THE POWER OF TESTIMONIES FOR DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION

Maarten Van Alstein (ed.)

EDITED VOLUME

The power of testimonies for democratic education

Colophon

Changing Democracies: The power of testimonies for democratic education

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CONTENTS

About the authors 5

1 Introduction 7

1. Background 7
2. Changing Democracies 9
3. Learning from history? 10
4. The possibilities and limitations of oral history in education 13
5. The meaning of history and memory 15
6. Outline of the report 21

2 Czech pupils' attitudes towards the collective memory of socialism 25

1. Introduction 26
2. Research method 28
3. "Why do they remember socialism differently?" 29
4. "What does family argue about?" 33
5. Conclusion 37

3 The transformative potential of non-formal relational pedagogy 41

1. Introduction 42
2. Methodology 44
3. Pedagogy beyond the formal gaze: approaching oral history education as an entangled cultural process of democratic becoming 45
4. Borderland education: exploring the transformative potential of the Sejny Lektorium programme 47
5. Staging alternative educational encounters: from then to now 48
6. Findings from the programme: intersections between education and democracy 49
7. Conclusion 55

4 Images of democracy in the eyes of arts students 59

1. Introduction 60
2. Methodology 60
3. The educational activities 65
4. What significance did the students attach to the oral testimonies? 72
5. Conclusions, recommendations and discussion 78

5 Take the floor. Performing with non-fiction material 83

1. Introduction 84
2. Take the floor: the workshop 85
3. On methods and concepts: scattering the findings 93
4. Final highlights 94

6 Students and pupils make meaning of democracy in the Netherlands 97

1. Introduction 98
2. Setting of the Local Experience(s) 99
3. Target groups 100
4. Description of activities 101
5. Research methods 102
6. A note on the positionality of the researcher 105
7. Findings 105
8. Conclusions 120

7 Changing Democracies in Antwerp 125

1. Introduction 126
2. Didactic formats and research methods 127
3. From interpretation to critical reflection: oral history in the classroom 129
4. Conclusion 139

Conclusions from researching Changing Democracies: This polyphony that we co-create 143

1. Oral histories about dictatorship and transition 143
2. Approaches to the political in Changing Democracies 144
3. Giving meaning to and learning from history 145

Unlocking the potential of a transnational perspective when working with micro-stories in education 157

1. Introduction 158
2. This project's transnational perspective 158
3. Necessary conditions before embarking on a project with a transnational perspective 159
4. What a transnational perspective offers 159
5. Some points to take into consideration 160
6. Moving from a transnational perspective to action 161

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Flemish Peace Institute

The Flemish Peace Institute is a center for peace and conflict studies associated with the Flemish Parliament, Brussels, Belgium. Our mission is to provide policy relevant and practice oriented peace research to inform public debates and promote peace and the prevention of violence. As a senior researcher, *Dr. Maarten Van Alstein*'s work focuses on conflict transformation, peace education and learning from violent histories. *Sofie De Leeuw* is a newly appointed research assistant with a background in the non-profit sector, and practically supports the researchers at the FPI.

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i2ADS

i2ADS is a leading R&D Unit in Art and Design hosted at the Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Porto (FBAUP). It is an institutional member of SAR – Society of Artistic Research and a co-convenor of NW29 at EERA – European Educational Research Association.
In Portugal, Changing Democracies is based at i2ads and run by *Samuel Guimarães* and by Cat S. Martins, in institutional backing. The authors, *Samuel Guimarães* and *Rita Reis* are both independent researchers and practitioners. *Rita Reis* is an actress with an MA in directing/acting and she develops projects in the fields of acting and artistic direction, working in various theatres companies and festivals. Rita teaches at Esmae and articulates this practice with editing scientific texts in the field of theatre

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Borderland Foundation

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EuroClio

EuroClio - European Association of History Educators is an international organisation that supports the development of innovative history and citizenship education across Europe. Together with history education professionals, EuroClio develops educational resources, provides professional development opportunities and conducts research on the state of history education in Europe and beyond, primarily mapping the needs and challenges of history teachers. At EuroClio, *Eugenie Khatschatrian* is leading a variety of projects on themes related to European remembrance, dealing with difficult pasts, democracy, and media literacy. Here within, she primarily focuses on the development of resources that are rooted in youth-led place-based learning pedagogy.

Evens Foundation

The Evens Foundation is a public benefit organisation working at the intersections of youth, technology, and democracy. We collaborate with communities to explore barriers to engagement, support critical thinking, and address the impacts—positive and negative—of digital platforms and innovations on civic participation. Building on knowledge accumulated over thirty years in the fields of journalism, education, the arts, and science, we aim to reimagine Europe's relationship with democracy. *Marjolein Delvou* and *Hanna Zielińska* are both programme curators based in Antwerp and Warsaw respectively. At the foundation they are responsible for developing and implementing initiatives that focus on reimagining traditional forms of education, empowering communities, creating transnational spaces for exchange, using approaches like storytelling and experience-based learning. In this role, they are coordinating the Changing Democracies project.

1 Introduction

Maarten Van Alstein (Flemish Peace Institute)

1. Background

There are various ways to think about teaching histories of violence, such as colonialism, the world wars, the Holocaust, dictatorship and totalitarianism. To make sense of different pedagogical approaches, a somewhat crude but useful distinction can be made between "disciplinary" or academic history teaching (learning *about* history) and "engaged" or peace-oriented history teaching (learning *from* history).[1]

The "disciplinary" take on history education emphasises first and foremost the importance of teaching the skills typical of the academic historian, such as historical thinking, critical source analysis, multiperspectivity and building historical frames of reference (time, space and context). Scholarly research into this pedagogical paradigm focuses on issues such as adequate didactics and effectiveness of teaching strategies. Making young people learn about the violent past in a historically adequate and critical way is crucial for good history education. Nonetheless, when histories of violence and dictatorship are discussed in the public sphere, the discussion often does not take the form of academic discourse. Because they refer to violence and oppression, and in many ways resist closure, more often than not these histories are expressed in explicitly moralising or politicised tones of voice. Rather than as academic arguments, they are articulated as cultural or political *memories* that keep the violent or authoritarian past very much alive in the present – as controversy, moral warning or political activism. When histories of violence and dictatorship are discussed in history classes or during tours in historical museums, the chances are, moreover, that instead of leading to academic investigations, conversations will veer off course to become politically or morally charged discussions about the current meaning of these histories. At the same time, many teachers and museum educators might somehow feel that when they teach histories of violence or dictatorship, something more is at stake than a mere objectifying, academic historical analysis. This experience is often expressed in terms of a "need to draw lessons" from the violent past.

Among academic historians the idea of learning *from* history – or, for that matter, of drawing lessons from history – is often met with unease, suspicion and even resistance. Instrumentalising history for present-day purposes (in the service of the nation or normative ideals such as democracy, peace or human rights), it is argued, will lead to anachronist or presentist, politically manipulated, and homogenised narratives – or even myths. These products of instrumentalised history are deemed to be antithetical to historical thinking. Even when well intended – for example, when the teaching of violent history is framed in terms of combating antisemitism or racism – efforts towards learning from history are often encountered with unease or scepticism by academic historians.[2]

Nonetheless, the question of learning from violent histories is not easily sidelined, nor should it be. Although efforts in this direction raise all kinds of thorny issues, the moral and political significance that histories of violence and dictatorship hold for a great number of people in today's societies warrants a closer look at the idea. One can moreover assume that when they learn about these histories, many young people will, as one scholar has phrased it concerning Holocaust education, inevitably and naturally "be disturbed into reflection of a deep and personal kind".[3] Other young people might, on the other hand, react to histories of violence and dictatorship in exclusionist, hateful or authoritarian ways. Educators should be prepared for these reactions and be able to react to them in a competent way.

Inspired by insights from conflict studies and social psychology, a growing body of literature in educational sciences and peace education has addressed exactly this issue: how can educators best engage with the moral and political significance of histories of violence and dictatorship? In the literature, however, the question of how to learn from histories of violence and conflict is predominantly addressed in terms of didactics and learning methods. This edited volume takes a different tack. It does not focus on how teachers and educators can develop effective learning strategies or didactic materials to inspire young people to learn from histories of violence. It turns its attention instead to the dynamics of meaning-making and learning on the part of young people themselves.

This volume seeks answers to a number of empirical questions. How do young people engage with and give meaning to histories of dictatorship? How do they learn not only *about* but also *from* these histories – on their own terms and in their own voice? Do they negotiate these histories in the discursive register of academic history or that of political memory (or "mythology"[4])? Are histories of violence and dictatorship navigated in conflictual or in "multidirectional" ways?[5] And, importantly in light of the objectives of the broader Changing Democracies project (see the following section), does learning about histories of dictatorship lead young people to reflect on democracy and peace – and, if so, how and in what ways?

The chapters in this volume also analyse young people's meaning-making and learning against the backdrop of a number of theoretical conceptions and normative assumptions. First, they look at young people's discourses in terms of conceptual distinctions such as that between antagonistic, cosmopolitan and agonistic modes of remembering the violent past. Second, the chapters read young people's discourses in light of the normative stake of the overall project. The stated aim of Changing Democracies, as a public project, is not only to explore testimonies about life under a dictatorship and the experience of the transition to democracy but also, in a more normative vein, to engage people in and inspire them to critically reflect on present-day democracy. In line with the latter objective, in the research part of the Changing Democracies project, the aim was to investigate under which circumstances young people can be engaged – in open, constructive and historically adequate ways –

to critically reflect on topics related to dictatorship and democracy, and possibly also to enhance their democratic and peace-oriented attitudes and competencies. In line with insights from critical strands in both peace education and democratic education, this approach specifically seeks to explore how educators can create spaces where young people can think as freely as possible about democracy and peace, on their own terms and in their own voice.
The following sections elaborate on the theoretical and normative underpinnings of this approach.

2. Changing Democracies

To explore these questions and better understand how young people react to and give meaning to histories of dictatorship in educational practice, the authors of this volume studied educational projects in the context of the Changing Democracies project. The aim of this transnational, trans-European and intergenerational project – coordinated by the Evens Foundation and EuroClio, the European Association of History Educators, and funded by the European Commission – is to engage young people and citizens in ten EU member states in critical reflections and conversations about democracy. What does democracy mean to different people? What is our role as citizens in fostering our democracy? And, importantly, what is life like without democracy? The last question hints at the underlying basis of the project. Across ten European countries, testimonies were collected from ordinary citizens who had experienced dictatorship and a transition to democracy. Thus, the Changing Democracies project aims to explore how Europeans' living history might help us understand the current crisis of democracy. The overall aim is to link oral histories about communist and fascist dictatorship to critical conversations about democracy and citizenship today. More specific aims are to increase historical awareness of Europe's histories of authoritarianism and transition to democracy, promote multiperspectivity, and create transnational and intergenerational spaces in which to investigate European history.[6]

Gathered by local partners in communities across Europe, the oral testimonies are integrated into various outputs, including an interactive website, an educational resource pack and a travelling exhibition. In all partner countries, moreover, local projects were developed with young people – pupils in secondary education, students in teacher training and students in art schools. In six countries these local projects were analysed by teams of researchers linked to the Changing Democracies project. In four of the six researched countries (the Czech Republic, Poland, Spain and Portugal), the educational projects presented histories of fascist or communist dictatorship and transition to democracy that are mostly national in orientation (although because of the interaction with the other testimonials in the exhibition, the website and the educational resource pack, they will also be framed in a transnational, European context). In the Netherlands and Flanders/Belgium, the project recorded stories of immigrants who migrated from countries under a dictatorship, such as Cuba and Syria, to cities in the Low Countries. By looking at three contexts (fascist dictatorships, communist regimes and immigration from authoritarian countries), the Changing Democracies project purposefully explores the history of dictatorship in Europe in a complex, multiperspectival way. As such, the project also aims to contribute to building a polyvocal and shared space for European histories and memories.

The primary ambition of the case studies in this volume is to empirically study how young people give meaning to histories of dictatorship and how they learn from these histories in their own voice. As mentioned above, the project also has a normative goal: the aim is to investigate under which circumstances young people can be engaged – in an open, constructive and historically adequate way – to critically reflect on topics related to dictatorship and democracy, and possibly also enhance

their democratic and peace-oriented attitudes and competencies. It is important to note in this respect that when young people are confronted with histories of violence and dictatorship, there is always the possibility that some of them will react with indifference or cynicism, while others might draw exclusionist, violence-oriented or anti-democratic lessons from these histories. From the perspective of democratic citizenship and peace education, teachers and educators are presented with a problem when this happens. Like many scholars – historians included – the Changing Democracies project ideally wishes young people to take away non-violent and pro-democratic insights from these histories.

Another important premise of this research project is that learning from history is also problematic when it puts pressure on or diverges from the prerequisites of academic, disciplinary history teaching. Learning from history, in other words, is problematic when it results in one-sided, moralising narratives that frame history in the black-and-white terms of good versus evil. Because, as Duncan Bell has argued, "critical historians are – or at least should be – self-reflexive, aware of the partiality, weak foundations, and fallibility of their enterprise, as opposed to the intrinsic simplicity and univocality of mythology", they should employ modes of historical sensibility that stress "the contingency, opacity, and plurality of the past".[7] In line with this insight, the premise of the Changing Democracies project is that learning from history should always start from and be based on the foundations of sound academic history teaching. No learning from history without learning about history.

3. Learning from history?

Before taking a closer look at the methodological and theoretical approaches that inspire the case studies in this volume, it is useful to flesh out this last point. How exactly are learning about and learning from history linked? And why are so many historians sceptical about this way of thinking about history?

3.1 Critiques and scepticism

A first point to note is that a sizeable chunk of the research on teaching histories of violence (certainly in terms of the number of studies) focuses on history education in post-conflict societies. A key observation in this literature is that history teaching is often used to reproduce essentialised us-versus-them narratives. Young people learn *from* the violent past in the sense that they are taught or encouraged to internalise exclusionary, stereotypical or revanchist perceptions of the violent past and "the enemy". Arguably, this enmity-reproducing form of "learning from history" is ubiquitous in many societies dealing with a history of intergroup violence.[8] As Charis Psaltis and colleagues argue, "representations of the past and history teaching are still weaponized for [...] collective struggles" such as "nationalism, separatism, sectarianism, terrorism and radical fundamentalism and proxy wars resulting in a vast number of casualties, refugees and internally displaced people".[9]

The scholarly critique of the idea that we can learn from history, however, is broader than the denunciation of the weaponisation of history education in post-conflict contexts. There is a long history of instrumentalisation and abuse of history by politicians, political parties and states, about which historians over the years have been very critical.[10] As Arthur Chapman observes, the idea that we can learn from history has a long pedigree. The unavoidable reference here is Cicero's *historia magistra vitae* (the idea that history is the teacher of life). Chapman not only sees news media and politicians using and abusing the past through offering lessons (often based on unwarranted historical analogies) or complaints that "the lessons of history have not been learned". He also points at "popular

histories" that are frequently structured around lists of "lessons" (he mentions historians such as Yuval Noah Harari and Timothy Snyder).[11] Sceptical historians have pointed at a number of problems linked with such lesson-based approaches to history. Not only, as shown above, can instrumentalisations of history result in ahistorical, one-sided narratives, but also lesson-oriented teaching often draws on outdated bodies of research or downplays "inconvenient" aspects of more up-to-date scholarship.[12] This can result in distorted, presentist views of history, or in overly vague and broad moralising lessons.

To a significant degree, historians' unease with the idea of linking history teaching to a normative goal is also rooted in scepticism about memory policies, which, in times of what scholars have called a "memory boom", have become widely popular with politicians and governments as well as with historical museums and organisations in the heritage industry. In their 2020 book *Beyond Memory: Can We Really Learn From the Past?*, Sarah Gensburger and Sandrine Lefranc critically assess the core idea of many of these policies: "that knowing the tragedies of the past means being able to build peaceful and tolerant societies in the present – and prevent the return of hatred and violence". The authors point out that despite their widespread popularity since the 1990s, these memory policies have not been associated with the development of more tolerant or peaceful societies in Europe – and thus have not been effective.[13]

The critical stance of many scholars with regard to memory policies and the idea of drawing lessons from the past needs to be taken seriously, as it highlights real risks and pitfalls involved in any attempt to learn from history. This does not necessarily imply, however, that all efforts to engage with the moral and political significance of histories of dictatorship and authoritarianism are impossible. Indeed, in the literature can be found not only scepticism regarding the idea of learning from history but also a number of approaches that explore how history education can effectively be linked with peace and democratic citizenship education in open, constructive *and* historically adequate ways.[14]

3.2 Opportunities and possibilities

Before looking at these approaches in more detail, it is useful to highlight the complexity of moving from "learning about" to "learning from" history. As Chapman argues, "Learning 'from X' denotes that one draws conclusions from the study of 'X' for some other topic that one learns about, and learning the lessons 'of X' personifies it, such that it teaches one something of a wider applicability." In other words, this is a secondary kind of learning (or meta-learning) in which young people learn about the meaning of the history they have learned about for things beyond that history. Importantly, according to Chapman, this implies that young people cannot learn *from* if they have not already learned *about* history. The "learning from" involves a transfer of knowledge and understanding from one topic (a particular history of violence) to another (e.g. how to act in the present and future). These processes, Chapman concludes, are complex, multifaceted and "open for debate".[15] Or, as this introduction phrased it above, no learning from history without learning about history.

That being said, post-conflict societies are an important context in which scholars have explored how meaningful links can be established between history education and peace education. In these societies, direct violence has ceased but peace (in its more "positive" dimensions) is still under construction. The scholarly approach here is often interdisciplinary; scholars come not only from the historical sciences but also from social psychology, political science and conflict studies. One of the core ideas in this literature is that combining history teaching with a social-psychological perspective offers possibilities for working on the reduction of prejudice, the transformation of stereotypes and us-versus-them-thinking

and even reconciliation.[16] The underlying theoretical assumption is that social-psychological insights about the construction of social identities and intergroup relations can be fruitfully combined with critical understandings of conflict in the past through the cultivation of historical thinking and empathy and the promotion of multiperspectivity.[17] Starting from polyphonic readings of history, this approach posits that educators can constructively work with young people to enhance intergroup contact, empathy, positive forms of social group identification, processes of humanisation and the cultivation of trust. In other words, history teaching based on these social-psychological pillars can help young people and groups to overcome ethnocentric narratives and the reproduction of hostile us-versus-them thinking, and become more inclusive, open-minded and accepting of the "other".[18] Furthermore, because this approach is inspired by insights from social identity theory, it helps educators to understand why young people might react with resistance when they are presented with perspectives and representations of the past that may threaten in-group-based identities built on certain perceptions of the violent past.[19] Combining insights from academic history, social psychology and conflict studies, this kind of history teaching thus can be framed as a transformative and peace-oriented endeavour that, at the same time, stays the course with regard to the demands of academic, disciplinary history education.

Scholars have also explored approaches that link history education to peace and democratic citizenship education in more peaceful contexts. The idea here is that engaging with violent histories or controversial historical topics can enhance young people's democratic and peace-oriented attitudes, such as their critical thinking, pluralism, critical sensitivity to violence and ability to engage in complex moral judgement.[20] In the *Handbook on Peace Education*, Alan McCully argues along these lines when he claims that history education can contribute to peacebuilding in four key areas: "First, it provides students with a foundation in critical analysis; second, it encourages them to recognize that the interpretation of the evidence of the past is a discursive and constructivist process in which alternative versions vie for recognition (multiperspectivity); third, it fosters empathetic understanding, or caring; and, fourth, it promotes democratic values."[21]

McCully's work is based on research in the context of the conflict in Northern Ireland, but his argument is equally interesting for more peaceful contexts. Some authors have also linked global history teaching to global citizenship education. Girard and Harris, for example, argue that global and world history courses in particular are effective in offering spaces for young people to focus on topics such as global interconnections, multiple perspectives and aspects of global citizenship. They add, moreover, that in these spaces the disciplinary methods of world history dovetail with the goals of global education.[22] This is an interesting observation. Note that these approaches explicitly base learning *from* history on learning *about* history. In other words, to promote and foster young people's peace-oriented and democratic attitudes, it is necessary to build on sound disciplinary history teaching. Thus, it could be argued that the attitudes of a "good" critical historian converge in interesting ways with democratic, peace-oriented attitudes. Perhaps, then, in the sense that disciplinary, academic history teaching aims to develop and enhance skills and attitudes such as critical thinking, multiperspectivity and the ability to engage in complex moral judgements, disciplinary history education in itself can be framed as a good basis for moving from learning about history to learning for democracy and peace.[23]

A third way some historians and educators have engaged with the idea of learning from history is by drawing "substantive" lessons or guiding ideas from history that can be used as rationales for action in the present. Scholars distinguish between different kinds of lessons that people seem to draw from history, such as deontological and ontological lessons (the former about how to act morally and the

latter about the nature of human and social reality).[24] As mentioned above, many academic historians are quite sceptical about this kind of exercise, but others have argued that it is possible to work with young people on lessons such as "the appreciation of the nature and significance of stereotyping and scapegoating; appreciation of the importance of legislation to outlaw incitement to religious or racial hatred; and appreciation of the importance of banning of overtly racist organizations".[25]

A well-known example of a historian drawing lessons from the violent and totalitarian 20th century is Timothy Snyder. In 2016 Snyder gave his book *Black Earth* the telling subtitle *The Holocaust as History and Warning*. He further developed this normative take on history in his 2017 essay *On Tyranny*. Based on his extensive research into genocidal political regimes, Snyder formulated 20 lessons, ranging from ones focused on citizens' rights and responsibilities (such as do not obey in advance, defend institutions, beware the one-party state and take responsibility for the face of the world) to ones offering inspiration for thought and action (such as be kind to our language, make eye contact and small talk, listen for dangerous words and be a patriot). In *On Tyranny*, Snyder bases each lesson on a short explanation of the underlying historical insights. Although the essay presents the lessons first and the historical explanations second, it is clear that Snyder's learning *from* history is based on extensive and deep learning *about* history.[26] The question is, of course, whether this careful balance between learning about and from history will be respected in all cases when educators turn to Snyder's book in their classroom practice.

3.3 Researching how young people give meaning to histories of violence and dictatorship

There is clearly a substantial body of literature that links history teaching with peace and citizenship education. A significant part of this research is focused on history education in post-conflict contexts. With regard to learning from history in more peaceful societies, there is also a substantial literature on Holocaust education, as well as on teaching controversial historical topics. Many of these studies zoom in on theoretical and didactic aspects (how, when, which target audiences and so on). There are also a number of quantitative and qualitative studies on how educators and young people experience teaching and learning about controversial historical topics. There is less research, however, on how young people give meaning to histories of violence and dictatorship, and how they themselves engage in learning from these histories. In other words, what is needed is more systematic research on how young people receive, process and give meaning to histories of violence and dictatorship.[27]

This is the kind of research the authors of this volume took up in the context of the Changing Democracies project. Building on a collection of testimonies from people who had experienced transitions from dictatorship to democracy since the 1970s, the oral history projects with young people in six countries provided an excellent starting point for this research.

4. The possibilities and limitations of oral history in education

Over the past decades, oral history has become more popular in educational contexts. This popularity appears to be linked to a shifting emphasis away from history education as the memorisation of facts and towards young people's application of historical thinking and co-creation of knowledge. Furthermore, according to surveys, the concrete stories that oral history offers seem to appeal more to

young people's imagination than, for instance, websites about history, school textbooks or computer games.[28]

Like many oral historians, the partners in the Changing Democracies project share the assumption that oral history provides a promising method for young people to learn from histories of dictatorship, in the sense that engaging with the testimonies of people who experienced dictatorship and transitions to democracy has the potential to stimulate and enrich critical reflections and conversations about democracy.

Nonetheless, there are some limitations and pitfalls associated with this kind of learning. In 2017, Kristina Llewellyn and Nicholas Ng-A-Fook edited a volume in which a group of educational researchers and historians took a closer look at the possibilities and risks associated with using oral history for educational purposes.[29] The main potential of oral history education – the authors of this volume seem to discern – is that it provides "a pedagogical site for teachers and students to challenge grand narratives that are still reproduced through the disciplinary techniques for doing history"[30] and that it enables them to experience stories from alternative viewpoints and to engage in perspective-taking.[31] At the same time, if done well, oral history projects can help young people to connect micro- and macro-histories[32] and reinforce their historical thinking skills.[33] Importantly for the purposes of the Changing Democracies project, oral history educators also assert that oral history can open up spaces for young people "to confront the moral complexities of violent pasts".[34]

Llewellyn and Cook, who explicitly build on the social justice pedagogy of Paulo Freire, take a step further by investigating how oral history "can be enacted as a form of historical thinking that supports a peace pedagogy". Although the authors in this volume on the Changing Democracies project do not start out from a Freirean perspective, it is interesting for the project to see how Llewellyn and Cook note that oral history has the potential to encourage young people "to examine the meaning and deeper messages of violent historical events". Through oral histories, they are prompted (in the words of Roger Simon) to "take the world's complexities, ambivalences and paradoxes, ambiguities and dissonances into account" and are "encouraged to co-construct meaning through dialogue with community groups". To conclude, Llewellyn and Cook quote historian Theodore Schieder, who claimed that historical consciousness "refers not only to a knowledge of the past but implies the use of that knowledge to understand the future". Clearly, these are also ambitions of the Changing Democracies project.[35]

Admittedly, these are high ambitions. The chapters in this volume will look more closely at whether the local projects were able to achieve them. For now, it is useful to delve deeper into some of the risks and limitations associated with oral history education. A first one is practical but important. Oral history projects are time consuming. Finding space in the curriculum will not be easy for many teachers.[36] A second, more substantive problem arises when young people read testimonies as simply personal anecdotes[37] or place too much emphasis on the role of individuals. As Karel Van Nieuwenhuyse notes, oral history projects carry the risk that young people will approach agency in history as too individual a matter and not give sufficient attention to cultural, social and economic structures that limit and/or guide people.[38] Linked to this, there is the risk that young people may not be adequately critical with regard to treating the testimonies as historical evidence. Oral history is problematic when young people regard oral accounts as "authentic truth" or a collection of facts, and not as "a complex cultural practice that stands at the intersection of testimony and memory".[39] Oral history projects, in other words, should encourage young people to consider testimonies as historical evidence, using critical thinking.[40]

Furthermore, there are a number of pitfalls specifically associated with oral history about political conflict and violence. On the one hand, when projects only use testimonies from one group in the conflict, they risk reinforcing feelings of hate and enmity towards the other group.[41] On the other hand, scholars point out that oral history projects can have the effect of depoliticising history. This may happen when educators only mobilise stories they think are edifying and easy to identify with (e.g. by only referring to stories of heroes, such as members of a resistance movement) or "safe" (in the sense that they will not give occasion to discomfort or conflict). This kind of effort to obfuscate the unruly character of political history may produce forms of disengagement and depoliticisation on the part of students. Gensburger and Lefranc discern in these depoliticised forms of history education the characteristics of many contemporary memory policies: "the refusal of the Manichaean narratives, emphasis on individual experiences, and the importance of emotion".[42]

These are interesting observations for the Changing Democracies project. The project coordinators, however, explicitly aimed at integrating a political dimension, while also striving for multiperspectivity. They interviewed individuals from very different contexts – both post-fascist and post-communist, and people who had immigrated to Europe from authoritarian countries. The witnesses, moreover, were not only asked to recount their memories of living in a dictatorship and transitioning to a democratic regime but also invited to reflect on what it meant to them to live in a democracy (in light of their experience of dictatorship) and what messages they had to share with younger generations of citizens.

In this sense, the project was not simply aimed at "reconstructing" histories of dictatorship through memory. It was more concerned with what it *means* to people to live in a dictatorship and, based on these reflections, what it means to live in a pluralist democracy. *Meaning* and *meaning-making*, in other words, are central to this project.

In light of this focus, the project's research partners opted for research methodologies that are grounded, in one way or another, in hermeneutic and interpretive outlooks.[43] Specific details about methods will be presented in the individual chapters of this volume. In contrast, the following section takes a closer look at the centrality of *meaning* in this research project from a theoretical perspective. The general research question all authors of this volume set out to investigate concerned how young people gave meaning to the histories of dictatorship and transitions to democracy they were confronted with in the local projects. How did they react to and process the testimonies they were asked to listen to? How did they learn from these histories?

5. The meaning of history and memory

The literature offers a number of theoretical and conceptual perspectives that help to make sense of how young people might give meaning to histories of political violence and dictatorship. The following sub-sections first discuss some insights from the educational sciences about the dynamics of learning from history in school contexts. Next they take a closer look at some conceptual distinctions established in memory studies. The key takeaway from both perspectives is that young people interpret historical content presented by educators in complex and differentiated ways, filtered by processes such as learning dynamics, particular classroom situations, family and socio-cultural backgrounds, and societal context. Young people's learning about and from history, in other words, is not univocal.

5.1 Learning dynamics in the classroom

A first important point is that learning about and from violent histories always involves an interactive dynamic between educators and young people. This dynamic takes shape through mutually influencing processes of presentation, reception and negotiation of histories. In other words, young people's learning is always dependent on and influenced by how teachers and museum educators present histories. When it comes to how young people receive, negotiate and learn from history, it makes a difference not only how history is presented (e.g. testimonies, handbooks, visits to a museum or a remembrance site, or arts-based methods) but also how stories about the past are conveyed (as academic history; as individual memories, such as testimonials; or as cultural or political memory).

Secondly, learning dynamics are influenced by situational factors of a very practical and sometimes even banal nature. A classroom where young people have just had a fierce row might react differently to history lessons than a classroom that just finished a collaborative project. One pupil who resists or rebels might change the interactional dynamics between pupils and teacher. Moreover, as Gensburger and Lefranc note, young people's rejection or appropriation of historical content cannot always be taken at face value. Some pupils and students may seem indifferent when they are actually processing content in their own way. Conversely, others may seem receptive to the presented lessons while at a deeper level remaining sceptical or even feeling dismissive of the messages a teacher wants to convey. At the same time, while the subject may require intense levels of concentration to process, some pupils' and students' attention may be drawn to other things or weakened by fatigue or other concerns.[44]
Finally, pupils and students do not come to history classes as empty canvasses on which teachers can project any meaning or message. Educational content is always interpreted and processed through filters such as the sets of attitudes and values constituted by young people's family and peer groups, as well as young people's multiple social positions and their cultural, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. In that sense, how young people navigate the historical content they are presented with is always subject to processes of reformulation and distortion.[45]

5.2 Making meaning of history and memory

To make sense of how oral histories are presented by educators and subsequently received and negotiated by pupils and students, the research team of the Changing Democracies project turned to insights and conceptual distinctions from memory studies. A number of these distinctions are useful in understanding the variety of ways in which narratives about the past circulate, both in public and in educational spheres, and how young people navigate these narratives. A classic distinction is between (scientifically informed) historical knowledge and memory. The former ("historical knowledge") is produced and reproduced in academic institutions and – ideally – also in historical museums and schools (although it might be the case that school curricula and museum exhibitions are often part of social memory rather than scientifically informed historical knowledge). The latter ("memory") is a broad term that encompasses a wide range of psychological and social phenomena.

It is relevant to point out that memory, in the sense of remembering events in the past, is a cognitive property of individual humans.[46] Nonetheless, individual memory and personal memories inevitably have a *social* character. As Maurice Halbwachs, one of the founding scholars of memory studies, argued almost a century ago, individual memories are always anchored in social "frames" – collectively shared frames of interpretation that are characteristic of a specific socio-cultural and temporal context. In other words, although remembering takes place in the minds of individuals, memories are

always social because people are social beings; they share not only language but also socially and culturally determined beliefs, identities and symbols.[47] Halbwachs' conception of memory as a social phenomenon is still relevant, including for this project, as it points to the importance of the memory culture in which individual memories are situated. It is crucial to take this culture into account if we want to grasp the meaning of witnesses' testimonies.

Building on these insights, a second distinction that is relevant to this research was made by Jan Assmann. Assmann distinguishes between individual, communicative and cultural forms of memory.[48] *Individual memories* are personal recollections of past events. Importantly for this research, these memories are inevitably distorted experiences. There is no unmediated relationship between the remembering of an event in the present and the remembered event itself, which is in the past. Memories, on the one hand, are – following Halbwachs – always mediated by socially shared frames of reference and interpretation, while, on the other hand, they change over time. Whenever someone remembers something, the memory itself evolves and possibly "overwrites" older variants of the memory (as it is informed by current experiences). Again, this is a crucial observation if we want to understand witnesses' testimonies using critical thinking. The second form of memory distinguished by Assmann, *communicative memory*, is produced when individuals share their memories and transmit them through direct communication with other people – for example, members of their family or social groups they belong to. An important characteristic of communicative memory, according to Assmann, is that it inevitably fades after three generations, at which point first-hand transmission from personal experience ceases. This does not mean that in a society the memory of certain events disappears. The memory does, however, take on a different form: that of *cultural memory*. While communicative memory is tied to individuals and close social groups, cultural memory is institutionalised. It is external to individuals, linked to objects, and transmitted in cultural media such as monuments, texts, rituals, films, libraries and websites. Thus, it potentially has a much longer lifespan than the three generations of communicative memory. Cultural memory thus constitutes a collectively shared "knowledge" of particular pasts upon which cultures and societies build their social identities. Importantly, Assmann notes that this process is selective and also implies forgetting. This is why he calls this form of historical consciousness "memory", and not "knowledge" of the past.

Building on Assmann's work, scholars have also pointed to another category, that of *political memory*. This form of memory can be created "from below" (by individuals and groups) as well as constructed or legitimised "from above" (by the state or by political elites). In the case of the latter – memory orchestrated from above – memory can become instrumentalised and institutionalised in the service of state or identity politics.[49]

In relation to theorising how learning from the histories of dictatorship might take shape in the context of Changing Democracies, these distinctions are interesting because they generate a number of research questions and hypotheses. For example, in what mode or discourse do teachers and museum educators present histories of dictatorship – that of critical (scientifically informed) history or that of individual (e.g. via testimonials), cultural or political memory? And how do pupils and students react to these histories – in the discursive register of academic-critical history or rather in the register of cultural or political memory (modes they might be familiar with through media representations or narratives in their family or cultural context)? In the context of the Changing Democracies project, which builds on testimonies by individuals, these are pertinent questions. Testimonies, as a form of individual memory, are (as noted above) shaped by the idiosyncrasies of the human function of memory as well as by the

cultural context in which they happen. Thus they are necessarily selective (and possibly political). An important question in oral history projects is therefore whether pupils and students are aware (or made aware) that the testimonies they are asked to listen to are a specific type of historical evidence that is best engaged with in a critical manner, or whether they receive them as memories holding the "real truth" about the past.

These are questions that need to be investigated empirically. It can nonetheless be hypothesised that if young people engage with violent histories in the mode of critical history, the chances are greater that their learning from these histories will draw from and be built on complex and polyvocal readings of the past. In contrast, when young people navigate these histories in the mode of cultural or political memory, there is a distinct possibility that mythologising elements will be infused into their learning processes (e.g. by using monolithic and selective narratives about the past).

5.3 Modes of remembering

Besides outlining distinctions between different forms of memory (individual, communicative, cultural and political), the literature also offers clues to help us better understand variations in the specific content and discursive strategies of memories and ways of remembering.

The first conceptual framework relevant to this research is Michael Rothberg's work on multidirectional memory. In his writing on how different histories and memories can confront and/or engage with each other in the public sphere, Rothberg maps how memories of the Holocaust and colonial violence have resulted both in *competitive* narratives of victimhood and in *multidirectional* explorations of historical parallels, transmissions and mutually reinforcing sensitivities to violence. While the former (a competitive mode of remembering violent histories) pits one memory against another, the latter (a multidirectional mode) seeks to establish dynamic links and bonds of solidarity between different "communities of suffering". By contrasting these two modes, Rothberg explains how memories can interact in unexpected ways.[50]

A second useful conceptual distinction, elaborated in detail by Anna Cento Bull and Hans Lauge Hansen, is that between *antagonistic*, *cosmopolitan* and *agonistic* modes of remembering.[51] Antagonistic modes of remembering rely on celebratory, glorifying or nostalgic narratives, framing violent histories in terms of a struggle between good and evil protagonists. Cosmopolitan modes of remembering emphasise victimhood and the human suffering of past atrocities and human rights violations, representing "good" and "evil" not in terms of a battle between characters but in more abstract and dehistoricised terms (e.g. as a battle between dictatorship and democracy). Bull and Hansen take issue with some of the main characteristics of both modes of remembering. Both are overly moralising, they claim, framing history in terms of "good" versus "evil". Additionally, both the antagonistic mode, which reproduces violence, and the cosmopolitan mode, which is too consensual because it paints over tensions within and between (democratic) memories of the violent past, are unable to understand complex histories of perpetratorship. Drawing on the work of Chantal Mouffe, they therefore explore a third, agonistic mode of remembering. With the term "agonism", Mouffe refers to the conflictual nature of democratic politics and the relationship between adversaries who share democracy as a symbolic sphere where they struggle – with respect for democratic rules – for hegemony. Agonistic politics moreover recognises emotions, passions and collective identities as elements integral to democratic politics and confrontation.[52]

Building on these insights, and moving narratives about the past beyond reductionist morality tales, Bull and Hansen conceptualise a third, agonistic mode of remembering. This approach "recognizes conflict as an ontological and fundamental characteristic of human society". At the same time, an agonistic mode of remembering "tries to deconstruct the moral pitting of the other as an enemy on moral grounds" through the social and political contextualisation of the historical conflict. Thus it becomes possible, for example, to understand (but not legitimise or condone) perpetratorship (or, as might be relevant to the Changing Democracies project, collaboration in dictatorial regimes). An agonistic mode of remembering thus is "highly conscious of its own responsibility as a social discourse in the construction not only of the identity of the 'we' position, but also of that of the 'adversary'". Important in Bull and Hansen's approach, moreover, is that agonism works "to oppose or unsettle hegemonic ways of understanding", while it also reveals "the socio-political struggles characterizing the public sphere both in the past and in the present".[53]

Distinguishing between different modes of historical discourse opens up interesting avenues for research about the varied ways in which young people learn from history in educational settings. For Bull and Hansen, for example, it seems to be clear that public history has a normative goal. They claim, for example, that "learning from the past also means changing the present in order to ensure that the conditions and processes which may lead to mass crimes are not repeated in the present".[54] To encourage this kind of learning, Bull and Hansen prefer agonistic modes of cultural remembering, as these are best suited to opening up pedagogical spaces to learn about polyvocal and conflictual histories of dictatorship and transitions to democracy. Interestingly, this approach resonates well with critical approaches to peace education as well as with agonistic pedagogies as developed, for example, by Claudia Ruitenberg.[55] Common to these approaches is that they aim to provide pedagogical spaces where young people can voice their – possibly dissenting – opinions, and question or contest power relations and structures in society.

There are, however, two important caveats regarding the use of agonism as an analytical lens in the studies in this volume. These caveats are specifically linked to the fact that Changing Democracies focuses on projects in pedagogical and educational settings.

First, key in Bull and Hansen's definition of an agonistic mode of remembering is that it not only reveals "the socio-political struggles characterizing the public sphere both in the past and in the present" but also opposes or unsettles "hegemonic ways of understanding".[56] In short, building on Mouffe, power is central to this approach. This reading of agonism is productive, including in pedagogical settings, but it also has consequences requiring reflection. A strong focus on power determines not only how and when, in the context of educational projects, interventions by teachers and young people are interpreted and categorised as agonistic or not, but also what is expected from educational professionals when they teach violent histories. Presentations by teachers and reactions by young people might only be seen as agonistic if and when the teachers and young people criticise or oppose the discourses and practices of (in Mouffe's terms) deliberative-liberal or neoliberal hegemonic power. In the context of pedagogical and educational settings, however, it might be useful to further clarify what counts as agonistic interventions. This links up with the different approaches to agonism in the literature.[57]
On a first level, discourse by teachers and young people might be interpreted as taking the first step in an agonistic direction when it shows an awareness not only of the importance of multiperspectivity but also of the inevitability of conflict when people and groups – and, for that matter, historians – remember or interpret the past. The focus at this first level is thus mainly on recognising the conflictual

ways in which different people and groups give meaning to the violent past, as well as to what this past means to them in the present. Although they are not demonstrating agonism in a more radical sense, teachers and young people take an important step when they accept that history is inevitably complex, multiperspectival and conflictual, and when they avoid the one-sided moralising overtones of antagonistic and cosmopolitan modes of remembering. A focus on conflict, in short, is the core of what might be called *first-level agonism* in the classroom.

On a second level, interventions in the classroom can more emphatically be seen as agonistic when they explicitly address the issue of power. This *second-level (or deep) agonism* happens when pupils and students recognise the power dynamics at play in memories of the past, and when they critically question, unsettle or contest ahistorical hegemonic discourses of the past. Teachers, in their turn, can be seen as working in an agonistic manner when they create educational spaces that allow pupils and students to make interventions that question or oppose existing or hegemonic ideas and practices, or engage the teacher or other young people in conflictual (but not hostile) interactions and discussions. It is important to note that this approach does not imply that teachers must make counter-hegemonic moves or interventions themselves. In more radical or activist pedagogies, it is deemed desirable for teachers to encourage pupils and students to contest power. In the view of this project's researchers, however, this entails the risk that the pupils and students might not perceive the classroom as sufficiently open to express their own views, in their own voice, or to dissent and formulate critiques on their own terms. It might also put pressure on the teacher's position of impartiality – a stance they might need on other occasions. In this way, creating sufficient openness in the classroom to support agonism entails careful and difficult balancing acts on the part of teachers and educators.

The second important caveat regarding the use of agonism as an analytical lens in the studies in this volume is that Bull and Hansen do not discredit all aspects of a cosmopolitan mode of remembering.[58] Agonistic theory is in essence a *democratic* theory. In this sense, democracy – explicitly or implicitly – is always pitted against tyranny and dictatorship. What agonistic theories aim to avoid, however, are one-dimensional and uncritical narratives about democracy, where space for critique, conflict and dissensus disappears. This sphere of overlap between cosmopolitan and agonistic modes of historical discourse is interesting for the Changing Democracies project. For example, what happens when pupils and students frame dictatorship as the "enemy" of democracy? This idea is a central feature of the cosmopolitan mode of historical discourse. From the normative perspective of peace or democratic citizenship education, this would be a favourable outcome. From an agonistic (as well as from an academic historical) perspective, however, this position might be problematic if young people fall prey to easy and overly moralising discourses of good (democracy) versus evil (dictatorship), so that all complexities, tensions and ambivalences of history disappear. As long as young people frame their perceptions of histories of dictatorship and democracy in sufficiently complex and polyvocal ways, on the other hand, it does not seem to be problematic if they incorporate elements of cosmopolitan and agonistic discourses. At the same time, setting up the classroom as an agonistic space makes it possible for young people to formulate critiques of today's liberal democracy.

To conclude, these distinctions between different modes of remembering (competitive/multidirectional and antagonistic/cosmopolitan/agonistic) are interesting means of sharpening the focus of this research and theorising how young people might react and give meaning to global histories of violence. They also allow further research questions to be proposed. First, what are the effects when educators present histories in different modes of remembering? Second, in what mode do young people

navigate these histories? In terms of the black-and-white discourses of antagonistic discourse or of the moralising good-versus-evil perspective of cosmopolitan discourse (pitting dictatorship against democracy, uncritically glorifying the latter)? Or do they engage with the complexities and polyvocality of history through multidirectional or agonistic discourses? Finally, how can educators engage with young people who react to violent histories in oppositional or competitive ways – for example, when young people visiting a Holocaust museum raise the question of the conflict between Israel and Palestinians to contest some of the messages conveyed by the museum?

6. Outline of the report

This report presents the research findings from educational projects under the Changing Democracies umbrella in six countries: the Czech Republic, Poland, Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands and Flanders/Belgium. The authors carried out exploratory research using various didactic formats, including traditional classroom conversations, work on digital platforms, and arts-based practices such as drawing and theatre. This variety is also reflected in how the various chapters are structured and written. While some take the form of traditional research reports, others are more reflective. Given the exploratory and qualitative nature of the research, the findings reported in the six case studies are to be interpreted as illustrations of how oral histories about dictatorship can stimulate critical thinking in young people in particular local contexts. They are not representative or easily generalisable.

Besides their roles as researchers, most of the authors were involved in the development and implementation of the educational projects. This required self-reflection. Positionality and reflexivity were therefore important topics in the collective discussions during the research process. The authors reflect on their positionality in the various chapters. The authors were also aware of another dimension of their positionality: as discussed above, although our research questions were mainly empirical, we also examined more normative aspects.

