How to Teach Serbian History Students about School Failure and Cultural Diversity

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Abstract *History teaching in Serbia has a clearly identified political role. Paramount is the need to reform history teaching to transform it from a form of indoctrination to a mode of study that develops the knowledge and understanding that educated citizens require. The paper examines a thinking skills approach to history that will equip students with the cognitive tools that they need to be members of the new democratic societies that are emerging from a decade of conflict.*

Introduction

Three contextual factors arising from the authors' professional and cultural backgrounds affect this paper.

- The broader societal context in several aspects is relevant for teaching and learning history. Post-war circumstances have an influence on history as scholarship since scholars determine the way society interprets recent and past events. This leads to a shaping of public opinion that sometimes conflicts with initiatives aimed towards building a contemporary democratic society. The status of the state is still re-examined (structure, name, borders, constitution). The transition processes aimed to establishing Serbia as a democratic community continuously raise numerous questions. All these circumstances in a non-directive manner increase general perception by the people of how important history scholarship and teaching is, but also the risk for it to be used and abused for political purposes;
- The changing role of teachers in the contemporary world and current developments in teacher education, policy and scholarship;
- Our professional accountability for the quality of teacher education combined with efforts to develop professionally through critical review of our own praxis introduce changes according to contemporary standards within the local context.

In order to understand our position as history teacher educators, we find it important to talk about circumstances related to Serbian history teacher education policy. Professionally we are a psychologist and pedagogue assigned to train future history teachers, both secondary and high school. Accordingly, we have a limited background in history education. The next characteristic is the relationship between three components of history teacher education: the main part (85.62% of classes) consists of academic history courses, while 6.25% involves teacher education courses and the remainder consists of studying languages, both modern and ancient.

Teacher education courses are divided into three areas each being covered by one discipline:

1) psychology for teachers,
2) pedagogy and didactics
3) history methodology teaching

The predominant pedagogic approach in this system is content based teaching that makes students more oriented towards learning a specific body of information, rather than building connections between the course disciplines. This makes students perceive teacher education as a supplement to what they would consider as their main focus – becoming a historian. This fact is also related to the teacher professional status: low payment together with low prestige place teaching among the least desirable professions. The features of History teacher education are common to teacher education in general: predominantly academically oriented, lack of interdisciplinary courses, lack of teaching methodologies and a systemic approach to Teacher Education (we have been writing about these issues in Radulovich, L. & Rajovich, V., 2001.

One more relevant aspect is related to the approach to history scholarship and teaching embedded in University history courses. It is about how our historians view history and its teaching as science across all school levels together with university studies. Briefly, history is characterized as a study of the past exclusively. There is no connection between what we could learn from the past in order to understand the time we live in, or to be able to relate current events with what we could deduce as future consequences of our actions. Feature of academic history and its teaching at all levels are:

- The memorizing of a great number of specific, discrete knowledge-facts ('rucksack model') instead of a problem solving and critical thinking skills acquisition approach;

- The dominant view of history as a history of wars and military-political developments as opposed to a history of civil society, culture and social groups.

These are features of the system, with big individual differences among teachers at all levels and across the courses. The reasons that individual initiatives do not become part of the national system are diverse. How can we bring about change?

We believe that one of the most promising strategies to provide opportunities for teachers to learn from one another and empower them in front of 'authorities' is the networking of teachers and teacher educators. Next, it is important to mention the efforts made by the previous Ministry of education (that was in power from March 2001 to the 2004 elections) to reform the whole education system. Among others, a vital aspect of these reforms was introducing Education for Democratic Citizenship: introducing a Civic Education course as an optional course starting from first grade (elementary and secondary school) and planning cross-curricular forms of EDC. These innovations were prepared by previous programs developed by various unofficial bodies that covered education for democracy, children rights, non-violent communication, etc. In the current system, we do not have a policy regarding the development of civic education teacher training. In general, civic education and history teaching are organized and practised independently of each other. One additional circumstance important for our practice and for this paper topic is the fact that Higher Education (including history studies) is not yet reformed. The university sector has officially adopted the need to reform HE. Preliminary steps have been made, but reform is yet to be undertaken. Our investigations described in this paper can be viewed within that frame of reference.

