belief that one side has the monopoly on objective truth regarding an issue (e.g. a conflict) as well as the

sole identity of the ‘victim’ in the historical narrative thus undermining possibilities for peacebuilding and conflict-resolution. In fact, discussions of controversial issues in the context of conflict-affected societies often include essentialised understandings of identity; moral and ethical judgements; stereotypes, othering and biases; narratives that are related to collective memory and collective trauma; (ab)use of discourses of human rights to blame the other; selective remembering and forgetting; and the prevalence of myths or even fake news.

Both scholars and practitioners have already convincingly discussed why careful engagement of controversial issues in the classroom is both important and useful, pedagogically, socially and politically (e.g. Hess 2009; Kerr & Huddleston, 2015; Stradling, 1984) and this gains additional urgency in times of physical and/or structural violence. Ideally in times of war and protracted conflict, it is *particularly* crucial for teachers to engage with controversial issues, in order to avoid further escalation, the spread of propaganda and hatred etc. However, doing so in praxis is fraught with ethical, practical, political, contextual and emotional dilemmas and challenges. For example, in our past and current research (e.g. as part of an Erasmus+ project entitled ConCitizen) teachers in the Republic of Cyprus have reported that the major reason for avoiding discussion of controversial issues is because they are concerned how such issues are going to be perceived by colleagues, parents, students, the community, their employer (the Ministry of Education) etc. In other words, they are anxious of how engaging with controversial issues in the classroom might backfire and affect either them or their students negatively. Other challenges mentioned include: lack of time, and perhaps more significantly, teachers’ own resistance and discomfort in dealing with an issue due to their own sensitivity and proximity to the controversial issue.

Teachers’ resistance is compounded when the controversial issue is referring to an unresolved or ongoing conflict for reasons that go beyond their own ‘personal baggage’. Firstly, these relate to the dynamic, fluctuating and political nature of conflict and of perceptions of how the conflict should or could be solved. Secondly, there is the practical difficulty of accessing teaching resources which deal with these issues using multiperspectivity, critical thinking, inclusiveness and historical truths. It is telling, for instance, that around half of the teachers involved in our current research said they do not have access to the necessary resources. More surprising was the finding that teachers felt there were very little or no opportunities in the very fixed and state-controlled curricula to teach controversial issues (e.g. related to current or historical aspects of the Cyprus conflict), despite these supposedly being under a framework of education for democracy and human rights. Thirdly, teachers’ resistance to teaching controversial issues was related to the fact that they did not feel adequately equipped or confident to develop a safe environment for teaching controversial issues. The teachers felt they needed additional training and specific classroom strategies. It was also pointed out that in the rare cases when such training was provided it is too theoretical rather than practical and so it was ultimately the teachers’ personal stance on these issues that motivated them to research and teach a topic independently. This last point reveals a tension between teachers’ practical need and desire for concrete guidance and the theoretical complexity that such guidance entails that makes it contextual and dependent on several factors, particularly if a teacher wants to prepare young people for peace in pedagogical ways that minimize harm.

We would like to explicitly acknowledge that we do not believe that there can ever be a *guaranteed* way of ‘peace education that does no harm’, if in the definition of harm one includes an affective disruption of the ontological Self that causes, for instance, feelings of shame, discomfort, fear and anxiety. There are risks, challenges and dilemmas entailed in the examples of the three pedagogies we propose below. We argue that when navigating these difficult conversations, there are several

factors out of the control of the educator that cannot guarantee the way the conversation will go, and that it is important that we acknowledge these. What the educator can do is be adequately prepared and aware of their complex subtleties and how to mitigate these risks in caring, productive and strategic ways. For example, even the best trained educator with the finest intentions will have to face several contextually different dynamics depending on broad socio-political issues (e.g. structural societal in/justices), the timing and space of raising controversial issues in class, the students' age and maturity, the teacher's biography, societal perceptions of national or religious identity, emotional and linguistic triggers, the specific topics discussed, the dynamics between the students etc. In fact, it is precisely because it is meant to be *transformative* that 'difficult knowledge' (Britzman, 1998; Pitt & Britzman, 2003) and hence 'difficult conversations' entail a dialogue/learning process that is discomfoting.