This volume begins with two case studies respectively from Central and Eastern Europe. Vaclav Sixta and Bohumil Melichar report on history lessons that used the online tool HistoryLab.cz, an application designed to work with historical sources in history education. Sixta and Melichar focus on how pupils from the Czech Republic perceive the events of 1989 and the transformation that followed. In particular, they study whether pupils see this topic as one where there are conflicting views and, more specifically, whether they themselves experience the topic as conflictual. In the next chapter, Weronika Czyżewska-Poncyljusz and Katharina Kurz look into the possibilities of using oral testimonies in non-formal history education. They reflect on educational theory in light of empirical findings from the Sejny Lektorium, a long-term community-based project that is part of the cultural and educational activities of Pogranicze (the Borderland Foundation) in Krasnogruda and Sejny, which is situated on the Polish–Lithuanian border. The Sejny Lektorium programme is founded on experiential and place-based activities (including discussion-based workshops, study visits and artistic activities) in which a small group of local young people meet frequently over the course of a year to learn about the multivocal and multidirectional present of their home through engagements with diverse past experiences and memories of local witnesses.

The next two chapters zoom in on local educational projects in Southern Europe. Cécile Barbeito presents the findings of her research in Barcelona. The project she developed involved working with young art students. After listening to testimonies of people who lived through Francoism (1939–1975)

and the transition to democracy (1975–1981), the students were invited to reflect on the current state of democracy in Spain and asked to capture their reflections in a sketchbook. Based on the results of this project, Barbeito offers an interesting look at some of the obstacles educators might experience in their ambitions to link oral history to democratic education. In the Portuguese context, Rita Reis and Samuel Guimarães reflect on the work they carried out in Porto. In April 2024, which marked the 50th anniversary of the introduction of Portuguese democracy on 25 April 1974 (known as the Carnation Revolution), they worked intensively with eight of their theatre students on the Portuguese testimonies of the Changing Democracies project. In their chapter, Reis and Guimarães reflect on how the students created performative interventions in their immediate surroundings (the art school) on the basis of the testimonies, thus creatively interpreting democratic values today.

The last two case studies reflect on a third context. In the Netherlands and Flanders/Belgium, the local history of dictatorship dates from a period (the Nazi occupation during the Second World War) much longer ago than the periods of dictatorship in Central and Southern Europe. Much oral history has already been conducted about this period. The partners in the Changing Democracies project therefore opted to take a different road and ask newcomers to the Netherlands and Flanders/Belgium how they had experienced the political situation in their countries of departure (often an authoritarian regime) and their migration to a democratic society. Testimonials were recorded from people from countries such as Cuba, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Iran. In her chapter on the Netherlands, Eugenie Khatschatrian reports on educational projects with students (history teachers-in-training) and primary school pupils in the cities of Arnhem and Nijmegen. The students developed educational materials and the pupils created artworks to link oral history testimonials to reflections on present-day democracy. In Flanders/Belgium, Sofie De Leeuw and Maarten Van Alstein studied educational projects in two secondary schools and a teacher-training college in the superdiverse port city of Antwerp. Based on testimonies from newcomers from Cuba, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Syria, the participants engaged in written assignments and dialogue, and developed educational materials.

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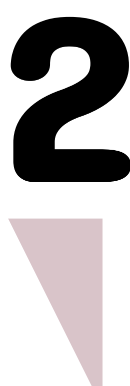


Czech pupils' attitudes towards the collective memory of socialism

"My friends and I don't talk about it much – we don't find it interesting"

Chapter ID

Authors: Vaclav Sixta and Boumil Melichar (Faculty of Arts, Charles University)
Summary: This chapter focuses on the young generation – specifically, how pupils from the Czech Republic perceive the events of 1989 and the transformation that followed. In particular, it focuses on whether pupils think of this topic as one where there are conflicting views. It attempts a qualitative study linking research on three areas: memory, pupils' historical thinking and historical education. The goal is to provide not only a better understanding of what pupils think about the transition to democracy and capitalism in the Czech Republic, but also recommendations on how to teach this topic.

1. Introduction

A TV reporter, microphone in hand, asks Czech students and recent high school graduates what the Velvet Revolution was, whether they would like to live under socialism and what changed in 1989. The bemused young people try to answer the questions, many of them expressing uncertainty, some of them having a better idea of the facts than others. In the final segment of the piece, the reporter presents an alarming account of young people's lack of interest in history, the disastrous state of history teaching and the general decline of education. An academic lends their authority to these conclusions, despite the fact that they have no expertise in the subject. This ritual is repeated each year in the Czech mass media (especially on television) in the week around the anniversary of the beginning of so-called Velvet Revolution in November 1989.[1]

This chapter focuses on the young generation – specifically, how pupils from the Czech Republic perceive the events of 1989 and the transformation that followed. In particular, it focuses on whether pupils think of this topic as one where there are conflicting views. Unlike television reporters, this chapter does not have preconceived "right" answers to the questions it poses. It attempts a qualitative study linking research on three areas: memory studies, pupils' historical thinking and historical education. The goal is to provide not only a better understanding of what pupils think about the transition to democracy and capitalism in the Czech Republic, but also recommendations on how to teach this topic.

This research touches upon several fundamental frameworks. The first is research in the field of memory studies, as this chapter goes beyond the national level of thinking about people's relationship with socialist regimes and transitions. The second is public opinion research and sociological research in general, focusing on the relationship between the people of the Czech Republic and their own past, and specifically their relationship with contemporary history. The third is the constructivist pedagogy of history, expressed in the concept of historical thinking. Last but not least, the research results may be related to the way young people's relationship to the past is presented in the public space, as suggested in the introduction to this text.

Sociological data are provided mainly from the surveys of the Centre for Public Opinion Research (CVVM).[2] The CVVM is part of the Czech Academy of Sciences, and its research covers current political topics as well as cultural, environmental and other areas. People's relationship with history is one of its main areas of research. This study is particularly interested in research on the anniversary of the Velvet Revolution and the developments that came after it.

The major study on this topic was conducted in 2019, on the 30th anniversary of the Velvet Revolution. It involved 1,046 respondents representing the whole of society in terms of age, education, size of place of residence, region and gender.[3] The aim of the research was to find out how the population of the Czech Republic perceived the Velvet Revolution and what people saw as the differences between the two social and political regimes. The main conclusion of the study was that the Velvet Revolution was one of the most positive historical events of the 20th century.[4] The study confirmed that most people perceive the current regime as better than the previous one.[5] People had the most negative perceptions of the current regime in relation to social security and crime. In these particular areas of the research over 40% of respondents said that the current regime was worse.[6] Other particular areas on this topic support the prevailing positive assessment of the current regime.[7]

In all of the surveys cited above, young people (respondents aged 15 or older) are consistently identified as those who have benefited the most from the revolution. In relation to the question "Who gained and who lost as a result of the change in November 1989?" young people are ranked fourth in the list of those who have gained, behind businesspeople, dissidents (i.e. people who opposed the socialist regime) and experts.[8] In terms of the opinions of young people specifically, the information from the CVVM provides only a very general – and somewhat predictable – insight. A younger age, just like higher education, higher income and a better standard of living, correlates with a more positive view of the Velvet Revolution.[9]

These results are supported by the research and publications of the sociologists Jiří Šubrt and Jiří Vinopal.[10] Their publication *Historical Consciousness of the People of the Czech Republic from the Perspective of Sociological Research* summarises the results of various surveys from the 1990s to 2011. Some of their findings may enrich our knowledge of how the Velvet Revolution is remembered in the Czech Republic. The authors point out that following the establishment of the Czech Republic in 1993, there was a gradual increase in the number of people who evaluated the past regime as better; only after 2000 did this number start to decrease.[11] Velvet Revolution itself is generally evaluated positively, the period after is in all sociological research evaluated ambivalently. However, there does not seem to be a contradiction for the respondents themselves.[12]

The existing sociological research provides a general overview of how the Velvet Revolution is perceived by the majority of people, and thus forms one frame of reference to which this study's results can be compared. At the same time, these are unilaterally designed surveys that focus on general questions that can be easily quantified. Respondents are asked to rate a particular era as better or worse in terms of material security or society's ethical values, but are given little opportunity to articulate their own experience or to provide a more complex explanation of the choice they have made between the questionnaire's options.

As unique as the data are, they are also limited by traditional notions of memory, understood as "what individuals think about the past". In contrast, contemporary memory studies – on which this research is based – understands memory more broadly as an interaction of practices, media and institutions.[13] Research using this approach focuses on the interaction between a memory medium and its users: learners and educational tools, visitors and museums, and so on. Existing publications have mainly focused on traditional memory media (such as monuments, television and film, museums) or the politics of memory. [14] The focus of academic is on the period of socialism and its fall, rather than the subsequent period.

The post-1989 period is thus usually dealt with either by scholars who are specifically interested in the period or by memory studies researchers. Veronika Pehe and Joanna Wawrzyniak in particular belong to the first group of scholars. For these authors, the key concept is the "neoliberal turn", which they understand not only as a change in the economic system but also as a whole set of economic, social, political and value changes.[15] For them, memory is primarily a sociological phenomenon that is dynamic but that can always be attributed to a variety of actors, from political parties to institutions to non-profit organisations. These actors' activities then provide a framework for the biographical memory of the public.[16] Of the research that clusters around this notion, the study *The neoliberal turn in biographical narratives of young people in Poland*, by Adam Mrozowicki and Justyna Kajta, is closest to the focus of this chapter. These authors compare the actual experiences of Poles born between 1985 and 2000

with how they narrate those experiences.[17] In contrast, this research focuses on younger respondents, born after 2000.

In the second group are memory studies scholars.[18] These authors emphasise how the materiality of a particular medium influences the historical meanings circulating in society. Kamil Činátl touched on the transformation of memory in the 1990s in a study published in 2014.[19] Čeněk Pýcha shows the global transformations of memory that have occurred in the Anthropocene using examples from the post-revolutionary years, especially ones from the field of cultural heritage preservation.[20] These works draw on current theoretical approaches from memory studies and apply them to specific cases in the post-socialist context.

A common feature of memory research in relation to late socialism in Czechoslovakia and developments after the Velvet Revolution is the need to engage with conflicts over memory. These may be interpretative or generational disputes, disagreements related to the political use of contemporary history, or contradictions between the promises made during the transition to democracy and the extent to which they have been fulfilled. Therefore, this chapter also focuses on the presence of conflict in contemporary pupils' views of the transitional period of the 1980s and 1990s.

Specifically, the study examined whether the pupils themselves perceive this topic as conflictual. In addition, we are interested in how they react to differing memories of the Velvet Revolution. The analysis of pupils' views of the past is based on the division of remembering into different modes described by Anna Cento Bull, Hans Lange Hansen and Francisco Colom-Gonzáles, following the thinking of political scientist Chantal Mouffe.[21] This study sought to find out whether pupils adopt and reproduce in their treatment of the past a conflicting mode of remembering that divides the actors of the past into binary (positive and negative) heroes or whether they perceive the past in a more complex way. That is to say, the study was interested in whether they are able to treat witness testimony in a universalist–cosmopolitan mode and perceive the humanistic values and the hardships of life in a dictatorship from different perspectives, or whether they use an agonistic mode and recognise the relevance of different historical experiences that are open to dialogue within a conflictual consensus. In other words, this study sought to understand whether they are able to think about late socialism and the democratic transition in the Czech Republic without harsh moral judgements and to acknowledge the relevance of the memories of all participants in the events shaping the broad context of their knowledge of the past. Such handling of witness testimony and other sources is an important competence that is built into school education via approaches based on multiperspectivity and the cultivation of a historical consciousness.[22]

2. Research method

The following data are the result of history lessons based on two activities on HistoryLab.cz, which is an application designed to work with historical sources in history education and is based on the principles of constructivist pedagogy.[23] In the first activity, "Why do they remember socialism differently?", pupils work with the conflicting memories of a woman and a man who experienced the fall of socialism when they were in their twenties. They compare one memory – which emphasises the lack of freedom of religion and freedom of speech – with another – which emphasises the social security and unfulfilled hopes associated with 1989.[24] The second activity, "What does family argue about?", focuses on families' memories of the socialist period and the potential for conflict, particularly between the

generations.[25] The pupils work with the memory of a woman who talks about the different perspectives on socialism and the 1990s in her own family.[26]

The experiment took place during the spring of 2024, and six teachers – three at elementary schools and three at secondary schools – worked with the activities.[27] The pupils who participated in the research in the elementary schools were 14–16 years old, and the secondary school pupils were 17–19 years old. At each level, one school from Prague and two schools outside Prague were included, and at each level at least one of the schools could be identified as being from a peripheral region of the Czech Republic that has been struggling with economic and social problems since the 1990s. All the participating classes were already familiar with HistoryLab from previous lessons, so unfamiliarity with the app did not affect the results. In total, 179 individual responses were collected for the activity "Why do they remember socialism differently?" and 147 for the activity "What does family argue about?"

Additionally, a questionnaire was issued asking teachers to reflect on the classroom work and pupils' reactions to the activities. Following the HistoryLab work, a focus group was held with the teachers to provide more in-depth context on the responses from each activity, to seek details about the way the work was done, and to complement the pupils' responses with the teachers' perspectives. All the responses were anonymised, and unique codes were used in the app (assigned to each activity completed and submitted) to identify quotes.

3. "Why do they remember socialism differently?"

The pupils were presented with the memories of a man and a woman who recounted their experience of life in the late socialism of the second half of the 1980s. Both had been young people at the time of the Velvet Revolution, just starting their families. The first, Josef K., had been 26 years old at the time of the revolution. He had worked at the Poldi Kladno metallurgical plant since his teenage years and saw his work as a source of stability, both on the material level and on the level of his identity. He openly expressed pride in being a worker and collective belonging. Poldi Kladno was one of the flagship heavy industry production plants in socialist Czechoslovakia and was often publicly used to showcase the planned economy. The turning point in Josef's life was 1995, when the company went bankrupt. Its demise was symptomatic of the wave of deindustrialisation that Western Europe experienced during the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, and that arrived in post-socialist countries a decade later.[28] The pupils worked with an excerpt from Josef's testimony that had been captured in the spring of 2023. In it, Joseph expresses the view that socialism was a period of social stability. He states how easy it was for a Poldi Kladno worker to start a family, get an apartment and secure a good loan with a state guarantee. At the same time, he felt no pressure from the dictatorship and did not personally encounter any restrictions on his human rights.

The pupils contrasted this memoir with the testimony of Martina S., who was 23 years old at the time of the Velvet Revolution, living in Prague and on maternity leave caring for her child. A cornerstone of her identity was that she was actively involved in the Catholic Church. In the excerpt available to the pupils, she talked about her experience of living a double life, the separation of public and private spaces in terms of freedom of expression, and her fear of state harassment on account of her faith. She also described state paternalism as a negative aspect of the regime that resulted in an underdeveloped sense of self-responsibility among people who grew up during socialism.

The pupils analysed these two memories in several steps. After listening to the audio recordings for the first time, they were asked to look at the transcript and separate out the passages into two groups: those where the witnesses evaluated socialism positively and those where the evaluations were negative. They were then asked to compare the two memories. In the final steps of the activity, they interpreted their findings. They were asked to answer two open-ended questions: "Why do Martina and Josef remember socialism differently?" and "Which of the memories matches what you know about socialism?" They were given a limit of 400 characters to express their findings. Their responses became the basic data for this research on pupils' perceptions of memories of the period of socialism and the democratic transition in the Czech Republic.

The two witnesses were chosen for this educational activity based on analysis, comparison and interpretation because their memories represent positions that became the foundation of disputes about the nature of socialism in the 1990s and 2000s. According to oral history research, the desire for individual freedom and joy at its acquisition often accompanied shock at the loss of social security during the country's transition.[29] This tension characterised attempts to understand the socialist dictatorship and come to terms with traumatic memories of abusive practices of state violence under the Communist Party. Additionally, the debate on human rights, freedom of religion and freedom of speech was accompanied by a discussion of the consequences of state paternalism in the material sphere, especially during the transformation of the economy from a regime of collective ownership to a market economy.

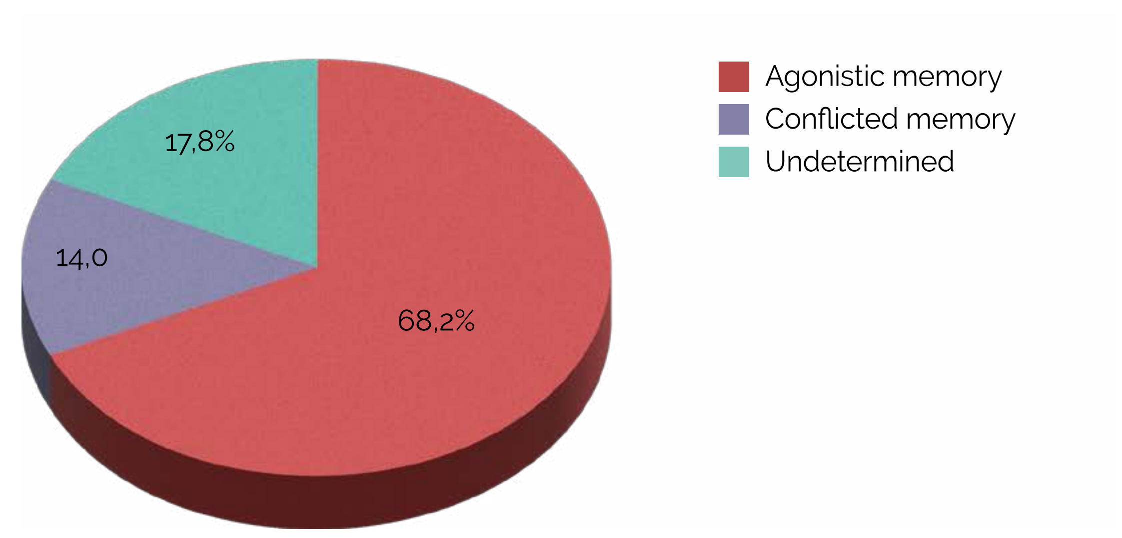
According to the French historian Françoise Mayer, in the 1990s, it was circles of political prisoners and dissidents who became dominant in the conflict over the definition of the experience of 1948–1989; these circles represented a strongly critical voice pointing to injustice, surveillance and repression.[30] Similarly, the notions of the robust individuality of the entrepreneur and the positive influence of the free market gained strong influence.[31] Any nostalgia or positive assessment of the socialist welfare state was easily denounced as downplaying the totalitarian practices of the Communist Party, given the formidable cultural and symbolic capital of the economic experts and intellectuals who emerged from what had been the counterculture under the socialist regime.

The conflict is still alive in academic historiography as well as among people born during Czechoslovakia's baby boom of the 1970s, who tend to be called Husák's Children.[32] At that time, the state's concern for the social stability of workers and their families was significantly strengthened, resulting in faster population growth.[33] The aim of this research was to examine to what extent this conflict is present in the perceptions of the past of the generation born after 2000 – that is, those without direct experience of socialism or the subsequent transition. At the same time, the goal was to empirically verify Nicoletta Christodoulou's finding that the involvement of witnesses in history teaching can help to overcome inherited memory conflicts through the construction of a deeper historical consciousness.[34] The following response from one of the pupils at the end of the analysed activity is symptomatic of how conflict about memories can be exacerbated down the generations:

"Mr Joseph is simply a communist who is blind because he submitted to the regime at that time and because of that he had advantages. But just because he was fine doesn't mean that the regime worked. What about people who, for example, wanted to have freedom of speech, the most basic right in my opinion? They were usually oppressed. I know this because my grandmother and grandfather witnessed it. They themselves experienced pressure from the communists." (Response 48262)

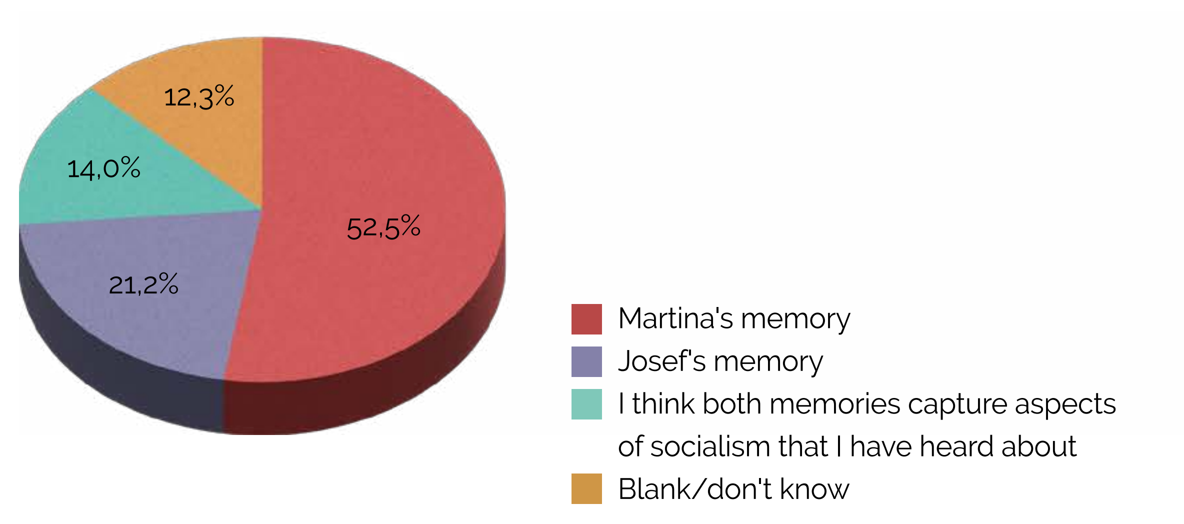
We approached the research at the beginning with the assumption that this type of escalated opinions would dominate among the pupils and would pose a challenge for teachers to moderate any conflicts in the classroom and direct pupils towards a productive discussion that would enhance both their historical consciousness and their civic attitudes. Surprisingly, these expectations were not met. Only 3 of 179 responses absolutely denounced one of the memoirs as amoral, biased or provided under the influence of a harmful ideology. However, the dominance of the negative mode of remembering socialism is confirmed by the fact that in all three cases, the condemned opinion was that of Josef K. In contrast, the vast majority of the pupils (122 out of 179 responses) demonstrated the agonistic mode of memory. This can be defined as when a pupil sympathises with a memory and acknowledges the relevance of the witness's life story, despite not identifying with it, and is willing to subject the witness's insights to scrutiny as a relevant source about the past. A total of 25 responses, including the three radically judgemental ones, fall within the category of conflicted memory, where the pupil perceives the witness to be conveying an untruth that distorts the past. Finally, 32 of the responses did not clearly belong to either category (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: **The modes of memory in which the pupils evaluated the memories of Josef and Martina, which represented positive and negative evaluations of life in late socialism in Czechoslovakia.**



The prevalence of a certain historical narrative – where, through dissent, the people overcame a socialist dictatorship that trampled on individual human and civil rights – is confirmed by the following finding.[35] When asked "Which of the memories is more consistent with what you know about socialism?" the majority of the pupils specified the memory of Martina (94 responses; 52.5%). It is interesting that when they justified this position, they argued almost exclusively with reference to the well-known motif of violations of human rights and freedom of religion. Few of them noticed the second part of the testimony, which criticises state paternalism and the problem of people failing to take responsibility for their own material security. Nevertheless, the number of responses preferring the view of Josef was not negligible (38 responses; 21.2%). Often the justification for this choice alluded to family memories of the positive role of the state-guaranteed standard of living. Only 25 responses (14.0%) could be interpreted as meaning "I think both memories capture aspects of socialism that I have heard about." The remaining 22 responses (12.3%) were either "don't know" or blank (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Distribution of responses to the question "Which of the memories is more consistent with what you know about socialism?"



In their responses, the pupils cited both school education and family memory as their main sources of knowledge about the socialist era. Compare the following two responses:

"Martina's memory is more in line with what I know about socialism. Both at school and at home, I have heard that there was no freedom of speech and people couldn't do what they wanted." (Response 47813)

"Both of them, because my grandfather and most of my family are the exact type of people as Mr Josef, but at school we talk more about Martina's story." (Response 48264)

While in the first case the family memory is consistent with the school history narrative, the second case is a mature response demonstrating an advanced historical consciousness with the ability to supplement and refine knowledge with different perspectives on the past. However, there were also responses where family memory was in tension with school teaching or the pupil's own positive attitudes towards human rights, which the Czech school system is supposed to systematically develop.[36] For example, the following response can be read as a sigh at the insensitivity of society:

"I more often hear about Josef's view. People talk about the availability of housing and loans. As if freedom of speech doesn't matter." (Response 49031)

An important consideration is that these conclusions are the result of an analysis of data collected across a sample of all the pupils' responses. Any differences between the views of pupils from the centre of the country and those from the periphery is conspicuously absent.

It can be concluded that witness testimony implicitly invites pupils to make comparisons with family memory, which stems from orally transmitted stories. At the same time, family memory lies outside the framework of institutionalised memory and often even questions it. It has been found that working with witness testimony in the classroom has the potential not only to incorporate experiences that have thus far stood in the shadows of the grand narratives of history but also to open up space for a

plurality of family memories.[37] This is confirmed by the feedback of the teachers who guided the pupils through this lesson. Only one directly encountered an emotionally dismissive reaction to the testimony of one of the witnesses during the lesson in front of the other pupils. Others described a normal working atmosphere or positive moments when the activity led pupils to discuss the multiperspectival nature of historical experience or sparked their interest in intergenerational dialogue within their own families. The experiment presented here shows that pupils are able to analyse and compare two narratives and, in the process, form a more plastic idea of the past without necessarily adopting the conflicting nature of memory typical of previous decades.

4. "What does family argue about?"

Concerning the analysis of the activity titled "What does family argue about?", it should be borne in mind that the pupils were working with a testimony that does not say something about the past, but rather about memory. In the selected passage, the witness does not talk about what it was like to grow up under socialism. Instead, she describes conflicts in her family's memories in the autumn of 2023. She mentions the different perceptions her family has of key individuals (e.g. Václav Havel, last president of Czechoslovakia, and Václav Klaus, second president of the Czech Republic) and of the old and new regimes. While her parents feel nostalgia and probably pride in connection with the socialist regime, the witness is ashamed of these attitudes and sometimes argues with her parents at family gatherings about the past and current politics. She concludes, however, that these are not conflicts that could tear the family apart.

After the analysis of the witness's talk, the pupils' were asked to respond either "Agree" or "Disagree" to three statements:

"It is my experience that the Velvet Revolution of 1989 is a controversial topic."
"Controversies about socialism often reflect views about contemporary politics."
"I and my peers are not so concerned with the controversy over communism."

The questions follow the content of the witness sample but focus on the pupils' own experience. After responding to the three statements, the pupils were asked to justify their responses.

Of the corpus of 147 coded responses, 49 came from elementary schools, of which non-Prague (and non-periphery) schools supplied 17 responses, Prague schools supplied 16 responses and schools from the periphery of the country supplied 16 responses. The distribution between regions is thus fairly even. One hundred and two responses from secondary schools are missing the responses from Prague because the responses were not saved due to technical problems of the teacher. The remaining responses are thus divided into 25 responses from schools outside Prague and 77 from the periphery, where the number of responses was affected by the initiative of one of the teachers. Therefore, for secondary school pupils, the correlation between region and pupils' attitudes towards the past cannot be conclusively determined.

Regarding the first statement, 51 pupils (34.7%) agreed that the Velvet Revolution is a controversial topic. Of these, the 18 responses from elementary schools were quite evenly distributed between the regions. Even fewer pupils perceived a link between evaluations of the past and contemporary political views (the second statement). Overall, 37 pupils (25.2%) said that they agreed with this statement.

Of these, the majority (26) were from secondary schools in the periphery (20) or outside the capital (6). For elementary schools, all regions were represented. When it comes to the third statement, 112 respondents (76.2%) agreed, 75 from secondary schools. Responses from elementary schools (37) are distribute in a balanced way regarding the regions (Prague 12, outside Prague 12, periphery 13) (see Table 1).

Tabel 1: Pupils' attitudes towards the public debate on socialism.

	Agree	Disagree
It is my experience tha the Velvet resolution of 1989 is a controversial topic	51 34,7%	96 65,3%
Controversies about socialism often reflect views about contemporary politics	37 25,2%	110 74,8%
Me and my peers are not so concerned with the controversy over communism	112 76,2%	35 23,8%

In most of the coded responses, it is very difficult to identify the memory mode with certainty. The conflicted mode characterised thirteen responses, the agonistic five responses, and the cosmopolitan two responses. This can be explained primarily by the reflexive focus of the activity. It did not invite pupils to express opinions about history but rather to reflect on memory.

The key issue seems to deal with the high number of "agree" responses to the third statement. What does it mean when pupils declare that disputes about socialism do not concern them? In order to understand this phenomenon more precisely, the three modes of memory can be supplemented with two additional categories. The first, "does not concern me", includes all responses in which pupils declared their distance from the topic or reported that they witnessed disputes about the past but did not engage in them themselves. The second is the more open category "other", which includes all other attitudes expressed by pupils.

It is important to note that the "does not concern me" category is not limited to responses in which pupils stated that they agreed with the third question. Fifteen out of a total of 100 responses contained a negative reaction to this statement. The reason for these responses' inclusion in this category is therefore pupils' explicit articulation of their distance from the topic. Thus, of the total corpus, 68% of the responses fall into the category "does not concern me". Let us now take a closer look at how the pupils themselves characterised this distance.

Several recurring themes can be discerned in the responses from elementary schools that are worth exploring further. The largest number of responses (11) simply state a lack of interest in disputes about socialism and do not elaborate further on the reasons. A model response that sums up the most common motives well is this statement:

"The topic of communism is not discussed much in my family. I have never heard the opinions of my family and relatives. Overall, politics is not a discussed topic. My friends and I don't discuss it much either. We don't find it interesting." (Response 49138)

As will be shown, pupils commonly emphasised the influence of the family. If they were not introduced to the topic by the family environment, then they saw no reason to be interested in it.
Family memory is the subject of a number of pupils' explanations:

"When I visit my grandmother's house with my parents, when they start talking, my grandparents immediately remember how everything was cheap under communism, and so on, so they start complaining about how overpriced everything is today. We don't discuss communism at all among our peers." (Response 47942)

This quotation is typical of the pupils' responses. Two pupils mentioned nostalgia for socialism among their grandparents' generation. Conversely, two described witnessing conflict between their grandparents and parents. The conflict has a predictable form: grandparents reminisce nostalgically, parents defend the current system, and pupils declare their distance from these conflicts.

There is also a significant group of pupils (11 respondents) who perceive 1989 to have been a long time ago. Some of them see the topic as controversial but only for the generations that experienced the regime change. Others state that, for them, the events are too distant to arouse a strong interest:

"I think it doesn't concern me, but someone who has experienced it – it certainly concerns them, and they will have an opinion about it." (Response 47936)

The remaining two responses mention that it is a topic they only encounter at school and do not discuss outside school – that is, neither with their peers nor with their parents.

The responses from the secondary schools have similar features to the responses from younger pupils. Twenty-five of the 71 pupils merely stated that the controversy over socialism did not concern them. Again, there is a significant group of responses emphasising that the disputes reside with the older generation (15) or saying that they have witnessed conflict (10) or nostalgia (2) in the family. Twelve pupils said that the topic did not concern them because they had not experienced it. Compared to the responses from the elementary schools, some new groups of responses also emerge, but they are marginal in number. In particular, four pupils stated that the topic was not a matter of conflict in their experience. Across the responses, the keywords "media" and "politics" appear more frequently. In these responses, pupils situate the topic in these areas. According to this perspective, the history of socialism is related to political struggle and the media agenda and does not relate to pupils' personal lives or family memory.

If the goal is to gain a deeper insight into the responses in the "does not concern me" category, then the main preliminary conclusion is that pupils situate the controversy about socialism and transformation outside their generation (see Table 2). Most pupils understand the topic as conflicting but see the disputes as being led by the older generation. This older generation is most often personified as

parents and grandparents, and less often interpreted to mean institutions – politics, school and (for secondary school pupils) the media. A second important message is the emphasis that pupils place on their own experience of the socialist period. This is sometimes formulated positively (people argue about socialism because they experienced it) and sometimes negatively (I don't care about socialism because I didn't experience it). Here – especially from the perspective of historical education and public history – there is space for multiperspectivity. Thus the response "it does not concern me" can potentially be reformulated to "I am open to different points of view and experiences" or "I need to be convinced about why I should think about how the topic relates to my life".

Tabel 1: The attitudes of pupils who feel that the public debate on socialism does not concern them.

Does not concern me	100 (68% of all responses)
Lack of interest in disputes about socialism	11
The topic is the subject of disputes between my parents and grandparents that do not concern me	20
Too much time has passed since 1989 and therefore these events do not concern me	12
Disputes about socialism are political and I am not concerned with politics	4
Did not answer the question at all	33
Others	20

Looking at the "other" category, there are 33 entries, 10 of which are from elementary schools. All of these responses are in this category because the pupils did not fill in the final text field (the main source for determining memory mode). However, seven of these pupils indicated that they agreed with the statement that the controversy over socialism did not concern their generation. They could therefore be joined to the previous group, but without a more precise idea of what the pupils meant in their responses.

In the case of secondary schools, there were only three blank responses out of 20. Among this group, there was a strong tendency to disagree with the third statement (i.e. these pupils tended to declare that disputes about socialism concerned them). Nine pupils claimed that the issue was not a matter of conflict because everyone in their environment thought the same way. At the same time, these responses did not specify what exactly the people in their environment thought. Eight pupils reported witnessing disputes about socialism in their family. However, in contrast to the pupils whose responses fall into the category "does not concern me", they also identified the topic as important for themselves:

"I discuss politics with my parents, but we all keep our opinions to ourselves. Communism is a big topic, and I think my parents and I have very similar views on it. Communism is going to affect every generation, just like every major historical and current political situation." (Response 49706)

Other pupils used a similar argument to justify the opposite position: socialism concerned them because their parents experienced it.

Through the questionnaire and during the focus group, teachers were asked whether they had encountered any reactions from pupils that would help to shed more light on pupils' relationship to socialism and the subsequent transition. In particular, the aim was to obtain information about interactions that took place in the classroom but were not recorded by the pupils in their responses. A valuable response came from a teacher from a secondary school outside Prague:

"After the pupils worked in pairs ... I initiated a discussion about personal experiences of arguments in the family. Out of 30 pupils, three came forward and were willing to share specific stories about a generation of grandparents who approach the pre-1989 period nostalgically and uncritically. The debate engaged most of the class, and we developed follow-up topics (how memory works, how to approach these disagreements, etc.)."

Another teacher (elementary school, periphery) responded:

"Pupils shared the observation that there is usually less intergenerational discussion about communism in families; it tends to be an explosive topic before elections. Or they mentioned grandparents judging people to this day based on who was or wasn't in the Communist Party."

It is clear from the responses that the activity based on witness testimony was able to motivate the pupils to discuss memory, especially family memory. The teachers' responses also confirm the findings described above. These can be summarised as showing that pupils generally perceive the topic of socialism as a matter for the older generations or school teaching. This is confirmed by pupils' numerous reports of witnessing conflicts in their families but not being involved in them themselves. In elementary schools, this is true across the regions of the Czech Republic.

It is therefore clear that witness testimony is a suitable medium for discussions about memory among pupils. Pupils were very often able to recognise the difference between their perspective and that of their parents and grandparents – without, however, formulating their views in a conflicting way.

5. Conclusion

Several conclusions can be drawn about young people's relationship to the Czech Republic's socialist past from the pupil´s responses from the two activities. In addition, the aim was to establish whether these findings have any implications or recommendations for the relationship between history education and education about democracy and human rights. This conclusion begins with theses that are more grounded in the Czech context and gradually moves outwards to more general conclusions.
Regarding the perception of the historical events themselves, it can be said that Czech pupils perceive the Velvet Revolution as a positive event – only a minority perceive it as an issue that prompts conflict. However, when asked about the "socialist period", pupils perceived the topic as significantly more conflictual. This is in line with the sociological research presented above, which suggests that the revolution itself has a privileged position but the periods that preceded and followed it contain dividing lines or conflicting elements.

This study proceeded from the assumption that the period of socialism and the subsequent transition is experienced in Czech society as a source of conflict, and as such that it is necessary to address

this period in school education. However, the data obtained show that pupils attribute disputes about the nature of this stage of Czech history to the older generations and, additionally, to institutions (media, politics and school). They have no desire to engage in disputes themselves (either at home or in the public space). Thus, it seems that the capacity of the memory of socialism to spark conflict is fading. Young people have no need to make and instead are working with a wide range of options and experiences. They are also often aware of the limits of their own knowledge of the past. This can be seen as a shift since the late 1990s and early 2000s, a time when, according to many experts, there was increased pressure to "come to terms" with the past and controversies about contemporary history were multiplying.[38]

At the same time, it should be kept in mind that the schools involved in this study have been working with the HistoryLab application, and therefore the inquiry-based learning method, for a long time. Integral to this approach is an emphasis on multiperspectivity and a focus on distinguishing contemporary from historical perspectives. This means that the respondents' level of historical thinking may be higher than that of the average Czech pupil of the same age. This may also explain why there were no significant differences between the regions in terms of the responses of elementary school pupils. If this is the case, it means that inquiry-based learning leads to greater interpretative openness among pupils.

Several implications for education follow from the theses presented above. The first is methodological and concerns the work with witness testimony in the classroom. This study used witness testimony to thematise memory – that is, not as an oral–historical source but as a medium of memory. The focus on perceptions of the features of witness testimony as medium was furthered for the "What does family argue about?" activity by dividing the analysis into two steps. First pupils worked with the content – what witnesses said – and then they focused on the nonverbal component of the communication. In the activity "Why do they remember socialism differently?" the comparison of two different memories led to insights into the subjectivity of the medium of eye-witness records.

Pupils responded openly and were motivated to discuss and reflect on the topic of memory, and in particular family memory in both activities. Based on the findings above, it is important not only to use eye-witness records as a source of information but also to reflect on these records as a medium of memory.

Democracy and human rights education very often borrow examples from the past to illustrate processes of emancipation or examples of human rights violations.[39] The question is whether the findings suggest that other frameworks should be sought to teach democracy and human rights than the contrast between dictatorship (traditionally understood as an autocratic state) and democracy. On this contrast the story of the democratic transformation of Central Europe in the 1980s and 1990s is actually built. History education can contribute to this exploration of new possibilities – which is essential for motivating pupils – by broadening its scope towards the present. In this way, democracy and human rights education can also draw on events from the post-1989 world, which are closer to the experience of the younger generation. Indeed, the tension between the repressive behaviour of the Communist Party dictatorship and its egalitarian welfare state, which is topical for the parents and grandparents of today's teenagers, may seem to those teenagers an overly abstract example from a distant past that now plays a marginal role in their lives.

Endnotes

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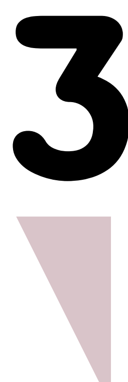

The transformative potential of non-formal relational pedagogy

The case of the Sejny Lektorium

Chapter ID

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Summary: This chapter explores and discusses possibilities for including oral witness statements in place-based non-formal history education. It brings together educational theory and empirical findings from the Sejny Lektorium, a long-term community based project as part of the cultural and educational activities of Pogranicze (pl. Borderland Foundation) in Krasnogruda and Sejny situated on the Polish/Lithuanian border. Drawing on recent critical scholarship, primarily rooted in the field of education (e.g. Biesta, Todd) and memory studies (e.g. Rothberg) we illustrate the approach of the program by unpacking its characteristics within their particular political landscape. Based on these reflections, we draw conclusions and open space to build on discourses concerned with the transformative pedagogic potential of intergenrational community-based oral history education. Further, we aspire to encourage our readers to reflect on possibilities for nurturing anti-hegemonic practices in light of their political and pedagogic relevance in different contexts.

1. Introduction

This chapter discusses possibilities for including oral testimonies in non-formal history education. It brings together educational theory and empirical findings from the Sejny Lektorium, a long-term community-based project that is part of the cultural and educational activities of the non-profit organisation Pogranicze (the Borderland Foundation) in Krasnogruda and Sejny, which are situated on the Polish–Lithuanian border. The Sejny Lektorium programme is founded on the principle of a trivium of three equal elements of education: acquiring knowledge, practising art and developing civil engagement. It comprises a number of experiential and place-based activities (including discussion-based workshops, study visits and artistic activities) in which a small group of young people (secondary school pupils) from places surrounding Krasnogruda and Sejny meet frequently over the course of a year to learn about the multivocal and multidirectional present of their home by engaging with diverse experiences and memories of local witnesses.

This chapter's approach is inspired by Anna Cento Bull and Hans Lauge Hansen's concept of "agonistic memory", which not only views collective remembering as a socially constructed discourse but also calls for the acknowledgement of the "multiplicity of perspectives in order to bring to light the socio-political struggles of the past".[1] Put differently, agonism and cosmopolitanism, viewed through the concept of agonistic memory, can be seen as complementary. At points they can be approached as constitutive partners engaged in a deeper process of "reconstruct[ing] the historical context in ways which restore the importance of civic and political passions and address issues of individual and collective agency".[2] Even though this chapter draws on insights derived from agonism and memory studies, this line of inquiry is not the main concern; the discussion is largely based on recent critical scholarship in the field of education, and, following this adventurous pedagogical spirit, it is both descriptive and exploratory in nature. Seen through the prism of relational pedagogy, the chapter focuses on moments indicative of change in political and personal consciousness while aiming to stay as close to the words of the participants as possible. It refers to these moments in the broadest sense as *transformative*, aspiring to illustrate their rich anti-hegemonic character without classifying them as agonistic or non-agonistic as such. The authors also do not want to suggest that the perspectives or judgements of young people may be inherently wrong or that they perhaps even lack perspective altogether. Rather, this chapter's broader pedagogical and scholarly concern lies in finding ways of generating awareness of perspectives that were, and in many cases still are, deemed out of place in mainstream discourses in which witnesses of alternative political stories have been, and might otherwise continue to become, increasingly silenced and isolated.

Following this introduction, the chapter moves on to a description of the methodology, followed by a theoretical discussion to introduce the pedagogical approach of the programme. The next three sections present findings from the Sejny Lektorium, drawing conclusions about both their educational effects and relevance for democracy. Lastly, the chapter briefly discusses the concept of "educational responsibility"[3] to further reflect on the transformative potential of oral history education, if approached as an anti-hegemonic foundation of democratic practice. The guiding questions addressed in this chapter are: 1) What, if anything, are young people learning from engaging with oral histories in light of the Sejny Lektorium programme? 2) What are the views and experiences of both the participants and the pedagogues who participated in the programme, and to what degree might they be understood as transformative? 3) How might educational encounters based on long-term non-formal community

education differ from traditional forms of schooling, and why could it be important to support these alternative possibilities?

Throughout conversations with youngsters who participated in the Lektorium group of 2023–2024, the topic of transition from the communist regime to democracy in Poland in the late 20th century arose naturally as a matter of particular interest. As part of the young people's wider participation in the Europe-wide Changing Democracies project, they discussed imaginaries of uneven political transitions, belonging, intersectionality, inclusion and exclusion, the role of education, and related themes. These discussions took place under the guidance of pedagogues with various levels of experience, who all had a strong sense of rootedness in Krasnogruda and deep familiarity with the work of the foundation. Due to the long-term and organic nature of the Sejny Lektorium programme, this chapter focuses on selected aspects of this educational experience. Through educational literature and findings from qualitative research of the process, the authors aim to illustrate the importance of creating and nurturing informal spaces for experiential, situated and guided engagement with witnesses of local history. The aim is to open up opportunities to reflect on possibilities of learning from and with lived experiences in a sustainable and equal way. This is crucial for the (re)generation of possibilities for imagining democracy and democratic education. In this chapter, both democracy and education are seen as uneven yet relationally intertwined and co-constitutive processes of becoming.

Over the course of the year's programme, the Sejny Lektorium group – ten secondary school pupils, four tutors (young members of the Borderland team) and lead educator Małgorzata Sporek-Czyżewska – engaged with the subject of democratic transition in Poland through various educational activities (seminars, lectures, discussions, film screenings and book presentations led by educators from the Borderland team). Subsequently, there were also two study visits to the Silesia region (another Polish borderland with strong ties to histories of transitions). During the study visits, the participants met with experts, artists and activists; visited sites and institutions; and attended artistic events. The aim of this first stage of the programme was to broaden knowledge, introduce different narratives, and familiarise youngsters with current discussions and debates, artistic interventions, and social and cultural initiatives relating to the subject of democratic transition in Poland. The intention was to give them the necessary confidence and tools to engage with the second stage of the programme, in line with the focus of the Changing Democracies project. The aim of this project is to encourage learning about lesser-known perspectives on political changes that have taken place across Europe and explore links with the broader European discussion on democracy.