How to Make Teacher Education Courses More Relevant For History Teachers

This question has become part of reviewing our professionalism in order to identify possible solutions at different levels. Through collecting student feedback and interactions with colleagues, we identified the following aspects that we could include in our psychology and pedagogy courses to make them more relevant for prospective history teachers:

The aims: critical thinking and problem solving

We argue that our aims are to teach critical thinking skills so that future teachers can autonomously develop their own historical understanding (cause-consequence relationship, having the courage to hold a personal opinion, achieving an insight into personal motivations, skills to use readings actively – beyond the author's interpretation, communication skills development, cooperative work skills...). Developing problem solving skills together with an interdisciplinary approach can help students in studying history as well as with learning how to address the problems that may arise during their teaching practice.

Methods

Here we try to teach and provide examples of different teaching methods by using them in our own teaching practice. Doing so, we expect our students to use us both as their teaching model and as a resource of the whole range of classroom management and teaching strategies. In addition we introduce methods and techniques such as group work, cooperative learning methods, techniques for introducing a subject, and ways of motivating and engaging students in active learning.

Content

It is, maybe, the most difficult job to identify common topics that are legitimate parts of our courses, but have relevance in studying history too. But, if we have an understanding of history as a tri-dimensional process (not only the past), we connect it with active citizenship, and then an educator's intent is always societal-political action. This leads us towards the ideas of cross-disciplinary topics that could be interesting from both educational and historical aspects. One of these topics is multiculturalism. We are here presenting a lesson sample that, we find, shows certain ways of identifying intertwined topics among these areas.

Lesson sample: School success and cultural diversity

The objectives
- Introducing a diversity of potential sources of student failure and an understanding of cultural diversity as one of the possible causes of school failure;
- Introducing a diversity of compensatory programs and their potential influence;
- Providing students with insight into the meaning of specific social circumstances from the different educational theoretical frameworks;
- Providing students with an understanding of the need for educational intervention in order to prevent school student failure – as a prerequisite to introducing interactive teaching theory;
- Fostering development of the skills required for students to connect theoretical knowledge with everyday experience; skills for thinking critically about societal practices (identifying sources of the issues, foreseeing the possible solutions consequences...);
- Fostering sensitivity for recognizing and understanding social issues in the world of education;
- Developing a readiness to understand and actively accept differences among people;
- Developing a readiness to recognize, re-examine and solve inter-cultural problems;
- Developing a readiness to act in everyday life – individual accountability;
- Developing communication, teamwork skills and competencies ;
- Learn interactive and cooperative teaching methods – providing students with the opportunity to experience interactive methods and feel the learning benefit out of them.

Concepts analyzed

- Intellectual difficulties as cause for failure

- Culturally handicapped students as cause for failure

- Culturally diverse students as cause for failure

Procedure

1. Students are to be divided in small groups of 4-6 through a play-like activity. The groups could stay the same throughout the lesson. For the rest of the class it is important to have six small groups working.

2. Group discussion
a) Instruction: 'Imagine, you are a teacher already, and one of your students is not advancing in your history classes the way you would expect him/her to. Your task as a group is to produce as many ideas as you can on possible reasons for his/her relative failure.' Student work on the task and choose the reporter for the group.
b) Presentation of the ideas that groups have produced and collection of all the ideas on a poster
c) Discussion follows small group presentations
    The questions for the discussion:
    1. Where could you find the reason for a student to be failing (related to the individual student, his/her family, environment, or...)?
    2. Could anything coming from the school cause student to fail?
    3. Could it be anything you do or say?

3. Mini lecture: Possible reasons for academic failure
The lecture is based on teacher notes based on the outcomes of group discussion. Its purpose is to introduce cultural diversity together with understanding of a range of causes of student failure in school.

4. Work on group problem solving
Each of six groups is assigned one of three problems relating student diversity with their school failure: type of cultural background, socio-cultural deprivation and intellectual developmental delay. Besides the type of the problem to be solved, each group is assigned one of the educational roles - policy makers or teachers. So we have six groups working on three different problems from the perspective of one of two roles.