Before briefly outlining the three pedagogies we propose, it is important to be aware that merely replacing one form of education with another, e.g. 'war education' with 'peace education', and doing so in an almost forceful (if not fascist) way with the sole purpose of achieving peace by any means, can fail at best and be counterproductive or solidify essentialist positions at worst. Presenting romanticised versions of the past, trying to trivialize or embellish past traumas and atrocities, and a lack of honest and meaningful engagement with local actors who resist peace agendas does not take us very far in terms of building bridges. It is essential 'to examine why some individuals or groups may not necessarily be "against" peace, when they demand that first there should be justice and then peace' (Zembylas et al., 2016, p. 25). Labelling or treating these individuals as 'spoilors' (Newman & Richmond, 2006), as 'backward', or as belonging to groups with 'problems' (Psaltis et al., 2019) 'arguably risks falling in the essentialist traps of positivist psychologised traditions that suggest the issue lies more in the individual mind... thereby underestimating the material and structural injustices' (Christodoulou, 2021; see also Bekerman & Zembylas, 2012). Often the ground we walk and work on is soaked in the blood of historical atrocity and injustice, whether we choose to remember it or not.

Instead of focusing primarily on replacing one form of knowledge with another and on developing fixed skillsets as part of peace education manuals that prescribe a set of best practices, we argue that meaningful engagement with difficult conversations requires new modes of *being* that can only materialise through long-term processes of self-reflection and critical pedagogies. The full intricacies and repercussions of teaching controversial issues cannot be properly understood unless they are (also) viewed in terms of affectivity and deconstruction that blends the emotional and analytical (deconstruction) elements. The goal is to develop intellectual, affective, and relational capacities/spaces within which difficult conversations can take place (with attention to political, economic, religious, and cultural complexities).

Here we propose three examples of pedagogies that we have been using in our research and teaching over the years in order to create these capacities/spaces within which difficult conversations can take place. First, we begin with *pedagogies of discomfort*. These pedagogies are uncomfortable, that is, they take us out of our comfort zone, because they disrupt our core beliefs and emotions (Zembylas & McGlynn, 2012; Zembylas, 2015; Zembylas & Papamichael, 2017) in ways which destabilise our long-term understandings of self-identification, and cause ontological insecurity and cognitive dissonance (Christodoulou, 2018). It is therefore important to explicitly acknowledge resistance to discomfort and encourage students to identify their own resistance, linking it to the destabilisation of their identity and the persistence of simplistic and dangerous polarities (good vs bad) in everyday life. Increasing their flexibility to discomfort by allowing unpleasant emotions to exist, practising

cognitive diffusion rather than cognitive dissonance can ease the process of discomfort and offer a more constructive way of dealing with difficult conversations. The rationale is not to eliminate students' negative emotions or experiences but rather to find productive and strategic pedagogical ways of processing them over time. As one of us has argued:

A pedagogy that wishes to develop self-criticality, ethical responsibility, and the prospects of transformative learning opportunities, needs to create conditions for addressing the complex psycho-social dimensions of difficult knowledge through both critical and strategic engagement with one's affective investments in relation to social and political norms. (Zembylas, 2016, p. 11)

Within pedagogies of discomfort, teachers can help students to shift away from black or white, binary ways of viewing and experiencing the world and become more accustomed to complex grey spaces, of *affective and intellectual ambivalence*. In other words, students can learn that it is 'okay', that it is acceptable and sometimes inevitable or necessary to go through a stage where one experiences the co-existence of two opposite positionalities and affectivities regarding a controversial issue. Here teachers create a dialectical space for students which opens up 'possibilities not for overcoming the ambivalence itself, but for developing a critical awareness of mixed feelings and orientations...and initiating a negotiation of hitherto firm positionings' (Zembylas et al., 2016, p. 210) that at least recognises the legitimacy of the opposite stance – its right to exist.