The second stage of the programme was when national and transnational oral testimonies were introduced, initially as the focus of a series of seminars on memory studies, oral history as a historical source and practical approaches to conducting interviews with witnesses. Then the youngsters watched and discussed three interviews of witnesses conducted as part of the Changing Democracies project by Weronika Czyżewska-Poncyljusz with witnesses from the Polish–Lithuanian borderland or with ties to it. These interviews introduced the perspectives of people who had experienced transitions in this remote region of Poland, marked by its proximity to the closed (at that time pre-democratic) border with the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic, a difficult past and a multicultural heritage. Next, each member of the group was tasked with conducting their own interview with a witness of their choosing, with tutors offering assistance with the recording process. These interviews were then presented and discussed during the workshops lead by Czyżewska-Poncyljusz. Finally, the group watched excerpts of other interviews that had been recorded as part of the Changing Democracies project and had become part

of the travelling exhibition "Is My Democracy Your Democracy?" In a series of workshops and seminars, the group discussed the excerpts, reflected on connections and other factors with the oral testimonies they had collected, and shared their reflections, learning and observations from this experience. The last workshop was dedicated to their understanding of democracy and its challenges. This final stage of the programme is of particular interest for this chapter, and the main findings and conclusions refer to the materials from workshops and seminars dedicated to the process of conducting and reflecting on the testimonies.

2. Methodology

The methodology comprised qualitative semi-structured interviews and participant observations of verbal and non-verbal communications. The researchers conducted interviews with all the tutors who played a key role in the Sejny Lektorium programme and with its key founder, who still leads the majority of the pedagogical activities.

The Sejny Lektorium programme is of long duration and was not yet finished at the time of writing. Each yearly cycle of the Borderland Foundation's activities always ends with the development of a performance to be shared with members of the local community. The testimonies (both those collected by the participants and those from interviews associated with the wider Changing Democracies project) from the 2023–2024 programme will be brought together (probably around the end of 2024) and transformed into an artistic form, in which each member of the Lektorium group will play a role. In addition, the oral histories themselves and the learning gathered throughout the research process will be translated into educational resources that local history teachers can use in formal school systems.

The authors of this chapter collaborated in the design and realisation of the Sejny Lektorium's activities and experiences (over the course of 2023 and 2024) as part of the wider European Changing Democracies programme. Weronika Czyżewska-Poncyljusz has a history background with a focus on memory studies in Central and Eastern Europe. Her way of working is action led, characterised by cycles of continuous reflection on her educational work and the implementation of lessons in the design of the next workshop and following projects. Katharina Kurz is a funded Hume & Pat Doctoral Scholar at the National University of Maynooth, Ireland. This scholarship supports this research, since her dissertation project is related to the research conducted for this chapter. Katharina brings together the disciplines of anthropology and education. She takes an ethnographic approach and has become familiar with the work of the Borderland Foundation over recent years.

Czyżewska-Poncyljusz was a crucial figure in the facilitation of the workshop and group activities, and speaks Polish and English fluently. Kurz only speaks English. Because most of the workshop activities were held in Polish, Kurz occasionally sought assistance with translation. Czyżewska-Poncyljusz collected most of the observational data during the workshops (such as observations of all workshops, observations of workshop participants who had collected oral history narratives from members of the local community). The same author also conducted her own interviews with three of the local witnesses. This multimodal qualitative material was combined with the data collected by Kurz, who collected and analysed the observational data from the final workshop and from the reflexive interviews with selected people who had pedagogical and organising roles. It must be noted that the views expressed in the interviews are subjective experiences and observations, and could be validated through further research.

This collaboration served to mitigate bias, in particular since Czyżewska-Poncyljusz was already an integral part of the Borderland Foundation's activities and works closely with the whole team. The presence of the view of an "outsider" (Kurz) who was less familiar with the context and nature of the work allowed for a more well-rounded perspective. Furthermore, the interview questions were designed and asked by Kurz, with the hope that the interviewees would answer more freely if the questions came from someone who had a more independent role in the research process. It must be noted, however, that the participants had second-language English, which occasionally seemed to influence the degree to which responses could be communicated. Additionally, the fact that Kurz only participated in a small proportion of the programme meant that her depth of understanding might be compromised. Both researchers made sure they stayed mindful of these limitations and maintained an open and continuous line of reflexive communication throughout their collaboration.

3. Pedagogy beyond the formal gaze: approaching oral history education as an entangled cultural process of democratic becoming

The pedagogical approach of the Sejny Lektorium project aligns with theories that conceive of education in its broad sense, namely as rooted in multivocal discourses emerging from historically situated, cultural processes of becoming. In other words, cultural histories and democratic opportunities are dynamically entangled, and stretch across multiple temporal and spatial scales. Because we live in a world of plurality, individual experiences may lead to division and exclusion if they are not embedded in a larger process that facilitates historically and future-oriented diversity – for example, through principles of agonism. In Michael Rothberg's sense, engagement with memory and memory-making – for example, in the form of oral testimonies – can support striving towards justice and thereby strengthen democratic values. Rothberg suggests switching from a *competitive* view of memory (i.e. either one or the other can be true) to a *multidirectional* view (i.e. memories are collectively produced and distributed, thus events can be understood better by acknowledging as many recollections as possible in their diversity).[4] Chantal Mouffe's framework of agonism similarly suggests that, particularly in times when idealistic visions of globalisation and liberal democracy have become universalised, one should be cautious about the seductive qualities of the post-political zeitgeist. Her theory of agonism is based on the transformation of agonistic sentiments into agonistic stances, where disagreements are seen as an important part of democracy without necessarily feeding into polarisation and further exclusion.[5] In contrast, agonistic perspectives aim for profound transformations of existing power inequalities and work towards creating democratic relations by enabling the incorporation of plural positions into new hegemonic orders.[6]

Bull and colleagues, building on the work of Mouffe and others, explain how cosmopolitanism imposed from the top down in a move towards universalism, or universalistic-cosmopolitanism, runs the risk of prioritising certain perspectives over others.[7] In their framework, the agonistic mode of remembering recognises the kinds of conditions that can "make normal people turn into war criminals", believing they are doing the right thing and thus complicates morally charged labels such as "victims" and "perpetrators" without legitimising violence.[8] Viewed through this critical lens, the agonistic mode of remembering requires people to remember the "historical context and socio political struggles" instead of aiming for a single reductive "transcendent, universalised" story.[9] At the same time, practising agonistic remembering is itself a socio-political process; its features are "fluid, relational and

contextually embedded".[10] Using slightly different language, in her piece "Living in a Dissonant World: Toward an Agonistic Cosmopolitics for Education", educational philosopher Sharon Todd proposes the concept of "agonistic cosmopolitics", emphasising that democratic processes have a dissenting nature that does not take away from the political situatedness that is implicated in the process of collective future-making. "Agonistic cosmopolitics", according to her,

"is in its profoundest sense an engagement with human plurality as a definitive feature of co-existence. This does not mean accepting, acquiescing to, agreeing with, or merely tolerating different views; this would be absurd. However, it does require a sustained openness to listen to other perspectives and to counter and respond."[11]

With Bull and colleagues, this chapter recognises the discursive complexity of thinking through concepts such as antagonism, cosmopolitanism and agonism.[12] With Todd, it recognises how education, both as a field and as a discipline, is a crucial site for such multifaceted and emotionally charged memory work, which requires as much renegotiation and reinvention as its terminology.[13] However, educational institutions often fall short in acknowledging the complexity of historical events, leading to the perpetuation of simplified narratives that can be exclusionary to already marginalised groups. In a more recent piece Todd describes education as a cultural, political and aesthetic process that emerges through encounters "that delineate the contours of who counts as a public and who does not".[14] In line with this view, Gert Biesta, drawing on the work of Klaus Prange, sees pedagogy as an act of "pointing" that invites the refocusing of attention.[15] Pedagogy, then, becomes a relational process that engages the person as a whole; yet, *how, with what means, and towards whom or what* should pedagogues point? Other than being a mere case of strong instrumentalism, pedagogy – tasked with the refocusing of attention – participates in the reimagination of culture in both a collective and a particular sense.[16] Thus, agonism, education, pedagogy, memory-making and justice go hand in hand. For Todd, pedagogy is also an aesthetic project, since the emphasis of this undertaking has the potential to move away from binary questions of right or wrong, good or bad, success or failure. Much more, knowledge emerging from pedagogical encounters is relational and diverse, which means that it is co-produced between different actors (including teachers, pupils and other learners) whereas the tangibility of knowledge is expressed differently, relating to individual subject positions. However, the practice of this kind of relational education is often restricted in formal state institutions, which tend not to sufficiently acknowledge the multidirectional nature and collective dimension of both education and memory work.

Biesta rephrases Prange's point: "It only becomes education, so to speak, when the question of *how* to do this [education] comes into play."[17] Thus, this chapter can be read as a reflection on how history education can be approached differently from what is usually possible within the tight schedule of formal curricula. Exploring concrete pedagogical practices, if those practices are viewed through a relational process-oriented lens, can expand the democratic and educational imaginary. Carl Anders Säfström, in a similar vein, insists on a necessary distinction – the difference between *education* and *schooling*.[18] In his view, education is inherently linked to democratic principles, rooted in ancient Greek Sophist traditions. In contrast, schooling logics are limited by hierarchical approaches to cultural stratification dating back to exclusionary forms of Aristotelian politics. This fundamental tension between education and schooling continues to matter today, even though this binary works only conceptually, becoming more complicated in practice. Drawing a distinction between schooling and education can be of help. It can, for example, enable an understanding of current phenomena such as the increase in strict managerial and accountability regimes in schools. In Säfström's sense, schooling logics are tied to

high-stakes testing and the obligation for teachers to prove their efficacy and efficiency to state bodies – for example, through obligations to produce evidence of the achievement of certain standardised outcomes.[19] Such regimented schooling measures, in the views of Biesta, Prange and Säfström, limit possibilities for education, which they see as directly linked to democracy and plurality. The oppressive tendencies of schooling regimes make it even more important to seek educational opportunities beyond the formal gaze. Yet, *where* and *how* might alternative educational encounters be nurtured? And in what sense, if at all, might they be seen as transformative?

4. Borderland education: exploring the transformative potential of the Sejny Lektorium programme

One way of responding to this call for democratic education can be found in work that incorporates diverse lived experience when engaging with histories through the lens of pedagogy. Combining elements from agonistic pedagogy with a commitment to historical justice, the educational programme referred to here particularly focuses on voicing historical experiences of witnesses that might be less popular in the gaze of dominant national narratives, many of which are perpetuated through formal history education. The Borderland Foundation was founded for this purpose. Its Sejny Lektorium programme uses oral histories for learning in community settings.[20]

The value of engaging directly with oral witnesses has been widely recognised, but much research concerned with learning from oral histories takes place in regular school contexts.[21] Such work illustrates the intersection of learning in formal schooling and in formal community settings, illustrating the transformative value of learning from testimonies. Scholars and practitioners from around the globe see engagement with oral testimonies as an important “part of a global social movement to democratize history and nation-states”.[22] In the view of Kristina Llewellyn and Nicholas Ng-A-Fook, oral histories, regardless of their location of enactment (in formal or non-formal settings) are (in)valuable public pedagogical means to provide

“historical evidence from the underside, to shift the historical focus, to open new areas of inquiry, to challenge some of our assumptions and judgments of the past, and to bring recognition to substantial groups of people who have been largely ignored or purposefully silenced.”[23]

The Borderland Foundation and its Sejny Lektorium programme build on and further this insight. The Lektorium’s pedagogical spaces are purposefully based on principles of long-term non-formal community education. Its flexible programme is created through close collaboration between community members, experts, workshop participants and Borderland centre pedagogues. This enables in-depth inquiries into emerging topics; self-directed yet guided engagement with lived experiences from members of local communities, including relatives and significant figures in the pupils’ lives; city trips; and place-based learning. As mentioned, the experiences collected through the programme all feed into the development of a final performative presentation, which represents the participants giving the knowledge they have gained back to the community and provides them with additional insights.

5. Staging alternative educational encounters: from then to now

Formally established in 1990 in Sejny (with headquarters in the old Jewish district of this small town, and later also with a presence in Krasnogruda, where the International Centre for Dialogue was created in an old family mansion of the famous Polish American poet Czesław Miłosz), the Borderland Foundation works on both local and international fronts. While many of its activities engage local schools in artistic and educational projects, the spaces for, and aims of, this engagement vary. The foundation's commitment, since the very beginning, has been to bring "the ethos of coexistence of people living among a strong cultural ethnic, generational and ideological and other types of diversity" into the "modern context".[24] Its pedagogy emerged organically over time and dates back to the experiences of founding members of the foundation with alternative, avant-garde theatre. Małgorzata Sporek-Czyżewska (one of the founders) was originally inspired by the work of the Gardzienice Centre for Theatre Practices in the 1980s. As she explained in an interview conducted for this research, she wanted to search for a "different environment for the theatre" to "break with the old-fashioned divisions between the audience and the actors" and to "give up the stage" to address "theatre performances to a different kind of audience". As an actress, she participated in productions that largely relied on so-called explorations of the countryside. Initially this included visits to villages located along the eastern border of Poland, and later there were also visits to other countries. Tales, songs, memorised gestures, objects and details of ancient rituals shared by members of traditional communities provided material for theatrical work. The felt responsibility to further engage with personal stories gave – and continues to give – purpose and drive to the Sejny Lektorium programme in particular, and to the Borderland Foundation as a whole. In the same interview, Sporek-Czyżewska retraced the beginnings of the Lektorium programme. She remembered the crucial effect that engaging with lived experiences had on the educational aspects of the artistic work:

"So I understood, and it's not only me, I was not alone with this feeling that the theatre performance was not the most important thing here. The most important thing was the ability to travel back to be more and more with these people."

This sense of responsibility continues to motivate the Borderland Foundation's interest in oral histories to this day and has reached new generations. The commitment to travel and place-based knowledge creation and exchange underpins the work of the Lektorium programme and provides inspiration for the continuous evolution of its practices. As Sporek-Czyżewska says:

"It's not that we knew from the beginning what we would do, it's not that we had a plan. But for 30 years now, the dynamic has been the same. So the most important thing is the people that we are working with – they are our guides and they are our teachers and so we are following this relation of mutuality. And that's how the work is being moved forward."

The driving force of the Sejny Lektorium pedagogues is rooted in commitments to care and exchange, while community members who share their experiences are treated as experts. They take up the roles of guides and teachers instead of being approached as sources of objective information. According to Sporek-Czyżewska, artistic and educational sensitivities towards "the whole vast personal experience", together with an awareness that these "just didn't fit in the general mainstream narration", were crucial in reigniting the "spirit of communality" in a political context where alternative stories had "no space" to be expressed and where the witnesses of these alternatives were increasingly isolated and slowly vanishing. The intergenerational aspect of this work is crucial for understanding the Lektorium

pedagogy as a case of critical non-formal community education. Sporek-Czyżewska emphasises the need to attend to silences and resulting dimensions of heaviness in the community through engaging both educational and artistic faculties:

"These personal stories, these singular experiences, this is the fabric from which the community life is built. And this is something what is weighing the most heavily on the community life. [...] And here I come back to this question of finding a language for that [i.e. the experiences] which will allow you to share but also to pass on the memory and the stories that you collected."

One way in which the foundation preserves, and continually updates, the memories of the community is its living exhibition based on the long-standing tradition of the *silva rerum* (a multigenerational chronicle common in Polish families in earlier centuries). The exhibition resides in the Krasnogruda Manor House. Similarly, the use of artistic modalities as a form of language is integral to the work of every Sejny Lektorium. The same holds true for the current Lektorium group and for the envisioned communication of their learning from local testimonies as part of the Changing Democracies project. The public with whom the group will share their educational experiences is made up of people from local communities, the group's families, and other friends and acquaintances of the Borderland Foundation community.

6. Findings from the programme: intersections between education and democracy

To describe the most relevant findings from the programme, this section will focus on two series of workshops and discussions held in Krasnogruda with youngsters from the Sejny Lektorium programme, respectively on 24 March and 6 June 2024. These two workshops were the ones most directly connected to the Changing Democracies project and thus are most illustrative of the work with oral testimonies carried out as part of the Sejny Lektorium. Each event consisted of a full day with eight pupils, four tutors and two educators: Sporek-Czyżewska and Czyżewska-Poncyljusz. The analysis is based on recordings of the workshop sessions, notes taken by the authors and video recordings of the interviews.

The first series of workshops was focused on the participants' preparations for conducting and recording interviews with witnesses of their own choosing. They began by watching and discussing three interviews conducted within the Changing Democracies project with witnesses from the Polish–Lithuanian borderland. Then, they discussed the list of questions for their own interviews in light of the witness statements they had just watched. They were instructed to focus on five aspects: personal story, the communist political system, everyday life within that system, experience with the democratic transition and the meaning of the transition today. Each pupil presented their own recording of their collected testimony (cut and edited) and the educators moderated a discussion based on these recordings.

The pupils' initial reflections on their recordings suggested that they were already familiar with oral history testimonies but mostly associated them with memories of the Second World War and Holocaust studies. Some of them even already had experience with recording testimonies and family stories (however, most of these stories referred to a past before the transition period). They were very aware that the main topic of the interviews – the transition of the political system – is only just becoming part

of a history. Very quickly, the theme of the discussion turned to the meaning of democracy today, and this became an inescapable focus of the whole conversation.

In search of relevant witnesses, the participants turned to their immediate surroundings, mostly interviewing family members and neighbours. Many of them interviewed their teachers. Justifying their choice, they often argued that they were looking for witnesses whom they respected, whom they saw as an authority or who they knew had broader knowledge of the subject than others in their community. While the researchers did not explicitly control for the influence of personal relationships in this study, familiarity with and admiration of their chosen witnesses may have influenced the degree to which the participants' learning was transformative (e.g. by making them pay more attention, be more engaged, ask different questions and be more open to reconsidering views).

There were two distinct narrative lines in all the interviews. The first one focused on well-known and well-described aspects of everyday life under communism but related from a local, personal perspective that resonated deeply with pupils. The pupils observed that stories about the routines of public life, such as parades, sounded different when they were given details about the exact spots in the town where they happened; knowledge of the locations caused their imaginations to work differently. The duality of family and public life did not sound abstract when placed in the context of examples the young people knew personally. When explained through the life stories of people who grew up in a different reality from today, the role of the Catholic Church and the banning of books inspired curiosity and opened up space for reflections on the tension between universal history and the specifics of one's own community and place.

The second distinct narrative line related to the reality of the transition period in this rural area of Poland – the poverty, unemployment and emigration that followed privatisation. The themes discussed related to broader issues concerning social injustice and lack of solidarity. The pupils reacted most intensely to this topic, admitting that they did not know much about it and had not expected to hear about it from their chosen witnesses. One of the interviews was particularly striking in this regard: it was a testimony by the grandmother of one of the participants. The youngster had a strong connection with his grandmother, admiring her commitment to social work and the fact that she was highly respected in the community. Clearly, he anticipated hearing a different story from her than the one she shared. He was surprised to learn that she believed the transition period had been destructive for the local community. At one point in the interview, he emotionally asked, "So, what are you saying? That we didn't need the transition?" She firmly answered, "No, I'm just saying that it hasn't been done right, and we lost something from the sense of community that for me was important."

The first line of narrative stemmed from the youngsters' parents and teachers – the first generation to have had the opportunity to study in cities across Poland. This generation was forged by changes brought about by the democratic transition, dedicated to building a different future with a new Poland and a new Europe. The second narrative line came from the older generation, whose voice may be considered less relevant, by their grandchildren and in the overall cultural memory, due to intergenerational distance. Whereas the youngsters' parents were the main witnesses (having been actors and participants in the democratic change), the grandparents in relation had been more hesitant to share their experience and thereby risk countering established narratives. The emerging discussion based on this generational division brought forward how the social ethos of the political left has become discredited due to associations with the former communist regime. Today, leftist narratives have

become disconfirmed so much that it is now difficult to even use vocabulary to articulate issues referring to social injustice and belonging in these parts of Central and Eastern Europe. Instead, many of these concerns have been taken over and manipulated by current populist and far-right movements.[25] Most of the participants highlighted how this intergenerational aspect, visible in the interviews, was crucial for them. Many claimed that they probably would not have been able to challenge their understanding of the democratic transition if not for the fact that the narrative was so deeply connected to their own community. This perspective made them feel engaged and that they had a duty to acknowledge the complexity of the subject. In their written summary of this workshop, one of the pupils stated:

"What I knew [about this period] I knew primarily from dominant narratives, often very black and white. Even such a small collection of interviews with people whose lives went on far from the centre of historical events, on a somewhat separate track, and therefore in reality with a different history of its own, has become a fascinating source of knowledge about the past. The vision of transition, composed of lesser-known and less obvious voices, creates a richer picture, full of tension, dashed hopes, lost opportunities and often a life that flowed at its own rhythm, as if outside the time of breakthroughs and transitions."

This statement shows how the testimonies helped to diversity and add "colour" to the otherwise "very black and white" explanations of history that the pupils usually encountered. There was also a very personal level of transformation: finding connections with their grandparents. Instead of discrediting the young people's previous knowledge, these encounters with marginalised experiences facilitated an integrative perspective on the diversity of human experience that shaped the past, shapes the present and will shape the future of human existence. Next to this conceptual level, the pupils also described engaging with local witnesses as transformative on a personal level. Engaging in conversations with their selected witnesses opened up new paths to intergenerational dialogue on a family level:

"This is something completely new [for me]. In my case, my grandfather [previously] didn't want to say anything at all. The moment of the conversation itself was a kind of breakthrough. And now my grandfather keeps asking me, 'Maybe a second conversation?'"

The second series of workshops was dedicated to analysing and reflecting on testimonies from witnesses in different European countries who contributed to the Changing Democracies project with their personal stories. The young people were divided into two groups and watched different excerpts from the interviews. They also familiarised themselves with the witnesses' biographies and with quotes about democracy chosen from the interviews to become posters shown as part of the exhibition. Later that day, each group was tasked with presenting different witnesses' perspectives and stories (six interviews per group). The working questions were: Who are the witnesses? How do they describe life under an undemocratic regime? What were the changes they experienced living in democracy? What does democracy mean for them? These presentations were the basis for a later discussion between the whole group facilitated by the educators.

The discussion focused on differences between the perspectives of witnesses from countries that had experienced a communist regime and witnesses from countries that had experienced dictatorship. The pupils found the perspectives of migrants who had come to Europe from Angola, Cuba, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Iran to be the most interesting and significant for broadening their thinking. These people seemed to the pupils like outsiders looking in, and their strong statements served to shift the pupils' perspectives. Asked to identify the most crucial points made about democracy in the testimonies, pupils emphasised the view that democracy is an unfinished process that should not be

treated as given. They became aware of the tension between individual freedom and social solidarity and responsibility, the importance of social trust and the often relatively illegitimately acquired nature of leadership, the danger of simply adopting ready-made solutions, the role of the educational system, and the need to develop a democratic culture, understood as a way to express the system of social relations and interactions:

"If people brought up in such a [socialist] school were given the task of building a democratic system, it would be a great challenge. [...] They were not at all accustomed to expressing any opinion. And even the habit of determining one's own opinion without the presence of a strict teacher is absolutely a challenge."

This statement points to the participant's awareness of the restrictive tendencies of schooling systems, particularly under socialist rule, functioning to actively discourage pupils from expressing their personal opinion. Instead of blaming schools as institutions or demonising their key actors, the quote indicates a new critical understanding of the socialising function of official institutions as powerful extensions of the state in the flow of culture. Furthermore, participants perceptively reflected on how today's relatively high levels of societal comfort and security can, paradoxically, work in favour of authoritarian regimes by having depoliticising effects. At the same time, they demonstrated a critical understanding of the mobilising function of historical totalitarian political and economic conditions that directed people's lives through restrictive means. In both cases, their newly gained sense of empathy did not endorse oppressive measures; the young people identified the to a large degree systemic nature of social conditions without blaming people's actions on the receiving end of political decisions.

Similarly, instead of disparaging individual actors, the pupil below voiced a holistic understanding of personal and structural conditions during communist times:

"When the average person's standard of living increases year by year, certain restrictions on rights and freedoms and a one-party system cease to be a concern. [...] This is true both for the experience of a totalitarian system, where people have lost a sense of how big these restrictions are simply out of habit, but at the same time it concerns a situation like today, when in everyday life a kind of vigilance is lost. [...] When these changes and restrictions are not associated with a drastic decrease in the comfort of life, it is easy to overlook some things [referring, for example, to less explicit forms of oppression]."

The last task of the second session of workshops was for the pupils to give their personal answers to the following question: "What does democracy mean for me?" They were asked to formulate oral statements and share them with the rest of the group. Below are listed a few of the most poignant examples of statements. Participants expressed different, and often apparently contradictory, views of democracy. However, due to the anti-hegemonic dialogue space created through the Lektorium, different positions could be voiced and held without seeming to push the group towards polarisation:

"For me, democracy is something that contradicts instincts, in the sense that often if we are put in the position of a decision-maker, we already feel that we know [what to do]. And since we know, we wouldn't like to wait and consult the procedures, to involve others, to have to convince them – we would prefer to just act quickly, act now. So, democracy is something we do against this instinct."

"For me, it [democracy] is constant change and the risk that this change brings. In a democracy, we can never be completely sure. This is both a minus and a plus. Changeability is risky, but it brings opportunities."

“Democracy is something we have to choose. And something that has to be maintained. Because even if now, at this moment, we make good decisions, decisions that have the right, intended effect, that actually do people good, if the people who gave us the power to decide are not included in the process of making it [the decision], then they will neither benefit from this good, nor will they want to maintain it.”

The statements and discussion allowed the young people to sum up their learning, observations and experience gathered over the course of the programme but also to internalise them, giving them their own meaning and individual perspective. The pupils made the effort to move from acquiring knowledge and experience to formulating their own opinions, voicing them and contributing to the discussion with them, signalling a transformation towards higher levels of political maturity. The statements were well thought out, reflecting various aspects of the problems that had been addressed during the Sejny Lektorium programme. They were also very telling about the issues that the pupils found the most interesting, problematic or inspiring. It was clear that the statements referred directly to the pupils' experience with the testimonies. This personal interaction was the most crucial component in the meanings they gave to the learnings and findings. As a consequence, the themes of stability versus risk, the constant process of change in democracy and political life, the responsibility for making people feel heard, and social injustice and solidarity were at the centre of their reflections.

What was also striking was the maturity with which the pupils processed this experience. Their reflections were personal, paying great respect to the witnesses, but also critical. What changed and was also very visible in that last session of the workshops was their very conscious use of language to talk about democracy. They did not simply quote witnesses but referred to concepts and terms discussed in various workshops and seminars. When reflecting on this session, pupils stressed that they experienced an increased confidence from voicing their opinions because they were speaking not only as recipients of information but also as active participants in the search for answers. Since this was a guided process, they were not held back by fears of facing and addressing complexity. They were assured that there was no wrong or right answer. The effort and the level of reflection they put into this process seemed to make them feel that they could have their own opinion on the subject and that this opinion could be valuable to the discussion, but at the same time they were aware that it was just one of many positions that needed to be considered. Finally, almost all of them stated that they felt their learning on this subject had only just started, and that they planned to continue working with and reflecting on the interviews collected for the Changing Democracies project. They were also eager to take part in the performance, even though many of these young people were to take on different scholarly responsibilities because of study plans in different cities.

The analysis of data from interviews with the tutors (who were young people themselves, albeit slightly older than the pupils) revealed similar themes relating to personal transformation, albeit the nature of the tutors' role meant their experiences were different from those of the pupils and they narrated their reflections differently. There was also a professional component that was naturally not present for the pupils. However, it appears that they experienced transformative effects in at least three ways. Firstly, engaging with local testimonies (both those collected by the group and those from the wider Changing Democracies project) enabled the tutors to question and expand their view of democracy. Secondly, hearing from others during the workshops and participating in trips to various cities close by deepened the tutors' knowledge and allowed them to reflect politically. Thirdly, the tutors seemed to develop new pedagogical skills from being responsible for supporting their own group before, during and after their interviews. Through conversations with key people involved in the programme, the researchers gained

insights into the kinds of changes the tutors had observed within the participating young people over time. For example, one of the tutors had participated in various Sejny Lektorium projects over the years. He is now a tutor in various Borderland educational projects that use history to inspire learning among groups of different ages and across formal and non-formal settings, and he also supports the work and daily activities of the foundation. Reflecting on the differences in the group of young people before and after they collected their oral history narratives, he noted:

"They are more into the project [now]. Like they [now think], 'Oh, it's really my job. It's really, I'm into it. It's my grandma's story. Or it's my favourite teacher's story.' So they are more intuitive, more interested in that and they [...] want to more speak with us [more]. Like [...] they are starting to be more open in conversations."

From this quote it is clear that the tutor observed an interest and new sense of responsibility among the pupils arising from them listening to other people's lived experiences. The young people seemed to have become increasingly engaged and confident throughout the process, and the tutors voiced similar sentiments about themselves and their work. One of the tutors, who had joined the Borderland Foundation only a few years ago but had soon become responsible for multiple public-facing strands of activity, developed new skills as an educator and gained new insight into the connection between education and democracy. They recognised being honest ("not to act like somebody else"), being "present" and the ability to "listen" as crucial qualities for a good tutor, as well as for someone committed to supporting democracy. While in the beginning, they had initially been shy and slightly nervous about their teaching abilities, their involvement in the Lektorium programme, in retrospect, had been "a very big lesson". Tutors were asked

"to prepare them [i.e. the group] for something and so I am responsible for that subject and I want to – I need to know a lot to give it [i.e. the necessary knowledge] to them. [...] So for me, it was this kind of information lesson [i.e. learning from city visits and other Sejny Lektorium activities], which was also a lesson in how to be with people like the group, how to feel [i.e. understand] them, how to learn just on this level of being with people in a group through connecting."

The same tutor expressed an ignited desire to learn about the larger political system after having engaged with oral testimonies. What had sparked this new curiosity seemed to be their encounter with testimonies from non-post-Soviet contexts, such as those in more "Western" democratic systems seen through the perspective of an immigrant woman from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Next to a freshly awoken awareness of, and interest in learning about, testimonies related to colonial experiences, the tutor recognised new connections across microscopic and macroscopic political spheres:

"During almost all my life, I was not into politics and [...] stuff like this – I didn't think it was an important thing. It was somewhere behind, like I wasn't connected with that. But now, I know that you can't just cut yourself off from that because you are living in this system in this world, where everything [...] is here. [...] The world is based on politics, and it's [i.e. politics] not the most important [thing] obviously, but it's important, so now, I think I will focus more on [...] the world – like, not the world, but ... that political stuff. Yeah, so I will try to be more present in this world [...] not only here now in Krasnogruda, which is the most important [place for me], [because] I am here and now in Krasnogruda. And I really like it and it's really important not to be crazy [...] but I know that it's not only this place. The world is [...] everywhere. And [...] you and I are part of the democratic system and the world."

After the whole series of workshops had come to an end, the young people were asked for their general reflections on the programme and its meaning to them. Like the tutors, they strongly underlined the importance of engaging with witnesses and testimonies. The quote from a pupil below describes how the programme supported the building of empathy, leading to a recognition of the common humanity connecting people with diverse stories and experiences:

"These interviews [...] showed such a human perspective, such feelings in them. Because in books we have dry facts – what happened that day and that and how it went. But here you could feel their feelings and what they experienced then. Such a simply human perspective. Such a humanisation of the perspective of change."

The pupils also stressed the way in which the programme created a space for them to learn, engage with the discussion, find inspiration and challenge their own views. They appreciated the responsibility of being free to engage in topics that mattered to them, without being silenced or restricted. The young person quoted below addressed the future-oriented dimension of the Lektorium. They highlighted how participant engagement allowed the building of "a basis for dialogue" that went beyond the surface level of the topics discussed:

"We also created [in this programme] our own space to exchange experiences in a sense, but also to create [...] a dialogue, a basis for dialogue. To talk not only about the transformation, but also about other topics."

Finally, the pupils also appreciated the interplay produced by going deeply into learning about one's local community while at the same time becoming a part of a broader European discussion. The young person quoted below described a progression from a personal dimension to a larger European consciousness. The exposure to a diverse pool of languages and experiences allowed him to become aware of their position within a relational process of collective future-making:

"When I started listening to these interviews and these people talking about democracy in so many languages, using similar concepts that mean different things to them, I realised how important it is for us, I mean Europeans – this perspective of our place from which we start, our story and then hearing it against the background of this polyphony that we co-create. I think it is very important."

7. Conclusion

These findings can be read as a sketch of how relational education based on a democratic commitment to engaging with silenced experiences through inquiring into oral histories might occur. They can be interpreted as an experimental approach to the generation of agonistic spaces in parallel to normative schooling procedures, which, arguably, is exactly what enables the encounters staged through the Sejny Lektorium programme to be educational and generative of democratic relations. Additionally, treating older community members as expert witnesses with relevant politically situated experiences can contribute to the furthering of solidarity across generations. In intergenerational researcher Greg Mannion's terms, education and intergenerational practice can be seen as mutually constitutive processes.[26] The current authors hope to have illustrated how intergenerational engagement has been a life-giving force for the establishment of the Borderland Foundation, which also nurtured this case study.

The participant statements presented above narrate various transformations on a personal level (e.g. conversations that were deeper and different than usual with family members and community members who had been interviewed by the pupils). They also suggest developments and improvements in the participants' agonistic capacities (e.g. their ability to express empathy, understanding, new interest, and tolerance of different – and often at first sight incompatible – viewpoints and experiences). The pupils' and tutors' reflections illustrate how both collecting and engaging with existing oral testimonies as part of the Sejny Lektorium and the Changing Democracies project may have fed into the generation of relational democratic futures. They also raise critical questions about the people, space and pedagogical practices needed to achieve transformations in line with agonistic principles. It is important to remember the specificities of the local context – Krasnogruda and the Borderland Foundation – to grasp the significance of community-based cultural work. Willingness to listen to the experiences of differently aged community members is part of why the centre's work has taken shape and continued to grow over the past decades without losing its initial focus.

The current authors hope to have outlined how informal intergenerational practice can form a productive part of relational pedagogies with an agonistic and social justice ethos. In Mannion's words, relational practice and education are integral to "the ongoing, reciprocal production of new relations between generations" and can inspire a deeper understanding of how challenges have been, are and might in the future be "purposefully responded to in some specific place".[27] Furthering this insight, it can be argued that the context-sensitive nature of this study can be seen as a strength both methodologically and educationally. This work centres on Poland, but its insights can be translated and trialled in other contexts that are interested in oral history education, particularly in community-based non-formal settings. Furthermore, the findings can be read as witness statements in themselves. They explain as well as argue for the transformative potential of education by both assuming and highlighting the importance of staging educative agonistic encounters.

In this light, the current authors further suggest that the participants' descriptions of their views and experiences as part of the programme reach beyond mere achievement of technical learning goals, such as getting a high grade or passing an exam. It can be theorised that the experiential nature of the programme, as well as the carefully curated exposure to other democratic imaginaries, can enable the formation of democratic subjectivities by approaching people (both educators and pupils) as holistic, situated historical witnesses as well as living and experiencing relational actors. Biesta describes education as the cultivation of "voices" that may be part of, but are not fully grasped by, their functioning in the *mainstream* "intellectual community" that is largely shaped by formal schooling forces, which excludes in-depth engagement with lived experiences of local witnesses. In his view, the pedagogical task is to prepare democratic actors to

"come into presence in a world of plurality and difference, because we can only come into the world if others, who are not like us, take up our beginnings in such a way that they can bring their beginnings into the world as well."[28]

"Coming into presence in a world of plurality and difference" requires a commitment to nurturing plurality. This needs alternative, informal opportunities where the transformative potential of experiential learning, and with it the democratic nature of relational education, can be cultivated. The condition, however, is to also question mainstream understandings of democracy (i.e. understood merely as a system of electoral party politics) and education (i.e. conflated with schooling). Instead, education and democracy are intertwined processes. Education, viewed through the eyes of the Sejny Lektorium, is

an inherently relational, historically situated act that benefits from engaging creative means. This view can enable us to take up each other's beginnings and carry those aspirations forward. Thus, educational responsibility (the responsibility that educators hold) has both a collective and a subjective dimension; while it addresses the situated person in their uniqueness, both educators and those who are being educated take turns in shaping (and being shaped into) a plural reality. In Biesta's terms, educational responsibility "is not only a responsibility for the coming into the world of unique and singular beings; it is also a responsibility for the world as a world of plurality".[29] This kind of responsibility, albeit in their own terms, seems to have been felt by the majority of the participants in this research, and verbalised in conversations with the respective pedagogues.

The findings from interviews and observations, that are multi-layered testimonies themselves, narrate both the possibility and the importance of nurturing opportunities for community-based long-term educational encounters through pedagogical engagement with diverse lived experiences. Ensuring conditions for the continuation of agonistic educational experiences based on plurality through situated and in-depth inquiry and engagement with oral histories could be a crucial aspect in the pursuit of a larger democratic vision seen as a process of becoming, based on principles of relationality, mutuality and multi-generational justice. In other words, the Sejny Lektorium can be approached as an example of an agonistic process that gives rise to alternative futures. The transformative moments described and discussed in this chapter were experienced and named by both young people and young tutors in their own terms, yet always in reference to the microscopic and macroscopic cultural context and the programme more broadly. The current authors do not want to make any claims about whether these moments were purely agonistic even though they were clearly anti-hegemonic. Nevertheless, this research documents how potentially conflicting historical and personal narratives can peacefully coexist within one educational space without having to become mutually exclusive, which is integral to the continuation of democratic and educational possibilities in a world shaped by plurality and difference. It is hoped that this chapter has pointed out the most exemplary cases, some of which were translated from Polish and some of which were quoted directly. To understand the kind of agonistic process found in the Lektorium, one should remember that the programme does not have a strict beginning or end point, even though this chapter has focused on describing some of its distinct features and phases.

The educational space of the Borderland Foundation continues to develop both intentionally and organically. Because the Sejny Lektorium programme is so deeply embedded in the practices of the local community, agonistic relations between participants and historical witnesses continue to grow and evolve even after a programme cycle formally ends. The selected workshops and reflexive conversations drawn on in this chapter are smaller processes embedded in a larger vision that is being realised at this very moment – for example, through the mobilisation of informal pedagogical practices combined with agonistic and democratic theory. This chapter offers conceptual and methodological findings as inquiries into the possibility of nurturing educational agonistic relations across generations. They can be seen as particular encounters with transformative effects on individual and collective levels that manifest across different yet intersecting temporal and spatial lines.

Endnotes

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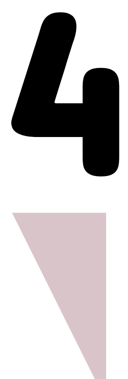

Images of democracy in the eyes of arts students

"Studying politics today should be compulsory. I can't spend two years studying prehistory and one month studying current politics"

Chapter ID

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Summary: In Catalonia, Spain, an activity put in relation testimonies of people who lived through Francoism (1939-1975) and the transition to democracy (1975-1981) with some twenty young art students, who then had to capture their reflections in a sketchbook. The experience allowed to assess the extent to which listening to testimonies of people who lived through an autocratic regime can foster a change in perceptions towards democracy.

1. Introduction

Do we learn from the experiences of previous generations? To what extent are we influenced by the experiences of previous generations, and to what extent do we need to generate our own experiences and meanings?

"Learning from the past" is a widespread maxim in the social sciences, and it is especially relevant when talking about dark pasts, such as wars or undemocratic periods. However, is it possible to learn from the past from other people's experiences, or is it necessary to have our own life experiences that bring us closer to meaning?

The research presented in this chapter took place in Catalonia, Spain. The researcher worked with young art students to consider testimonies of people who lived through Francoism (1939–1975) and the transition to democracy (1975–1981). In total, 23 students from the La Massana Arts and Design centre in Barcelona listened to the oral testimonies of three people who lived through Francoism and the Transition (known in Spanish as La Transición), as a basis for reflecting on the achievements and limitations of the emergence of democracy in Spain. The students captured their reflections in a sketchbook.

The overall aims were twofold: to assess the extent to which listening to testimonies of people who lived through an autocratic regime can foster a change in perceptions of democracy, and to identify which factors have a greater or lesser influence on this change in perception.

2. Methodology

The research followed the parameters discussed in detail in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of research characteristics

Why	This research aims to put this into practice and analyse the impact of oral testimonies in raising awareness of historical events.
What	The research considered a set of linked questions: To what extent can the viewing of testimonies about the dictatorship and the transition to democracy influence listeners, and in what ways? What methodological and contextual factors may have conditioned this influence?
Who	The following people took part: 23 students from the La Massana School of Arts, their two art teachers, the author of this chapter and, indirectly, the witnesses featured in the three testimonies.
When	The activities with the students took place between October 2023 and June 2024, in a sporadic fashion and integrated into the school year. The research was carried out during the same period and in the three months following.
Where	La Massana School of Arts (a school for artistic baccalaureate and higher-level vocational training) in Barcelona, Catalonia, Spain.
How	The qualitative research involved observation of the activities, two group discussions (*n*=21 and n=21/21 students), one focus group (3 students) and analysis of 15 student sketchbooks. The sources of information were therefore the notes and recordings of the activities carried out in the classroom, and the drawings in the sketchbooks handed in by the students.
What for	To draw methodological conclusions about how to make the most effective use of testimonies for social science education, and specifically for citizenship education.

2.1 Why: on democratic health, citizenship and (ant)agonisms

The concerns that gave rise to this research stemmed from observations of the rise of populism, the decline in electoral and civic participation, increasing polarisation, and growing support for extreme right-wing parties (in general, and especially among groups aged under 25) in Europe, including Spain.

From a historiographical point of view, it is often considered that teaching about dictatorial or undemocratic contexts allows us to learn from the past and not to repeat such regrettable historical events. However, as authors such as Anna Cento Bull and Hans Lauge Hausen critically reflect, the antagonistic and cosmopolitan[1] memories that are more often promoted in Europe – usually excessively Manichean (in the case of antagonism) and often ignoring the nature of the conflict (in the case of cosmopolitanism) – may be contributing to populism, racism and fundamentalism.[2]

The researcher collected three life stories of ordinary people who lived through Francoism and the Transition, with the intention of providing a non-Manichean and multiperspectival view that could overcome antagonism. In addition, a learning space was created for students to experience what happens when they listen to the life stories of people who defend democracy as a system while at the same time identifying its limitations, regardless of their ideology.

2.2 What: how can listening to testimonies about Francoism and the Transition affect perceptions of democracy?

One of the hypotheses of this research was that learning from testimonies about the dictatorship and the Transition – when the testimonies provide sufficiently plural and nuanced views – can be an effective way of learning from the past that transforms points of view about present-day democracy in Spain. Without assuming this hypothesis to be valid, the research aimed to analyse the extent to which viewing testimonies about the dictatorship and the Transition can affect listeners' appreciation of democracy, to identify the most significant lessons learned, and to understand what methodological and contextual factors may have conditioned this influence.

The testimonies depicted the experiences of two men and one woman who lived through the Franco regime (for 32, 23 and 27 years respectively). Although the witnesses came from families with different ideologies (one of them pro-Franco), the testimonies themselves were mostly critical of the dictatorship, so the points of view provided limited diversity. In that sense, because the testimonies did not include the point of view of a perpetrator, they cannot truly be said to fulfil the requirements to be considered agonistic memories,[3] instead broadly corresponding with a cosmopolitan point of view.

In summary, the research questions considered for this chapter were: To what extent did viewing testimonies about the dictatorship and the Transition influence students' perceptions of democracy? How did the students relate to stories about dictatorship or democracy? To what extent did their own characteristics (age, gender, class, degree of politicisation, ideology, values, etc.) condition their view of democracy? To what extent were the testimonies decisive in these reflections? What didactic factors favoured or hindered the influence of the testimonies on the students' reflections?

2.3 Who: participants

The main group participating in the research consisted of 23 students. Of these, 13 identified as women, 4 as men and 6 as non-binary. They were between 18 and 25 years old, and some of them came from or had parents originally from other countries (Argentina, China and France). The research considered whether their characteristics – gender, age and origin, among others – were reflected in the drawings they provided in their sketchbooks. It was possible that, as a group, the students could have had an ideological bias towards left-wing values, [4] given that they were art students.

In addition to the students, two teachers at the La Massana school of arts, both men, also took part. One of them had lived through the Franco regime until he was nine years old. The second had lived through it for barely a year. Their role mostly consisted of providing the students with instructions for the drawing task. However, the teacher who had lived under the Franco regime for nine years offered a few critical comments on the regime.

The author of this chapter, who did not directly experience Francoism, played the dual role of facilitator of activities and researcher. She is a researcher at the Escola de Cultura de Pau (School for a Culture of Peace) at the Autonomous University of Barcelona and specialises in tackling controversial issues. Although her family was mainly pro-Franco, with a grandfather and uncle who were members of the military that sustained the regime, she tends towards having anti-Franco bias (and at the same time a predisposition to engage in dialogical exchanges in an agonistic mode). Her role was essentially participant observation, in the sense that she did not limit herself to data collection and analysis, but also promoted the initiative in the art school and facilitated the occasional discussion session. This allowed for a better degree of (participant) observation, although at the same time this implies a greater risk of bias in the analysis.

2.4 When: stages of implementation

The preparation stage lasted from June to October 2023. It involved selecting people from whom to collect testimonies, recording their life stories, identifying a group of students with whom to carry out the experiment, negotiating with the teachers, editing the testimony videos and planning the activities with the students.

