



Review of the Book:

**Diana Hess/Paula McAvoy. 2015. *The political classroom. Evidence and Ethics in Democratic Education*, New York/London: Routledge, ISBN: 978-0-415-88099-2
247 pp., 37 \$**

19) Hence the book offers a very inspiring, empirically grounded discussion of the very practical questions many teachers face on a daily basis: “What values, skills and dispositions am I trying to encourage when I engage students in discussions of political controversy?” (p. 77)

The United States as context

The present political situation in the United States poses severe challenges for teachers when dealing with controversial issues in their classrooms. While students are to be encouraged “to adopt a view of democracy that is more deliberate than what they see in the public sphere” (p. 79), at the same time Hess/McAvoy report of “concerns from some teachers that they are not as trusted as they need to be by parents or the general public to create a politically fair classroom.” (p. 205)

The direct consequences of this mistrust for educational practice are not far to seek: “Many teachers choose to avoid using political deliberations and discussions with students, often because they are unsure about how to negotiate the accompanying pedagogical challenges. Further deterring teachers is the increasingly polarized climate outside schools. Fear of parental and public backlash leads some teachers to retreat to lectures and the textbook.” (p. 6)

Hess/McAvoy do not conceal these challenges, they rather point to the growing necessity of well-educated teachers who make well-informed choices and decisions when teaching controversial issues as one “of the effects of political polarization and the increasing ideological make-up of so many communities in the United States is that citizens are not routinely exposed to political views on important political issues that differ from their own.” (p. 52)

The Political Classroom takes up this social challenge: “First, when classrooms are heterogeneous along lines of social class or race, teachers need to be aware of how social divisions affect the classroom culture. [...] Second, and more commonly, because schools in the United States have been rapidly resegregating since the mid-1980s, the deliberative space of the classroom is often a discussion among similarly positioned people in society [...]. In short, if the overarching question of the political classroom is, “How should we live together?”, then teachers need to be very clear about who is and who is not represented within their classrooms.” (p. 7-8)

The Political Classroom as teaching concept

Against this background Hess/McAvoy present an ethical framework for professional judgment that combines

The Political Classroom: *How should we live together?*

The Political Classroom is about how to work towards more nonpartisan political education in the United States and offers interesting insights into US classrooms, into the current functioning of American democracy, American schools and the American society. This book is entertaining to read and offers a varied mixture of empirical data, philosophical elaborations and personalized stories about teaching controversial issues in different school contexts. Clearly, Hess/McAvoy make the case for a professional teacher education. Written for teacher training and professional communities of practice in schools, it presents “one approach to democratic education” with the main focus on “cultivating students’ ability to discuss political issues”. (p. 77)

The research project

To anticipate the outcome, Hess/McAvoy’s research results point to the effectiveness of teaching for, through and about democracy: “There is clearly a strong relationship between the kinds of knowledge, skill, and dispositions that can be influenced by schooling and whether and how young people take up their citizen role as they age.” (p. 68) The study thus investigates the way *The Political Classroom* interacts with students and teachers on a large scale, using both quantitative and qualitative data (p. 10). One major focus is “[to] examine what students experience and learn in classes that engage them in high-quality discussions of political issues and to identify the effect of those experiences on study participants’ future political and civic engagement.” (p.

learning aims with the respective teaching context (e.g. classroom; school; larger political culture; community; country) taking into account evidence that is relevant for the specific learning group (Part I: Context, Evidence and Aims).

Regarding learning aims *The Political Classroom* focuses on *Political equality* as ideally enacted in classroom deliberations among equals, *Tolerance* towards contrary but reasonable views, *Political Autonomy* to participate in political affairs and *Political Autonomy* from your own political socialization as well as *Fairness*. Together they can enable students to think beyond their self-interest when making political choices, according to the authors. (see pp. 77-78) Added to this are *Political Engagement* outside of school and *Political Literacy* to “help students place the argument they hear and their own views into the larger political picture.” (p. 79)

How exactly can teachers work towards these aims by discussing controversial issues? What effect do specific classes have on learners in the short and long term? (p. 67) Firstly, Hess/McAvoy carve out different types of classroom interaction to make their point: “Students in Lecture classes are often engaged, to be sure, but their comments often sounded as if they appreciated being entertained. Students in Discussion Classes can choose to engage with the teacher in a dialogue, but they are not routinely required to engage with one another. Best Practice Discussion students are engaged with one another and as a result feel more responsibility for contributing to the learning that occurs in their classroom.” (p. 52) Secondly, the authors use their data to personalize teachers’ individual motivation in their political classrooms: “For one teacher, the central aim is to motivate students to participate actively in democratic institutions; for a second teacher, the paramount goal is to foster political friendships that transcend partisan lines; and for a third teacher, the key objective was to inspire students at an independent Christian school to reflect critically on their political values while adhering to their religious beliefs.” (p. 81)

Three case studies from different educational contexts within the United States highlight the different ways chosen by teachers to work towards these similar learning aims (Part II: Cases of Practice).