Secondly, and building on pedagogies of discomfort, are *pedagogies of desecuritisation*. Here students are encouraged to deconstruct the processes by which certain aspects of, for instance the Cyprus conflict, have come to be associated with perceived threats to the physical survival and ontological security of the students, and how this in turn affects the intellectual, affective and relational capacities/spaces within which difficult conversations can take place. In other words, students are taught to recognise how extreme politicisation of an issue, including the addition of several myths or inaccuracies to it, can act as a vehicle through which (their) feelings of anxiety, fear and insecurity are heightened to extreme levels. They are encouraged to identify their own emotional and linguistic triggers during difficult conversations and to examine whether and how these are linked back to intentional securitisation processes. The goal of pedagogies of desecuritisation is to ultimately create spaces of ontological security and safety: students' insecurities and other matters of security are successfully disentangled from educational spaces and difficult conversations can take place. The affective disruption taking place through securitisation – unlike the one that is taking place during discomfort – is such that it reaches extraordinary levels that go beyond what is pedagogically desirable, constructive and productive. This is why desecuritisation is desirable.

Nevertheless, one of the main limitations of these pedagogies is that during times of physical violence, it cannot create spaces of physical security, as by definition these are extreme situations. Undoubtedly, these pedagogies are less challenging when they relate to the ontological security of students and when conflict is structural rather than physical. For example, when we teach students about various forms of resistance to peace education initiatives that are related to revising history textbooks in Cyprus (absence of physical violence), we ask students to deconstruct these processes of securitisation as they relate to a disruption of the consistent biographical narrative of the Self

(ontological security) but also in terms of how these discourses of securitisation present changes to history textbooks as physical threats, threats to one's survival. In terms of the former, pedagogies of desecuritisation deconstruct 'everyday discourses, traditions, routines and ways of being which lead to a cohesive and stable understanding of one's self through a sense of certainty, comfort, continuity and order' and so they learn to recognise how and why divisive and difficult conversations about history textbooks often involve a perceived threat to the 'historical understanding of the Self, to who one essentially is, their self-identity' (Christodoulou, 2021, p. 232). In terms of the latter i.e. physical security, students are able to see how changes to history textbooks are associated with

a loss of patriotism, a loss of determination to fight for one's country that the future soldiers needed in order to be adequately prepared, and hence a negative impact on the security forces of the island, endangering its protection...There is an underlying anxiety that the citizens should always be prepared for war, given that there has not been a peace settlement yet, but more importantly given the insecurity felt with the presence of the Turkish troops. (Christodoulou, 2018, p. 388)

In other words, pedagogies of desecuritisation can offer 'a rather slow move out of an explicit security discourse, which in turn facilitates a less militaristic, less violent and hence more genuinely political form of engagement' in the classroom (Hensen, 2012, p. 539).

Finally, none of the above pedagogies could take place without *pedagogies of empathy* (Zembylas & Papamichael, 2017). Teachers should encourage the development of empathetic literacy – an authentic effort to understand the ideas, experiences, emotions and perspectives of the other – through active listening, role-playing, story-telling, embracing diversity of opinions and discussion of the repercussions of certain aspects of a conflict – for instance how the lives of the families of the 'missing persons' have been affected by not knowing the fate of their loved one or by how a student may feel dismissed or disrespected when their opposite view is received with rolling eyes by another classmate. These pedagogies offer opportunities so that students cultivate empathetic understandings of the Other, their affective worlds and especially their sufferings and hardships related to social and political injustices, without feeling that they are personally responsible or guilty for these. It is also only with empathy that educators themselves can gauge the emotional thermometer of a class or a student, know how to respond to intolerance, and recognize feelings of discomfort or insecurity involved in engaging with 'difficult' issues. Pedagogies of empathy also help the educator recognise that cognitive and emotional change does not happen overnight, especially when certain modes of feeling and doing had been reinforced during the most formative decades of one's life.

Teaching controversial issues is demanding and challenging on both the students and teachers and it is vital to engage in honest conversations that acknowledge this before any meaningful transformative work can take place. Transformation does not equate to following a peace agenda at all costs, but rather is part of a slow evolution and destabilization of previously held essentialist positions that necessitates, at times uncomfortable, self-reflection, affective engagement and enactment of critical pedagogies. If teaching controversial issues contributes to disrupting public and school pedagogies that promote war-like modes of being in the world, then it will have made an important contribution to undermining preparations for war.

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