The activities with the students – including an initial training session and discussion, the students' independent work, the presentation of their reflections in drawings, and a focus group – took place between October 2023 and June 2024, during the school year. The research was done in parallel (during the same period as the school activities) and in the three months following.

2.5 Where: the Spanish and Catalan context

The research took place in Spain, a country that faced civil war (1936–1939) between the Republican and the National sides, and a dictatorship (1939–1975) where the Nationals ruled. The fact that those names are not opposites (e.g. republicans/monarchists or Spanish nationalists/plurinationalists) shows how several groups overlapped in the two main blocs. In brief, the Nationals were right-wing Spanish nationalists and monarchists, while the Republicans were left-wing plurinationals and republicans (including anarchists). These cleavages persist today in updated forms. While the dimension of the republican/monarchist split is not known because very few data are published about support for the

monarchy, research considers the left/right split to be more polarising than the Spanish nationalist/plurinationalist/non-nationalist split.[5]

The transition to democracy in Spain, starting in 1975, focused more on amnesty than on truth, reparations, reconciliation or memory. Transitional justice was not officially addressed until the Historical Memory Law was passed in 2007, more than three decades after Franco's death, and the topic remains controversial. In fact, many consider that in Spanish society, learning from the past is not just controversial but taboo, especially in teaching. How people remember the dictatorship has changed over time, with differences also existing between regions and contexts: as some argue, "within a broad cosmopolitan frame, it is possible to detect traces of agonism".[6] Indeed, as some researchers highlight, "the Catalan memory culture might be more antagonistic (Spain as an oppressor) than the Spanish one, mostly preoccupied with the recuperation of the memory of the victims".[7]

More concretely, this research study took place in Catalonia, a territory in which anti-Franco spirit predominated (although the three testimonies were from people who had migrated from other regions of Spain). As the account of the activities with these students will show (see Figure 2 below), it is important to note that seven years earlier, an uprising in favour of Catalan independence had taken place, including a symbolic referendum launched by civil society and declared illegal by the Spanish government. The school-based activities took place in Barcelona, although two of the witnesses and some of the students lived in different cities. The La Massana School of Arts is part of the Autonomous University of Barcelona. The teachers who agreed to the initiative were convinced that a public educational institution must fulfil a social function.

2.6 How: summary of the activities

The research had an essentially qualitative approach, oriented towards understanding the construction of meaning, although mixed methods were used for the analysis.

The collection of information involved observing the initial learning activity (image theatre exercises and a debate following the viewing of the testimonies on the dictatorship) (23 students); analysing the students' drawings, together with their presentation and justification of their drawings (n=15); and a focus group (n=3). Although a focus group (taking the form of a semi-structured interview) was planned from the beginning of the research, it was revealed to be particularly appropriate when it was realised that the students had barely reflected on the testimonies in their drawings. Seven students were pre-selected together with the teachers to participate in the focus group, according to criteria based on diversity (both less and more politicised people), but only three students actually participated in the discussion, all of them with the most politicised profile.

The sources of information were therefore the students' drawings; notes and transcribed recordings of the activities carried out in the classroom (in October 2023 and January 2024); the 15 sketchbooks handed in by the students, with more than 150 drawings (created in May and June 2024); and the transcription of the focus group discussion (which took place in June 2024).

The information was analysed using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. The drawings, the presentations and the focus group were initially analysed qualitatively. The information from these three sources was analysed through classroom observation, discourse analysis of their interventions during the sessions and analysis of the drawings of the sketchbooks. At the same time,

in order to minimise possible biases in the analysis, all of this information was collected in an Excel file that included the personal characteristics of each student (age, gender, origin, social class if specified by the student, degree of politicisation and ideology if specified) alongside transcripts of their oral contributions and their drawings.

The themes to be analysed were defined inductively, based on the analysis of the transcripts and drawings. They are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Themes used for the qualitative analysis

Focus of analysis	Description
Perception of democracy and the political system	Perception of the degree of dictatorship/democracy where the students live or lived, in Spain or other countries.
	Perception of the system of representative democracy in Spain, and of the role of politicians.
	Social and economic benefits or challenges that policy is, or is not, able to address.
	Factors impeding politicisation.
Meaning-generation process	References to the influence of the testimonies in students' reflections on democracy and the Transition.
	References to articles, podcasts and other sources of information that students had used for further information.
	References to the influence of schooling on students' reflections.
	Politicisation through family or friends.
	Aspects of identity (age, sexual orientation, class consciousness, etc.) that influence politicisation and perceptions of democracy.

The various sources of information were compared to ensure correct interpretation of the students' meanings: images from the sketchbooks, the students' oral presentations about their work, and (in the case of the focus group participants) the students' additional reflections.

2.7 For what: changing changing democracies

Starting from the observation that European democracies are changing (the "changing democracies" of the project title), this research aimed to look at how to change these more dysfunctional aspects of democracy, using a play on words (changing changing democracies) that is intended to move from observation to action.

Specifically, the research aimed to assess to what extent oral testimonies about people who have lived through non-democratic regimes can influence young people's views on democracy and their political behaviour. Understanding the degree of influence these testimonies had will allow conclusions on how to use them more effectively in social science education, and specifically in citizenship education.

3. The educational activities

The classroom activities took place across two sessions: a first one in which the students listened to the testimonies and discussed them, and a second one in which the students presented their thoughts on their process of reflection on democracy.

3.1 Session 1: what are your experiences of democracy?

The interaction with students began with a two-hour session in which the Changing Democracies project was introduced, along with its objectives of educating people on the value of – and encouraging to reflect on the limits of – democracy today, based on testimonies from different countries that have experienced different kinds of non-democratic situations (left-wing, right-wing and colonial regimes).

Secondly, in order to connect the topic with their previous experiences and knowledge, the students were asked to carry out a “image theatre” exercise in four groups.[8] Two groups reflected on their own positive experiences of the proper functioning of democracy, and two groups reflected on their own negative personal experiences linked to deficiencies in the current democracy. The images relating to the proper functioning of democracy had to do with the holding of free elections (Figure 1a) and public services (Figure 1b). Those relating to its malfunction had to do with the repression of a civil society attempt in 2017 to hold a referendum on whether Catalonia should be independent of Spain, which was declared illegal and repressed by the police (Figure 2).[9]

Figure 1: Positive personal experiences of the smooth functioning of today’s democracy

(a) One group showed the act of voting.

(b) Another showed the use of public transport, as an example of public services.

Figure 2: Negative personal experiences due to the shortcomings of today's democracy

Both groups show the unofficial (and unauthorised) referendum in Catalonia on 1 October 2017, which asked citizens to vote on the independence of Catalonia and where police repressed the electorate at numerous polling stations.

Although three out of the four images relate democracy to the possibility (or impossibility) of voting, the discussions following the image theatre exercise had more depth. The students mentioned aspects such as polarisation, the role of the media, fear of the rise of the extreme right and so on.

Thirdly, a video was shown containing fragments of the three testimonies. The three witnesses were Ovídia Sánchez, a woman originally from the Andalusia region who worked in factories and as a domestic worker and participated in 'neighbourhood movements'; Mariano Royo, from La Rioja region, a male teacher in a private school during the Franco regime and in a public school during the Transition; and Andrés Ruiz, from the Andalusia region, who had held various jobs and been imprisoned for two years for his anti-Franco militancy. To contextualise the video, the three testimonies were presented, highlighting that the witnesses' family backgrounds were ideologically different (one pro-Franco, two anti-Franco), although it should be noted that the ideas reflected in the video were not so diverse (all of the witnesses had left-wing ideas). The video then presented an 11-minute montage of their answers to three questions.

The first question – "Did we live better with/against Franco?"[10] – prompted personal anecdotes about the witnesses' lives during the dictatorship. Two explained that they had experienced propaganda on some subjects and punishments at school, and one had been able to attend school for only one year due to poverty. They had also experienced other prohibitions and censorship, such as police persecution in the streets for *saltos* ("jumps" – speedy actions where participants handed out pamphlets, as demonstrations were prohibited).

The second question – "How do you evaluate the Transition?" – prompted the witnesses to assess the Transition. Negative evaluations included how the same people (including families) held power for long periods (e.g. in the judiciary, police, army and government) and economic inequalities. Positive evaluations included the achievement of the right to vote and more democratic forms of organisation.

The third question – "What now?" – prompted reflections on future difficulties for young people, and the lack of participation of young people in demonstrations and campaigns for social rights.

After the students had watched the video, a new debate was opened to enable them to share their reactions and reflections. There was a lot of discussion about rights, in light of a testimony explaining that in Franco's time people were not allowed to kiss or hold hands in the street (not even heterosexual couples). There were also reactions to a witness who deplored the fact that her grandson had never gone to a demonstration. In the debates, some students criticised the extreme right, and in some cases the right. Some, probably less politicised, remained silent, although the researcher attempted to encourage dissenting opinions through some questions. Although it was not an objective of the activity, some students entered into a left–right debate.

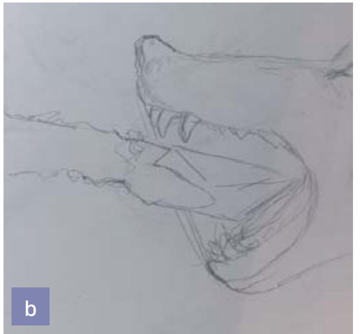
At the end of the session, the students were given instructions on their next task (which they would carry out outside the sessions). They were asked to produce a sketchbook to express their reflections on democracy after watching the testimonies and thinking further about them. They were not asked to produce finished drawings but instead to capture their entire creative and reflective process, with a view to presenting their drawings, to the group in the second session. To facilitate their assimilation of the contents of the video, the students were informed that it would remain available on the internet and that they could review it while preparing their work. The art teachers also provided them with some press articles and podcasts, and they were encouraged to do their own research. They were also informed that the Changing Democracies project included a research component and an exhibition, and that students who wished to participate in the exhibition with their drawings were welcome to do so.

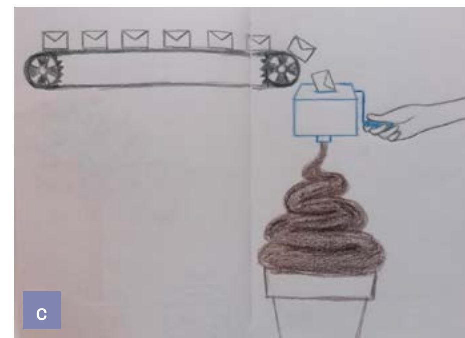
3.2 Session 2: what are your reflections on democracy?

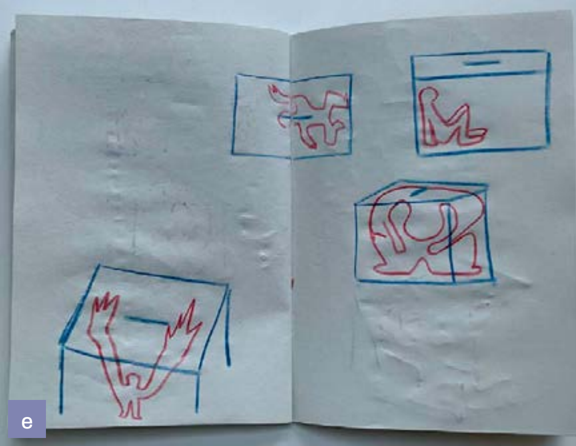
The second session took place three months after the students had viewed the testimonies. In this session, the students presented their sketchbooks, explaining the process of reflection that had led to their drawings.

In general, the students' views of democracy were rather pessimistic (Figure 3). A significant proportion of the drawings depicted politicians as liars (three students), cockroaches, clowns or bureaucrats. Drawings also represented the uselessness of voting, depicting the ballot box as a paper shredder (three students), a rubbish bin, or a process where social diversity is homogenised and grossly simplified via overly narrow political choices.

Figure 3: Drawings with negative views of democracy

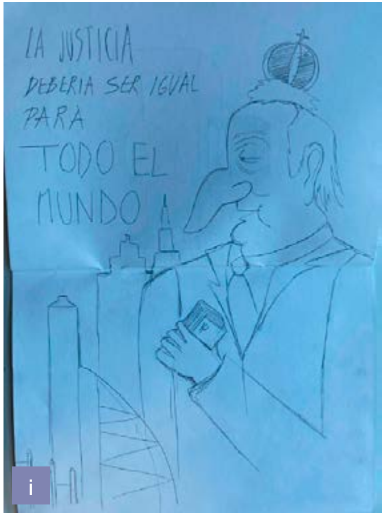






Drawings of the uselessness of voting: (a) "vote here" in a rubbish bin (by Ismael Alcaide); (b) votes in the lion's den[11] (by Estel Soler); (c) the fate of the electorate's votes as appetising or nauseating (by Jiaying Li); (d) electoral lists with options to choose which one is worse (by Enya Garolera); (e) "trapped in the vote" (by Alba Martínez); and (f) "come on, choose" (by Aina Sans).

Drawings of politicians: (g) as cockroaches (Ismael Alcaide) and (h) as liars (Enya Garolera).

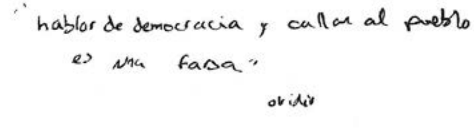


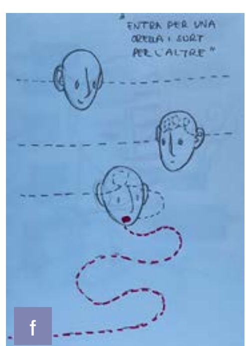
Drawings of the monarchy and judiciary: (i) “justice should be equal for everyone” – a comment on the privileges of the monarchy (by Nora Zapata) and (j) “No effort to maintain a just balance” (by Clodette de Felipe).

Several drawings identified democracy as being at risk (one drawing explicitly contained the phrase “Democracy at risk” and another used “Democracy is at stake”). Two others identified the risk of the resurgence of the far right (Figure 4) or suggested that the far right is an impediment to progress.

Figure 4: Drawings of democracy at risk

Drawings directly referencing the far right: (a) risk of history repeating itself on the far right (by Estel Soler); (b) “With the growth of the far right, our comfortable democracy is being silently threatened” (by Aspen); and (c) a static bicycle with swastika wheels with the title “Just like the old days” (by Isaac Guzmán).

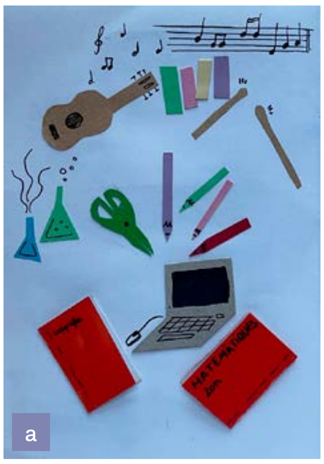




Drawings commenting on restrictions on thought and speech: (d) muted citizens (by Nora Zapata); (e) “Talking about democracy and silencing the people is a farce (Ovid)” (by Bianca Rossi); and (f) “It goes in one ear and out the other” (by Aina Sans).

The rest of the students – the majority – created drawings that portrayed democracy as established – with flaws and dysfunctionalities to be resolved, but as an unshakeable reality (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Drawings of the benefits of democracy



(a) Democracy as access to education, culture and scientific research (by Aina Sans); (b) voting as a way of envisioning the future (by Pau Macián); and (c) the possibility of conveying political demands (by Pau Macián).

Of the 21 students who submitted drawings, most focused on representative democracy and voting, while two considered the importance of direct democracy (as a concept). Although many referred to the etymological definition (“people power”) and two drew arms in the air as a representation of people power (e.g. Figure 5c), surprisingly very few drawings showed concrete strategies for direct participation, such as referendums, demonstrations or participation in grassroots organisations.

Also noteworthy is the use of metaphors, such as an eagle (a symbol of Franco’s regime) fighting with a lion (a symbol of the Congress of Deputies) (Figure 6). Other drawings included images of iconic buildings, such as the White House, or American soldiers raising their flag in a foreign territory, as a representation of imperialism.

Figure 6: **Experimentation with symbolic representations to depict the struggle between democracy and dictatorship**

On the right, an eagle (Francoist symbol) attacks a lion (a symbol of the Congress of Deputies). On the left, other drawings featuring eagles (coming out of a ballot box, flying, etc.). This student also used arrows pointing upwards, part of the symbol of the Falange Española de las Juntas de Ofensiva Nacional Sindicalista, a fascist political party created in 1933, shortly before the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War (by Clodette de Felipe).

The next section explores the meanings the students gave to the testimonies and their processes of reflecting on democracy in the past and today.

4. What significance did the students attach to the oral testimonies?

In addition to seeking to understand the students' perceptions of democracy, the research asked about the process of meaning construction: to what extent were the testimonies decisive, and what other factors were influential?

4.1 How did the students construct meaning from the testimonies?

The first observation, regarding the construction of meaning, is that seeing the testimonies did not have a significant influence on the students' conception of democracy. Although several of the drawings reflected ideas against dictatorship, only one student mentioned (in his presentation of his drawings) a reflection arising from the video, which had to do with the importance of youth participation (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Invitation to youth participation

"And you, if you are between 18 and 25, I invite you to conduct a session to think about whether the system is working in order to change things" (collage by Isaac Guzmán).

While explaning this poster, one of the drawings in his sketchbook, this student reflected that "at the end of the day, older people are already very comfortable with the progress achieved, and I think it is us young people who have to do something about it in order to change the world".

In the focus group, asked to what extent they remembered the contents of the testimonies, the students' answer was "little". Two students mentioned the testimonies' reflections on the role of young people in the defence of democracy. Indeed, the video included clips of Ovídia Sánchez lamenting that her grandson had never been to a demonstration; of Mariano Royo encouraging young people not to

be "users of democracy" but to struggle for democracy and to produce, not only consume, good for society; and of Andrés Ruiz saying people should "get off their asses" to defend their own causes. Thus, although some students were able to remember messages from the testimonies (Figure 7), the impact of the messages was not significant.

A second observation is that approximately a quarter of all of the students expressed that they were "not interested in politics". The students' explanations of this statement showed that this was not so much because of a lack of interest in politics – some of the students who claimed to have no interest in politics maintained elaborate arguments about the dysfunctions of the political system – but rather because of disappointment with politicians and the poor representativeness of the political system.

The lack of interest in politics was complemented by a lack of consensus on what politics is. While one student expressed her perplexity and disagreement with the statement that "everything is politics" (Figure 8a), another student denounced in his drawing (Figure 8b) the double standard around what is considered political and what is not, depending on the political interests.[12]

Figure 8: Examples of drawings of what is (a)political

(a) "Everything is politics?" (by Luz Ortega), showing her perplexity and wondering whether the good or bad functioning of trains is political or not. (b) "Eurovision is apolitical!" showing the Eurovision logo (the heart) containing the flag of Israel (by Ismael Alcaide).

Bearing in mind that the testimonies did not have a significant influence on the reflective process recorded in the students' sketchbooks (see Figure 7 for the single exception), how did the students construct their meanings?

Analysis of the sketchbooks shows that the construction of meaning was based primarily on the etymology of the word "democracy" (*demos*, "people"; *cratos*, "power") from classical Greek, rather than using more elaborate definitions of the concept . A second source of inspiration that students frequently used was quotations about democracy. Other sources included newspaper articles and podcasts as well as students' own reflections on the shortcomings of democracy in certain countries (such as Spain, Argentina, Nicaragua and the United States).

Table 3: Summary of discussion topics and key learning points

Topics for reflection	Testimonials	Other sources
Importance of the welfare state		x
Obtaining civil liberties	x	
Youth's lack of participation	x	
What is political and what is not		x
Existence of risks and threats to democracy		x
Distractors		x

As shown in Table 3, the main discussion topics and learning points – discussed in the sessions and reflected in the drawings – referred to the importance of the welfare state; to the obtention of civil liberties ((in)ability to walk down the street holding hands, right to demonstrations/"jumps"); to the youth lack of participation and apathy; to what is political and what is not; to the existence of risks and threats to democracy; and to distractors (social media, too fast way of living). Two of those issues were addressed by the testimonies and remembered by some students.

4.2 Methodological factors

The limited influence of the testimonies on the students' reflections and drawings makes it necessary to reflect on what methodological factors acted to limit the testimonies' pedagogical usefulness. Among the possible hypotheses are that the students' exposure to the testimonies was too short, which did not allow them to develop sufficient empathy with the witnesses' life stories; that the video was not sufficiently emotional; that it did not connect sufficiently with the students' prior knowledge; and that the students accessed the testimonies through a video and not in person, potentially limiting their scope for curiosity by not allowing them to ask questions. Other hypotheses are that the video was perceived as too biased, potentially leading to its rejection; that the other materials (articles and podcasts) the students consumed dispersed the message too much; that the video did not require re-reading or re-viewing the testimonies; that the students were not required to view the testimonies more than once; (so as not to falsify the results); and that the context was an art lesson with art teachers, not a social sciences lesson, which may have influenced the direction the students' reflections took.

Some of these potential explanations were more prominent than others in the conversations with the students. In the focus group, the students identified several reasons why they had found the work challenging and why the testimonies had not been particularly influential in their elaboration of their reflections.

On a more generic level, many of the students expressed difficulties in carrying out the task, mainly due, in their own words, to not being in the habit of being required to have a formed opinion on a subject. In the words of one student, "Having an opinion makes you responsible, and people in general don't want to have more responsibility." Two students expressed that they would have liked to spend more time on the work because the exercise had provided an opportunity for introspection, "self-knowledge and personal growth". But most expressed difficulty in clarifying their views on democracy and politics. Although throughout their studies they had been asked to take a position on other social issues, such

as poverty or gender, they experienced this task as much more politicised and requiring them to take a stronger stance.

Indeed, the Spanish education system is not characterised by encouraging a critical spirit or the clarification of one's own values or personal opinions: although there is the subject of Education in Civic Values, it makes up a small proportion of the curriculum (usually, depending on the region, students undertake one class in primary school and another in secondary school)[13] and it is stigmatised as a subject of little interest, with the class time often being wasted. Although the current curriculum invites teachers to approach subjects from the perspective of controversial teaching situations that require inquiry to base subjects on controversial learning situations and subjects that require enquiry, this was not the educational framework in which this study's participants had been educated. In the social sciences, too, the cultivation of one's own opinion does not usually take centre stage. As an example, a comparative analysis of the seven main social science textbooks for (the fourth year of secondary education) in Catalonia concluded that only 4% of activities in social science textbooks asked students to debate or contribute their personal opinion (compared to 91% of activities involving reading comprehension and summarising information, 4% of those relating historical content to current events, and 1% involving action in the immediate environment, such as interviews with family members or research in the supermarket).[14] Thus, these students' lack of practice in critical thinking corresponds with the educational reality of the country.

A second reason the students found the work challenging and why the testimonies were of limited influence has to do with a lack of interest in the subject. As previously identified, the object of the reflection was demotivating for a quarter of the class, who stated that they "did not like politics" and who had represented democracy and politicians in very derogatory terms. The correlation between motivation and learning has been widely explored in the field of education.[15]

More specifically with regard to the limited influence of the testimonies, some of the arguments mentioned in the focus group suggested that there was too long a period of time between the viewing of the testimonies and the drawing task, which meant that the influence of the testimonies was blurred.

Obviously, too, the fact that the task of constructing meaning in the sketchbooks did not require the use of the testimonies was an influencing factor. However, this was a conscious decision on the part of the researcher to enable observation of the extent to which the testimonies were influential.

A third reason, which affected some students in particular, was the alleged ideological bias of the activity. In the first session, it was emphasised that the initiative was part of a European project that had collected testimonies from non-democratic systems of different types (fascist, communist and colonial) and that, although one of the people interviewed came from a Francoist family, the testimonies shown in the session over-represented left-wing ideologies. Subsequently, at the end of the first session (in which the testimonies were shown), one student expressed her discomfort at participating in the project, saying, "I don't want to participate in politics." The teachers answered that she had every right to decide not to participate in the project and that her drawings would not be analysed for this chapter, but that she had to do the drawings and present them to the class as part of the course. An attempt was made, for this research, to speak to her directly to find out more about her point of view, but she was evasive and the teachers recommended not insisting. When the other students were asked whether they considered that ideological bias could be one of the reasons for their difficulty in tackling

the project, the majority opinion was that, although they identified that there was indeed a bias in the testimonies, this had not been a determining problem for most of them but it had been for a student who was ideologically distanced from the interventions in the testimonies. These students considered that the bias was justified in the context of the subject matter, which focused on testimonies against the dictatorship in Spain.

The question of bias relates to the role of the teacher and the creation of a space of trust in which all opinions can be heard in a spirit of understanding. According to her classmates, the student who felt uncomfortable with the research project was not usually withdrawn. As such, the fact that she could not find the confidence to defend her positions and opinions suggests that the content of the testimonies was not appropriate for her, and perhaps some others. At the same time, there were indications that there was a somewhat favourable climate for giving opinions that were not aligned with either the left or the right. One student stated that she would have liked to know the dissenting opinion of the student who felt uncomfortable. Another student reflected in her sketchbook cases of a lack of democracy both in Javier Milei's Argentina (right-wing anarcho-capitalist) and Daniel Ortega's Nicaragua (autocratic left), showing that in addition to the positioning between left and right, a positioning between democracy and dictatorship is possible.

Thus, the main conclusion from the educational activities is that coming into contact with the testimonies was not enough to significantly influence the students' perceptions. Among the above hypotheses as to why the results were poor, some were confirmed and others were not. The factors that proved to be the most influential were a lack of personal opinion, not being used to taking a position, disenchantment with the subject matter addressed, too long a time lag between viewing the testimonies and carrying out the task, the lack of obligation to take the testimonies into account when carrying out the activity, and, for some students, excessive bias and/or a lack of a safe space in which to contradict the accounts of the testimonies.

4.3 What other factors were influential?

Given that the testimonies did not seem to have a significant influence on the students' reflections on democracy, the research explored what other factors were influential in the development – or not – of their democratic awareness.

Despite reporting a lack of interest in politics, some students indicated that their main source of information on political issues was their parents (none mentioned their grandparents), when their parents commented on current affairs. Thus, the family is a factor in students' political awareness. family seems to be an influential but not a determining factor: two of the women students who said that their contact with politics was related to their parents' politicised reflections stated that they had no interest in politics.

A second factor was identity – either social class or gender identity. According to some students, perceiving discrimination had given them greater political awareness. In one case, too, a student said that although he did not consider himself part of any minority, solidarity with regard to discrimination against people close to him (in this student's case, gender discrimination suffered by his mother and girlfriend) was a factor in his growing political awareness. Among other identity elements, neither age nor family origin y seemed to have been determining factors in the participants' reflections.

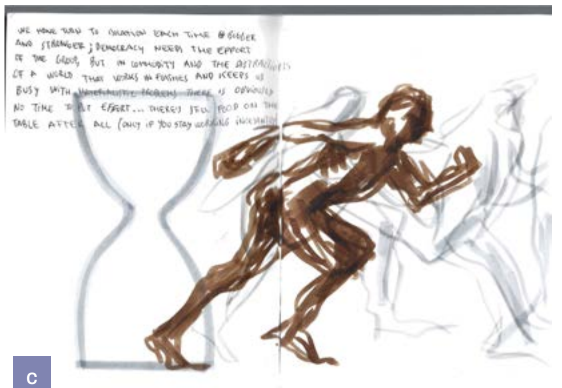
Unexpectedly, one factor identified by the students as not being influential was schooling. Although one student recalled discussing democracy when studying ancient Greece,[16] several students deplored the lack of contemporary political content: "Studying politics today should be compulsory. I can't spend two years studying prehistory and one month studying current politics" or "Of course you have to study history, but you also have to know about current politics!" These statements seem to reveal that, in the absence of education on the relationship between the past and the present,[17] learning about non-recent history does not seem to be sufficient for students to develop criteria for assessing the current state of democracy. Another possible explanation is that it is taken for granted that democracy today necessarily has to be deeper, more participatory and/or more equitable, and that therefore examples from the past are considered too low a standard to enable students to make judgements about democracy today.

Another factor that this research found to be significant in non-politicisation is the presence of distractors (Figure 9). The students identified a host of elements that distract people's attention and thereby reduce their political awareness. Some of these factors are the media, social networks and alienation due to work obligations.

Figure 9: Examples of drawings of distractors

a

b



c

(a) Life as a video game, alienated by money and likes (by Aina Sans);
(b) "We have to turn to isolation, each time bigger and stronger; democracy needs the effort of the group, but in commodity and the distractors of a world that works in flashes and keeps us busy with materialistic problems there is obviously no time to put effort... there is still food on the table after all (only if you stay working incessantly)" (by Aspen);
(c) "The best defense against democracy is to distract people –Noam Chomsky" (by Arlet).

In the light of these observations, what conclusions and lessons can be drawn from this experience?

5. Conclusions, recommendations and discussion

Reflecting on democracy, its scope and its limits, based on the testimonies of people who suffered its absence, does not seem to have been a decisive experience for the participating students.

In the classroom, their reflections were based on an invitation to identify their own experiences of democracy: two negative and two positive experiences. The testimonies, for their part, were critical of the current state of the democratic system but left no room for doubt that, for all its faults, a democratic system is preferable to a non-democratic one. Even so, the students' drawings were characterised by a very negative view of the current system in Spain (lies, lack of representativeness, etc.). The students took democracy for granted and did not perceive it to be under threat, but identified some specific factors that put it at risk (e.g. the extreme right inequality, distractors).

This chapter has pointed out possible methodological explanations for the limited effect that the testimonies had on the students' drawings and reflections: for example, too short a period of exposure (time), which did not allow enough empathy with the witnesses' life stories (emotion) and did not provide sufficient opportunity to understand them (knowledge), and also the inability to question the witnesses in person (curiosity). Some students additionally mentioned excessive bias – or insufficient confidence to question it. Among these possible explanations and others, the ones confirmed by the participants are summarised in Table 4.

The main systemic factors identified as enabling students' democratic awareness were the influence of the family in cases where parents watch and comment on the news at home, and students' identity consciousness (awareness of gender discrimination and socio-economic class, which leads to politicisation), which led them to be critical of the political system.

In contrast, the main systemic obstacles to the students' democratic awareness – and why they generally found the task of expressing their views on democracy difficult and unmotivating – turned out to be disillusionment with politics, the educational system's failure to invite them to clarify their own values and opinions, and the distractions of what Guy Debord has called the "society of the spectacle".[18]

Table 4: Factors influencing students' democratic awareness

	Enabling factors	Obstructing factors
Systemic factors	- Politicisation through the family - Identity consciousness (relating to gender or oppressed social classes)	- Disappointment with politics leading to disinterest - Lack of practice clarifying their own values in the education system - Distractions that make it difficult to focus on political issues (social networks, alienation, etc.)
Factors relating to the testimonies	- Content that has connected with their reality (e.g. testimony lamenting that the witness's grandson had never been to a demonstration)	- Too long a time between viewing the testimonies and carrying out the task - No obligation to include reflections on testimonies - (For some students) bias in the testimonies and/or lack of confidence in expressing dissent

Oral testimonies played a very limited role in students' learning about an inclusive and multiperspectival concept of democracy in the research described above. The testimonies did not, in themselves, guarantee significant learning or awareness-raising. As Table 4 shows, there are systemic and methodological factors that favour and hinder democratic awareness, but contact with the testimonies did not prove to be a determining factor.

In the light of these findings, structural measures could be recommended, such as a more critically focused education system oriented towards helping students to understand today's world (not only history) and emphasising the clarification of values and how to argue one's own opinion. A further measure would be to promote the responsibility of families in the democratic awareness of their children.

Regarding the use of testimonies, the research points to some methodological recommendations. One is to ensure that the testimonies offered include ideas that young people can build on, that connect in some way with their current reality, and that allow them to understand that the topic is a historical reality that has repercussions for the present. Moreover, notwithstanding a need for more evidence in this regard, it may be important to give sufficient time to each testimony so that students have time to understand the essentials of the witness's history before listening to their ideas. This would also allow room for nuance, empathy and curiosity, and would enable the verbalisation of complex ideas so that the witnesses' statements do not seem like slogans.

As for discussions following the testimonies, it seems crucial that the conditions are in place for students to perceive that they can disagree with both the claims of the testimonies and the opinions of other students. This requires creating a trusting atmosphere in the classroom beforehand, ensuring that the testimonies show a sufficiently wide range of perspectives, and facilitating discussions by playing devil's advocate and/or giving voice to dissenting opinions in the classroom.

The experience reported here opens up questions for further research to evaluate the impact of the confrontational mode on learning. In the experience described, one student expressed a rejection of the project because of perceived excessive bias. Other students stated that, while they recognised the ideological bias, they saw it as justified because of the subject matter (transition from dictatorship to democracy). Even so, the drawings presented do not seem to show significant differences in the students' evaluation of democracy. It seems clear that the perception of ideological bias is different depending on the ideology of the person receiving the message, and that the people who perceive a greater bias in a testimony are those who are more distant from the witness's political views. The student who refused to participate in the project demonstrated a first-level agonism in the classroom,[19] as she was able to express to the teachers her discomfort with the lack of multiperspectivity of the testimonies of the witnesses who lived under Francoism and could decide not to participate fully in the project.

If the aim is to transform people's perception that democracy is a better system than dictatorship by using testimonies in an educational arena, several methodological challenges arise. The agonistic approach is the closest to multiperspectivity, and it seems the most inclusive mode to use to promote learning from the past, as it involves engaging with people who feel close to the perpetrators. At the same time, though, there is a persistent challenge in how to make perpetrators accountable. As Anna Cento Bull, Hans Lauge Hansen and Francisco Colom Gonzalez state, the agonistic mode needs to explore further how to "ensure that the understanding of the perpetrator and his or her background does not turn into

legitimation".[20] Showing understanding for perpetrators without demanding that they show a sufficient sense of responsibility could lead to rejection among people who feel close to the perpetrators' victims. In such cases, creating a safe space and encouraging the expression of a plurality of opinions might not be sufficient for a group (such as the students in this research) to regulate itself, so the question of how perpetrators are portrayed needs to be carefully balanced when testimonies are chosen.

Endnotes

1 For explanations of the concepts of antagonistic, cosmopolitan and agonistic memory, see the introduction to this volume.

2 Cento Bull, A. & Hansen, H.L. (2016), On agonistic memory, *Memory Studies*, 9 (4), pp. 390–404.

3 According to Cento Bull and Lauge Hansen's framing, when people use agonistic memory, they "1) avoid pitting 'good' against 'evil' through acknowledging the human capacity for evil in specific historical circumstances and in the context of socio-political struggles; 2) remember the past by relying on the testimonies of both perpetrators and victims, as well as witnesses, bystanders, spies and traitors. The perspectives of the former perpetrators can provide crucial elements for understanding when, how and why people turn into perpetrators; 3) recognize the important role played by emotions and promote empathy with the victims as a first step towards remembering the past in ways that facilitate and promote critical understanding and also acknowledge civic and political passions; 4) reconstruct the historical context, socio-political struggles and individual/collective narratives which led to mass crimes being committed." People using agonistic memory must therefore incorporate the views of perpetrators in order to understand the personal and social context that led to the situation developing. See Cento Bull & Hansen, On agonistic memory-Abstract, p. 18.

4 The latest opinion polls show that the under-25 age group is characterised by a greater affinity towards the extreme right than older age groups. Even so, the fact that they were students of artistic disciplines determines a very specific profile of this age group, as observed in their interventions at the debates and in many drawings. Indeed, many comments from the participants in the sessions confirmed a tendency towards left-wing rather than right-wing ideologies. See CEO, 2023. Enquesta sobre generacions i participació. Dossier de Premsa. Centre d'Estudis d'Opinió. https://upceo.ceo.gencat.cat/wsceop/8948/Dossier de premsa_1070.pdf.

5 Miller, L. (2020), Polarización en España: más divididos por ideología e identidad que por políticas públicas, *EsadeEcPol Insight*, 18, https://www.esade.edu/ecpol/en/publications/polarisation-spain.

6 Ferrándiz, F. & Hristova, M. (2021), The production of memory modes during mass grave exhumations in contemporary Europe, in: Berger, S. & Kansteiner, W. (eds.), *Agonistic memory and the legacy of 20th century wars in Europe*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan. pp. 39–68 at p. 44.

7 Hansen, H.L., online discussion with the author during the peer-review process, October 2024.

8 Boal, A. (2002), *Games for actors and non-actors* (2nd ed.), London: Routledge.

9 In a similar workshop that took place in Barcelona in September 2024 with secondary school pupils, none of the images about the shortcomings of democracy referred to the referendum, probably due to the fact that the younger students had fewer memories of the 2017 events. Instead, several groups of students – which included a larger proportion of ethnic minority students than in La Massana group – represented how some public services (justice and education) had discriminatory practices towards immigrants.

10 In Spanish, "Con(tra) Franco vivíamos mejor?" (the sentence is open: "con(tra)", or "with/against", in order to include two points of view). "Con Franco vivíamos mejor" is a widely used phrase by those who are nostalgic for Francoism, indicating that they had a better life under Franco. "Contra Franco vivíamos mejor" is a phrase used by opposition activists to indicate they had a better life while they were mobilised against Franco. This question was added in the video as a heading for its first part, but it was not asked in this way in the interviews.

11 In Spanish, the equivalent idiom for "in the lion's den" is "in the wolf's muzzle".

12 The second session with the students took place shortly after the Eurovision Song Contest 2024, which was marked by the controversial participation of Israel. While Russia had been banned since 2023 for invading Ukraine, Israel was not banned in 2024 on the grounds that "Eurovision is apolitical" (DW, Eurovision Song Contest: Politics getting in the way of pop? (3 May 2024), https://www.dw.com/en/eurovision-song-contest-politics-getting-in-the-way-of-pop/a-68979556.

13 Decret 175/2022, de 27 de setembre, d'ordenació dels ensenyaments de l'educació bàsica, *Diari Oficial de la Generalitat de Catalunya*, 8762, 29 September 2022, https://portaljuridic.gencat.cat/ca/document-del-pjur/?documentId=938401; Ley Orgánica 3/2020, de 29 de diciembre, por la que se modifica la Ley Orgánica 2/2006, de 3 de mayo, de educación, *Boletín Oficial del Estado*, 340, 30 December 2020, pp. 122868–122953.

14 Barbeito, C. et al. (2017), *Anàlisi de la didàctica de les ciències socials des d'una perspectiva de pau (Tercer d'ESO, 2007, 2015, 2016)*, Barcelona: Institut Català Internacional per la Pau. https://escolapau.uab.cat/img/programas/educacion/Informe-llibres-de-text-3-ESO_DEFINITIU_-17-05.pdf.

15 Bueno, D. (2017), *Neurociencia para educadores*. *Todo lo que los educadores siempre han querido saber sobre el cerebro de sus alumnos y nunca nadie se ha atrevido a explicárselo de manera comprensible y útil.* Barcelona: Octaedro.

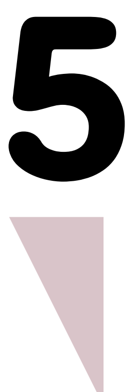
16 According to historian Jack Goody, considering the ancient Greeks as the inventors of democracy is a "theft of history", an ethnocentric interpretation that underestimates the importance of the Mesopotamian empire in shaping this political system. Yet this is the predominant narrative in schools. See Goody, J. (2012), *The theft of history*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

17 As mentioned above, only 4% of the activities in social science textbooks ask students to relate historical content to current affairs. See Barbeito et al., *Anàlisi de la didàctica*.

18 Debord, G. (1988), *Comments on the society of the spectacle* (M. Imrie, Trans.), London: Verso.

19 For further clarification of first- and second-level agonism, see the introduction to this volume.

20 Cento Bull, A., Hansen, H.L. & Colom Gonzalez, F. (2021), Agonistic memory revisited, in: Berger, S. & Kansteiner, W. (eds.), *Agonistic memory and the legacy of 20th century wars in Europe*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 13–38 at p. 21.



5 Take the floor. Performing with non-fiction material

Portuguese voices and words in the transition from dictatorship to democracy

Chapter ID

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Summary: The text describes and exposes the work carried out using the words of testimonies from Changing Democracies with theatre students in a workshop to create scenes from non-fiction material. The challenge was to perform with non-fiction material (the testimonies) to look into how these words and social experiences can mark the present of these young people and find new readings and interpretations of democratic values today. The research protocol: 'What do I want to say?', 'Where do I want to say it?' and 'How do I want to say it?' is described and fuelled by the transcription of the young students' written reflections on their performative experiences.

1. Introduction

This research was carried out in Porto, Portugal. It consisted of intensive work presented as a research workshop to a group of eight young theatre (acting) students aged between 20 and 22. The workshop sessions took place on 11 and 29 April 2024 at ESMAE – the Escola Superior de Música e Artes do Espectáculo (School of Music and Performing Arts) at the Instituto Politécnico do Porto (Polytechnic Institute of Porto). The choice of April was no coincidence, as this month marked the 50th anniversary of the introduction of Portuguese democracy on 25 April 1974 (known as the Carnation Revolution).[1] This group was chosen for practical reasons, as these students were being tutored by Rita Reis, for a one-term seminar (from February to July). At the same time, this seminar aimed, among other things, to chronicle the past 50 years of theatre in Portugal, from the post-25 April period and the establishment of democracy to the present day. We also considered it pertinent to work with testimonies collected as part of the Changing Democracies project, due to the obvious encounters of voices and times in understanding the movements of people and structures in the transition from dictatorship to democracy in Portugal. The challenge was to perform with non-fiction material (the testimonies) so as to look into how the words and social experiences relate to the present of these young people and reveal new readings and interpretations of democratic values today.

This chapter is a reflective text begun during the research workshop. It attempts to document the experience – in line with the approach of 'practice as research' and 'research as practice' – where the researchers worked with students on materials from the Changing Democracies project. The first session, on 11 April, a selection of quotes from Portuguese witnesses were read. The second session, on 29 April, we focused on the screenings of testimonies from Changing Democracies.

This chapter describes the utterance and critically reflects upon it, aiming to answer the research question "How do young people give meaning to violent stories from dictatorship to democracy?" A brief descriptive framework is provided of the performative situations and scenes that were created on the ESMAE school campus. Further questions considered in this chapter are: What meanings did the students attribute to the testimonies when they selected extracts to create scenes? What provokes them as young people? As young people and future performers, what untold stories can they tell?

The students – Benedita Mendes, Carolina Gandarela, Catarina Dias Vieira, Francisca Queiroz, Gabriel Pessoa, Inês Pereira, Marta Costa and Silvia Collado Baeza – generously provided written reflections on the experimentation and performance that went into this experience. We would like to convey the greatest of thanks to them, at the beginning of this text, which would not have this form and detail without the courage they showed about dealing with violent stories. Such acknowledgements are usually placed in footnotes, but in this text the students' writings are presented as material and provide a way of listening to young people, so it is right to thank them prominently.

The authors of this text are deeply involved in the research process, as they both supervised this group of young people and have worked with the Changing Democracies project since its inception.

2. Take the floor: the workshop

2.1 Introduction of the activity

Could a research protocol be created to enable experiences that would allow for collective discussion and reflection by those involved (the testimonies) in the untold stories of Changing Democracies?

The 11 April session with the group of young students began with an explanation of the Changing Democracies project, the aims and processes of the project partners, and the core of the project: a collection of testimonies from 31 witnesses of transitions from dictatorship to democracy in ten European countries.

The students were given a document containing excerpts, previously selected by us, from the interviews with the three Portuguese witnesses. These excerpts were offered so students could have a go at experiencing, experimenting with and training with non-fiction textual materials.

The students were told straight away that the words were from real people. They were given a biographical summary of each witness, so that they knew that these were quotes from people who had lived through the transition from dictatorship to democracy in Portugal. However, the choice was made not to specify which witness each quote belonged to. Also, the students did not see or hear the witnesses before they were shown the quotes, as it was hypothesised that this would prevent them from getting "stuck" in any one tone of voice and merely imitating that voice; it was intended that this would open up more possibilities for the content and ways of working with it. In the second session, on 29 April, the students viewed the raw material of the witnesses' interviews. Despite this, we were concerned that the quotes were being presented out of their original context, which is always dangerous, so we chose the excerpts very carefully. Even so, space for subjectivity, semantic and otherwise, is always inevitably left open, both in the "positive" sense of freedom concerning what can be done with words and their meanings, and in the "negative" sense of implying that something may be misunderstood because it is dislocated, or taken out of context.

The students read all the quotes and each student was asked to choose one quote, motivated by their personal connections, concerns, interests or curiosities. This was followed by a brief moment of sharing what had emerged from this first reading – keywords, ideas, images, or sensations that had caused disquiet or some other impact. The group was then invited to research and work with the witnesses' words as a starting point.