Group problem solving activity is followed by group answers presentations with a discussion by whole class: how do they see the solution proposed by a group; would they suggest any other possibilities; what could be strengths and weaknesses of each solution?

This activity's purpose is to make students think differently about the origin of student failure: to extend the range of possible causes from those ascribed to student shortages, to school as an institution that does not provide a context for diverse student's survival under the same roof, with the same rights and opportunities. Here is a good moment for introducing interactive pedagogy model of education and leave it open for another session.

Evaluation
Evaluation is assessed on two levels:

- The lesson level – student productivity during activities is monitored, students are asked what they have gained and learned; evaluation sheet is used in order to assess student perceptions of being engaged in different lesson activities;

- Evaluation from the point of integration in a broader context (history/teacher training relevance) – the impact on student understanding of similar topics will be followed up.

Inquiry as educators' culture

The teaching unit presented here could be analysed in terms of its 1) relevance to educational studies and 2) relevance to history/civics. In terms of educational studies (pedagogy and psychology) objectives contributing to student development are:

- Understanding the causes of failure
- Understanding strengths and shortages of compensatory programs for early education
- Understanding theories of education
- Acquiring teacher role as part of professional identity development
- Raising awareness and sensitivity for educational issues

In respect of relevance to history/civics, objectives contributing to student development are:

- Learning about multiculturalism as a concept useful for understanding both contemporary societies and the changes inside one society over time;
- Learning about multiculturalism as a point of view comprised of 1) a body of concepts (diversity, individual differences, tolerance...), 2) an attitude (assertive, respect for 'others') and 3) readiness to recognize and solve emergent problems, as well as to act accordingly.

This teaching unit plan is part of teacher educators' intentions that are aimed to overcome a lack of authentic teacher preparation for professional tasks that might arise in a real classroom, with real pupils when facilitating their learning of history. This inquiry is not about looking for so-called 'content correlations', it is not about offering separate answers on issues of educating a historian vs. educating a teacher, but educating a competent history teacher.

Conclusion

What have we learned from this and similar experiences? Follow up shows that the most difficult concept to understand is 'cultural diversity' and then 'cultural handicap'. When we ask students to produce the ideas for how to teach failing pupils in these three contexts, the results show the same pattern:

- The number and quality of their ideas are greatest when they are about intellectual deficits;
- It is hard for students to make a distinction between cultural handicap and cultural diversity when searching for proper strategies how to deal with learning/teaching issues and teaching to prevent failure.

These results were collected through monitoring diverse activities in the sessions that engaged students in producing original ideas for action, as well as through student answers on exam questions. There were difficulties students faced even when they were requested only to distinguish among the concepts about failure. We have found that there are several reasons for understanding student failure stemming from cultural diversity and the challenges it brings for our history students. Even when we study literature, we can notice that writers and researchers in the field recognized the hypothesis about cultural handicap vs. cultural diversity as separate causes of school failure later. Also, setting up a strategy to deal with this type of student failure requires us to ask a number of questions related not only to education policy, but also to macro societal and political issues. In addition, there are questions of values:

about the relationship between educational and other societal institutions, the aims of education, relationships between different cultures, etc. All this means that understanding this body of issues is a challenge, but that teaching units like the one we have described could serve as an opportunity for future history teachers to acquire knowledge and skills that are relevant for their careers.

We can continue looking further for areas of study that are of a crucial relevance for history teacher education as a whole, overcoming the existing two separate processes of teacher education and history education.

Our inquiry led us to engage with a range of cross-curricular concepts like diversity, multiculturalism, individual vs. societal development, prejudices, human and child rights, interpersonal relations, ethics, institution and individual relationships, activism and tolerance for the unknown. An important component of teacher education should be active participation in curriculum development aimed at learning how to re-examine existing concepts of history teaching (offered by policy makers together with scholars) by integrating that view of history as history through creation (progress), cooperation and cultural development.

The list could be endless and all the ideas to complete it are welcome!

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Further reading

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