2.2 Introduction of the utterance

The utterance proposed for this workshop was based on an idea that had been in development for some time and that is going to be the core of the Portuguese local experience. As an actress and creator, Rita Reis is working on a project called *Poetry: Revolution*, conceived as a performative action to take the word and to take the best place to say it. This is an invitation, from the actress to the public, to participate in a brief journey of freedom through poetry. Based on poems and songs connected to the celebration of freedom, the Carnation Revolution and the achievements after 25 April 1974, the invitation is the revolutionary act, understood as a proposition, as the will to choose and change and to get involved.

This idea also served as a base for the work with this group of young people, as it foresaw different formats and durations, and could take the form of a show or a workshop, to build ways of saying and doing together. In its adaptation for this research with theatre students, a similar utterance was presented, but using words from the Portuguese witnesses. In both cases, the essence of the thinking that underpins Poetry: Revolution remains: the will of "my" revolutionary act, of the individual self in communication with the whole, seeking those spaces between. It is about taking the floor, in the sense of "taking place" and taking the opportunity to speak – the place of speech. And it is about an action, an event that is "mine" in the world, because the first movement is from us: the first revolutionary act – as a decision and an event – is a personal daring.

The utterance proposed questions for the students to develop a performative action to take the floor and the place:

Take the floor.
How do I operate my little revolution?
The choice of words. The choice of a place.
How can I occupy the place?
What is my action?
Do I want to be nearby or far away?
Who do I want to say it to? Do I want to be heard and seen? By whom?
How do I intervene in the place and make myself heard and seen?
What makes it urgent? What do I need to say? What do I need to hear?
The conquest of freedom in the right to be a person and to be different, but not disconnected from the need to share and communicate with those around us, fuelled by the desire to be heard, to be seen, to exist and to propose relationships: to take the floor.

The utterance summarises three simple lines of thought:

- The choice of words: what I want to say.
- The choice of a place: where I want to say it.
- How I occupy the place: how I want to say it – this *how* encompasses the *what* and the *where*.

***What** do I want to say?* – not only the words we choose but also the meanings we give them – in other words, our saying in this saying and this saying in our saying; that which haunts us and which we therefore want to haunt and problematise.

***Where** do I want to say it?* – the action in the public place (this may be more or less public, depending on each person's preference; it may be the place in us where the courage of the revolutionary act resides, and this may be a more private or intimate sphere, which also presents a huge risk). A perception of the spaces between is played out, looking for ways to occupy larger or smaller spaces, which generate greater or lesser proximity; for a moment, there is a kind of involuntary privatisation of public spaces.

***How** do I want to say it?* – This *how* encompasses the *what* (words) and the *where* (place) to create images, to create landscapes, to invade perspectives – generating moments of friction and suspension, giving new meaning to the place and to what can happen there, and fostering a space between. How do I reach the other? How can my action/revolution enter directly into the movement of a place? A strong idea of composition is worked on here in a rich, complex and non-linear way, because we say things

in various ways, not just mere verbalisation, and we can propose various paths and possibilities for communicating, confronting and questioning.

Afterwards, they were asked to write brief critical reflection that explained why the specific motivations, concerns and performative actions had emerged from the testimonies for them.

2.3 The students' reflections on the testimonies

This section presents the quotes the students chose and the brief reflections they were asked to write immediately after their performative actions. The aim was for them to share in a simple way, still driven by their feelings and adrenaline, the concerns or desires that had motivated them: from that (the testimonies words), why did I do this (the action)?

Armandina Soares: interview excerpt

One of my sisters was a primary school teacher. Primary school teachers couldn't just marry anyone. Prospective husbands had to have a certain status, otherwise marriage wouldn't be authorised. The level of control over people's lives was absolutely unacceptable.

Benedita Mendes

When I read the quote, I immediately remembered my grandmother and how she did her teacher training here. This building contains the ghosts of its former inhabitants. Our freedom to simply be here is a feat that would have been impossible just 50 years ago, especially as young women. We can be here, wearing trousers and studying art and coming in like everyone else. The idea was to alert people to something we don't think about, even though we're here every day. It's an achievement to be here today, as we are.

Benedita and Carolina (whose reflection appears below) had common interests and performed together, motivated by the themes of women's freedom, achievements, conscience and memory. They approached people around the school, interrupted lunches, stopped in the corridor, sat at the table with groups, and said: "Sorry, let us interrupt for a moment just to say something" and spoke the quotes they had memorised. And they asked: "Do you know that before now a woman couldn't...? And today, we women, we can!"

For Benedita, the coincidence of the place and the fact that a member of her family had studied here many years ago (ESMAE was previously a training school for primary teachers) were significant. They helped her to value the achievements of democracy that allow women today to study at a higher level of education than before and that allow Benedita, herself, to do so at an artistic school. This achievement is of immense value, being a very recent development in Portugal's history and something that many places around the world do not yet have.

Armandina Soares: interview excerpt

We'd get to secondary school, for instance, it was as ridiculous as this: we all had to be wearing uniforms. Well, that was their less serious demand… But if, for instance, the hem of the uniform was too high, this lady from Mocidade Portuguesa,[2] this teacher from Mocidade Portuguesa, would undo the hems to make sure they were as low as they deemed appropriate.

Carolina Gandarela

(Talking to young women; teenagers)

Mention trousers, maybe put them on in the toilets while someone is getting in or already there. Saying it in the toilets while putting on lipstick. A bit too much; that's not really the image I want to convey. Putting together two texts that can coexist and taking them to groups with women because alone is too scary. Start with something apparently light and insert it into a serious context.

Carolina's interests were similar to Benedita's and both reinforced each other. What motivated Carolina was to address the roles of women and young girls, questioning clothing habits and behaviours from the past to highlight the achievements up to the present time, but also the ongoing struggle that is still necessary. Carolina was moved by this topic, feeling a sense of urgency. She shares in her reflection ideas she thought of for imparting this concern – how two young women can draw attention to these topics, in order to empower their contemporaries today.

Milice Ribeiro dos Santos: interview excerpt

If there was something that changed the way I thought about politics and understood the complexity of democracy, it was this permanent questioning, this permanent contention, the enquiry over every issue. This world[3] of opposing ideas was very intense.

Catarina Dias Vieira

The quote I chose challenged me, made me feel uncomfortable and gave me the idea of formulating a strange topic, which gave me the idea of saying it during a break or at lunch time when people are in a routine and doing a comfortable activity, where sometimes uncomfortable conversations arise.

Catarina enacted a simple and direct performance that was almost invisible. She gathered colleagues together at a terrace table and then launched into difficult topics about "permanent questioning" of everything between conversations about trivial topics of the kind that would be usual at a lunch with family and friends. At a certain point she spoke the quote she had chosen. Her purpose was to suddenly create an embarrassing space for potential reflection, to evoke the feeling that we have all had of everything being fine and trivial at the typical family lunch when suddenly a difficult subject arises –

namely those related to politics – and everybody becomes conscious of a tense moment, suspended in embarrassment, that may or may not provoke debate, questioning and conflict. Catarina's performance focused on the uncomfortable conversations that can arise in initially comfortable environments, such as between family and close friends. The question of how to manage the diversity of opinions in a democracy, even in the most intimate contexts, appealed to her. Through her performance, Catarina proposed a thought about the importance of the family and the richness of debates and doubts that arise in a tangle of personal and public universes, with a very strong awareness that our political formation and capacity for social debate begin in the family, which is a miniature society where we grow.

Armandina Soares: interview excerpt

What I would say is this: watch out. It's very easy to be fooled, and many people have been fooled, and what I'm really afraid of is the advance of the far right in Europe… and in Portugal. That's what worries me the most.

Francisca Queiroz

From these two paragraphs I felt the need to do something that wasn't so ephemeral, that wasn't just aimed at a group of people, something that would mark like a stamp.
Hence the idea of sticking up a poster at the entrance to the ESMAE, which is where all the students pass through.
The fact that it was next to a stone that says "State Heritage" turned out to be quite ironic. To the sound of Zeca Afonso's "Grândola, Vila Morena", because for me that's the true Portuguese anthem. The quote was chosen because this topic is very present in our country today. And it worries me a lot.

Francisca wrote her chosen quote on a poster and her action was to paste it on the external wall of the ESMAE entrance, with a nearby speaker playing "Grândola, Vila Morena (an iconic song by Zeca Afonso that was chosen as one of the signs to start the military rebellion and the revolution of 25 April 1974, becoming the anthem of the revolution). Francisca was particularly motivated by this quote because it resonated with her anger and fear stemming from the Portuguese elections a month earlier, which had seen the election of 50 far-right deputies to the parliament. In her action, there was an urgency and a will to "wake people up" to the danger of the growth of the far right and the fear that words are not enough. What drove the action was a desire to print a permanent reminder that we inevitably have to look at, which was why Francisca pasted her poster strategically, in a place that everyone had to pass to enter the building.

Milice Ribeiro dos Santos: interview excerpt

My family wasn't religious. Every year, my father would ask the government for his children to be excused from attending the religion class and even religious services held at school. This was hard on me and made me somewhat fearful… I remember that, whenever I left the classroom, before the children started praying and as I removed my gown, I would sometimes hear them beg for the salvation of my soul.

Gabriel Pessoa

Talking about religion is a private matter. A big taboo. Being conservative is the opposite of ESMAE? Non-religiosity is punishable? I'm not religious. This is a difficult subject for me. Approaching people privately, individually, with no expectation of a result and without explaining when the action was going to start. Does the ESMAE environment appreciate/listen to/discuss the subject or just observe it?
This space, the school space, changes my approach to the subject. This subject of religion seems to have become automated. Is being revolutionary with it just about breaking the silence? Or talking about it, in the case of ESMAE?

The themes of religion and intimacy sparked Gabriel's interest. When reading the quote about the pressure that existed for those who were not Catholic during the dictatorship, Gabriel made a connection with the pressure of being religious and religious freedom in a democratic regime. How should we interact with others, keeping in mind respect, freedom of choice, and peer pressure in habits, conventions and beliefs? Gabriel's performance idea was to make a kind of human fence in a passageway – not necessarily imposing, but creating some difficulty for those passing by. In this way, he would literally try to create a space between, to stop a person for a moment and have someone listening to what he had to share. Without being able to predict beginnings or endings, his purpose was to cause discomfort on several levels: for himself, for whom this topic was difficult, and for the people he addressed, who also perhaps did not know what to say or do – and ended up leaving. But there was the hope that maybe they would think about the encounter later.

Armandina Soares: interview excerpt

For instance, I myself and a group of friends, we used to go to a bookshop, I've told you about it… I think it was called Divulgação, and they always had forbidden books stashed away. They knew who we were. So we could buy these books. I had a lot of banned books. In fact, it's one of the things I've always had. At my house, this will be a problem when I'm gone… what will happen to all of those books?

Inês Pereira

Books are a very special thing to me | instinctive | guaranteed access to information | speaking in a place where it's supposed to be quiet | censored authors.

Armandina's quote about the books banned during the dictatorship was what impacted Inês the most. Inês spent some time quickly researching poets, novelists and dramatists who were silenced and censored during the dictatorship. She selected books by these authors that were freely available in the school library and distributed them to the students studying there. With each book delivered to each desk, Inês said: "Did you know that this was a censored author? During the dictatorship, the book wouldn't have been available to us." Armandina told how, during the dictatorship, she obtained banned books with the help of booksellers. Based on this information, Inês developed a performative action in which she interrupted the work and the atmosphere of silence and spoke loudly in a school library to question the students and give them information that many people do not really know or think about.

Maria Filomena Manuel: interview excerpt

We still live in a masquerade! Because nowadays you can't say "black", you can't say "negro"... You can't... You can't say "he's gay", "she's a dyke", whatever... And so there are covers that serve as camouflage and people live under those covers, and you can't tell whether someone is honest or not. Just like with money. Money is money... It produces dishonesty. And people enter into that farce as well. It's not as if... I can look at someone and know whether they are being honest with me. No, they're not. They're being dishonest. They look at me... I don't get that "good morning!" with a smile, only a "good morning" because they have to greet me. This woman they can't say is black or offend... in any way. Deep down, when they declare that "there are rights for these folks!", "this must be done", that helps to camouflage things and we go on living a farce.

Marta Costa

Regarding my performance, the original sentence puzzled me because wanting to compare the fact that you can't call people "black", "gay", or "dyke", with the fact that people allow themselves to be distorted by money is completely absurd, because one thing has nothing to do with the other, at least in my logic, other people may be different. I've chosen to use only some parts of the sentence, because if I had exposed the original sentence, I'll confess I was afraid, because I would fall into the error of agreeing with it, but what if it were the other way round?

Marta was intrigued by the fact that she did not understand the relationships between the themes that emerged in the quote. It was because of this discomfort that she chose it (Marta's choice again raises the question of semantic subjectivity that inevitably remains open; in this case, in the session that followed, in which the students viewed the witnesses' interviews, the context of this quote allowed Marta to understand what until then had seemed like a contradiction). With this in mind, she chose to centre her performative action around the issue of the power of money.

Marta put up a poster in a corridor (which connected the main entrance to the classrooms) displaying the phrase "Money rules" and placed herself in front of the poster, which in a way framed her action: Marta held coins of one, two and five cents in one hand, and with her other hand she took them out one by one and let them fall to the floor, continuously, as people passed by, in a mechanical, monotone echo that could be heard from the front door.

With this action, Marta raised the question of money as power, but there was also an ironic dimension: the money that (as people say) "corrupts" and moves the order of societies – establishing hegemonies and inequalities based on economic power and overlapping many other values – was presented with a certain contempt, as Marta's action showed a continuous waste of cents (those "worthless" coins). Perhaps money is not so powerful after all.

Milice Ribeiro dos Santos: interview excerpt

In fact, the sixties have some commonalities, right? Those are the years of the Vietnam War, in '64… Then Rhodesia declares its independence… It's the year of the Cultural Revolution… Better said, the decade of the Cultural Revolution in China. It's the year when… There's May '68, Salazar falls from his chair and suffers a brain haemorrhage… and the year ends with the landing of a human being on the Moon. Therefore, it's a year... Better said, it's a decade which provides a very special context to politics.

Silvia Collado Baeza

This is the text I've chosen and I've made a small contribution to it:
"In fact, the 1960s have some commonalities, don't they? They were the years of the Vietnam War, of Rhodesian autonomy. It's the year of the Cultural Revolution... It's the decade of the Cultural Revolution in China. It's the year of May '68, when Salazar fell off his chair.[4] <u>In this decade, demonstrations by workers and students against the oppressive state began in Spain</u> and it was the year that ended with a human being going to the moon. So it's a decade. It's a decade that has, that gives a very special context to politics."
First of all, I chose this text because reading it gave me hope, it gave me the impetus to think about current struggles. At the time we live in, we only think about how difficult everything is and how much it takes to change things, but it's not like that. The struggle begins with small acts, the small changes that we make day by day. That's why I thought of this kind of "performance" as a simple conversation you have between friends, but which later makes you think, makes you turn your head, reflecting on what you could do to change things. Historical memory is very important if we are not to make the same mistakes as in the past.

Silvia underlines the value of memory as an impulse to think about the struggles of her/our time. Her action was to invite her classmates, and anyone else who wanted to join in, to sit on the steps outside the school and create a space for conversation to remember the achievements that her chosen quote mentions, using the power of words to pass on knowledge, believing that it is in these small actions that we begin to make changes. Silvia brought a kind of invocation to the present moment, to today's young people, to foster hope for the future. The importance of other people's courage in other significant moments in world history, which gave us the world we have today, drove her to confront her own generation: What should we do? Why don't we talk? What are we afraid of, if other people did this in times much more difficult than ours?

It is worth mentioning that Silvia is a Spanish student in the Erasmus programme who came to study in Portugal for a year. She deliberately added an example from the history of her country to the quote

(included and highlighted above), which was not part of the witness's original words. All the students were aware of this option to deliberately add something to the original text. It is important to emphasise that this addition to the original was performed (spoken to an audience), and no writing without context was recorded or added. The performer deliberately spoke the entire text of her performance using her mother tongue.

2.4 Later reflections

Later, after a break in the first session, the group mapped keywords and major themes that the students had made visible and heard in their performative actions. The group debated these themes and their interconnections with other subjects that are important, not only in our day-to-day lives and experiences but also as part of a direct legacy of achievements that it is necessary to fight for – ones that were secured from the democratic revolution of 1974 and some of them still emerging. These demands have always been, and continue to be, highlighted through songs (those from the Carnation Revolution, those from later years and even those that new artists compose today). Then the group listened to songs, such as those of current young artists who have made new versions of songs by Zeca Afonso, José Mário Branco and other iconic singer-songwriters from the revolution and post-revolution period.

In the second session, on 29 April, the group used the keywords mapped in the previous session to share thoughts about the work they had developed, thinking in particular about the possibility of recreating their performative actions and their potential impact on this and other contexts. Subsequently, the students viewed the videos of the three Portuguese witnesses from the Changing Democracies project, taking time to listen and to deepen and enlarge their understanding of how to work with non-fiction material for performance.

3. On methods and concepts: scattering the findings

We emphasise, with Robin Nelson, an accommodation between practitioners and "the academy", so that innovative, investigative praxis (*being–doing–thinking*) can not only be accepted but fully respected as valid research.[5] The approach to structuring the workshop and writing this text is, on the one hand, a way of documenting it, and, on the other hand, a way of categorising it as an *arts-practice-based research process*.[6] We defend this way of proposing and doing research as one that does what it names.[7] Young Portuguese students were asked to (literally!) give meaning to or make meaning with the words and thoughts of the witnesses, experimenting and working with an utterance to develop theatrical actions.

The intention was to share the words of the Portuguese witnesses of the Changing Democracies project and play with them, making them happen again and rehearsing an in-built training in looking at non-fiction material as a basis for creating dramatic scenes. That is, as people, educators and researchers, the authors of this chapter were both compelled to situate the practices of art education in their own historicity. In the field of theatre training, we do not advocate for biographical approaches, historical revivals or re-enactments. In other words, this research was not interested in transposing these witnesses as figures to be brought to the stage; rather, we were interested in their words. The will was not to create characters; it was for the words to be core, beyond the living people who say them – raising the possibility of links with other stories, thoughts, lives, ages and so on. This direct work with words as material and utterances opens up when we take those words as the centre of the

action and as a trigger for scattering the testimonies' words. With this desire for dynamic archiving,[8] it was not expected that the students would be magically transformed by the words of the witnesses, nor could they become experts in the contemporary history of their country in 14 hours. Rather, as mentioned above, we wanted to share the words of the witnesses and play, together, with their dramatic possibilities.

Beyond this framing, it is our conviction, with Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández, that "the arts don't do anything".[9] The need to contribute to dismantling the rhetoric of effects (as summed up by Gaztambide-Fernández) requires questioning the salvific discourses surrounding the moral benefits of the arts or even artistic research, as granted only by using the term "the arts" or "the theatre". Too often, "art", "music" and "theatre" are taken for granted as universal and morally guaranteed values, without any critical thought, as is conveyed by discourses around salvation by the arts. This research has tried to "haunt" this exclusionary "absolute truth". A strong effort was made to resist the seduction of any essentialism or belief that "as long as it's art, it's good, and as long as it's art, it's research". That is why so much of this chapter is dedicated to the description of *what* was done and *how* it was done, defending the process as a situated practice. Following Gaztambide-Fernández, "rather than making a case that something called 'the arts' should be applied like a magic salve onto the lives of youth, the argument should hinge on the understanding that the lives of all students are always-already imbued with creativity and symbolic work, whether it involves something called 'the arts' or not".[10] However, both of us are educators engaged in social justice and in ways of constructing other (even fictional) ways of living together. It would be erroneous to draw the conclusion that, since symbolic creativity imbues the lives of young people, there is no need for cultural production in formal education. As Gaztambide-Fernández argues, "on the contrary, if we understand education as a cultural process, then schooling should be, first and foremost, a place for engaged and continued cultural practice. Symbolic creativity – including perhaps those practices and processes that are sometimes associated with the concept of the arts – should be central to how we conceptualize teaching and learning for all students, *not because it improves learning but because it is learning*".[11] In this light, we really did not know if these students learned from the witnesses' testimonies, but it is possible to affirm that they were "crossed", affected, by the words. Words and situations were trained using the "take the floor" utterance.

With this utterance, we modestly aimed with these young people to "train the imagination", a *modus operandi* that Gayatri Spivak defends. With Spivak, we believe that "the task of education is inseparably aesthetical and political". Thus, there is a need "to train the imagination in order to prepare knowledge and reorganise desires".[12] That is why we wanted to train the imagination (with non-fiction material) by making things happen! Our approaches (arts-practice-based research) make things happen to the world.[13] On the school campus, something happened on 11 and 29 April 2024: human fences; addressing people who were studying; having lunch while making killjoy observations; posters (without authorisation) on the main facade of the school; coins, dropping coins; books, forbidden books; words, sometimes violent words.

4. Final highlights

There are encounters and coincidences that, whether more or less by chance, are inevitably affective – even in the literal sense of what directly affects our bodies, memories, thoughts and desires.

It is worth ending by highlighting some spatial and special connections. The spatial connections: the coincidence of the campus being located in a building that was once a primary school for teacher training, during the dictatorship; the use of more or less visible spaces; the main entrance or the shadowy corridor. The special connections: the sessions took place in April, in the year of the celebrations of 50 years of democracy in Portugal and in the aftermath of the much-anticipated elections for the Portuguese government, where more than 50 far-right deputies entered the parliament.

We realise that we detect memory bumps when working with materials from Portugal's recent memory (particularly significant in relation to the burden of the continuing effects of colonial heritage in terms of race, gender and class) in day-to-day places, such as schools, cafes, subways and homes.

The experiences that happened on 11 and 29 April 2024 in Porto cannot be generalised, but this kind of practice can be reused in future approaches and could be, among many other possibilities, a way, rather than a tool, to work on materials relating to historical memory. How can non-fiction material be a trigger for theatre making that may trouble discussions about the "taken-for-granted" nature of democratic rights? We share the will to investigate how school spaces (or other institutional spaces) can be contexts for small performative moments that cause a short-term suspension of the routines and ways of using these places.[14] This research underlines the desire to voluntarily gather and work together, due to a collective need or demand for collaborative ways of *being* and *doing*; how young people are interested in the changes to democracy that are currently occurring; and the work to be done to persistently unlearn the official version of History and, above all, to understand how to "re-act" to difficult memories, such as the violent memories the students encountered in the testimonies of the Portuguese witnesses.

With Benedita's, Carolina's, Catarina's, Francisca's, Gabriel's, Inês', Marta's and Silvia's words, we wanted to further the Changing Democracies project and uphold the major importance placed on "what is said" and "how it is said": the modalities and nuances of the discourses – "what" the witnesses of Changing Democracies said and "how" they said it.

Finally, this chapter aimed to share the voices of this group of young theatre students about what they experienced through exposure to the witnesses' words. It also aimed to discuss how the processes of change in today's democracies are affecting young people and to contradict the stereotype that young people are far removed from debates about the common good. These eight young European people told (and are still telling) us about risk and dissent, the ethical demands of common life, and radical care for the common life. We agree with Achille Mbembe that "it is necessary to remember that politics consists of the never-attainable effort to imagine and create a common world and future. *The starting point for building this common world is the sharing of the word.* Like movement, the word is the expression of the living. Formal rules, institutions and norms arise in part from an initial gesture, the gesture of the word when we address someone, when we respond to something addressed to us or, better yet, when we deliberate. It is the shared word that makes politics a force for dialogue and connection. Sharing does not necessarily eliminate conflict. However, it allows the dispute to be dealt with other than by the sword: the debate in public space."[15]

In the eye of the storm of changing democracies, young people took the floor.

Endnotes

1 Estado Novo (1926–1974) was the name given to the Portuguese regime instituted by the 1933 Constitution. The Estado Novo can be considered to have lasted from the entry into force, on 9 April 1933, of the new constitution (itself the result of the political process initiated by the military dictatorship that emerged from the coup of 28 May 1926) and the later military coup that, on 25 April 1974, overthrew the ruling regime and put an end to the long period of fascist dictatorship in Portugal. The years from 1926 to 1933 were the transitional phase from the military dictatorship to the Estado Novo – the corporatist dictatorship established by António de Oliveira Salazar. Portugal was Europe's last colonial empire, with a colonial war that lasted from 1961 to 1974. See Rosas, F. & Brito, J. (1998), *Dicionário do Estado Novo*, Lisbon: Bertrand Editores.

2 A fascist youth organisation linked to the Estado Novo.

3 The witness is referring to the events of May 1968 when she was exiled in France.

4 In 1968, there was civil unrest in France in May, and in September Salazar fell into a coma and thus was unable to continue as prime minister of Portugal. Demonstrations by workers and students against the oppressive state also began in Spain in the 1960s.

5 Nelson, R. (2022), *Practice as research in the arts (and beyond): principles, processes, contexts, achievements* (2nd ed.), London: Palgrave Macmillan.

6 A key organisation in the field of arts research practices is RESHAPE, which is a collaborative, bottom-up research project that proposes ways of transitioning towards an alternative, fairer and more unified arts ecosystem across Europe and the southern Mediterranean. See Ilić, M. RESHAPE: an experiment in collaborative change-making, RESHAPE (22 December 2020), https://reshape.network/article/reshape-an-experiment-in-collaborative-change-making.

7 Bolt, B. (2016), Artistic research: a performative paradigm? *Parse Journal*, Summer, https://www.mdw.ac.at/ar_center/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Barbara-Bolt_Artistic-Research_A-PerformativeParadigm_PARSE_Issue3.pdf; Haseman, A. (2006), A manifesto for performative research, *Media International Australia*, 118:1, pp. 98–106.

8 Suely Rolnik writes about this desire for archiving: "The politics of the production of archives and the need to distinguish its multiple modalities become relevant here, which vary between active and reactionary vectors. In terms of the more reactionary vector, archiving consists in the mere cataloguing of the products of an artistic practice, in view to its supposedly objective reconstitution. The more active vector, however, implies the invention of archives 'for' and 'against' the disruptive forces of the experiences involved. In this case, the intention is to unblock the necessary access to the seeds of the future, hidden in the poetics that they address. The challenge of such initiatives does not consist in reconstituting the forms that this poetics has created, nor in turning them into fetishes or monuments, but to activate their critical acuteness in order to guarantee the conditions of an experience of the same caliber when facing the questions that are put today, so as to counter the operations that repeat its unconscious repression. The critical-poetic force of these archives can in this manner come together with the forces of creation active today." See Rolnik, S. (2011), *Archive mania* (Documenta and Museum Fridericianum, Eds.; P. Lafuente, Trans.), Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, p. 4.

9 Gaztambide-Fernández, R. (2013), Why the arts don't do anything: toward a new vision for cultural production, *Harvard Educational Review*, 83:1, pp. 211–236.

10 Gaztambide-Fernández, R. (2011), Musicking in the city: reconceptualizing urban music education as cultural practice, *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education*, 10:1, p. 3.

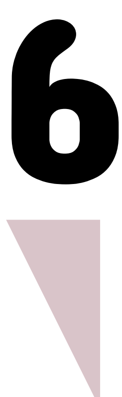
11 Gaztambide-Fernández, Why the arts don't do anything, p. 4 (emphasis added).

12 Spivak, G.C. (2013), *An aesthetic education in the era of globalization*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, p. 3.

13 Bolt, Artistic research; Haseman, A manifesto for performative research.

14 These might be called "places of suspension". See, among others, the texts and documentation processes of the *Hidden Curriculum* works by Annette Krauss. https://hidden-curriculum.info/w4.html.

15 Mbembe, A. (2024), Brutalism, Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, p. 49 (emphasis added).



Students and pupils make meaning of democracy in the Netherlands

"Democracy is something that people agree or disagree with. It is a choice you have to make with everyone about how to move forward in life''

Chapter ID

Authors: Eugenie Khatschatriani (EuroClio)
Summary: In the Netherlands, the research focused on how a group of in-training history teachers (students) and primary school pupils responded to, and worked with, testimonies from people of migrant background who shared their experiences of living in both democratic and non-democratic societies. With the testimonies, the in-training teachers co-designed learning activities for secondary school pupils. Here, the research looked at what aspects of the testimonies they aimed to highlight in their activities, and to what extent, and how, these were used to encourage discussion and reflection on democracy in the classroom. The primary school pupils participated in a creative workshop where one of the testimonies was a starting point for the pupils to discuss what democracy entails and to express these thoughts through art works. Investigating pupils' response to the testimony, their ideas about what democracy means to them, and how they defined a non-democracy, was the main aim of the research for this group.

1. Introduction

In the Netherlands, the Local Experience of the Changing Democracies project consisted of three educational projects that were implemented between January and October 2024 in the cities of Arnhem and Nijmegen, located in the eastern parts of the country. Most of the activities took place in Arnhem. Two educators, five history teachers-in-training and a group of primary school pupils (aged 9–11) participated in these activities. They were invited to engage with witness testimonies recorded in the Netherlands as part of the Changing Democracies project and, from these experiences, reflect on how they make meaning of democracy. Autres Directions and EuroClio – European Association of History Educators, two partners in the Changing Democracies consortium based in the Netherlands, had previously identified the three witnesses who would contribute to the project. The witnesses expressed their ideas on freedom and belonging through critically reflecting on their experiences of living in a non-democratic society and trying to settle in the Netherlands. They shared the challenges, expectations and confrontations they encountered living in a democratic society.[1]

All the participants were shown shortened versions of these testimonies. In his testimony, singer-songwriter Jeangu Macrooy shares his experience of migrating from Suriname, a former Dutch colony, to the Netherlands when he was 20 years old to pursue his musical career. During his first few years in the Netherlands, Jeangu observed a lack of historical awareness of the shared colonial past between the Netherlands and Suriname and also found that, in the Netherlands, little attention is paid to commemorating the abolition of slavery in Suriname. In 2021, Jeangu represented the Netherlands at the Eurovision Song Contest with "Birth of a New Age", a protest song about resilience and fighting for equality and justice. Parts were sung in Sranantongo, a language that came into being during the period of Dutch colonial rule in Suriname. Though Jeangu received a lot of praise, people also made fun of his use of the language. At times, these experiences made him question whether he could ever feel part of Dutch society.

Chee-Han Kartosen-Wong, an activist and children's book author, shares her experience as a child of Chinese parents growing up in a rural part of the Netherlands. Taking us back to her time at primary school, Chee-Han recalls how her teacher and classmates would sing her birthday songs supposedly in "Chinese", making derogatory gestures relating to differences in eye shape. Growing up, she also missed seeing role models in schools, books and media that she could identify with and look up to. At times, this made her feel different from her peers. Now, she is determined to change things and writes children's books that include protagonists from non-Netherlands backgrounds who immigrant children may identify with.

The third testimony tells the story of Amir Mohammadi, who fled the political regime of Iran and migrated to the Netherlands. He explains how he lived as an "undocumented" person living in a democratic society in his first years in the Netherlands. Amir tells us how he felt excluded from democracy, not being able to work, study, or open a bank account, and not being able to do all the things that people in a democracy can normally do when they hold citizenship.

All three testimonies, in their own way, invite the audience to hold up a mirror to themselves, as members of a society that has been a democracy since the end of the Second World War, and question to what extent democracy in the Netherlands delivers what they believe it should. They challenge – and in a way counter – established, dominant and hegemonic discourses about democracy in the Netherlands.

During the educational projects, the questions raised by the witnesses also formed a starting point for the participants to further explore their understanding of what democracy means to them. They considered their responses to the witnesses' experiences and how, and to what extent, their historical awareness of difficult pasts shaped this understanding, especially in a society that is increasingly diverse.

This case study has two main focuses. Firstly, it looks at how the five history teachers-in-training interpreted the testimonies through educational interventions that they developed. More specifically, it aims to explore how they gave meaning to the experiences of Amir, Chee-Han and Jeangu and how these interpretations were reflected in learning activities created for secondary school pupils. Secondly, it looks at how primary school pupils responded to the testimony of Amir and the extent to which they could relate to, understand or challenge what they saw. It also aims to explore how they make meaning of democracy.

2. Setting of the Local Experience(s)

Autres Directions and EuroClio co-designed and jointly implemented the educational projects in the Netherlands, pooling their experience and expertise. This involved setting up a cooperation with the Hogeschool Arnhem Nijmegen (HAN) and with Rozet, based in Arnhem. The HAN is a university of applied sciences that offers a four-year teacher training degree programme that prepares students to teach history at the junior level (years 1–3) of secondary education in the Netherlands.[2] More specifically, a collaboration was formed with a history teacher educator and a group of five history teachers-in-training who were in their third and fourth years of study. They had flexibility in their study programme and were given the opportunity to receive study credits for taking part in this project, instead of reading a list of specified texts With the guidance of the teacher educator, Autres Directions, EuroClio and Rozet, the teachers-in-training developed learning activities focusing on themes related to the testimonies and presented their work at Rozet during a workshop with the general public on 12 October 2024.

Rozet is a public library and a cultural and heritage centre located in the city centre of Arnhem.[3] It organises educational and cultural activities for youth, schools and the general public that specifically focus on historical and current-day topics related to Arnhem. Autres Directions contacted Rozet to set up a collaboration to host the travelling experience "Is My Democracy Your Democracy?" (linked to the Changing Democracies project) and co-organise the educational projects. National History Month (October), which is a nationwide event in the Netherlands, offered an opportunity to foster this collaboration. In 2024, the theme of National History Month was "Fake Real", oriented around navigating a world full of (dis)information and considering how it influences the way we look at the past.[4] The teachers-in-training were divided into two groups, and one group developed learning activities connected to this theme, focusing on the role of framing and propaganda in a democracy. It was this learning activity that was presented to the public by one of the teachers-in-training on 12 October 2024, on the Day of the History of Arnhem, in Rozet. It formed part of a series of history, heritage and cultural events taking place throughout Arnhem.

The cooperation with Rozet was also rooted in the framework of the Gelderse Vrijheidsdagen (Gelderland Freedom Days). This is a campaign launched by the local government of the Gelderland province focusing on the promotion of educational and cultural activities at Rozet and other like-minded organisations to invite young people to commemorate the end of the Second World War in

the Netherlands and reflect on the meaning of freedom today. [5] Under the umbrella of this campaign, a creative workshop about democracy was organised with pupils from the public primary school 't Panorama in Arnhem. The school has a vision for primary education that strongly focuses on the individual development of pupils and prioritises time and space for pupils to fully explore their strengths and interests. It combines active learning methods from various pedagogical movements. This philosophy allows the school to actively engage its pupils in on-site learning activities and projects outside the classroom, which may be less common among more mainstream public primary schools, which tend to work within a somewhat limited framework. Facilitated by a visual artist and scenographer with the support of Rozet, a grade 7 class (the second to last year of primary school in the Netherlands) of 't Panorama participated in a creative workshop where the pupils were invited to express what democracy meant to them through craftwork.

3. Target groups

The Local Experience in the Netherlands included three main target groups, as briefly introduced above. The first target group consisted of history teachers-in-training from the HAN. This group was specifically targeted based on the rationale that they were going to be future history teachers and contribute to the development of historical understanding, knowledge and critical thinking skills in young people in secondary schools. Participating in the project would also offer them the opportunity to put their knowledge and skills into practice and develop hands-on learning activities using oral histories. The research aimed to explore how the teachers-in-training (students) interpreted the testimonies through the learning activities that they developed. How did they give meaning to the experiences of Amir, Chee-Han and Jeangu, and in what ways were these meanings translated into the learning activities and lesson objectives they created for secondary school pupils? The research also looked at how this group reflected on democracy. The group was selected by the teacher educator, who issued an open invitation about the programme and Changing Democracies. Originally, seven teachers-in-training were selected, but unfortunately two of them dropped out shortly after the first in-person gathering for personal reasons. This resulted in a group of five history teachers-in-training in the final stages of their studies, with an age range of 19–26 years at the time of the activities. The group consisted of four male students and one female student. Out of the five, two students were of migrant background. Neither Autres Directions nor EuroClio were directly involved in this selection process. This also means that the researcher was not involved in the selection of the individuals in this target group.

Originally, the second target group was planned to consist of secondary school students in and around Arnhem. The idea was to identify schools and history teachers that would be interested in trying out the learning activities developed by the history teachers-in-training. Another idea was to explore whether some of the teachers-in-training could try out their learning activities in a formal or non-formal educational setting themselves during a guest lesson. This way, they would receive feedback on their work but also get the opportunity to gain practical teaching experience. Due to a lack of capacity and a tight study programme, this option was ultimately replaced with another format. Instead, Autres Directions, EuroClio and Rozet explored the possibility of offering a creative workshop about democracy.

Based on experience from previous collaborations, Autres Directions reached out to a visual artist and scenographer with a request to facilitate a creative workshop with secondary school pupils. In agreement with Autres Directions and EuroClio, Rozet aimed to identify a school in Arnhem or in the surrounding area that would participate in this workshop. This was done by sharing the invitation for

the workshop with schools around the city. Mostly likely due to the timing of when the workshop would take place (June 2024), no secondary school registered. However, Rozet did find a primary school, ’t Panorama in Arnhem, that was interested and also had enough flexibility in its school programme to participate in an on-site workshop. The school participated with a group of 35 pupils (15 girls and 20 boys) between the ages of 9 and 11 years. Based on the researcher’s findings during participant observation, the vast majority of the pupils likely did not have a migrant background. Based on data from 2024 provided by the municipality, about 36.6% of the population of Arnhem has a migrant background, so this particular group of pupils seems to have been more homogeneous than average in terms of ethnicity and cultural background.[6] The researcher chose to take information about the ethnic or cultural backgrounds of the target groups into consideration, because it is likely an important factor in how people experience democracy and how they reflect on questions of identity, inclusion and belonging. This was especially likely to be the case here, given that the witnesses in the testimonies the participants engaged with were all of migrant background. Watching and listening to the stories of these witnesses may have been, in some ways, a more challenging experience for this particular group of participants than it would have been for a group partially or entirely made up of children from migrant backgrounds, specifically when they can directly relate to some of the stories shared in the testimonies. The researcher was not involved in the selection of the school or the pupils.

Educators formed an additional target group in this case study. The research included observations of the teacher educator who guided the teachers-in-training and the visual artist who facilitated the creative workshop for the pupils, mostly to contextualise the reflections of the students and pupils. It is relevant to underline that the educators had a different role from that of their students and pupils, as they were co-organisers (with the researcher) and could make decisions about the content and format of the activities. Therefore, their ideas helped to better inform the set-up of the activities. It is likely that the relationship between the teacher educator at the HAN and her students (history teachers-in-training) was inherently based on a power dynamic, since she was in a position to give feedback and assess the quality of the students’ work. In addition, the students already knew the teacher educator very well before they became involved with this project, and the overall tone of communication between them could be described as rather informal, but appropriate to the context. In the case of the creative workshop, there was no prior familiarity between the visual artist and the pupils; therefore, the relationship between them during the workshop could be described as more distant. The educators’ reflections on democracy are included in this case study.

4. Description of activities

The collaboration with the teachers-in-training began on 19 January 2024, when Autres Directions and EuroClio presented Changing Democracies to them during an in-person gathering at the HAN campus in Nijmegen. Representatives from Rozet were also present at this gathering. In advance, the teacher educator had already informed the students of the main aims of the activities, and Autres Directions had shared shortened versions of the Dutch testimonies.[7] This meeting was moderated by the teacher educator. Autres Directions and EuroClio presented the overall aims and activities of Changing Democracies while the teacher educator explained the assignment to the students. The students were tasked with developing a learning activity, using the testimonies as a starting point, on a theme relevant to democracy. There were two set criteria that the learning activities needed to meet. Firstly, they needed to be linked to one of the Dutch testimonies. Secondly, they needed to include active learning methods. It was up to the students to determine the lesson structure and the target age

rangel of the activities. In addition, they were given practical information and had the opportunity to split off into smaller groups and do some initial brainstorming. The students ultimately chose to work in two groups.

To help the teachers-in-training with the development of their learning activities, Aniek Smit (of the Red Star Line Museum in Antwerp), a project adviser for Changing Democracies, was invited to host an online session on how to use oral history in learning activities for history classrooms. This took place on 8 February 2024. On 28 March, the teachers-in-training presented their initial ideas for the learning activities in an online session with Autres Directions, EuroClio and Rozet. The two groups of students took turns presenting their ideas and then received feedback and questions from the other attendees, including the organisers. This functioned as a mid-point check-in. On 30 May, the two groups presented their final learning activities during an in-person gathering at Rozet, and this was again followed by a round of feedback and questions.

On 6 June, the primary school pupils attended the creative workshop about democracy hosted at Rozet. As mentioned, the workshop was facilitated by a visual artist and scenographer, with the support of Rozet. At the beginning of the workshop, the pupils watched a short introductory video about democracy, after which they were asked to write down and share what they knew about democracy. Then, the story of Amir was introduced and the pupils watched a shortened version of his testimony. After a short follow-up discussion, the pupils were invited to get acquainted with all the materials (wood, glue, cardboard etc.) available in the room that they could use for their creations. They were asked to reflect on how they could use the materials and what they could make. In pairs, they made mind maps to explore keywords about what they thought democracy means. In the second half of the workshop, they created craftworks expressing what democracy means to them. The workshop ended with a reflection moment where everyone was invited to walk around the room to see what the others had created.

5. Research methods

In the case of the history teachers-in-training, the research was done by conducting an interview, a focus group and an analysis of the learning activities. Initially, interviews were set to take place with all five students. However, due to the students' tight schedules, only one participated in an interview. This interview was conducted online on 26 March 2024. The four remaining students participated in a focus group, conducted in person, that took place on 30 May 2024 after the final presentation of their learning activities. However, out of the two groups, only one group shared their finalised materials with the teacher educator. This means that for this one group, the content analysis of the materials was limited to the researcher's observations during the final presentation.
In principle, the sets of questions for the interview and the focus group were similar. However, given the interval between them, the researcher made some adjustments. The questions for the interview were as follows:

1. When do you think you are part of a democratic society?
2. Which themes from the testimonies that you have watched would you like to highlight in the learning activity? Why and how would you like to do this?
3. What themes do you feel it would be challenging to discuss with pupils in the history classroom? And why?
4. What would you like pupils to get out of your learning activity?

5 In what ways do you refer to history when teaching about democracy?
6 How do you expect pupils to respond to the learning activity?

When the focus group was conducted, the students had already chosen their themes and finalised their learning activities. Therefore, question 2 was taken out of the script for the focus groups.

In interpreting the data, it is important to consider that the teachers-in-training had limited practical experience of teaching and of developing learning activities. Therefore, during the interview and the focus group, some of the students gave ideas of what they would do or how they would react in certain situations, rather than concrete examples from their practical experience.

The researcher also noted the content of the work presented by the students during the interim check-in sessions. The researcher opted not to conduct participant observation during these presentation moments given her dual role during these sessions, as she was also invited to ask questions and provide feedback. Therefore, the researcher solely focused on the presentations of the content. Although she did note questions and reactions from students in relation to each other's work and take this information into account in the data analysis, these records cannot be considered field notes as such. Another limitation to consider is that the researcher was only present during the interim check-in sessions and the final presentation of the work. This means that the researcher did not follow the work process of the students in between sessions and therefore may have limited data about some specific questions or challenges that the students encountered in creating their learning activity.

The researcher also interviewed the teacher educator who guided the students through this process, with the aim of learning her views and understanding whether they differed from those of the history teachers-in-training.

The interview took place in person, following the final gathering of the partners involved in the Local Experience, on 18 October 2024. The questions for the interview were as follows:

1 What is the role of history education in a democracy?
2 How do you deal with teaching about difficult histories or other difficult themes? Could you give some examples from your experience?
3 How do you prepare your students to deal with difficult topics in the classroom?
4 Which questions or themes from the testimonies you have watched do you think are the most important for pupils to reflect on?
5 To what extent do you think oral history is an effective method in history teaching, especially when teaching about difficult or sensitive history?
6 What does democracy mean to you?

In the case of the second target group (the primary school pupils), the research consisted of participant observation during the first half of the workshop and informal conversations during the second half of the workshop. In the first half of the workshop, the participant observation mostly focused on how the pupils responded to the testimony shown and their knowledge of democracy. Initially, the researcher wanted to conduct focus groups during the second half of the workshop, when the pupils were creating their craftworks. However, this would have meant taking several groups of pupils out of the workshop into a separate room. Based on the energy levels of the group, the researcher decided on the spot not to conduct focus groups but, rather, to walk around and have informal conversations with the pupils while they continued working. The rationale behind this choice was that this way, the pupils' creative

process would not be disturbed as much as it would have been by focus groups, and they would also be allowed sufficient time to finalise their work. These informal conversations are documented in the field notes from the group observation.

At the end of the workshop, five creations were selected for a small exhibition in Rozet during the travelling experience "Is My Democracy Your Democracy?" The researcher then conducted follow-up interviews with the five pairs that had created these craftworks, at their school in Arnhem on 2 July 2024. The interviews took place about a month after the workshop. As with all the other interviews, the researcher prioritised the well-being, comfort and safety of the interviewees. Given the age range of this group (9–11) and the pupils' consequent vulnerability, the researcher was especially cautious about ensuring the pupils felt safe during the interview. Therefore, the researcher chose a flexible, semi-structured interview approach that would allow space for a more informal and natural tone of conversation to follow up on the pupils' answers. She also used language corresponding to the vocabulary and perceptions of this age group. The researcher used the following framework of guiding questions for all five interviews, although the themes and follow-up questions in each interview varied in line with the answers and ideas shared by the pupils:

1. What did you think of the workshop? And why?
2. What do you think about the testimony that you watched?
3. What did you learn about the topic of the workshop?
4. What does democracy mean to you?
5. If you had the opportunity, what would you change about society in the Netherlands? And why?
6. Can you tell me about your creation? What is it? Why did you decide to make this?
7. Your work will be part of an exhibition in Rozet. Everyone will be able to see it. What message would you have for the general public that visits this exhibition?

In total, 10 out of 35 pupils were interviewed. In addition to the group observation, informal conversations and interviews, the artworks were considered to be part of the data collection and analysis for this target group.

The design and format of the workshop likely had an impact on the research outcomes. Therefore, the researcher also decided to conduct a short interview with the visual artist and scenographer who designed the workshop to better understand certain aspects of the workshop format and why certain decisions, such as the choice of the testimony, had been made. The data from this interview were mostly used to ascertain how the workshop had been conceptualised rather than to gain an understanding of how the artist felt about democracy. The interview was done in person, shortly before the final gathering of the local partners in Rozet on 18 October 2024. The interview questions were as follows:

1. How would you describe the main aim of your workshop?
2. You watched all three testimonies beforehand. Why did you specifically choose to show the testimony of Amir Mohammadi during the workshop?
3. Can you tell me about the creative method you used specifically for this workshop? And why did you choose this specific method in relation to the target group?
4. What are your reflections on the workshop?
5. What does democracy mean to you and how is this reflected in your work as an art educator?

The interviews and focus group were transcribed using transcription software and checked by the researcher.

6. A note on the positionality of the researcher

The researcher of this case study had a dual role throughout the Local Experience. Working as project manager at EuroClio, she represented one of the partners in the Changing Democracies project and was therefore involved in several of the local education projects' activities as a co-organiser. This was particularly the case in setting up the cooperation with the HAN, where the researcher was part of the first conversations between Autres Directions, EuroClio, Rozet and the HAN, during which the set-up of the activity with the teachers-in-training was discussed and decided. The researcher also took part in the interim check-in sessions with the students to provide feedback and advice on the learning activities that they were developing and the themes they had chosen to focus on. The contributions by the researcher during these sessions may have influenced the outcomes of the students' work.

It was also a challenge to navigate this dual role during the workshop with the primary school pupils. Although the researcher was not involved in the facilitation of the workshop, she was asked for input on the selection of the five craftworks to put on display at Rozet, based on the informal conversations she had conducted during the workshop. This selection process also determined which of the pupils were ultimately interviewed. The decision-making was largely rooted in practical constraints, such as the limited space available to display the craftworks at Rozet.

On a more general note, the researcher had no prior experience with conducting ethnographic research and is not a researcher by profession. Her past research experience comprises historical research conducted as part of her academic studies. For this reason, the researcher is aware of her own limitations in this context and considers this case study to be a professional learning experience.

7. Findings

7.1 Teaching (about) democracy using oral history: reflections from secondary school students

Starting with the learning activities created by the history teachers-in-training, the two groups of students chose to focus on vastly different pedagogical approaches and main themes. The first group, which consisted of two students, created a learning activity of two lessons for second-year pupils of pre-vocational secondary education (VMBO) and senior general secondary education (HAVO), aged 13–14 years, focusing on the theme "Values in a Democracy". In the first assignment, pupils would watch the first four minutes of the testimony of Jeangu Macrooy. Then would follow a whole-class discussion focusing on three questions:

1. Why did Jeangu come to the Netherlands?
2. What is Keti Koti?[8]
3. Why did Jeangu find it strange how Keti Koti is celebrated in the Netherlands in the first years after he migrated?

With this assignment, the students chose to highlight Jeangu's feelings of confrontation and unease around the commemoration of Keti Koti, which Jeangu describes as follows in the shortened fragment:

"I was in Amsterdam and I went to the Oosterpark, because I had heard there is a commemoration there and there is also the Keti Koti festival. [...] And I sat in the tram and thought, 'Ah it feels a bit different', but I thought that's logical, because you're not in Suriname. But when I got to the park I found a fairly small group of people of whom most were descendants of enslaved people, with a Caribbean background. [...] And that was a confrontation with, actually an obfuscation of history. I think. I wondered, 'How could it be that the history between Suriname and the Netherlands is so intertwined, is such a shared history, but that in the Netherlands on that day, 2015, it was a normal day for the rest of the country?'"

At the same time, Jeangu's feelings also invite pupils to think about what kind of significance Keti Koti carries for the descendants of enslaved people, underlining the Dutch colonial past, and to reflect on how it is commemorated nowadays. The students did not elaborate extensively on how they would facilitate the discussion about Keti Koti, nor did they outline how they would explain the Dutch colonial past in Suriname. Here, Jeangu's reference to the colonial past is mostly used to activate the discussion around values and perspective-taking in a democracy rather than to activate historical thinking. The lesson would then proceed with an explanation of democracy and its values, mostly focusing on the value of freedom, which is also highlighted in Jeangu's story. Then, pupils would be given the task of individually reflecting on the following question: What does freedom mean to you? Next, their answers would be discussed as a whole class to identify similarities and differences.

The second lesson developed by the first group of students would start with a recap of the previous session and proceed by showing the pupils the fragment about Chee-Han Kartosen-Wong. After watching the fragment, pupils would again be invited to discuss three questions together:

1. What does Chee-Han do for a living?
2. How does she reflect on her time at school?
3. Why has she experienced certain events in an unpleasant way?

Here, the students chose to focus on the following fragment:

"When I grew up in Borne,[9] I was one of the few Chinese Dutch in elementary school. In the village we were the only Chinese Dutch in the beginning and that was actually quite tough, because you are quite different from all the other white kids. [...] And every time it was my birthday [at school], there would be singing too, but also the song 'Hanky Panky Shanghai', which is supposedly in my language. Which, of course, it's not. And yes, that was really very annoying. Because also the teacher or teachers asked me, 'Yes, Chee-Han, just sing along, because this is your language, isn't it?' And they also did the accompanying gestures, with the eyes. And that was actually really bizarre. And even though you're so young, of course you want to belong to a group. So you naturally want... On the one hand, of course you don't want to join... because it's so uncomfortable and just painful. But on the other hand, you were encouraged by the teachers... who actually should provide you with a safe environment to participate."

Here, the discussion questions would invite the pupils to reflect on Chee-Han's experiences of racism and discrimination as a child, and her experience of feeling different growing up in predominantly Dutch white surroundings. The students linked this fragment to the value of equality to challenge pupils to think about how they could make sure that everyone feels included in the classroom. In the final assignment of the second lesson, pupils would be asked to make a so-called value pie (waardentaart)[10] to illustrate which values were most important to them. They would then compare their value pies with those of their classmates to discuss why they had chosen a particular set of values and to see if there were any similarities or differences.

The students' response to these two testimonies translated into a learning activity that discusses democracy through the lens of human rights values such as freedom and equality, which are typically considered universal, while inviting pupils to reflect on what values are important to them. Their approach aims at increasing pupils' awareness that what people find important, whether it is certain values or the commemoration of a historical event, can be different and exist next to each other in a democratic and pluralistic society. Here, the examples from Jeangu and Chee-Han would challenge pupils to take different perspectives and acknowledge the experiences of others.

In the focus group following the presentations, one of the students who had developed this activity elaborated on their choice to focus on values, explaining the importance of perspective-taking:

"You can see in our lesson, it is very value-based and about how you treat one another and listening to one another, to see how the other thinks about something. I think that if you have the opportunity to take the perspective of others, that will make you smarter. This is especially important in a democracy, because today, with polarisation, it is difficult to get things done when you have two opposing parties".[11]

The second student who worked on the activity also underpinned the importance of pupils having an understanding of their own values as a starting point:

"I personally think critical thinking is very important in that. It is not something that we have embedded in our lesson per se. To think from within yourself, from what your values are and what you think, is important. [...] And I also encountered something similar to what Chee-Han described with the 'Hanky Panky Shanghai' song. [...] It would be good if pupils can take away from this lesson that this is really not acceptable."[12]
We can see that the students strongly acknowledge the difficult experiences of both Jeangu and Chee-Han. In this learning activity, the students did not engage with the testimonies historically but emphasised perspective-taking and values based in human rights. With their lesson, they want pupils to appreciate that different experiences and perspectives are normal, and that understanding the other, and reflecting on and negotiating these perspectives, is necessary in a democracy. With this intervention, they invite pupils to discuss what different values can mean to different people in a democracy. At the same time, the students also clearly indicate where this negotiation stops and is no longer democratic. In this case, they refer to acts of racism, discrimination and exclusion as a clear boundary.

The second group of students consisted of three history teachers-in-training. Their learning activity focused on the theme "Democracy and Freedom of Speech" and was designed for third-year pupils in senior general secondary education (HAVO, aged 14–15 years). They presented their learning activity as if they were implementing it with a group of pupils in the classroom. This group selected the testimony of Amir Mohammadi to create assignments around rights and freedom in a democracy, also discussing the role of media, framing and propaganda.

Pupils would begin by making a mind map in pairs in which they would answer the following questions:

1. What does democracy mean to you?
2. What is important in a democracy?
3. What are the rights of citizens in a democracy?

The mind maps would then be discussed by the whole class, with every pupil invited to share their answer and with the teacher making one big mind map based on everyone's input. This exercise is

rooted in the approach from history didactics of schematically presenting and unpacking complex concepts and encouraging pupils to take individual ownership to share and visualise their thinking and learning.[13] Then, the pupils would watch the testimony of Amir, after which they would be asked to reflect on these two questions, using their mind maps:

1 Which rights did Amir not have in Iran?
2 Which rights did Amir not have in the Netherlands?

In choosing these discussion questions, the students were specifically referring to this fragment:

"So let's say six years. Six years being undocumented, no ID card, no insurance, no money, no nothing. Undocumented, it means you are not a complete human. If you ask what kinds of rights undocumented [people] don't have that other people have, I can make it simple. [...] They don't have any of the rights that normal people have. Any of them. If you just mention any rights coming in your head, like for example going to school. They don't have [that]. Having insurance, they don't have [that right]. Having a job, they don't have [that right]. Having an ID card, they don't have [that right]. Having a QR code [to prove vaccination status during the COVID-19 lockdowns in order to gain admittance to public places], they don't have [that right]. Being able to participate in voluntary jobs without payment, they don't have [that right], they're not allowed. This is being undocumented. Completely rejected from society."

In this activity, the teacher continues to fill in the gaps in the mind map based on the answers given by the pupils. In their teacher manual, teachers are asked to provide some context and explain that Amir fled from the dictatorship in Iran. The students also underline that showing the testimony of a refugee who had escaped from a dictatorship would allow pupils to hear a story that was real and tangible, which would help them to critically reflect on democracy in the Netherlands and elsewhere. By focusing on concrete rights that Amir did not have, whether as a citizen of Iran under a dictatorship or as an undocumented person in the Netherlands, the students chose an approach to teaching about democracy that was based on increasing pupils' knowledge and understanding of basic and social constitutional rights while encouraging them to reflect how a person's position in society can affect those rights.

The second half of the activity was about the role of the media in a democracy. Pupils would be asked what types of media they knew of and the teacher would explain how media can reach, and potentially influence, large groups of people. An important factor that may have affected the students' choice to focus on this topic is that at the beginning of the process, they had been informed by Rozet of the possibility of presenting their work during National History Month, which they knew would have the theme "Real Fake".

The students selected another video for the pupils to watch: the report of a Dutch journalist who used to work as a news correspondent in Russia for one of the Dutch national public broadcasters (NOS) in the first year of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. In the video she explains how it has become increasingly dangerous for Russian journalists to speak up about the war.[14] After watching the video, the pupils would be asked to discuss what rights and freedoms are violated in Russia. This would be followed by an exercise using TikTok where the pupils would watch two videos containing disinformation and be asked to fact-check the information. Then, the pupils would be introduced to the concept of framing and invited to critically reflect on how the media can choose certain words that may (negatively) shape people's opinion. The activity would describe framing as a means to influence people's opinion, which can often be achieved using one specific word. To illustrate this, the students

gave some examples that could be used in the lesson, including "power nap" instead of "lazy nap" and "risk" instead of "innovation". They also provided an example of a headline in a Dutch newspaper, De Telegraaf, saying "Asielhopper-invasie", which could be translated as an "invasion" of refugees who hop from one EU country to another.[15] This example would be followed by a question for the pupils to discuss: How might this use of words influence or change people's views on refugees?

Taking this a step further, the activity would next introduce the concept of propaganda, mostly using posters from the Second World War, both Nazi propaganda posters and posters made by the Allies. The students described propaganda as a means to change people's opinion and gave some characteristics, such as a clear argument, repetition, sometimes addressing norms and values, calling out the "adversary", and use of symbols and fake news. They also included more recent examples, including an Iranian anti-American mural that the teacher could use to make a link with Amir's story. The mural is drawn on an outside wall of the former US Embassy building in Tehran and depicts a weapon containing the flag of the United States (Figure 1). The students also selected a poster from the presidential campaign of Ronald Reagan with the slogan "Make America Great Again" and made reference to how Donald Trump has reused the slogan.

Figure 10: Anti-American mural in Tehran

Source: Jackmalipan via Dreamstime.

During the lesson, pupils would be divided into groups and each group would be given a poster. Together, they would have to answer the following questions:

1. What do you think the poster is about?
2. What would have been the aim of the poster maker?
3. How does it influence people's opinion?

This exercise would invite pupils to engage in critical analysis of primary sources, which is key to the concept of historical thinking.[16] Finally, they would be asked to make a poster about a country of their

choice. The poster would include one image with disinformation about the country and another image with propaganda about the country. The pupils would need to explain how the poster could influence people's opinion.

Choosing Amir's story and connecting it to the right of freedom of speech, and then making the connection with the concepts of propaganda and framing in both non-democratic and democratic contexts, contains elements of the cosmopolitan mode.[17] In suggesting that teachers show the video about Russian journalists and use it as a prompt to talk about freedom of speech, the students make a clear judgement about the violation of this right, suggesting that it is a characteristic of a non-democracy. Their teacher manual also explains how Amir's story, and his hardships, would help pupils to critically question democracy in the Netherlands. It suggests activities to invite pupils to critically reflect on the use of media and information but also conveys the message that the deliberate use of media to influence people's opinion is not unique to dictatorships or non-democracies.

In the focus group following the presentations, one of the students who had worked on this activity shared the importance of showing pupils how democracies can become non-democracies and that this can still happen:

"I think it is very valuable to focus on a non-democracy. For example, the rise of Hitler and Nazi Germany. It is important to cover this history often, because you see how a democracy changes into a dictatorship. And that is something that could still happen – it is like a warning."[18]

Another student in this group – the single student who was interviewed (see Section 5) – indicated that after hearing Amir's story, she felt it would be important to discuss the history of Iran and show how different it was in the 1970s compared to what the regime is like now, so as to show pupils how quickly a political situation can change.[19] However, ultimately, this group did not choose to extensively engage with the history of dictatorship in Iran or histories of dictatorship in general.

A similar reflection was voiced by the teacher educator, who closely followed the work of the students. Professionally, she focuses on the history of the Middle East. When discussing the testimonies and the use of oral history, she primarily responded to Amir's story. She indicated how using his testimony in particular helps to make history more "human" and, in this case, also brings the "refugee closer to us" as we see what they are going through. She continued by saying that Amir's story gives a realistic insight into what is happening in Iran nowadays and invites people to learn more about the history and culture of Iran and understand how the Ayatollah came to power. As the teacher educator concluded: "It is a country with so much culture, philosophy and art and is, sadly, nowadays primarily considered as this big 'evil' by the West." Better understanding of how the Ayatollah came to power would also help people to widen their views of Iran and better understand the positions of people like Amir.[20] On the one hand, the teacher educator is criticising the one-sided and highly moralistic view that people in the West, according to her, tend to have about this history. On the other hand, her response to Amir's story could be described as cosmopolitan, as she emphasises how oral history can make history more "human" and thus make the experience of a refugee, in this case from Iran, more tangible. Oral history can help people to better understand the human rights situation under the Ayatollah and to empathise with what a refugee, in this case from Iran, is going through. This interpretation also positions Amir (or refugees in general) as a "victim" of human rights violations under the non-democratic regime in Iran.

Some takeaways from the interviews and focus group

The interviews and the focus group invited the students and teacher educator to more broadly reflect on how they approach teaching about democracy and discussions of difficult pasts or themes, and how they deal with conflict in the classroom. This section presents a small selection of reflections that can help us explore in what modes the students and teacher educator approach certain topics or situations in the history classroom, and what democracy means to them. Their reflections are to be contextualised in a period of time when racism, discrimination, the situation of refugees, and ongoing polarisation in society around recent wars and conflict are important topics in the public and political debate in the Netherlands.

One of the students pointed out that it is important to acknowledge that different people may interpret and understand democracy in different ways and that, when discussing democracy with pupils, especially in a classroom with a culturally diverse composition, one should be aware of this. As she explained it, "you cannot tell a pupil whose ethnic and cultural roots originate from a country in the Middle East that their country is not a democracy". According to her, that would be very offensive, but at the same time there should be space to talk about non-democratic regimes in other parts of the world regardless of where pupils originally come from.[21]

In more general terms, one of the students reflected on how he would approach discussions around sensitive topics, focusing on inclusiveness:

"It is mostly important to set up rules before you start a discussion. It is better if everyone can see each other and that everyone listens to each other and lets the others finish, and only focuses on the content. Safety in the classroom is very important, regardless of the topic."[22]

Another student added:

"There are different opinions and we debate in class. I think it is better if a pupil defends his or her opinion with factual arguments. And that the pupil on the other side has time to reflect and research facts. For example, if one of your rules is 'no racism', then it would still be okay for a pupil to say that they are frustrated about the fact that a lot of people are now against Zwarte Piet. [23] *That is possible – you can be mad about that. As a teacher, I can ask critical questions about this opinion. And it is very valuable that such controversial opinions are shared and then critically questioned. It is even better if the questioning is done by other pupils. [...] I, being a Muslim myself, also discussed with my supervisor what I would do if pupils started calling out Muslims as terrorists, for example. Even in that case, I would not kick them out. I would have a conversation with them and ask why they would think that and if they argue, I would then again respond to that."*[24]

On the topic of teaching about difficult histories, the teacher educator reflected on the example of the Israel–Palestine conflict. As she explained, the teachers-in-training are taught about the history of the conflict, including the Nakba (the mass displacement of Palestinian Arabs during the 1948 Arab–Israeli war), and a lot of her students find what is happening now horrible. At the same time, she also notices how some students have a very one-sided view of the conflict, perceiving the Palestinians as the "evil" side. She said: "When you confront them with the history, they go, 'Ah yes, yes', so you really have to open their eyes." As she added, such views are influenced by Dutch media and the general stance of the Dutch government.[25]

These reflections are largely rooted in agonistic modes of thinking, where a lot of emphasis is put on providing space for disagreement. In some cases, more conflictual debates may also be considered beneficial, as one of the students explained when describing a classroom debate about Zwarte Piet. At the same time, the students also pointed to a clear boundary that is provided by democratic values and principles in the classroom and that everyone taking part in an activity agrees to: there is no space for racism, discrimination, or any form of hate speech or violence.

As Chantal Mouffe has described, such "agonistic struggles" are inherent, and even vital, to a pluralist democracy.[26] Anna Cento Bull and Hans Lauge Hansen have developed this idea further into an "agonistic" mode of remembering that underlines how conflict is fundamental to society.[27] Building on this concept, and as outlined in the introduction to this volume, Maarten Van Alstein makes a distinction between first-level agonism and second-level agonism to explore how young people respond to the testimonies, in what terms they talk about the past and how they give meaning to democracy in Changing Democracies. With first-level agonism, teachers, students and pupils recognise that history can be conflictual and avoid one-sided narratives. With second-level agonism, students and pupils critically question dominant historical narratives or discourses, and teachers create educational interventions that invite students to actively and critically question dominant, hegemonic narratives or even engage in "conflictual" interactions with each other. Both the teachers-in-training and the teacher educator explained how they actively seek to question one-sided views or narratives. Some of the educational interventions the participants described during the focus group can be characterised as second-level agonism. Furthermore, when looking at the learning activities developed by the students, it is possible to note a strong emphasis on perspective-taking, where pupils are encouraged to acknowledge and understand that values and experiences can be different, conflictual and even counter-hegemonic in a democracy. In a way, this is not uncommon or striking; this approach is often an inherent part of history didactics and teaching. At the same time, but perhaps less evidently, some elements of the students' and teacher educator's learning activities and reactions also touch upon cosmopolitan modes of thinking, where non-democracies and non-democratic values are perceived as "bad" and human rights are considered a core pillar of democracy.

In describing what democracy means to them, the students and teacher educator talked about democracy in technical terms, mentioning characteristics such as the right to vote, the Dutch constitution and human rights. There was also an acknowledgement that these characteristics only apply when a person is a citizen of the Netherlands.[28] It is unclear whether the testimonies actively shaped this understanding. The participants also raised concerns about a lack of trust in democracy, largely due to political failures such as the Toeslagenaffaire[29] and how that has affected people.[30] The participants also used the word "empathy" and referred to feelings of safety and the importance of education to describe central characteristics of a democracy.[31]

7.2 Crafting democracy: interpretations of primary schools pupils

Before looking at the outcomes of the creative workshop with primary school pupils, a brief outline of the thoughts of the visual artist behind the workshop aims to establish the context. The main aim of the workshop was to let pupils visualise what they found important in a democracy in a creative way. The visual artist placed the pupils in pairs so they could converse with each other, have discussions and make decisions while they were creating something and working with the materials. This also meant that they had to negotiate and agree on what democracy looks like and how they wanted to visualise this.[32] The visual artist chose to show Amir's story. Here, a fragment about suicide was left out, given

the age of the pupils. The visual artist, in agreement with Rozet, felt that it would be productive to make connections between the feeling of exclusion as expressed by Amir and feelings of exclusion that the students may have encountered in their day-to-day life. [33] It is important to note that this workshop did not occur within the context of a history class. Therefore, the reactions to this testimony mostly related to Amir's experience as an undocumented person in the Netherlands.

The workshop took place at Rozet in a creative space where the pupils were surrounded by pictures of various European artworks about democracy and cards displaying quotes from all the testimonies of Changing Democracies. The pupils were guided by three representatives of their own school who were not their direct teachers. The representatives mostly stayed at the back of the room during the workshop. After an introduction, the pupils watched a short video showing an explanation of democracy, including the concept of the separation of powers, and were asked to write down any keywords they knew related to democracy.[34] While watching the video, the pupils were actively writing, and three of them shared their keywords in a whole-class discussion: "separation of powers", "the Senate and the House of Representatives",[35] "rights that everyone has" and "a lot of clubs that you can go to" (referring to sport or hobby clubs). Then, they watched Amir's testimony and were asked to explain what they had just seen. A pupil noted that "he had lived on the street and he had nothing, and couldn't do anything", while another pupil mentioned that "he [Amir] was not respected because he wanted something else". Other pupils added that "he was rejected by the IND".[36] To make Amir's experience more tangible, visual artist asked whether the pupils had ever been in a position where they felt excluded or had had to wait for something for a very long time. One pupil reacted: "Yes, when we were on vacation we were supposed to go mountain biking, but it took a very long time before we actually went and I almost wanted to give up."[37]

Next, the pupils were given an object (from the crafting materials that they could use later) and asked to brainstorm in groups of four how the object could be used. This resulted in many different outcomes and ideas, such as "ballot box, because there is a hole in it and in a democracy you can vote", "cutlery holder or a lighting rod", "tank", "camera", "microphone" and "island". In this exercise, the pupils also wrote down some more keywords related to democracy. Recurring words were "freedom", "roof above your head", "water and food", "place to sleep", "equal treatment", "your own opinion", "to be who you want to be", "constitution" and "freedom of the press".[38]

In the final part of the workshop, the pupils paired up to co-create a craftwork that, according to them, represented democracy, reflecting on the mind maps they had created. During the co-creation process, the pupils reflected on what they were making and why. Some of these reflections were further explored in the interviews. One pupil shared:

"We are making a house for refugees, because it is important that refugees have the freedom to do fun things. That is not the case in the Netherlands and the reception of refugees here is bad."

Another pupil shared:

"I think it is important that everyone is equal. In the Netherlands, everyone lives in peace, but in many other countries this is not the case. But also, not everyone is equal in the Netherlands, for example people with darker skin. They are excluded."

Another pupil reflected on the right to demonstrate:

"Extinction Rebellion is blocking motorways. That is really not acceptable. [...] They can protest, but then they have to talk to the politicians."

Her classmate added:

"It is good that people debate, but it should be done normally. I think that often, the police are needed in these cases, and that is not okay. It should be safe, and not aggressive or dangerous."

A pupil reacted to Amir's story:

"I think it is horrible, because you flee from a country that is not safe but then you are excluded in the Netherlands. And I did not know that this was happening. A lot of people here are well off and you do not often hear these stories. It should be on the Jeugdjournaal[39] more often so that more kids will see it and have more understanding of these people. We have to learn more about this at school so that we can better empathise."

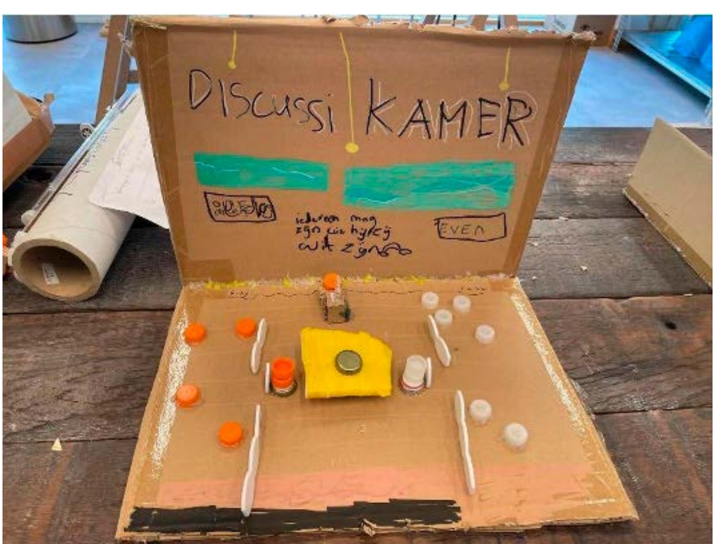
And finally, another pupil shared: "You should always have hope." When he was asked if he had hope in democracy, he said:

"Yes, we have a good government, there is not something that I am worried about. There is a bit of racism and discrimination, but that is only for a very small group. For a lot of people it is good."[40]

The Discussion Room

Ten pupils reflected more deeply on their work, on Amir's story and democracy, in the semi-structured interviews that followed the creative workshop. The first pair co-created a discussion room, which they described as a place where people could be "for" or "against" a statement or decision that needs to be made (Figure 2). In the middle, two people from opposing sides can then discuss the statement or decision. The person in the middle of the two was described as a "prime minister" or "judge" type of figure who helps the pair to decide. The decision is made based on the number of votes "for" or "against". On the wall, the following statement has been written: "Everyone can be who they want to be". According to the pair, this means that "everyone can say what they want to say and it doesn't matter what you look like. And no one can change that."[41]

Figure 11: The Discussion Room, made by pupils during the creative workshop.



One of the pupils also pointed out that “it [the discussion room] has a big role in the world and how we can change the world together. [...] Now people protest on the street, but with this they can go inside and protest there.”[42] Their main message was that “it is always good to give your opinion and to listen to others”. At first, the pupils were thinking of making a protest room, instead of a discussion room, because “in a protest room there will be a lot of people because everyone is mad and then they get into fights”.[43] Reflecting on democracy, one of the pupils noted:

“Democracy is something that people agree or disagree with. It is a choice that you have to make with everyone about how we move forward in life. [...] And when you live in a democracy, you have freedom because you can go outside and play. In a war, for example, you have to hide and you are scared every day.”[44]

For this pair, the most important aspects of a democracy would be that everyone can buy their own food, everyone has a job and can share their opinion, and no one is belittled for their appearance.[45]

The House of Representatives

The second pair co-created a house of representatives where we can see representatives discussing and making decisions based on the number of votes “for” or “against” a statement (Figure 3). The pictures on the wall represent nature as that is what the representatives are discussing. They are deciding whether they should pay more attention to nature and climate change. The next topic they have to discuss is whether there should be more housing for refugees. As the pupils describe:

“It is of course connected to nature because with more refugees, more nature will be gone but it is nice for these people to have a place. [...] We could build tiny houses for refugees in nature, for example.”[46]

Figure 12: The House of Representatives, made by pupils during the creative workshop.

In reaction to Amir's testimony, one of the pupils responded:

"At first I thought that if you exist, you just exist. [...] But if you do not have a passport, you simply don't exist. You are actually not a human. And you really need it in order to be able to do things, and to live in a country. [...] That seems very hard and I didn't know that this is how it goes."[47]

The other pupil added:

"I also think it is weird that you need permission to live in another country. [...] And people come to the Netherlands when they flee, but then they have to figure out everything on their own."[48]

Similarly to the previous pair, these pupils mentioned that everyone having food and a place to sleep, and feeling at home, would be the most important aspects of a democracy.[49]

The Cyborg Laser Arm

The third pair translated their understanding of democracy into a cyborg laser arm (Figure 4). With this, the pupils wanted to make others aware of the dangers that technology can pose to a democracy – specifically, when we reach the point when robots have more abilities than humans and can take over. According to the pupils, this would mean that the robots could make decisions about us and have their own opinions. This could also mean that "a robot taking over could be one that has very different opinions than we do, and that is scary".[50] For this reason, the pupils wanted to "make people stop creating robots and not only think about the money, but also about the risks".[51] For them, a democracy means that people can voice their opinion and should also be aware of the risks that their decisions may have. Additionally, one of the pupils pointed out that, for him, what characterises a democracy is equality and that decisions need to be made together.[52] As he said:

"In our country most people are equal, but in other countries they are not. [...] For example, in a war some people want to be the boss which also means that a lot of people need to hide and then they cannot do what they want. So they are not equal. Those who are then in power can do whatever they want. [...] But in the Netherlands, everyone is equal according to the constitution."[53]

Figure 13: The Cyborg Laser Arm, made by pupils during the creative workshop.

The Freedom Angel

The fourth pair visualised democracy through an angel that is trying to break free from its chains (Figure 5). It struggles with this, because it does not have rights and it is not treated equally. With this idea, the pupils wanted to highlight that some people are treated differently and cannot do whatever they want. Additionally, the angel is engulfed by trees, as we can see, symbolising the presence of nature and that this is something that we cannot ignore. The pupils' message was that people should try treating each other equally and not exclude others.[54]

Similarly to other pupils, they were shocked to hear Amir's story and experienced feelings of empathy. They also made a connection to other refugees coming from Gaza, Ukraine, and concluded that these people might be in a similar situation to Amir. Reflecting on that situation, they argued that not having an ID also means that you cannot vote, and therefore that "you do live in a democracy, but you don't have democracy. You don't have an identity and, so, you don't live in a democracy yourself."[55] In further reflecting on democracy, they described it as "when multiple people make decisions". As an example to explain what is not a democracy, one of the pupils mentioned Russia: "Russia is not democracy – they cannot vote there. And the news they hear is often fake news.[...] If people protest against the war, they will be arrested and maybe put to death too."[56] He continued to explain how, in the Netherlands, more people get to make decisions together and people can vote "for" or "against" decisions and argue why they agree or disagree. Linking back to Russia, the pupil continued:

"There you have Putin. He is the only boss. [...] He gets to decide and does what he wants. But sometimes he makes very stupid decisions like starting a war against Ukraine. So Russia is not a democracy because you cannot vote and the people there can do very little and don't really know what is going on."[57]

Figure 14: The Freedom Angel, made by pupils during the creative workshop.

The pupils also underlined equality as important in a democracy. Here, one of the pupils made a connection with the history of slavery: "Enslaved people were not treated equally. They were taken from Africa to work on the plantations and they were mistreated."[58] The pupil's mention of this particular example can be explained by the fact that Keti Koti had been celebrated just the day before the interview. The pupil was then asked if (and why) it is important to learn about the history of slavery. He replied as follows:

"Then you know what the ancestors of some people have experienced and because of that you also know what needs to be changed now and that we don't want to go back. Yes, so as to learn that that was wrong. You also better understand it, and that is important. It is not a nice feeling to know what happened to your ancestors. So it is important to learn from it, because then we know what we should not do. In the past, the Netherlands was not a democracy at all, and that has now changed a lot."[59]

The House for Refugees

Thinking about what democracy meant to them, the fifth pair were inspired by Amir's story to co-create a house for refugees where there would be enough space for the inhabitants to live comfortably and engage in fun activities such as play and hobbies (Figure 6). Both pupils responded with strong feelings of empathy towards Amir, stressing that the government should also help him and other refugees. For them, democracy is inherently linked to helping those in need, especially refugees who end up without a place to live.[60] As one of the pupils explained:

"We built a home and that also fits democracy. Because there are many people that are not accepted into the country and they have no roof over their head. [...] For example, when someone arrives, they can stay in a nice place and prepare their asylum request."[61]

Both argued that it is unacceptable for a democracy to reject refugees and send them “back” because “every human being has their own rights. [...] And having a roof over their head is one of them, because it is not okay to let people live on the streets.”[62]

Figure 15: The House for Refugees, made by pupils during the creative workshop.

Summary of findings from the crafting workshop

What we can see is that all the pupils interviewed responded to Amir’s testimony in a very empathic way, acknowledging his experience. For them, Amir’s experience was clearly what a democracy is not. There were also critical reflections on how the pupils thought refugees were treated in the Netherlands and an awareness that not everyone experiences democracy in the same way as they do. The pupils acknowledged this counter-hegemonic perspective on democracy in the Netherlands presented by Amir. The pupils also repeatedly mentioned the importance of voicing one’s opinion and of people having multiple opinions. Rejecting violent ways of disagreeing, such as the examples they mentioned about demonstrations where police forces become involved, they strongly preferred discussion and debate in a peaceful and constructive manner while very much recognising that people can disagree and that opinions can be in conflict. To a certain extent, these reflections can be characterised as first-level agonism, with the pupils recognising that conflicting perspectives can exist in a democracy.

At the same time, when explaining democracy, some pupils expressed themselves in rather moralistic, or cosmopolitan, modes of thinking, especially when describing non-democracies, giving the example of Russia and explaining how people there do not have the same rights as people in the Netherlands. During the workshop, some pupils described democracy in the Netherlands as “good”. Those who critically reflected on the shortcomings of democracy in the country also talked strongly of “good” and “bad”: it is “good” or “bad” if people do or do not have certain rights. This mode was also reflected in the way in which one of the pupils made a link between inequality and the history of slavery. Here, this past was clearly “bad” and something that we have to learn from to prevent it from happening again.

A further recurring theme in all the interviews, as well as in the informal conversations and group observation, was that the pupils had some shared concerns that to them seemed to be very much connected to democracy. When asked what they worried about, several of them indicated the importance of safety to freely play. They explained this in the most practical terms – for example, saying

that the government should consider building safer roads or closing dangerous roads near their school. This concern is, of course, very much related to the daily lives and perceptions of children of this age. A second recurring theme was nature and climate change. This is demonstrated above in some of the reflections, but it was touched upon in one way or another in all the interviews.

It is worth underlining again that the pupils in the workshop only watched Amir's testimony. Amir described his position in society as an undocumented person in the Netherlands, and this sparked ideas among the pupils about how the Netherlands, as a society, could respond to the situation of refugees in a way that shows empathy and treats people equally. Amir's story also paved the way for a broader exchange about what democracy meant to the pupils, and equality, safety, human rights, discussion and debate were important elements. The main purpose of this specific case study was, firstly, to see how the pupils would respond to the story of someone who had experienced democracy in the Netherlands differently and, secondly and following on from this, how the pupils would describe what democracy meant to them. There is no account of how these pupils gave meaning to democracy before watching the testimony, and therefore no conclusions can be drawn regarding how the testimony changed their understanding of democracy. It is also important to note that the pupils were shown only one out of three testimonies from the Netherlands. The three testimonies are vastly different in experience. Therefore, it is likely that the outcomes of the interviews and the way in which the pupils described democracy would have been different if they had engaged with another testimony, or two out of three, or all three testimonies.

8. Conclusions

This case study aimed to explore how the history teachers-in-training and the primary school pupils would react to the testimonies of Dutch witnesses who all shared, in their own ways, experiences and feelings of exclusion and unequal treatment in the context of both a democracy and non-democracy. It also aimed to find out how they would then make meaning of democracy. When they heard the stories of Amir, Chee-Han and Jeangu, would they disregard, reject, acknowledge, empathise or be indifferent to these experiences? And in what terms would they talk about democracy as such?

In the case of the history teachers-in-training (the students), the research investigated these questions by analysing the learning activities they created using the testimonies and explored how they would approach certain situations of tension and conflict in the history classroom. None of the students extensively engaged with the histories presented or referred to in the testimonies when creating the learning activities. This can be explained by the way in which the witnesses told their stories and the content of the shortened versions of the testimonies that the students watched. In the fragments, the witnesses mostly focus on some specific examples of when they felt excluded. Some of these examples were very much reflected in public and political debates that were taking place in the Netherlands at the time of this research, which likely influenced the students in co-designing the activities. While one group of students used the testimonies of Chee-Han and Jeangu to design a learning activity focusing on perspective-taking and exploring core values in a democracy, and how these can differ, the second group took Amir's testimony as a starting point to develop a learning activity encouraging pupils to critically reflect on the use of framing and propaganda in both democratic and non-democratic societies. None of the students questioned or countered the perspectives presented by the witnesses. On the contrary, the design of the learning activities showed a sense of recognition and empathy regarding the personal experiences of the witnesses. When discussing classroom dynamics and practice, the

students' reflections largely followed agonistic modes of thinking, where disagreement and debates of conflicting opinions in the classroom among pupils – or even between teacher and pupil – are encouraged.

The primary school pupils only watched the testimony of Amir, to which they responded with astonishment and a great deal of empathy. It inspired some of them to create a house for refugees and most of the pupils agreed that Amir's experience did not reconcile with their ideas of what a democracy is. In describing democracy, most pupils highlighted the importance of people having multiple opinions and a space for discussion, debate and – to a certain extent – conflict, albeit resolved in a peaceful manner. At the same time, they used stronger moralistic language when explaining what makes a good democracy, and when a government or society cannot be called a democracy. Their interpretations therefore contained elements of both agonistic and cosmopolitan modes of thinking. They all showed a very good understanding of how democracy works in technical terms, meaning the right to vote, the constitution and the parliament. A week prior to the workshop, they had visited the municipality to learn about how democracy works. This could partially explain their knowledge of democracy and have impacted the ways in which they described the meaning of democracy.

This case study has limitations that could be considered and explored further in future research. Though some of the students (history teachers-in-training) did have in-class teaching experience through an internship carried out during their studies at the time of the research, it is important to note that their teaching experience was very limited. This lack of practical experience may have influenced how they designed the activities. To get a better understanding of how the students engage with the history of slavery and Dutch colonialism, or the history of dictatorship in Iran, it would be relevant and interesting to ask the students to try out their activities in a history lesson at a secondary school.

In the case of the primary school pupils, watching one specific testimony very likely influenced the direction and terms in which they reflected on and talked about democracy. It cannot be known how they would have responded and interpreted democracy if they had been shown one of the other testimonies or all three of them. It also cannot be known to what extent the testimony itself changed their understanding of democracy. Similarly to in the case of the students, none of the pupils interviewed rejected, questioned or remained indifferent to the story of Amir. Theirs was also a rather homogenous group, and even though they reacted to Amir's story with great empathy, their reactions showed that they had never heard or seen anything like his story before. Several of them explicitly acknowledged this. Given the multicultural composition of Dutch society at large, it would be valuable and relevant to conduct the same workshop in classrooms where multiple cultures, ethnicities, religions and languages were represented, to explore whether there were any similarities or differences as to how the pupils responded to the testimony.

Endnotes

1 Changing Democracies, Free browsing (n.d.), https://www.changingdemocracies.eu/free-browsing.

2 Hogeschool Arnhem Nijmegen, HBO-opleiding leraar geschiedenis (n.d.), https://www.han.nl/opleidingen/hbo/leraar-geschiedenis/voltijd.

3 See https://rozet.nl.

4 Maand Van De Geschiedenis, Thema Echt Nep (n.d.), https://www.maandvandegeschiedenis.nl/page/30145/thema-echt-nep.

5 See https://www.vrijheidgelderland.nl.

6 Gemeente Arnhem, Bevolking (n.d.), https://arnhem.incijfers.nl/dashboard/staat-van-de-stad/bevolking. Please note: this reference is provided to give an indication of the demographics of the city of Arnhem. However, it is not clear how the data were collected or what parameters the municipality used to define “migrant background”.

7 See the shortened versions of the testimonies (in Dutch) created by Autres Directions for the educational projects in the Netherlands as part of the Changing Democracies project (2024).

8 Keti Koti occurs on 1 July in Suriname and the Netherlands and celebrates the end of slavery in the country, in 1863, at which point the country was under Dutch rule.

9 A town in the east of the Netherlands.

10 A *waardentaart* (literally translating to “value pie” or “value cake”) is a visual representation where values are assigned segments of a “pie” (as in a pie chart) according to their relative levels of importance to the individual.

11 Focus group with history teachers-in-training from the HAN, conducted by EuroClio on 30 May 2024 in Arnhem, Netherlands.

12 Ibid.

13 See Wilschut, A., van Straaten, D. & van Riessen, M. (2020), *Geschiedenisdidactiek: handboek voor de vakdocent* (2nd ed.), Bussum: Coutinho.

14 See NOS Jeugdjournaal, Hoe gaat het met de journalisten in Rusland? (13 October 2022), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J93NR3vSHjk.

15 See J.-W. Navis, Asielhopper-invasie, *De Telegraaf* (7 January 2017), https://www.telegraaf.nl/nieuws/37564/asielhopper-invasie.

16 See Seixas, P. & Morton, T. (2012), *The big six historical thinking concepts*, Toronto: Nelson.

17 See the introduction to this volume for a discussion of cosmopolitanism and the related concepts of agonism and antagonism.

18 Focus group.

19 Interview 1: interview with a history teacher-in-training from the HAN, conducted by EuroClio on 26 March 2024, online.

20 Interview 2: interview with the teacher educator from the HAN, conducted by EuroClio on 18 October 2024 in Arnhem, Netherlands.

21 Interview 1.

22 Focus group.

23 This refers to the figure of “Black Pete”, the helper of Saint Nicholas, who typically brings gifts and sweets to children on 5 December. Zwarte Piet is depicted as a black-faced person whose appearance and clothes resemble those of enslaved Africans. There is considerable debate about the origins of Zwarte Piet. According to some, he is black because of the soot in the chimneys he climbs down to bring gifts to children during the night.

24 Focus group.

25 Interview 2.

26 Mouffe, C. (2013), *Agonistics: thinking the world politically*, London: Verso, pp. 7–8.

27 See Bull, A.C. & Hansen, H.L. (2016), On agonistic memory, *Memory Studies*, 9:4, pp. 390–404.

28 Focus group.

29 The Dutch childcare benefit scandal, where the Dutch Tax and Customs Administration (Belastingdienst) falsely accused more than 20,000 families of tax fraud between 2005 and 2019. Many of them went into severe debt as a result, and in some cases children were taken away from their parents. The Dutch government admitted culpability in May 2022. Many of the affected families were from a migrant background.

30 Focus group.

31 Interview 2.

32 Interview 3: interview with the visual artist and scenographer, conducted by EuroClio on 18 October 2024 in Arnhem, Netherlands.

33 Ibid.

34 See SchoolTV, Wat is een democratie? (2 March 2017), https://schooltv.nl/video-item/waarom-is-nederland-een-democratie-het-volk-regeert.

35 In Dutch: Eerste Kamer and Tweede Kamer, which together form the Nederlandse Staten-Generaal, the parliament.

36 IND stands for Immigratie-en Naturalisatiedienst, the Dutch immigration and naturalisation service, which also deals with requests for asylum.

37 These are findings from the group observation.

38 These are findings from the mind maps the pupils drew.

39 This refers to a news broadcast made especially for children, created by the Dutch national broadcaster (NPO/NOS).

40 The ideas shared here flowed from the informal conversations and therefore were not structured. Some of these ideas were explored further in the semi-structured interviews.

41 Interview 4: first interview with two pupils from the primary school ’t Panorama, conducted by EuroClio on 2 July 2024 in Arnhem, the Netherlands.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

46 Interview 5: second interview with two pupils from the primary school ’t Panorama, conducted by EuroClio on 2 July 2024 in Arnhem, the Netherlands.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid.

50 Interview 6: third interview with two pupils from the primary school ’t Panorama, conducted by EuroClio on 2 July 2024 in Arnhem, the Netherlands.

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid.

54 Interview 7: fourth interview with two pupils from the primary school ’t Panorama, conducted by EuroClio on 2 July 2024 in Arnhem, the Netherlands.

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid.

60 Interview 8: fifth interview with two pupils from the primary school ’t Panorama, conducted by EuroClio on 2 July 2024 in Arnhem, the Netherlands.

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid.

7 Changing Democracies in Antwerp

"We should not frame one side as the antagonist and the other as the hero"

Chapter ID

Authors: Sofie De Leeuw and Maarten Van Alstein (Flemish Peace Institute)
Summary: In Antwerp, a port city in the north of Flanders/Belgium, we researched how secondary education pupils and students in teacher training worked with testimonies of four persons who migrated from an authoritarian regime to Antwerp. Our case study focused on four elements. First, we explored whether pupils and students had the basic historical thinking skills to adequately engage in learning from history. Second, we examined how pupils and students gave meaning to oral histories about life in a dictatorship and migration to democracy. Third, we studied whether the educational project succeeded in encouraging young people to think critically about democracy. And finally, we investigated how pupils and students believe the history of dictatorship has current relevance and whether it is possible to learn from history.

1. Introduction

How do young people make sense of oral history about life in a dictatorship? Do they think this history is relevant to democracy and non-violence today?

These are the questions that guided research conducted in the spring of 2024 with three groups of secondary school pupils and bachelor students in Antwerp on oral history about life in a dictatorship. The Evens Foundation, one of the coordinators of the Changing Democracies project, had collected four testimonies from residents of Antwerp who had migrated to the city from an authoritarian regime: Lisbeth from Cuba, Norbert from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Seham from Syria and Slobodanka from Serbia.[1] Like these witnesses, the young people involved in the oral history project had a wide range of backgrounds. This should come as no surprise. Antwerp – located in the north of Flanders, a state of federal Belgium – is a super-diverse port city. In 2024, the city had 545,000 inhabitants, 56% of whom were of "foreign origin".[2]

In Antwerp, the local educational projects of the Changing Democracies project were developed with pupils in two secondary schools and bachelor students at a teacher training college. The first secondary school is part of the public education network and is located on a busy square that forms a transitional space between the historic city centre and the densely populated urban neighbourhoods northeast of the centre. The school attracts a particularly diverse student population. Taking a whole-school approach, the school works with that diversity in an open and constructive way – for example, by organising intercultural dialogue through the medium of art. Two teachers – a historian and an economist – worked on the Changing Democracies testimonies with fifth-grade pupils (17-18 years old) from the humanities and the economics-modern languages programmes at the school. The other secondary school involved in the project is a Catholic college. This school – located just outside the ring road – also has a diverse student population. In this school, the project was developed by a history teacher and a religion and German teacher. Finally, a group of students on a teacher training programme at one of the universities of Applied Sciences and Arts in Antwerp also worked with the testimonies. These were bachelor students preparing to teach civic studies classes in vocational secondary education. Under the guidance of a social education lecturer, the project was embedded in a second-year course on "societal awareness".

The Evens Foundation project coordinators gave the teachers and the lecturer the freedom to use the testimonials in their lessons as they saw fit. As a result, the didactic methods differed from case to case. Nevertheless, in the three cases the study started from the same research questions: How do young people give meaning to oral history about life in a dictatorship and migration to a democratic society? And what – and how – do they learn from these histories?

Building on the theoretical framework outlined in the introduction to this edited volume, the researchers formulated a number of specific sub-questions. In light of the premise that learning from violent histories best builds on historically adequate learning about history, the researchers first wanted to know how young people approach the testimonies from a historical–critical perspective. Second, the research explored how young people give meaning to testimonies about living in a dictatorship and migrating to a democratic society. Do they talk about dictatorship and democracy in an antagonistic, hostile or competitive way; do they use a cosmopolitan mode focused on victimhood and pitting "evil" dictatorship against "good" democracy; or do they appreciate the multidirectional and (first-

level or deep) agonistic complexity of histories of dictatorship and democracy, while also being able to formulate nuanced normative judgements on dictatorship and democracy? Third, the research explored whether and how the testimonies encourage young people to look at democracy in complex and critical ways. Fourth, it examined whether the history of dictatorship has current relevance for young people. According to them, can we learn anything from that history that is relevant to today? As learning in educational contexts is not only influenced by pupils' and students' personal and cultural backgrounds but also by the interactive dynamics of presentation by teachers and reception by the pupils and students themselves[3], the analysis also paid attention to how these interactive learning dynamics shaped conversations about the testimonies.

2. Didactic formats and research methods

The selection of schools for this qualitative study had a number of criteria. The intention was to include schools from the two major education networks in Flanders (public and Catholic). Additionally, the schools needed to have a pupil population reflecting the diversity of the urban neighbourhood in which they were located, and the focus was on pupils following programmes that prepared them for higher education studies. As for the teacher training programme, the researchers looked for a group of students in a professional bachelor's programme designed to prepare them to teach in vocational schools. The teachers and lecturer were selected from the professional networks of the researchers and the Evens Foundation project coordinator.

As mentioned above, the teachers and lecturer were given the freedom to work with the testimonies of the four newcomers as they saw fit. As a result of the aforementioned differences in didactic formats, the research methods also varied somewhat from case to case.

In school 1, the two teachers chose to devote six class hours to the project between January and March 2024. The first two hours were spent discussing democracy. The pupils made word clouds and discussed dilemmas provided by the teachers. The following lessons were devoted to working with the testimonies. After briefly learning about the witnesses' countries of origin and watching excerpts from their testimonies (selected by the teachers), the pupils were asked to write down their thoughts. After these classroom sessions, the pupils also worked on topics related to Changing Democracies during the school's annual arts education project. The pupils produced stop-motion videos and made collages about democracy with news articles and cartoons. To investigate these various activities, the researchers used several qualitative methods: classroom observations, analysis of pupils' written work and artistic productions, and two focus groups. Focus group 1 took place on 11 March 2024 with five students from the humanities programme. Besides the history teacher, the Evens Foundation project coordinator was also present. Focus group 2 was held on 18 March 2024 with ten pupils from the economics-modern languages programme in the presence of the economics teacher.

In school 2, the project covered four class hours. On 29 April 2024, 25 pupils worked in three groups, with each group viewing one full testimony. The teachers chose not to work with the testimony on Serbia, as they felt they did not have sufficient time to properly highlight the complexity of that testimony and its historical context. After viewing the testimonies, the pupils wrote a short reflection. A class discussion of the testimonies was held the following day (30 April 2024). The teachers facilitated the conversation using a questionnaire of their own devising. To examine the project in school 2, the researchers observed classroom work and analysed the reflections and the transcript of the class

discussion. During the classroom discussion, in addition to the two teachers and the researcher, the Evens Foundation project coordinator and (for the last half an hour) the school's headmaster (who supported the project) were present.

As mentioned, in the teacher training programme, the project was embedded in a second-year course on societal awareness. Students were instructed to develop a pilot lesson based on the testimonies for a class in a vocational school. They were divided into four groups. The first group of students consulted educational research to explore the context of super-diverse schools. The second group analysed textbooks. The third group collected existing teaching materials on the topic. The last group was responsible for developing the lesson plan. The researchers held two focus groups with eight students each. These focus groups took place after a two-hour introductory lesson during which the students viewed the testimonies and discussed them. The lecturer did not attend the conversations, but an Evens Foundation staff member did.

For the purposes of this study, the focus groups provided the most valuable data. As a hermeneutic study, this research aims to explore how young people make sense of oral history about life in a dictatorship in a school context.[4] As Ivana Acocella and Silvia Cataldi note, focus groups are particularly well suited to exploring opinions and attitudes from an "insider's perspective", as well as studying participants' conceptual and analytical categorisation processes in their social context (in this case, the schools and teacher training programme).[5] At the same time, all the usual caveats about the limitations of focus groups apply. The findings reported below are illustrations of how oral history about dictatorships can stimulate critical thinking in young people in a particular context; they are not representative or easily generalisable.

The focus groups facilitated by the researchers were semi-structured.[6] The topic lists were used flexibly according to the flow of the conversations. As is generally the intention with focus groups, the researchers strove to establish dialogical interactions between the participants. This was more successful in some focus groups than others. In focus groups 1, 3, 4 and 5 (i.e. the class discussion in school 2), there was a lot of interaction. In focus group 2, the dynamic was less interactive and the researchers had to take a more active role as facilitators, which meant that this conversation sometimes tended more towards a group interview than a group discussion. During the discussions, a majority of the participants took the floor a few times. Participants were assured that their contributions would be anonymised.[7]

The audio recordings of the focus groups were transcribed using audio-to-text software. The transcriptions were thoroughly checked by both researchers. The transcripts were then coded using a theoretically informed coding scheme.[8] Initial coding was done by author 1 (research assistant). Next, further coding was done by author 2 (a senior researcher with more than a decade of research experience in the fields of memory studies and peace education).

3. From interpretation to critical reflection: oral history in the classroom

To break the ice, the researchers began the focus groups by asking the pupils and students how they encounter history in their daily lives and which histories they find interesting.[9] A small number of participants indicated that they were not interested in history. Those who did show an interest encountered historical content in various ways. Often they came across history on social media platforms such as YouTube and TikTok.[10] Secondary school students mentioned that they also watch historical (war) movies, while the teacher training students additionally referred to historical museums, documentaries, books, podcasts, traditional news outlets and travel.

Several observations can be mentioned about which histories the participants found interesting. First, the participants mentioned a wide range of topics, such as clothing, "true crime" in history, women's rights issues, witch burnings, the DRC and genocide. Second, participants referred to specific historical periods and civilisations, such as the Aztecs, classical antiquity, Egypt, the Ottoman Empire and the Renaissance. Overall, it is striking that the Second World War was mentioned quite often in these discussions. The participants' reasoning varied, however. One group mentioned the Second World War almost immediately as one of the topics they found interesting. One pupil in focus group 2, for example, shared that he found the film *Wil* (about the deportation of Jews from the city of Antwerp), which he went to see with his class, very interesting, because it made him "see [his] own city in the past".[11] A second group, however, indicated that they "would rather not" have to learn about the Second World War so often. Some found the war's history too "gruesome" or too "rough". Others thought topics related to the Second World War came up too often in the school context: "We have to learn about it all the time – it is so often repeated, and it is just not interesting, not nice to listen to it any more." Other pupils, in focus group 1, reacted to this by saying that some history (such as that of the DRC) is indeed hard to listen to, but that it is nonetheless important to learn it.

In the focus groups, the researchers investigated whether the participants were particularly interested in non-European history. In focus group 2 there was an interesting interaction on this topic. The discussion started after this remark by a pupil:

"I feel that we deal with the Second World War a lot. But I think we should also learn about other things, not just European history. We really talk a lot about European history, even though this is a multicultural school."

Another pupil disagreed, saying the fact the pupils were frequently taught European history was, in his view, "normal, right?" and adding "You live in Europe." Another pupil concurred:

"Yes, in other countries outside Europe they also talk about their own country's history in schools, don't they? So here in Europe it's just normal to learn about European history."

Some students in the teacher training programme regretted that the focus in their secondary education had mainly been on European history. One of them, for example, noted that she found it "extremely scandalous" that she had never learned about the colonisation of Congo in secondary school (other participants indicated that they had been taught about it). Some students in focus group 3 who combined their civic studies courses with classes in history teaching furthermore indicated that until that point (in their second year), in their history teaching courses they had mainly covered European history, although they mentioned that they would have a course on "world history" in their final year.

3.1 Historical thinking

An important premise of the theoretical framework outlined in the introduction to this edited volume is that learning from history should build on adequate learning about history. This implies that the didactic soundness of oral history projects such as Changing Democracies depends on the presence or the development of skills such as historical criticism and historical thinking. The class observations and analysis of the teachers' preparations carried out for this study showed that in none of the three cases was there an explicit reminder for pupils and students to keep in mind that testimonies are historical sources that should be approached in a historical–critical way. The teachers rather seemed to assume that the pupils and students already possessed these skills from their previous learning paths. In order, then, to examine the extent to which the pupils and students interpreted the testimonies in an adequate historical–critical way, in the focus groups the researchers asked the participants whether, in their view, the testimonies offered the "real truth" – or, in other words, a look at how "it actually was".[12]

Overall, the analysis suggests that the pupils and students viewed the testimonies in a (sufficiently) critical and nuanced way. They realised, for example, that witnesses speak about history from their own perspective and do not show *the* truth. In the words of one participant in focus group 3: "It is their truth of course, so through their lens." Otherwise, the testimonies were seen as personal stories that might be completely different from those of other people "who experienced exactly the same things". The relevance of the testimonies, a student claimed, is therefore not that these stories offer the truth, but mainly that they "make you think". In focus group 4, a student even used technical terms such as "historical perspective-taking" and "multiperspectivity" to explain how she would teach oral history in class: "You have to be able to explain to your students: this is a person from this era." In focus group 2 it was also noted that ideally there should be more than one witness for every country.

At the same time, a pupil in focus group 1 responded to the question about whether the testimonies offered the truth by arguing that the personal stories indeed offered her a sense of the truth. After all, she claimed, what the witnesses said about their countries corresponded with the images she previously had of their countries. Moreover, she thought that people who talk about how things were in their countries "will know, because they were really there". These statements could perhaps have been interpreted as demonstrating a lack of historical thinking skills, if the pupil had not immediately added nuance to complicate her own words. She added that it was possible that what she had heard about these countries was "completely wrong" because, she argued, media reports about the countries might be biased or incorrect. Indeed, she said, "the West" does not always "talk well of other countries".

Generally speaking, a critical stance on the epistemological value of oral history seemed to go hand in hand with a positive appreciation of multiperspectivity.[13] In focus group 5, furthermore, some pupils linked the importance of multiperspectivity to their personal background. One pupil, for example, explained that she had a Belgian father, while her mother had grown up in the Soviet Union: thus "I have both their perspectives." In focus group 2, on the other hand, an interaction about the conflict between Israeli and Palestinians seemed to suggest that while pupils may acknowledge a space for multiperspectivity, this does not necessarily mean that they think other perspectives are equally correct or valuable. One pupil, for example, stated that while the teachers at their school kept repeating that the conflict between Israel and Palestinians was about "land", "for us it is about religion". They also stated that while in itself it is "of course" good "that we see different perspectives", "we are still going to follow our own perspective".

3.2 Giving meaning to testimonies on dictatorship and democracy

One of the central questions in this study is how young people give meaning to oral history about dictatorship and the transition (or migration) to democracy. In a more theoretical vein, this study explores in which narrative modes young people in the Antwerp context discuss testimonies about dictatorship and democracy. Therefore, the focus groups probed whether the participants interpreted the testimonies in a competitive or antagonistic mode (pitting "good" against "evil" or "enemy" against "hero"), in a cosmopolitan mode (focusing on victimhood and pitting "good" democracy against "wrong" dictatorship in an overly simplified way), or in a mode that involved navigating the stories about dictatorship and democracy multidirectionally and agonistically. In the last case, they would take up the testimonies as prompts to interpret the past in complex ways, acknowledge the presence of conflict in multiperspectival readings, and possibly unsettle or oppose hegemonic readings of the history of dictatorship and migration to a democratic society.

The analysis suggests that a combination of multidirectional, cosmopolitan and agonistic elements predominated in the discourse of the Antwerp pupils and students. The researchers did not observe truly antagonistic discourse, in which "the other" is seen as an enemy and a personification of evil, or is rejected in an irreconcilable moralising way. In a few cases, however, participants shared views that were pitted in more or less competitive opposition against those of the witnesses (or those of other participants). In focus group 4, for example, a teacher training student reacted in the following way to the criticism of the Serbian witness of NATO's bombing of Belgrade in 1999:

"I especially had a problem with the woman from Serbia. That [her testimony] hit me pretty hard. ... I know a bit about what happened in Serbia and Bosnia, and how the Balkans fell apart. For example, that a lot of people fled because they didn't have the religion of the majority. And yes, that she looks at it that way and looks at 'being European' that way, I found that almost toe-curling. ... Either she really believes in what she says – or is brainwashed – or we are wrong. It's one of the two."

Referring to war crimes by Serbian soldiers in the 1990s, this student concluded:

"It is clear that she has had very different information than we have. Or we are wrong. It's one of the two. Yes, it is quite striking to see how someone looks at it like that, and that we are completely at the other end of the spectrum."

In pitting the "Serbian" view against the "Western" view (in terms of right and wrong) in an oppositional, competitive way, the student seemed to foreground the role of the victims in this history ("a lot of people fled"). This suggests that his opposition to the testimony might have been inspired by a cosmopolitan mode of remembering the Balkan Wars. In reacting to these statements, a second student additionally seemed to discover elements of antagonism in the statements of her fellow student. Starting from a more technical and historical–critical perspective, this student argued that we can also understand the witness' views through the lens of concepts such as "perspective-taking" and "multiperspectivity". She explained what she meant by this by going back to her own experiences as an intern teacher:

"I had to teach lessons on colonisation, and I started first from the perspective of the coloniser, and then from that of the colonised. And then you have to explain things in such a manner that you don't portray one side as the antagonist and the other as the hero. They are both equally valid."

The student thus injected non-antagonistic and agonistic elements into the discussion. At the same time, her use of the phrase “equally valid” raises the difficult question of the relationship between multiperspectivity and the risk of moral relativism. This will be explored in more detail below.

As already mentioned, overall, a combination of cosmopolitan, agonistic and multidirectional elements predominated in the discourse of the Antwerp pupils and students. This can be illustrated by highlighting three dynamics.

First, in a number of cases, participants spontaneously (i.e. without being prompted by a question or cue from the facilitator) made connections between different histories. For example, in focus group 1, when discussing the Second World War, a pupil made a link with Belgian colonial history. When pupils in focus group 2 discussed whether we can learn from the past, they talked mostly about dictatorship and war, but one pupil also argued that we did not learn from slavery, as evidenced by the existence of “modern”, “technological” forms of slavery today, such as in sweatshops. In the sense that pupils drew attention to human suffering and human rights violations, their multidirectional discourse also carried features of cosmopolitan historical discourse.

Second, in some cases, students reacted with incomprehension to what they heard from witnesses about life in a dictatorship and migration to a democratic society. It seemed difficult for some students to understand that for certain witnesses, living under a dictatorship had ambivalent aspects and was not entirely characterised by victimhood. This incomprehension points to cosmopolitan elements in the way the students gave meaning to the testimonies. At the same time, their initial difficulty understanding the testimonies did not make them see the witnesses in an irreconcilably hostile manner or attribute malicious intentions to them. On the contrary, the pupils and students entered into conversations about what the witnesses might have meant. In this way, a certain level of (critical) insight sometimes emerged. The testimony about Serbia particularly prompted these kinds of discussions. According to the pupils in focus group 1, the witness’ story was more about war and migration than about life in a dictatorship. They also felt that the witness, with her criticism of the West, did not really show “gratitude” after her migration (which, again, shows element of a cosmopolitan discourse). Nevertheless, they made an attempt to better understand the witness’ comments. For example, one pupil said she understood that people coming to the West may be disappointed, especially when their ideas and expectations about Europe do not match the reality they experience.[14] In other focus groups too, the critical Serbian testimony resulted in rather nuanced and complex responses. In response to the witness’ statement that “Western youth” are asleep and free “on the streets, but not in their heads”, one student in focus group 3 responded that she found this an interesting observation. According to her, “on the one hand” there was some truth in what the witness said, but “on the other hand there [was] not”. After all, she argued, some years before many students had “[taken] to the streets for climate protests”. However, she concluded:

“The government doesn’t listen to us anyway, so I think many young people nowadays think ‘What’s the point?’”

The ambiguity in this student’s reaction is relevant in the context of democratic citizenship education: on the one hand, it shows openness to conflict and paradox, while on the other, it reveals feelings of resignation and pointlessness.

A third dynamic, which gave the focus groups an agonistic dimension, occurred when participants provided additional information to contextualise testimonies, make their interpretation more complex and unsettle hegemonic historical discourses. An example of this second-level (or deep) agonism occurred in focus group 5. In the discussion about the testimony on Cuba, a pupil remarked that to understand events in Cuba, it is necessary to look at the role of the United States. The pupil, moreover, somewhat intensified the discussion by stating that "surely there is a difference" between Cuba and the other two dictatorships covered by the testimonies (the DRC and Syria):

"Unlike the other two regimes, which are really dictatorial, in Cuba there are forms of democracy which, although seen here [in the West] as sham forms of democracy, are ... in my view ... not quite the same thing."

Other pupils clearly disagreed. A lively and conflictual discussion ensued. Someone responded, for example, that:

"You cannot talk about a real democracy if there is only one party. ... The people, the demos, does not rule there."

Others pointed to the existence of censorship in Cuba, a topic that was also discussed in the testimony. Thus, the first pupil's intervention resulted in a discussion with strong positions, but the conversation remained substantive. All pupils were challenged to reflect on the meanings of dictatorship and democracy. That the discussion remained substantive was also related to the teachers' effective facilitating role ("we keep listening to each other").

Overall, then, the pupils and students in the focus groups did not react with irreconcilable hostility or with black-and-white moralising rejection when they were presented with "different" or "unexpected" views about dictatorship and democracy. On the contrary, they seemed to navigate the testimonies with a questioning, inquisitive attitude. This indicates an openness to complexity and multiperspectivity. Nevertheless, there is a side note to be made. Several times pupils or students noted that "multiple perspectives" can exist with regard to dictatorship and democracy. In some cases, however, this recognition of multiperspectivity seemed to tend towards forms of relativism rather than towards complex political and moral judgements. In focus group 3, for example, a student responded to the testimony from Cuba saying that people in the West have a negative view of dictatorship, while "the lady from Cuba was actually saying that they were reasonably happy, even under that dictatorship". For the student, this raised the following question:

"Might there be an alternative then [to democracy]? I don't know – I think this is a difficult question."

How should this kind of statement be interpreted? Is it an expression of critical thinking about (and avoidance of an uncritical celebration of) Western democracy, or might it lead to a relativistic stance towards dictatorship? In the context of the Changing Democracies project, as well as democratic citizenship education in general, this is obviously a crucial question. Overall, in the focus groups, discussions about the testimonies seemed to encourage critical questioning, but not rejection, of democracy. In some cases, however, participants seemed to tread a path that might lead to relativism. In one example from focus group 3, a student noted:

"When we look at democracy from the West, we always have a very positive image of it, and a very negative connotation with dictatorship. But I think it is also important to show that dictatorship is not necessarily bad. It can also be good for a particular country. For us, a democracy might be good, but for

another country it might not work. So I do think it is important to show that it is not always necessarily bad or good – it can be somewhere in between."

In another case in the same focus group, a student even remarked that "the fact that Hitler was elected is very bad, but he also introduced things like the railways and so on".

In the focus groups with the students in the teacher training programme, it furthermore became clear that the students framed the teaching of issues related to democracy and dictatorship in terms of the neutral stance that teachers supposedly have to take. Responding to the question of whether they also should remain neutral when it comes to teaching democracy and dictatorship, a student in focus group 4 responded:

"As a teacher, I think it is important to be neutral on that. Personally, I am of the opinion that democracy is better. But yes, I think it is important to be neutral and not throw your opinion directly at the students."

Another student in the same focus group illustrated this point by referring to an exercise she had observed during an internship. Pupils had been asked by their teacher to list pros and cons of dictatorship and democracy:

"Actually, those pupils could come up with quite a lot of advantages and disadvantages. So I think you create neutrality there too – for example, by not only indicating advantages to democracy. So I think this is a good kind of exercise for pupils because they can choose a little bit for themselves."

At the same time, the emphasis on neutrality was complemented by reflections on the complexity of the issue. Some students, for example, noted that in teaching about democracy and dictatorship, it is important to avoid a "eurocentric view", while someone added that "Europe also has dictators".

An important dimension of the Changing Democracies project in the Dutch and Flemish contexts is that the coordinators chose to base the project on migration stories. The schools where the local educational projects were implemented have particularly diverse pupil populations. The researchers for this study therefore explored whether the migration dimension of the testimonies had an impact on how the witnesses' stories were received and interpreted. The analysis showed that a number of participants spontaneously (i.e. without a question or cue from the facilitator) made associations between the testimonies and their own (migration) backgrounds. In focus group 2, for example, a pupil noted that she had heard of dictatorial practices such as wiretapping in her home country (four or five years ago, before she moved to Antwerp). In focus group 5, pupils recognised practices such as censorship from their parents' stories, or shared that because of the different backgrounds of their parents they "understand both points of view and have both their perspectives".

3.3 Critical reflections on democracy?

A central objective of the Changing Democracies project is to invite audiences across Europe to critically reflect on contemporary democracy, based on testimonies about life in a dictatorship. In this study of local educational projects in Antwerp, the researchers explored whether and how the testimonies produced critical reflections on democracy among young people from diverse backgrounds.

A first observation is that the teachers applied different didactic approaches. These probably influenced the learning dynamics in the different cases. In school 1, for example, the teachers started the project with lessons about democracy and subsequently introduced the testimonies. In school 2, the teachers started with the testimonies and then proceeded to classroom discussions. In the teacher training programme, the students had worked on a project about democratic deficit the previous term.

The analysis revealed three ways in which the testimonies prompted the pupils and students to reflect critically on democracy.

First, in the focus groups, the participants offered their views on democracy in response to explicit questions from the facilitators or teachers. In some cases, these questions resulted in general and unelaborated – and thus rather shallow – statements such as "democracy is okay although there are problems" and "it could be better, but it is better than other countries, where you are not allowed to have your own opinion".[15] In other cases, discussions dug a little deeper. In focus group 5, for example, one of the teachers asked the pupils whether they were of the opinion that in a democracy parties should be able to get elected even when they have anti-democratic elements in their manifesto. One pupil responded that this should indeed be possible:

"Because it would not be democratic to exclude the party, even if there is indeed some kind of paradox. If you don't give people the space to be able to say they don't want democracy any more, then you are actually already not in a democracy any more."

Nonetheless, the pupil added that he thought other parties have the right not to want to govern with that party, concluding, "I think a cordon sanitaire is completely okay." A second pupil disagreed and took the opposite position: "I don't think that it is democratic to tell a party that has won in the elections 'we don't want to work with you because you think this or this'." In an almost dialectical fashion, a third pupil transcended both positions by sharing the view that parties are free not to want to cooperate with certain parties, but that a cordon sanitaire as a "rule" or a "law" is not democratic.

A second way in which the testimonies resulted in critical reflections about democracy is that they sparked discussions about the stability of Belgium's current democracy and the possibility of a new dictatorship arising. It is interesting to take a closer look at some of the interactions. In focus group 5, for example, one group of pupils took the position that Belgian society is not likely to evolve into a dictatorship because, in their view, "if that were to happen, we would be inclined to strike or revolt, ... because we have been brought up that way [i.e. in a democracy]". One pupil argued that "we have a very stable political system", saying that "in Belgium, Flanders and Europe, it is fairly difficult to have one person or one group completely in power". A dictatorship, the pupil added, is much easier to establish "in a country where democracy has not really been fought to the end yet". Other pupils added, moreover, that compared to the situations before the Second World War and the 1929 crisis, Belgium's current problems are much smaller. However, a second group of pupils took the opposite position. They explained that "if you look at how many people now vote for far right parties", it could be argued that this "does represent a path to dictatorship". This position was also motivated by a historical comparison: "It is the first step that is always taken, like with Hitler." In the end, a pupil made a dialectical intervention that seemed to combine and transcend the two positions: perhaps, this pupil argued, the current situation is indeed not comparable "to Hitler's situation", but nevertheless it is correct that evolutions towards dictatorship often do start with a small conflict, which then escalates through a snowball effect:

"I think you always have to keep in the back of your mind the thought that worse things could come."

The discussion ended with a pupil attempting a deeper analysis:

"You cannot create a perfect society, so then you need a scapegoat to put the blame on. It is like that with any problem, ... I don't think it has to do with left or right – it is something innate in people's behaviour."

A third way participants critically reflected on democracy was when the testimonies made them talk about what they called "one-sided European perspectives". Europeans, pupils in focus groups 1 and 5 argued, tend to look at democracy exclusively from the European perspective, in terms of "good guys versus bad guys". Additionally, in focus group 5, the opinion was given that wars are always considered "from the Western side and never the other side". In focus group 1, pupils engaged in critical thinking about traditional media, such as the public Flemish broadcasting company VRT. Someone argued that "many things are turned around [i.e. distorted or skewed] and certain groups are misrepresented". After the teacher noted that news sources try to report from a neutral perspective, the pupils reacted quite critically. They found it even "hateful" that the Western media always emphasises its neutrality while, according to them, it is not neutral. Asked for an example, pupils pointed to the conflict between Israeli and Palestinians. When the teacher then asked which media they watch at home, the responses pointed to a diverse media diet. One pupil in focus group 1, for example, explained that at home they watch Al Jazeera in the morning and VRT in the evening. In focus group 5, a pupil extended their critical stance to certain political discourses in the public sphere: "If you look at modern extremes, they change a few words so they can talk about the same issues, but in a veiled way." For example: "Nowadays, you hear racial slurs less often", but terms like "multiculturalism" are used to hide discourse "in a wrapper of fancy words ... so it doesn't seem racist".

In these three ways, then, the educational projects were fruitful in producing critical reflections and debates on contemporary democracy. At the same time, the analysis provided some caveats.

As discussed in Section 3.2, at some points there seemed to be a risk of elements of relativism creeping into pupils' and students' discourses on dictatorship and democracy. For example, a student in focus group 3 remarked that dictatorship "can also be good for a particular country". Moreover, in focus groups 3 and 4, it appeared that many of the teacher training students intended to teach about dictatorship and democracy from a position of neutrality. The available data does not make it possible to conclude whether the students conceived of this mainly as a didactic approach or as a matter of principle. In any case, statements such as "dictatorship can also be good" are, from the perspective of political philosophy, of a different order than a plea for "self-determination" of societies, or an argument against eurocentric visions of democracy. Certainly in the context of teacher training programmes, and democratic citizenship education in general, it seems to be important to further reflect upon this point.[16]

In addition, the analysis indicates that critical reflections on dictatorship and democracy can lead to resignation and feelings of pointlessness. In focus group 1, a pupil shared her view that lessons are always "about conflict, in past and present, always negativity", which leads her to "block" things "out": "you start to shield yourself and just go for [i.e. think about] yourself". Section 3.2 already quoted the student in focus group 3 who wondered what the point of demonstrating is any more, given that "the government doesn't listen to us anyway".

Finally, it is noteworthy that several pupils in schools 1 and 2 spoke about living in a democratic society in terms of "gratitude". That term was not brought up by the teachers or facilitators, but some of the witnesses did use it. For example, one pupil was struck from looking at the testimonies by "how these

witnesses, who have moved to Belgium, often say [that] people don't realise how lucky they are to live in a democracy. ... What they say is that you have to be a bit more positive, a bit more grateful." Other pupils used the motif of gratitude as an element in their evaluation of what the witnesses said. Some pupils, for example, found one witness' criticism of the West "weird" and "not very grateful". One pupil in focus group 1 added that she did not necessarily think that the witness "[had] to be grateful, but those other people who were in an extreme situation are grateful; she may not have had it so bad, but then she is not grateful". The pupil shared that she found this "a bit rude".[17] The theme of gratitude also emerged in focus group 5. In the context of the upcoming elections (which were held in Belgium on 9 June 2024) and polls predicting substantial gains for the far right, a group of pupils took the view that "people may not realise that freedom of speech can weaken because of that [i.e. if the far right gains power], and so we are not very grateful for that [i.e. we do not value our free speech enough]".

In summary, the analysis shows that educational projects based on testimonies about dictatorship and migration to democracy can encourage students to critically reflect on democracy. A student in focus group 3 described it this way:

"Because we have only known a democratic system, we think we are very democratic. But then, when you starting thinking about it, you wonder is such and such really democratic? And then the answer is actually no. And so I found that very interesting [about the project], because we often don't think about these questions."

Another student in the same focus group added that this was actually the first time she had "really thought about" these kinds of questions about democracy. Because sometimes, she went on, people wonder whether it is acceptable to think about how democratic our society actually is, without it feeling "like a conspiracy theory or something". The project, however, had provided her with an opportunity to think about democracy in a nuanced way.

3.4 Learning from the past?

The last key question of this study is how students engage not only in learning about but also in learning from history. Do they talk about "drawing lessons" from the past? In what sense do they invoke historical comparisons to think about contemporary politics and society?

A first observation from the analysis is that some participants started talking about the importance of learning from history spontaneously – that is, without being prompted to reflect on this topic by teachers or facilitators. This suggests that it was a topic that intrinsically interested some pupils and students.

Second, pupils' and students' views and arguments about the topic showed varying degrees of complexity. On the one hand, some participants claimed to value the importance of learning from the past but remained rather vague and superficial as to precisely what this kind of learning meant for them. Explanatory statements, for example, remained limited to opinions such as "by looking at history, you recognise 'red flags' so that we don't make those mistakes again" (from focus group 1) or "I think lessons should be learned, but it might also just be necessary to make sure history doesn't repeat itself".[18] This vagueness is, of course, understandable. The question of learning from violent histories is a difficult theoretical problem.

Yet there were also pupils and students who showed more complex thinking on the issue. After a pupil in focus group 1 remarked that it is important to "look at the mistakes people have made" in the past in order to learn from them and try "not to make the same mistakes again", another pupil responded that "you also have to bear in mind that everything changes with time, and so you cannot just take the same measures as before". Thus the second pupil injected more complexity into the discussion. In other focus groups, participants also offered insights that showed a higher level of insight into the possibilities of learning from history. Some pupils mentioned, for example, that it is interesting to look for the historical roots of current issues and debates. Others argued that oral history is particularly relevant to diverse societies because "sometimes you don't give enough thought to the histories other individuals have experienced" (from focus group 4).[19]

In focus group 5, the issue of learning from history sparked a long discussion based on historical comparisons. Interestingly, these comparisons pointed in different directions. The trigger for the discussion was a teacher's question about whether it might be possible "that we are not alert enough about an evolution towards an authoritarian system". One pupil started off the conversation about this question with a reference to G.W.F. Hegel's philosophy of history, arguing that we can read our own times as a repetition of the period before the Second World War, when democratic societies (the "thesis") moved towards their antithesis: authoritarian regimes. After the Second World War, liberalism came to the fore again. This prompted the teacher to ask whether this is an inevitable dynamic: can such a dialectical recurrence not be avoided because we now know what dictatorial regimes can bring about? The pupil thought not, however, as there have been enough generations between the periods for the thesis–antithesis dynamic to play out again. This comment led to an extended discussion on intergenerational learning. Pupils explored different dimensions of this kind of learning. Is it culturally determined? Referring to their own background, one pupil gave the example of how Armenian communities actively pass on the memory of genocide. When someone remarked that the Jewish community in Belgium also actively passes on the memory of the Holocaust, but that other Belgians do it less, another pupil responded that history is also transferred through films, books and documentaries. Factual knowledge about the war is indeed passed on, the discussion continued, but, as someone remarked, "somehow fear seems to have lagged behind [given that] many people now vote for the far right while 80 years ago the far right endangered the whole of Europe and maybe even the whole world". Is there then a risk of an evolution towards dictatorship? Opinions varied, although all sides based their arguments on historical comparisons. One group of pupils discerned in the growth of the extremes in European societies a first step towards dictatorship, as "with Hitler": "At first he was supposedly very good for the country, but then he was suddenly at war." However, another group responded that democracy will not disappear overnight: "The big step towards authoritarianism will only happen after a major economic crisis", because "most major changes in history only happen when people are hungry", as in Germany in the 1930s. "The situation today", a pupil representing this group noted, "cannot be compared to the situation before the Second World War" – our problems today, such as the quality of education and nitrogen emissions, are "relatively minor".

Finally, the analysis shows that while pupils and students may think it is possible to learn from history, they also critically question whether this learning ultimately, on a societal level, will have any real effects. Reflecting the views of several others, one pupil in focus group 1 noted that while often "we look back at history and wonder how it was possible that people back then voted [a dictator] into power", "maybe we are doing the same thing now". Pupils also suggested that while there may be some people who learn from history, many others do not. In the pupils' view, this is frustrating: it is "really a loop of 'oh, how

could they do that', and then they do the same thing" all over again. Interestingly, these observations resulted in three types of reactions among pupils.

A first reaction was resignation and feelings of pointlessness: "If you look at history, we repeat those mistakes, literally every time again and again and again." On the one hand, pupils argued, it makes sense to know about history, but "on the other hand, yes, it happens anyway ... so what's the point?"[20] For another pupil, this experience leads to disinterest: with so much conflict and negativity, she claimed, history and current affairs "have not interested me for a while"; "you're just going to block yourself off – you're just going to shield yourself and go for [i.e. think about] yourself".[21]

A second reaction was fear. One pupil noted that she becomes afraid when she realises that certain things (such as a dictatorship) could happen again: "Imagine, Hitler, if that happens again ... then I think about my children later, and about my parents, family, friends."

A third response, however, was a call to action. One pupil in focus group 1 argued that young people should be more aware that war could happen again. There is no point in waiting until it is too late: "We have to address this now and show that we are not going to let even these small steps be taken, because every time you allow something like that to happen, it is going to lead to something bigger."

In summary, most of the participants in the focus groups were of the opinion that history is relevant, including for present-day society, and that we can learn from history. What this learning might look like in practice often remained vague, superficial and shrouded in clichés. In some cases, however, pupils and students were able to arrive at interesting and more in-depth insights and discussions about learning from history. Remarkably, among this generation Hitler remains the most cited historical person when it comes to discussions of dictatorships.

4. Conclusion

This chapter has reported the findings from an analysis of three local educational projects linked to Changing Democracies in the Flemish context. The analysis builds heavily on the focus groups held in two Antwerp schools and one teacher training programme.

At the end of focus groups 1, 2, 3 and 4, the participants were asked to evaluate the educational project they had just experienced. Overall, pupils and students perceived the oral history project as interesting and "different" from their ordinary history lessons. In their opinion, the personal testimonies about dictatorship made history concrete, realistic and interactive, and encouraged critical thinking about democracy. Some pupils in focus group 2 suggested that it would have been interesting to have had more testimonies to listen to, and possibly to have been able to conduct interviews themselves. While the written assignments teachers asked for in the secondary schools were seen as "standard" and "boring", the artistic work and the focus groups themselves were appreciated, partly because, in the case of the latter, the participants in focus groups 1, 2, 3 and 4 stated that they enabled them to better understand the content of the testimonies.

This study focused on four elements. First, it explored whether pupils and students had basic skills relating to historical thinking and source criticism, at least in the minimal manner required to adequately engage in learning from history. This seemed to be the case. Second, the analysis suggests that pupils

and students in Antwerp gave meaning to oral histories about life in a dictatorship in multidirectional, cosmopolitan and agonistic ways. Competitive modes of historical discourse were rare, while fully fledged antagonistic narratives seemed to be absent. Furthermore, while the literature points to the risk that in some contexts oral history will work to depoliticise pupils' thinking, the analysis shows that "the political" was not avoided in discussions in the context of the local educational projects in Antwerp, in the sense that the fundamental meanings of dictatorship and democracy was a central topic in many of the conversations. This is not surprising. The Changing Democracies project clearly has a political stake; the idea is to invite pupils and students to engage in critical reflections on democracy, based on oral history about dictatorship. Third, and linked to this, in the three cases that were studied it is clear that the project succeeded in the objective to encourage young people to think critically about democracy. Finally, the analysis showed that pupils and students believed that the history of dictatorship has current relevance and that it is possible to learn from history. Although the participants' thinking about this topic often remained rather vague and clichéd, in some focus groups pupils and students also showed more complex ways of thinking based on historical comparisons.

Finally, the analysis provides some caveats. These are relevant to follow-up research, as well as to educational practice. First, the study suggests that it is not always easy for pupils and students to strike a balance between multiperspectivity and relativism. The pupils and students clearly showed a commitment to the value of multiple perspectives, but in some cases this did not seem to go hand in hand with more complex forms of political and moral judgement. Moreover, students in the teacher training programme made clear that they intended to teach about dictatorship and democracy from a neutral position. While this may make sense from a didactic perspective, it is not entirely clear whether the students also saw this as a matter of principle. Second, the pupils and students seemed convinced that we can learn from history. However, the analysis shows that this kind of learning can result in very different reactions. Besides prompting social engagement, it can also lead to resignation, feelings of pointlessness or fear. This raises the question of how educational professionals can constructively deal with such reactions.

Endnotes

1 https://www.changingdemocracies.eu/free-browsing.

2 https://stadincijfers.antwerpen.be/mosaic/hoofd-dashboard/demografie.

3 See the introduction.

4 Yanow, D. & Schwartz-Shea, P. (2013), *Interpretation and method: empirical research methods and the interpretive turn*, Abingdon: Routledge.

5 Acocella, I. & Cataldi, S. (2021), *Using focus groups: theory, methodology, practice*, Los Angeles: Sage, p. 6.

6 The following themes were addressed: how the participants came into contact with history in their daily lives; which histories they did and did not find interesting; their views on oral history as a source (for instance, whether they thought it was "the truth"); what had struck them about the testimonies; whether they thought there was "right" and "wrong" in the history of dictatorship; whether the witnesses said things they agreed or disagreed with; whether history is important to them in relation to today; whether the testimonies made them look at democracy differently; and how they evaluated the project.

7 All the focus groups and the class discussion in school 2 were recorded. For the underage pupils, the researchers sent a letter with information about the project to parents via Smartschool (the digital communication system in Flemish education), stating that parents could state if they wished their child not to participate in the study. The adult college students gave their own consent to participate in the study.

8 The following coding scheme was used: 1. History in everyday life; 2. Historical criticism; 3. Multiperspectivity; 4. Interpretation register (i.e. antagonistic, cosmopolitan or multidirectional); 5. Good vs. evil; 6. Political dimension; 7. Migration; 8. Learning from history?; 9. Current relevance of history; 10. Critical reflection; 11. Attitude; 12. Attitude towards controversial themes in lessons; 13. Attitude towards teaching about controversial themes; 14. Subject evaluation; and 15. Evaluation of learning forms.

9 This was done in focus groups 1, 2, 3 and 4; focus group 5 was facilitated by teachers.

10 Focus groups 1, 2, 3 and 4.

11 All the quotes from participants were translated through DeepL and edited for clarity by the authors.

12 This was done in focus groups 1, 2, 3 and 4; focus group 5 was facilitated by teachers.

13 Focus groups 2, 3 and 4.

14 The teacher, who herself had reservations about the witness' criticism of the Western intervention in 1999, noted that the testimony – from which students were shown only some excerpts – was too complex to discuss in a few hours. She said that she would take up this complex history with the class later.

15 Focus groups 1 and 2.

16 Maarten Van Alstein (2019), *Controversy and Polarisation in the Classroom. Suggestions for Pedagogical Practice*, Flemish Peace Institute.

17 This theme also came up in focus group 2.

18 These kinds of statements were also recorded in focus group 4.

19 These kinds of statements were also recorded in focus group 3.

20 Also in focus group 2, while discussing modern forms of slavery in the DRC, it was noted: "We don't really learn from our mistakes."

21 Quotes from focus group 1.

Conclusions from researching Changing Democracies: This polyphony that we co-create

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1. Oral histories about dictatorship and transition

Changing Democracies is a trans-European public outreach project based on oral history about life under dictatorship and transitions to democracy. In this volume, six partners of the Changing Democracies consortium have reported on their research in educational projects based on the testimonies. Exploring the intersections between memory, democracy and education, our aim was to investigate the various ways in which the Changing Democracies projects engaged young people in reflections about dictatorship and democracy.

Although the research efforts varied in many ways, the researchers started from a shared set of empirical questions. How do young people give meaning to testimonies about life in a dictatorship and experiences of transition? How do they learn not only about but also from these histories – on their own terms and in their own voice? And, importantly in light of the objectives of the broader Changing Democracies project, does learning about histories of dictatorship lead young people to critically reflect about democracy and peace, and, if so, how and in what ways? Next we analysed young people's meaning-making and learning against the backdrop of a number of theoretical insights from memory studies and a set of normative assumptions from peace and democratic citizenship education. The stated aim of the Changing Democracies project is not only to explore oral histories about dictatorship and transitions to democracy but also to inspire European citizens to critically reflect on present-day democracy. In line with the latter objective, in the case studies in this volume, we have explored the circumstances under which young people can be engaged – in open, constructive and historically adequate ways – in reflections on topics related to dictatorship and democracy, and possibly also enhance their democratic and peace-oriented attitudes and competencies.

2. Approaches to the political in Changing Democracies

The group of authors that contributed to this volume is composed of partners from six European countries: the Czech Republic, Poland, Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands and Flanders/Belgium. Most of the authors in this volume were involved, in close cooperation with teachers and educators, in setting up and/or facilitating the educational projects. The formats of these projects varied significantly, from traditional class discussions and workshops, online tools and development of educational materials in teacher training programmes to arts-based practices such as theatre scene-building workshops, drawing and stop-motion videos. There was also variation in context; we researched projects in formal education (secondary, teacher training and arts education) as well as in non-formal education (such as the Borderland Foundation in Poland).

This variation notwithstanding, all of the projects built on the same foundation: testimonies of people who talk about their memories of life in a dictatorship and transitions to democracy, and the ways in which today's young people engage with these oral histories. As the literature makes clear, oral history offers a great number of opportunities for educational projects. Scholars, however, have also identified a number of pitfalls associated with education based on oral history about political conflict or violence.[1] One is that projects, in order to avoid igniting heated altercations or reproducing old hostilities, tend to depoliticise histories of violent conflict or dictatorship. This could happen, for example, when educators only mobilise stories they think are edifying and easy to identify with (e.g. by only referring to stories of heroes, such as members of the resistance), or "safe" (in the sense that they will not prompt discomfort or conflict). In the case of oral history about dictatorship and transition, educators might run the risk of politically simplifying their project by choosing to work only with overly moralising narratives that one-sidedly pitch "evil" dictatorship against "good" democracy. The risk here is that the complexity and ambivalences of testimonies about living in a dictatorship will be obscured, while the space for critical reflection about present-day democracy will be closed off, or at least guided along narrow paths.

In order to determine how "political" the educational projects of Changing Democracies were, the chapters closely examined the various ways in which the organisers and educators presented the witnesses' stories. The case studies make clear that the projects did not avoid the more complex political dimensions of working with histories of dictatorship and transition: the projects not only wanted to inspire discussions about "politics" but also tried to engage participants in reflections about "the political" (i.e. about the fundamental character of choices between authoritarian and democratic systems).

That the projects succeeded in foregrounding the political dimensions of histories of dictatorship and transition to democracy is of course intimately linked to the normative assumptions and objectives of the Changing Democracies project itself. From the start, the project coordinators explicitly aimed at integrating a political dimension into the project. Multiperspectivity, moreover, was at the core. The project was based on the idea of interviewing individuals from very different contexts: people who had experienced fascist and communist dictatorships, as well as people who had immigrated to Europe (the Netherlands and Flanders/Belgium) from authoritarian countries. The witnesses, furthermore, were not only asked to recount their memories of living in a dictatorship and transitioning (or migrating) to a democratic society; they were also explicitly invited to reflect on what it meant to them to live in a democracy now, and what messages they wanted to share with younger generations of citizens.

The case studies make clear that the educators and facilitators of the local educational projects picked up this central feature of Changing Democracies in the ways they set up their projects. Educators in the Czech project, for example, used an online tool (HistoryLab.cz) to integrate the conflictual character of memories of communist society into the presentation of two testimonies. In Poland, educators started from the intention to create agonistic spaces for experiential, situated and guided engagement with local history witnesses. One of the core ideas of their approach was to incorporate diverse lived experiences when engaging with histories educationally. In particular, they focused on witnesses voicing historical narratives that might be less popular or less in line with hegemonic narratives. In Spain, the project started from the ambition to overcome antagonistic views by providing non-Manichean and multiperspectival stories, in particular of ordinary people who had lived through Francoism and the Transition. In Portugal, art students were engaged in an intensive workshop inspired by arts-education-situated practices, with a focus on "generating moments of friction". In the Netherlands and Flanders/ Belgium, educators were provided with testimonies of migrants, which not only offered stories about dictatorship and democracy (e.g. from the perspective of undocumented refugees) but also opened up perspectives on (post)coloniality.

These politically inspired starting points set the stage for the young people who were invited to participate in the projects. Did the projects succeed in their ambition to engage young people in familiarising themselves with the complexities of political history and in critical reflections about present-day democracy? The sections below present the general findings of our research.

3. Giving meaning to and learning from history

In the case studies, we wanted to explore how young people gave meaning to oral histories about dictatorship and transition. How did they navigate and negotiate the stories told by the witnesses – as history or as (cultural) memory? Did the participants apply antagonistic, cosmopolitan or agonistic modes to understand the testimonies about dictatorship and transition to democracy? And, importantly, did the testimonies inspire them to critically reflect on democracy? Alternatively framed, how did young people learn not only *about* but also *from* histories of dictatorship and transition?

As we highlighted in the introduction to this volume, learning from history (and certainly drawing "lessons" from history) is a thorny issue. Many academic historians are quite critical about endeavours in this direction.[2] For scholars and educators who are more warmly disposed towards the idea, the methodological problems and pitfalls are manifold. In order to not stray from the demands of adequate, critical history education, at the outset of the research we formulated a crucial normative assumption that we wanted to check empirically. Our premise – outlined in the introduction – is that learning *from* history should always build on adequate learning *about* history. This implies that the didactic soundness of oral history projects such as Changing Democracies is dependent on the presence or development of historical thinking skills. In more concrete terms, this means, for instance, that the pupils and students involved in the project viewed the testimonies as historical sources that should be approached in a historical–critical way. Another problem highlighted in the literature might arise when pupils and students read testimonies as simply personal anecdotes, or place too much emphasis on the role of individuals.

In the case study of the project in Antwerp, we explicitly investigated these assumptions and questions (see Chapter 7). Overall, the analysis suggests that the participants viewed the testimonies in a

(sufficiently) critical and nuanced way. Pupils and students showed an understanding that witnesses speak about history from their own perspective. For example, the relevance of the testimonies, one student claimed, is not that these stories offer the truth, but mainly that they "make you think". In the project in Poland, the educators presented the students with a multistage and multigenerational programme in which attention was paid to insights from memory studies, which assisted the participants in looking at oral history as a historical source. In the Czech project, participants were already experienced in working with the HistoryLab application and therefore with the inquiry-based principles of this teaching method. Integral to the tool, for example, is an emphasis on multiperspectivity and a focus on distinguishing contemporary from historical perspectives. According to the researchers, Václav Sixta and Bohumil Melichar, the respondents' level of historical thinking may therefore be higher than that of the average Czech pupil of the same age. In the Dutch project, on the other hand, students in the teacher training programme who were asked to develop educational materials for secondary education used a witness's references to the colonial past to activate a discussion around values and perspective-taking in a democracy rather than to activate historical thinking. Nonetheless, our analysis suggests that it is possible to build on oral histories to invite young people to learn from history in a historically adequate manner, and shows that there are multiple ways to do this.

The next step in our research was to examine how the local educational projects' participants picked up and negotiated the political dimensions of Changing Democracies. Generally speaking, the case studies indicate that the projects succeeded in engaging participants not only in historical analysis but also in political discussions about dictatorship, transition and democracy. The ways in which this happened varied, however. While reflections on the political dimensions of the project were sometimes rather superficial or defined democracy in rather narrow, technical terms, in many other instances participants engaged in more complex and profound thinking. In at least one case, too, the political character of the project resulted in an explicit refusal to cooperate. Of course, we cannot exclude the possibility that other participants were reluctant or dismissive but chose to remain silent about their attitude. In the sections below, we expand on how participants gave meaning to and learned from the testimonies about dictatorship and transition. Firstly, we look more closely at the ways in which participants talked about the history and memory of dictatorship and transitions to democracy. Secondly, we analyse how the testimonies inspired the participants to critically reflect on democracy. Thirdly, we explore the participants' emotional reactions.

3.1 Navigating memories of dictatorship and transitions to democracy

Overall, the case studies suggest that the participants discussed the testimonies in narrative modes that combined multidirectional, cosmopolitan and agonistic elements. Only in a few cases did the authors of the case studies detect discourse that was more moralising, competitive or antagonistic in tone. On the whole, the participants did not react with irreconcilable hostility, rejection or black-and-white moralising when they were presented with unexpected or non-familiar views about dictatorship and democracy. Although sometimes puzzled at first, they subsequently proceeded to work on the testimonies with a questioning, inquisitive attitude. This indicates an openness to complexity and multiperspectivity.

The case studies of the projects in the Czech Republic and Poland provide insightful information on how the participants were able to navigate conflictual memories and address tensions between hegemonic and local narratives in an agonistic mode. While the authors of the Czech case study expected at the beginning of the project that escalated opinions would dominate among the pupils and

would pose a challenge for teachers, their findings paint a different picture. A great majority of the pupils demonstrated the agonistic mode when navigating memories. In the words of the authors, this meant that they acknowledged the relevance of the witnesses' life stories while not necessarily identifying with them, and that they were able to subject the witnesses' insights to scrutiny as historical sources about the past. Only a minority of the participants perceived the testimonies in a more binary way; while they agreed with one of the witnesses, they judged the other testimony as conveying untruths that distorted the past. A very small number of participants went even further and denounced one of the testimonies as "amoral, biased or provided under the influence of a harmful ideology". Thus, in Sixta and Melichar's view, the project showed that the pupils were able to analyse and compare two conflicting narratives about the past without hostility towards one or the other, and think about late socialism and the democratic transition in the Czech Republic without harsh moral judgements.

In the Polish case, Weronika Czyżewska-Poncyljusz and Katharina Kurz found that the individual life stories of people growing up in a different reality from the one known by the pupils inspired curiosity and opened space for reflection on the tension between the hegemonic narrative on Poland's transition to a liberal democracy and the localised specifics of their own community and place. Through intergenerational dialogue, the pupils learned about the complex realities of the transition period in the rural area of Poland where they lived, and specifically the poverty, unemployment, lack of solidarity and emigration that followed the end of communist society. This narrative, according to the authors, was the one to which pupils reacted the strongest, in the sense that they did not know much about this aspect of their country's history and did not expect to hear what they did from their grandparents. Their reaction also highlights how useful it is to disentangle experiences of transitions to liberal democracy from narratives about transitions to a capitalist free market system. Czyżewska-Poncyljusz and Kurz conclude that the discovery and exploration of the two narratives also linked to discussion about "the social ethos of the political left", which "due to associations with the former communist regime" has become discredited to the extent that "it is now difficult to even use vocabulary to articulate issues referring to social injustice and belonging in these parts of Europe. Instead, many of these concerns have been taken over and manipulated by current populist and far-right movements." Or, in the words of one of their participants:

"What I knew [about this period] I knew primarily from dominant narratives, often very black and white. Even such a small collection of interviews with people whose lives went on far from the centre of historical events, on a somewhat separate track, and therefore in reality with a different history of its own, has become a fascinating source of knowledge about the past. The vision of transition, composed of lesser-known and less obvious voices, creates a richer picture, full of tension, dashed hopes, lost opportunities and often a life that flowed at its own rhythm, as if outside the time of breakthroughs and transitions."

In other case studies, we found that pupils and students sometimes fused agonistic modes of navigating memories with more cosmopolitan elements. In the Dutch case, for example, teacher-training students who were asked to develop educational materials based on the witnesses' stories used the testimonies to invite pupils to discuss democracy through the lens of (universal) human rights, such as freedom and equality. At the same time, they aimed to engage pupils in reflections on what values were important to them, specifically trying to increase pupils' awareness that what people find important, whether it is certain values or the commemoration of a historical event, can be different and exist next to each other in a democratic and pluralistic society. As Eugenie Khatschatrian notes, the different testimonies thus challenged pupils to take different perspectives and acknowledge the experiences of others. During

the part of the project where Dutch educators worked with primary school pupils, on the other hand, elements of a more straightforward cosmopolitan discourse surfaced. According to Khatschatrian, when explaining democracy, pupils expressed themselves more clearly in moralistic overtones. They described non-democracies as "bad" and democracies such as the Netherlands as "good". The pupils who critically reflected on the shortcomings of democracy in the Netherlands (based on the testimony of a refugee who was undocumented for several years) also talked strongly in the modes of "good" and "bad": it is "bad" or "good" if people don't or do have certain rights.

In the Dutch and Flemish cases – which were based on testimonies by people who had migrated from authoritarian regimes to the Netherlands and Flanders/Belgium – we found evidence of a multidirectional mode of navigating memories of dictatorship and violence. In the Dutch case, for example, pupils made connections between the importance of equality for democracy and the history of slavery. In Flemish schools, participants spontaneously (i.e. without being prompted by a question or cue from the facilitator) made connections between different histories, such as the history of the Second World War and Belgium's colonial history. In one instance, this multidirectional thinking was also transposed to the present day, when pupils connected the history of slavery with the existence of "modern", "technological" forms of slavery, such as sweatshops. In the sense that pupils here drew attention to human suffering and human rights violations, their multidirectional discourse carried features of cosmopolitan historical discourse. As these discussions and multidirectional reflections built on testimonies of people coming from former colonies of the Netherlands and Flanders/Belgium, we can hypothesise that this multidirectional thinking might partly have been sparked by the references to coloniality in the witnesses' migration stories.

Important to note, finally, is that in the Spanish case there was little engagement with the testimonies. The participants reflected on democracy without making many references to the witnesses' stories, nor did the testimonies seem to have any significant influence on their conceptions of democracy. When asked to what extent they remembered the contents of the testimonies, their answer was that they remembered "little". We will expand on this finding in Section 4.

Based on these observations, we can draw a number of tentative conclusions about the ways in which the testimonies inspired participants to engage in agonistic and multidirectional modes of navigating memories of dictatorship and transition.

Firstly, agonistic thinking seems to have been sparked or initiated in various ways. In some cases, it resulted when participants experienced certain parts of testimonies as unexpected, puzzling or difficult to understand. Instead of rejecting the witnesses' stories as false, immoral or bad, however, the pupils and students started a group dialogue to better understand the complexities of the testimonies. Agonistic discussions about the testimonies were also initiated when participants purposefully intervened to question or unsettle hegemonic narratives. In the Flemish case, we observed this type of intervention when a pupil questioned whether Cuba could be placed in the same category of dictatorships as the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Syria. This intervention resulted in a conflictual discussion, but the interaction between pupils remained adversarial without becoming hostile. The Portuguese case showed that an intensive arts-based workshop, set up reflexively from the perspective of practices situated in arts education, was also able to inspire students to engage in agonistic reflections, in this case through their performative interventions. Rita Reis and Samuel

Guimarães quote one of the participants in their workshop to show how their students were inspired by the tensions they experienced when listening to the testimonies:

“The quote I chose challenged me, made me feel uncomfortable and gave me the idea of formulating a strange topic, which gave me the idea of saying it during a break or at lunch time when people are in a routine and doing a comfortable activity, where sometimes uncomfortable conversations arise.”

Secondly, the recognisability of the testimonies contributed to the specific agonistic dynamics in which participants could empathise with witnesses despite the fact that their stories may have been unexpected or challenging, as the stories did not correspond with the hegemonic narratives familiar to the participants. This recognisability worked in various ways. In the Polish case, the very local perspective of the testimonies resonated deeply with the students, and the intergenerational character of the experience (grandchildren talking with their grandparents) made it possible for participants to feel profoundly challenged by conflicting narratives while not losing their ability to remain empathetic and inquisitive. For the Czech case, Sixta and Melichar also noted the effects of working with family memories, as these lie outside the framework of institutionalised memory and often even question it. Working with witness testimony in the classroom, the authors note, had the potential to open up space for a plurality of family memories, and therefore to incorporate experiences that may thus far have stood in the shadows of the grand narratives of history. The Portuguese case showed how art students made very personal connections with the testimonies, relating speech by the witnesses to their own lives, feelings, identities and bodies. In the Dutch and Flemish cases, recognisability may have been a result of the choice to work with witnesses who had migrated to the Netherlands and Flanders/Belgium. In these two case studies, because of their own background or because of the diverse character of their schools, certain pupils may have found it easier to empathise with the witnesses.

3.2 Critical reflections about present-day democracy

In light of the objective of Changing Democracies to make citizens reflect on democracy, the researchers subsequently examined whether the oral history projects about dictatorship and transition inspired young people to critically reflect on present-day democracy and whether they learned not only *about* but also *from* these histories. Our case studies indicate that pupils and students indeed were inspired to have critical reflections and discussions about democracy. This happened in a variety of ways.

Firstly, we observed many instances of pupils and students recognising the value and the importance of democracy. In a number of cases, this happened in rather superficial ways – for example, when participants talked about democracy as a form of governance that may be flawed and deficient in certain respects, but that nonetheless stands as an important and unshakeable reality. In the Spanish project, moreover, students in their drawings mainly focused on voting and the representative character of democracy, while only a few also referred to concrete strategies of direct participation such as referendums, demonstrations or participation in grassroots organisations. In other cases, pupils and students dug a little deeper. In Poland, pupils were inspired by the testimonies to discuss democracy as an unfinished process that should not be treated as a given, the tensions between individual freedom and social solidarity and responsibility, the question of stability versus risk, and democracies’ responsibility to make people feel heard. According to the authors, the pupils engaged in these reflections and discussions in very personal and critical ways, and with great maturity, but also with great respect for the witnesses. Participants were also able to recognise the importance of conflict in democracies. In the Netherlands, for example, students in a teacher training programme

developed educational materials with the objective of increasing pupils' awareness that what people find important, whether it is certain values or the commemoration of a historical event, can be very different but coexist next to each other in a democratic and pluralistic society.

Secondly, pupils and students shared their critical observations about present-day democracies. In some cases, such as in the Spanish project, students' views of democracy were rather negative. In their drawings, art students depicted politicians as liars, bureaucrats, clowns or even cockroaches, and represented voting as useless, showing the ballot box as a paper shredder, a rubbish bin or a process of homogenisation in which social diversity disappears. In other cases young people were inspired by the oral histories about dictatorship to reflect on the current state and stability of democracy. Although the opinions of pupils and students varied to a significant degree, often the participants based their arguments on insights drawn from history or even on historical comparisons. In the Flemish case, for example, pupils engaged in discussions about the stability of democracy and the risk of authoritarianism, drawing on the history of dictatorship.

Thirdly, in some cases pupils and students critically questioned hegemonic narratives about democracy, sometimes even using disruptive strategies and interventions to unsettle these narratives. In the Dutch case, the teacher-training students were inspired by the testimonies of witnesses from Suriname and Iran. The former testimony confronted them with unease around the commemoration of slavery, while latter – the story of an undocumented refugee who had escaped dictatorship – in their view would allow pupils to hear a story that was real and tangible, and that would help them to critically reflect on democracy in the Netherlands and elsewhere. The idea that the refugee did not have rights in his homeland (a dictatorship) and subsequently struggled to achieve these rights in a democracy, as Khatschatrian notes, inspired the students to develop materials aimed at increasing pupils' understanding of the importance of political and social rights while also stimulating them to reflect on how the functioning of a democracy (and indeed people's ability to function within it) depends on the allocation of rights to participate. The Portuguese case shows how students were inspired to engage in disruptive artistic interventions – for example, to share their views of the achievements of democracy (women's rights) but also of democracy as an ongoing struggle. In the words of Reis and Guimarães, the students performed interventions "to suddenly create an embarrassing space for potential reflection, to evoke the feeling that we have all had of everything being fine and trivial at the typical family lunch when suddenly a difficult subject arises – namely, one related to politics – and everybody becomes conscious of a tense moment, suspended in embarrassment, that may or may not provoke debate, questioning and conflict". Students were intrigued by the issue of how to manage the diversity of opinions in a democracy, as well as by the idea of questioning and unsettling established hegemonies (such as the power of money). In the Flemish case, the testimonies inspired pupils to talk about what they called "one-sided European perspectives" – for example, views that frame democracy exclusively from the European perspective, in terms of "good guys versus bad guys".

Finally, some of the authors also formulated critical commentary on the idea of learning about democracy and human rights through examining dictatorship and violations of rights. Sixta and Melichar conclude, for example, by exploring whether their findings suggest that other frameworks should be sought to teach democracy and human rights instead of didactic approaches based on the contrast between dictatorship and democracy. They suggest that history education may contribute to an exploration of new possibilities – essential for motivating pupils – by broadening the scope towards the present.

Democratic and human rights education, for example, could also draw on events from the post-1989 world, which are closer to the experience of the younger generation and less abstract for them.

3.3 A range of (emotional) reactions

The oral histories of Changing Democracies thus succeeded in inspiring young people to reflect on dictatorship and democracy. Furthermore, the case studies show that pupils and students also reacted to the testimonies in ways beyond mere intellectual, critical reflections and discussions. Their discourse revealed a number of emotional reactions, ranging from a motivation to act to reluctance, indifference, resignation and fear.

Some of the authors note that participants were able to internalise what they had learned over the course of the project and use it as an impetus for action. In the Portuguese project, for example, students claimed they felt "an urgency and a will to 'wake people up' to the danger of the growth of the far right and the fear that words are not enough" or asserted a belief "that it is in [...] small actions that we begin to make changes". Other participants noted that some of the testimonies gave them hope. In the Flemish case, pupils noted that they thought it was important for young people to be more aware that war could happen again: "We have to address this now and show that we are not going to let even these small steps be taken, because every time you allow something like that to happen, it is going to lead to something bigger."

In other cases we observed different dynamics. In the Spanish case, for example, Cécile Barbeito found that a quarter of students expressed that they were "not interested in politics". These reactions, Barbeito notes, did not necessarily stem from a lack of interest in politics per se; rather, they could be linked to disappointment with politicians and to views that the political system is dysfunctional and not sufficiently representative. In this sense, the "lack of interest" on the part of some of the participants might be the expression of a stand within the political, as they might feel disengaged from traditional politics – for example, as played out over the course of recent years, which have seen the failed Catalan referendum and the heavy-handed reaction of the Spanish state. Digging deeper into the matter, Barbeito suggests that some students might also have been reluctant to participate because of the alleged ideological bias of the activity. The educators emphasised in the first session that the initiative was part of a broader European project that had collected testimonies from non-democratic systems of various types (fascist, communist and colonial) and that, although one of the people interviewed came from a Francoist family, the testimonies shown in the session over-represented left-wing ideologies. Nevertheless, one of the student expressed their discomfort and a reluctance to engage in the project, sharing that they did not want "to participate in politics". Further inquiries into the motives of the student were met with evasiveness. Other students shared, however, that ideological bias could indeed have motivated some of the participants to not actively engage in the project. Although it remains a matter of conjecture, we might hypothesise that this reluctance to engage in "politics" may also be an expression of a deeper stand within the political, in the sense that the student in question did not want to engage in what they perceived as left-wing politics.[3]

Sixta and Melichar, in their turn, observed a certain lack of interest in disputes about socialism. On the one hand, this might be linked to the fact that some pupils just do not find politics interesting. On the other hand, the authors note, this finding might point to an openness on the part of young people "to different points of view and experiences" or to a "need to be convinced about why [they] should think about how the topic relates to [their] life".

Another emotional reaction we observed was fear. Some participants shared that they were fearful about the risk that democracy might be slipping into authoritarianism or dictatorship. These feelings, as the words of one pupils in the Flemish case study show, are not only political but also very personal: "Imagine, Hitler, if that happens again ... then I think about my children later, and about my parents, family, friends."

In developing projects that link history to peace and democratic citizenship education, educators hope that insights about the violent and authoritarian past will make young people aware of the importance of democracy and human rights. They hope, moreover, that these insights will translate into pro-democratic attitudes and a willingness to engage in democratic action. However, our case studies show there are also other possible reactions. In some instances we observed that engagement with politics resulted in feelings of resignation and pointlessness. In the Flemish project, for example, a student pointed out that they had been active in youth demonstrations demanding climate action. The experience, however, had made them question the relevance of that kind of political action: "The government doesn't listen to us anyway, so I think many young people nowadays think 'What's the point?'" Another pupil shared their doubts about the effects of learning from history: "If you look at history, we repeat those mistakes, literally every time again and again and again." On the one hand, they argued, it makes sense to know about history, but "on the other hand, yes, it happens anyway... so what's the point?"

Our research did not point to any ways in which educators could react to these dynamics. We suggest this is an important issue for further research. How can educators engage with these reactions?

3.4 What works? Reflections on oral history about dictatorship and democracy

The Changing Democracies project started from the idea that oral history provides a promising pedagogical site where teachers and students can experience stories from alternative viewpoints and engage in perspective-taking. As the literature notes, oral history enables students to challenge the grand narratives that are still reproduced in society as well as in traditional history education. Equally important for the Changing Democracies project was the assumption that oral history can open up spaces for students to enhance their skills in working with conflictual narratives, questioning hegemonic narratives and confronting the moral complexities of violent pasts. As explained in the introduction to this volume, the idea was that engaging with histories of dictatorship can enhance pupils' democratic and peace-oriented attitudes and skills, such as their critical thinking, their approach to pluralism, their critical sensitivity to violence, and their ability to engage in complex moral judgement.

Overall, in five of the six case studies, we found that the educational projects seemed to have worked in this way (see Section 3). Pupils and students took up the educators' cues about multiperspectivity and conflicting narratives, and actively engaged in critical reflections and discussions about dictatorship and democracy. For example, in the Czech Republic, Sixta and Melichar concluded that witness testimony is a suitable medium for discussions among pupils about memory; most pupils were able to recognise the differences between their perspective and that of their parents and grandparents without, however, formulating their views in a hostile or antagonistic way. In Poland, as Czyżewska-Poncyljusz and Kurz note, the participants were inspired by the local and intergenerational dimensions of the project to challenge their own understanding of history and politics, which made them feel engaged

and ready to acknowledge the complexity of the subject. In the Portuguese case, Reis and Guimarães concluded that, although they did not expect that "students would be magically transformed by the words of the witnesses, nor could they become experts in the contemporary history of their country in 14 hours", their art students picked up the words of the witnesses and "play[ed ...] with their dramatic possibilities". However, as Barbeito notes in the Spanish case study, although her group engaged in reflections about democracy, the testimonies did not seem to have played a critical role in this dynamic.

The fact that in one of our cases the educational project proved more difficult makes it possible to engage in a brief and tentative comparative analysis between the findings of the six case studies. This may yield some hypotheses to be taken up in further research.

A first relevant factor to consider seems to be the length and intensity of the projects. In the Polish and Portuguese cases, the projects were either long and substantive or very intensive. In the Czech, Spanish, Dutch and Flemish cases, on the other hand, the projects were much shorter (a number of lessons or workshops). There are, furthermore, two aspects that seem to distinguish the Spanish from the Czech, Dutch and Flemish cases: active engagement with the testimonies and context. With regard to the former, in Barcelona the students only watched some fragments from the testimonies, while in the other cases the educators asked the participants to engage with the oral histories more intensively – for example, by reflecting on them in written assignments or even conducting further interviews. With regard to context, in the Czech project, participants worked with an online tool they had routinely used before. The ideas of multiperspectivity and conflictual narratives, which are central to the tool, were therefore not strange to them. In the Netherlands and Flanders/Belgium, the projects took place in the context of school climates and national curricula that emphasise the importance of dialogue, multiperspectivity and critical thinking. In Spain, as Barbeito notes in her contribution, the situation is different. The students themselves expressed how difficult they found it to form substantiated opinions and engage in critical dialogue. Barbeito links this to the observation that the Spanish education system is not characterised by encouraging critical thinking or clarifying one's own values or personal opinion. A comparative analysis of social sciences textbooks showed that only 4% of the activities in the textbooks asked students to debate or contribute their personal opinion and 4% related historical content to current events (compared to 91% of activities involving reading comprehension and summarising information).

Another dimension of context that might be relevant here is the broader memory culture of which the education system is a part. Of our case studies, the Spanish is the only one where the memory of dictatorship is interlinked with the bitter and acrimonious memory of civil war. Spain still struggles with its memory culture, as well as with pernicious and even hostile forms of political polarisation, not least as a result of the tense confrontations around the failed referendum in Catalonia in 2017. All of these tensions might have had effects on how students positioned themselves with regard to the project and the invitation to express themselves politically.

In short, context matters. In this respect, our case studies confirm the fundamental insight that how oral history projects play out in practice is linked to a significant degree to factors such as the memory culture of society, the national curriculum, the openness of the school climate, and the prior knowledge and historical thinking skills of the participants. However, while oral history projects with a focus on multiperspectivity might work best in contexts with a previously established open school climate (which in the literature is linked to democratic attitudes such as interest in politics, trust, political self-efficacy

and recognition of the ambivalence of conflict[4]), this is of course not an argument against developing and implementing these kinds of educational projects in contexts that are less open. Indeed, it is only by structurally embedding these multiperspectival projects in lesson plans and the curriculum that, in the long run, open school climates will be established. As Czyżewska-Poncyljusz and Kurz note, in their reflections on the project, the pupils they worked with stressed that they felt "an increased confidence" to voice their opinions "because they were speaking not only as recipients of information but also as active participants in the search for answers".

3.5 Multiperspectivity, relativism, neutrality

As highlighted above, overall the participants in the educational projects were able to value multiperspectivity and navigate the conflictual nature of history. They did not react with irreconcilable hostility, rejection or black-and-white moralising when they were presented with conflictual or unexpected views about dictatorship and democracy. On the contrary, they seemed to negotiate the testimonies with a questioning, inquisitive attitude. This indicates an openness to complexity and multiperspectivity. Nevertheless, there is a side note to be made. Our research shows that in some instances the pupils' and students' recognition of multiperspectivity seemed to tend towards forms of relativism rather than towards complex political and moral judgements. In the Flemish case, for example, some participants came to the conclusion that "dictatorship is not necessarily bad" and "it can also be good for a particular country". It became clear, moreover, that almost all the students involved in the research through their teacher training programme intended to teach about dictatorship and democracy from a position of neutrality. On the basis of our limited, explorative research, we could not conclude whether the students conceived of this neutral stance mainly as a didactic approach or as a matter of principle. In our view, however, statements such as "dictatorship can also be good" are, from the perspective of political philosophy, of a different order from pleas for "self-determination" of societies or arguments against Eurocentric visions of democracy.

In the context of democratic citizenship education, and of teacher training in particular, it is important not only to reflect on this point but also to pick it up in further research. We suggest that efforts in this direction might benefit from theoretical work on the concept of multiperspectivity. This concept has not only received attention in educational studies. Scholars in memory studies and peace research have also worked on the intersections between multiperspectivity, agonism and relativism. Importantly, scholars have emphasised that the acceptance of agonistic plurality in the memory of violence does not inevitably result in historical or moral relativism. Historical relativism would mean that all modes of remembering give equally "correct" or "accurate" accounts of the past. Moral relativism would lead to a situation in which it is no longer possible to draw a distinction between moral and immoral forms of remembering. However, agonistic multiperspectivity does not have to equate with relativism. On the contrary. The historiographical value of different modes of remembering can always be critically tested on the basis of the modes' historiographical merit. This might not always be easy in educational projects as it is time consuming, but it is in line with historians' sound practice of attaching great importance to the disclosure of as many narratives about the past as possible (this diversity of narratives and sources is even deemed a necessary condition in order to reach informed and adequate interpretations). And with regard to the moral value of different forms of memory, within an atmosphere of open dialogue it is possible, even necessary, to enter into critical discussions on the moral consequences of different forms of remembering – for example, when they contribute to the continuation of physical, structural or symbolic violence.[5]

Furthermore, in their work on agonistic memory, Anna Cento Bull and Hans Lauge Hansen have made a valuable contribution regarding the relationship between agonism, multiperspectivity and relativism. Starting from their concern that understanding the perspective of perpetrators is not the same thing as legitimation (or relativism), they have put forward a distinction between "consensual" and "radical" multiperspectivism. While consensual forms of multiperspectivism only look for voices and perspectives that coincide and belong to actors who essentially agree (e.g. victims and heroes), radical forms of multiperspectivism emphasise the coexistence of antagonistic experiences, such as victimhood and perpetration, alongside those of collaboration, treason or bystandership. In order to encourage thinking along the lines of radical multiperspectivism, educators would need to try to increase young people's understanding (in an analytical sense) of all these perspectives, without stumbling upon the pitfalls of morally or politically legitimising or relativising the perspectives of perpetrators or traitors.[6]

Another way of framing the issue is to distinguish between "analytical" and "moral" multiperspectivity. While the former is aimed at analysing and explaining different perspectives regarding historical events or trends, the latter questions these perspectives in terms of complex political and moral judgements. In other words, while the former asks learners to engage in historical thinking and perspective-taking, the latter invites them to pose difficult political and moral questions about history. (As with the premise that learning *from* history should always build on learning *about* history, we suggest that learners first engage in analytical multiperspectivity before they work on moral multiperspectivity.)

3.6 Final thoughts

The partners in the Changing Democracies projects wanted to create trans-European and transgenerational spaces where European citizens could meet and engage in dialogues about the multitude of conflictual memories that we share in Europe. To conclude these reflections on the research part of the project, we propose to listen again to one of the young voices:

"When I started listening to these interviews and these people talking about democracy in so many languages, using similar concepts that mean different things to them, I realised how important it is for us, I mean Europeans – this perspective of our place from which we start, our story and then hearing it against the background of this polyphony that we co-create."[7]

Endnotes

1 See the introduction for references.

2 See the introduction.

3 With thanks to the reviewer who suggested this interpretation.

4 Van Alstein, M. (2019), *Controversy & Polarisation in the Classroom: Suggestions for Pedagogical Practice*, Flemish Peace Institute.

5 Van Alstein, M. (2017), The memory of peace, in: Praet, D. (ed.), *Philosophy of war and peace*, Brussels: VUBPress, pp. 187–199.

6 Bull, A.C. & Hansen, H.L. (2020), Agonistic memory and the UNREST project, *Modern Languages Open*, 1:20, pp. 1–7.

7 From the Polish case study (see Chapter 3).

Unlocking the potential of a transnational perspective when working with micro-stories in education

Marjolein Delvou and Hanna Zielińska (Evens Foundation)

"But a change... Well I was expecting it to be simply better, that I would manage well. That as soon as I graduated, I'd get a job that would be adequately paid. I'd just live like in the West. We thought that... The truth is that we idealised life in the West a little bit. We only saw the nice things on TV: the commercials, the series, the glamour."

> *"There was a new constitution, there were elections, the political system had changed. There was freedom... But there was no revolution. And that, that transition was theoretically huge. We had gone from a fascist regime to a democratic regime. Ultimately, the transition was theoretically revolutionary. However, many powers and many institutions of the state remained the same."*

"When my mother came back from prison, there's an image – one – when I was incredibly embarrassed about what I was supposed to do. I remember my mother sitting in the kitchen and me standing at the other end of the hallway, rehearsing how to hug her."

> *"Daily routines take over your life. I wasn't idealistic enough to break the chains, to risk running away."*

"Of course, we heard that there were dissidents, that there were people who were protesting, but these people were very few and dispersed. We didn't really understand the protests and the reasons behind them."

> *"Everyone was euphoric. I was full of doubts. Because I had already seen so much optimism ending in failure that this '89... I could think... I'm not going to lie, 'Ah, I remember I thought exactly that.' But that, 'Hmm, I'm not sure. I'm not sure, we'll wait and see.'"*

1. Introduction

During the first phase of the Changing Democracies project, just after collecting the testimonies but before "processing" them, we had the opportunity to share our initial reflections with an audience of academics, educators from civil society organisations and librarians who attended a conference in Wisła, a small town in the south of Poland, about working with stories in education. At a session about our project, we presented some quotes from the testimonies we had collected, asking the participants: Who is talking? (supporting questions: Who are these people? What are their biographies? Where do they come from? What are they sharing? What emotions do these quotes evoke?)

After reading some quotes, the conference attendees guessed that the speakers were people from Poland, or possibly from neighbouring countries linked with Poland due to their shared geopolitical fate of being on the east of the Iron Curtain and in the orbit of the USSR. These countries all had the experience of living under communism and transitioning to democracy.

There were also immediate emotional reactions recalling similar personal or family experiences.

After the identities of the speakers were revealed, the conference attendees were surprised to find out that the witnesses whose quotations they had just read, came from contexts as diverse as the Czech Republic, Greece, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Spain.[1]

This surprise may have been because in these micro-stories, individuals recognised something familiar, sometimes personal, something that momentarily triggered a reference to their experiences, even though – as it turned out – the source of the quote was different from what they had assumed.

Thanks to the brief evocation of a transnational dimension, an awareness emerges that certain things did not only happen "at home", and curiosity is provoked about "what exactly" happened elsewhere. This gives a sense of sharing similar experiences, but also surprise about discovering certain differences – about confronting one's own narrative (often dominant in a given context) alongside other possible perspectives outside the national frame.

2. This project's transnational perspective

As we have seen in this volume, the educational studies within the Changing Democracies project worked with testimonies that were collected within each respective context. This was mostly due to practical constraints. We did not have all the testimonies translated into English when the research began and we also needed some time ourselves to become familiar with the stories we had managed to gather. In a more or less conscious way, we were also following the fairly common logic in educational projects that one should become familiar with the closest context first, before moving further away. (We will revisit this standard, or habit, in Section 5.) Only in Poland was the group introduced to the transnational dimension of the Changing Democracies project during the process. (see Chapter 3)

After having immersed ourselves in the 31 testimonies collected by the consortium and having read through the findings of and reflections on the various case studies in this volume, we want to look ahead. We want to make the case for the transnational perspective that was fundamental to the conception of the Changing Democracies project. We believe that this perspective can provide meaningful answers

to some of the challenges raised by the researchers. In that light, it deserves our attention both as an educational strategy that needs more practical exploration and as a topic for further research.

Obviously, in working with testimonies about recent transitions from dictatorship to democracy collected in ten different contexts, we needed to confront the fact that we couldn't possibly expect ourselves – or teachers and educators – to have ready historical knowledge of all these contexts. While this seemed like an obstacle at first, we came to understand that there were ways to transform it into an opportunity.

3. Necessary conditions before embarking on a project with a transnational perspective

First of all, and as frequently emphasised in this volume, when working with testimonies in a project that aims to support learning from history, the presence of historical thinking skills is more important than mere historical knowledge.

Secondly, it is possible to select fragments that reflect the personal experience of the witnesses with dictatorship and democracy but that do not contain many historical references to the specific context. In that scenario, providing some background information, about both the witness and the historical context, is sufficient to equip viewers with the information they need to understand and situate a fragment.

Once these conditions have been fulfilled, a transnational perspective offers educators a whole new set of possible learning experiences.

4. What a transnational perspective offers

Firstly, a transnational perspective allows educators and their students to transcend (hegemonic) nationalistic historical narratives and delve into the hopes and fears that shape people's lives across different ideological systems. By giving up our own uniqueness (of which we are so often convinced by traditionally taught history), we gain insights into processes and events far beyond national discourses. This shows us that histories of dictatorship and systemic transformations to democracy – and the choices, actions and moral dilemmas of individuals these imply – are understandable and relatable across borders.

A transnational perspective also allows individuals to compare and contrast what connects and divides people in different contexts, past and present. As such, it may enable them to shed a new light on their own context, making visible what has so far gone unnoticed.

In that sense, a transnational perspective – as a result of the continuous comparison it prompts – might also accelerate the process of getting learners to navigate memories in a multidirectional mode as explored in the introduction of this volume. We believe this acceleration may be related to the reality that people from entirely different contexts may think or feel the same way about certain things, and, conversely, that people from similar contexts may think or feel very differently. As such, a transnational perspective complicates the hegemonic narratives to which students are often exposed.

In this project specifically, the fact that we worked with carefully selected short fragments of testimonies – what we call micro-stories – translated into different languages, might have supported this process. Learners step into a story, get another perspective and can thereby move to another position instantly if they wish. In proposing this approach, we make it clear from the start that we do not aim to be exhaustive or linear about different episodes in history.

A transnational resource can also help to overcome conflicts about national history that may arise when individuals default to the national perspective. As we saw in the case study from the Czech Republic, the students were not particularly eager to get involved or drawn into conflicts of previous generations (see Chapter 2). And in Spain – a context still marked by strong divisions about the country's recent history – the students showed no real interest in engaging with national history (see Chapter 4).

Historians are only just beginning to focus on the period of transition in Europe (which some of our witnesses claimed is ongoing). Relatively recent events are often considered too fresh to be critically analysed. As the authors from the Czech Republic and Poland point out, Leftist ideas still struggle to break through the antagonistic dichotomy "communism equals bad" versus "capitalism and democracy equals good". A detour past testimonies from other contexts might be a way to re-engage with our own past and present.

We explicitly invited all the witnesses to reflect on what it meant to them to live in a democracy today. This was a way to bring the contexts and micro-stories – including those from the learners themselves – together again while at the same time fostering and opening up a space for critical reflection with the learners about present-day democracy. Do present-day democracies deliver?

Last but not least, taking a transnational approach when working with personal micro-stories may simply be (more) engaging for certain learners. It may spark their curiosity about unfamiliar or unexpected contexts – or the opposite, letting them see their own emotions or experiences reflected in the words of witnesses from other contexts. For some learners, a personal micro-story situated in a certain country can work as a catalyst, getting them interested in the history of that country.

5. Some points to take into consideration

Of course, the transnational perspective we are suggesting here for future practice and research also has some pitfalls and challenges. The most obvious is that it requires educators who feel confident engaging with micro-stories from very diverse contexts.

Another point is that for some groups, it may be alienating to take this perspective from the start. In such settings, it is better and more appropriate to start with testimonies from a more familiar context before moving to the transnational level. In certain contexts, we also need to be careful about including witnesses from previously hostile countries.

It should furthermore be noted that witnesses will not necessarily paint a representative picture of their specific historical context. In that sense, there is a risk that a transnational oral history resource could give learners a distorted picture of certain events or periods in the history of the country to which it pertains. However, as mentioned above, the presence of historical thinking skills, a carefully curated selection of fragments that emphasise personal experiences with dictatorship and democracy, and

some basic information about the witnesses and their historical contexts can help to overcome this challenge. In addition, for each national context, new voices can be added over time.

Another important consideration to take into account is that the transnational perspective may reinforce forms of relativism if it is not framed or explored adequately. As mentioned in the conclusion to this volume, this is an important issue for further research.

Additionally, there is a need to ponder the extent to which learning from history should translate into a willingness to engage in democratic action, and under what conditions.

Finally, there is the question of how many fragments are needed, and from how many different national contexts, to unlock the potential of a transnational perspective.

These considerations notwithstanding, we believe that exposing learners to a plurality of voices from different contexts meaningfully contributes to creating agonistic spaces for learning.

6. Moving from a transnational perspective to action

The very title of the Changing Democracies project opens up a space for different interpretations, revealing a variety of meanings. Drawing attention to "democracies" in the plural offers an alternative to the idealisation of "democracy", giving up the pretence that we all understand the same thing by this concept. This polyvocality makes clear that democracy is not a fixed, immutable state, and this may encourage people to get involved in shaping it.

We have tried to create this kind of space by making examples of democracies' functioning in different contexts accessible to a European audience of learners in various languages.

Exploring fragments from across Europe may make us feel connected but uncomfortable, empathetic yet critical, and finally responsible but not overwhelmed.

"I would say that I did not directly participate, but I witnessed the transition from a one-party to a multi-party democratic system – from a socialist mode of production to a capitalist one. When I sum it all up, I can say that nothing is black and white and that, as far as the degree of democracy in our society is concerned, it is far greater than it was, incomparably greater.
What we couldn't or weren't allowed to do is now possible. The question is whether anyone hears it and whether it resonates.
As for this economic transformation? I sincerely believed that a better world was possible in which there would not be those who have and those who have almost nothing.
It turned out that this will not be the case for the time being. [...] And so, we can only hope that the system we have adopted will become more and more democratic over time and that we will try to keep at least some meagre elements of the welfare state."

> *"The main thing is that we have the freedom to say what we think is wrong. And maybe if more people talk, it will come to something. Several parties distort the ideology of the party that wins the election. Because it [a single party] won't be able to govern on its own and then it will associate with parties that bring their people and their ideas and then something else comes out. I think this is a*

negative part of democracy and we don't have anything better at the moment. I have been told this for a long time: 'We don't have anything else – something better hasn't been invented yet.'"

"And the more you recall the past, the better you can accept the future. And if we lighten up the future a lot and blacken the past a great deal, there is much more stress in general. We aren't inventing anything – we simply rely on the past when heading to the future. And to deny our past, whatever it is – pitted, holey, leprous... but it's ours, it's part of my identity and I cannot renounce it. It would be lovely if my past was only light, but I can disclaim my mother, yes she was a communist, yes she was serving that system, but she still was my mum. And whatever she has done, I wouldn't renounce her ever – she is my mum. And that means a lot."

"I think there is always plenty [to understand]. A person should always wonder and look for new solutions. Why should we think that those systems that exist at the moment are the most ideal? Or will the next generation come along and suddenly invent, not necessarily suddenly, but find even better solutions? You never, never know."[2]

Endnotes

1 Lucia Bartošová (50), pharmacist, Czech Republic; Virginia Despotidi (64), teacher, Greece; Vladimir Davydov (62), businessman, Lithuania; Joanna Miłosz-Piekarska (69), poet, Poland and Australia; Michaela Roman (77), biologist, Romania; and Mariano Royo (80), teacher, Spain.

2 Željko Rogina (65), philosophy lecturer, Croatia; Michaela Roman (77), biologist, Romania; Juozas Malickas (52), history teacher, Lithuania; Joanna Miłosz-Piekarska (69), poet, Poland and Australia.

Notes

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