In “Adams High: A Case of Inclusive Participation (Chapter 5)” the focus of interest is on the social composition of *The Political Classroom* when arguing about controversial issues in front of a wider audience. The authors describe a legislative simulation on immigration in a public school with diverse racial/social classes:

The students of color, for the most part, valued the experience of the simulation, though many also said that they heard views from their classmates that they found offensive. However, having the opportunity to vote and speak against these views was powerful. As one example, Gabe, a first-generation Mexican American student, overheard his fellow Republicans dismissing a Democrat speaking in favor of an immigration reform bill, saying things like, “Oh man,

get out of here,” and, “Go back to Mexico.” [...] Gabe decided to act. [...] He walked over to the line to speak, and, though he “felt very uncomfortable,” he told the assembly that he was an immigrant and a Republican and that he “supported the Democrat side. (p. 103)

Hess/McAvoy analyze and evaluate this observation very positively:

Gabe’s example illustrates the democratic values in tension during the simulation. On the one hand, students experience a highly partisan activity designed to give them an understanding of the legislative process, but students also feel personally invested in the issues. Further, while students are expected to treat each other as political equals, they nevertheless experience different social standing relative to the issues. (p. 103-104)

The second case study, “Mr. Kushner: A Case of Political Friendship (Chapter 6)”, is based on data from a rather like-minded, leftish school. What is of main interest here, is the way Mr. Kushner wants students to be tolerant and fair toward the other: “That is, he wants students to know how to disagree in a spirit of goodwill and to talk about differences in a way that preserves relationships and respect.” (p. 117) In this context, Hess/McAvoy mention three habits, that could be developed to encourage political friendship: “1. willingness to talk to others as political equals; 2. reasoning about public policy with a concern for the public good; 3. holding a view of politics that obligates winners to maintain a relationship with those who lost a particular political battle.” (p. 129)

In the third case study “Mr. Walters. A Case of bounded autonomy (Chapter 7)”, the authors carry out research at a private evangelical Christian school and see ways of balancing Christian faith and political autonomy: “According to its mission statement and website, King High was established with the core beliefs that parents are primarily responsible for their children’s education, the Bible is the word of God, and the school ought to be an extension of the home. To enroll, students and their parents have to sign a statement declaring they have “been saved” - meaning they have dedicated their lives to Jesus and trust that He will guide them to heaven and “save” them from hell. [...]” (p. 133)

What can be deduced from this? How can the aims of *The Political Classroom* be adapted to the vast variety of different classes or schools in different countries?

The following systematizing analysis (Part III: Professional Judgment) helps to comprehend and – if required - easier implement parts of the concept of *The Political Classroom* in one’s own educational practice.

1. How should teachers decide what to present as a controversial political issue?
2. How should teachers balance the tension between engaging students in authentic political controversies and creating a classroom climate that is fair and welcoming to all students?

3. Should teachers withhold or disclose their views about the issues they introduce as controversial?" (p. 155)

First of all: There are no simple rules. Hess/McAvoy stress the importance of "professional judgment", asking teachers to consider their teaching context, the educational aims and available evidence. (p. 12) The Political Classroom implies that "decisions about what issues to include in the curriculum and whether to include them as open or settled are themselves highly controversial *pedagogical* issues that should be deliberated." (p. 173)

To give an example: Whether an issue is controversial (or controvertible) or not can depend on the definition of the issue, that is, whether it is a question of values or rather rights. For instance: "Instead of treating same-sex marriages as an open question, some argued that it should be presented as a human rights question for which there is a correct answer: Same-sex marriages should be legalized." (p. 159)

Moreover, there are empirical and political questions, while issues can also be presented as either open or settled. (p. 160) "Empirical questions can be answered through systematic enquiry requiring observation or experimentation. [...]" (p. 161) Political questions on the other hand are not resolvable by 'empirics' (information, data, statistics, etc.) alone, but are about how we should live together and are thus guided more by norms, values and ideas (p. 161) However, the two types of questions can be (and mostly are) closely related.

A further differentiation concerns whether a question can be deemed settled or open. "The difference between a settled and open issue is whether it is a matter of controversy or has been decided. Settled issues are questions for which there is broadbased agreement that a particular decision is well warranted. Open questions, on the other hand, are those that are matters of live controversy." (p. 161) Accordingly, settled empirical questions should be taught as settled. Such would be the case regarding the issue of climate change. However, precisely this example also reveals a further important aspect in differences between empirical and political or open and settled issues, namely that the 'nature' of the respective issues may depend also on the larger societal context: What is deemed controversial in one society (climate change in the United States) constitutes an almost wholly settled, empirical issue in European countries.

Secondly, in addition to defining types of issues, Hess/McAvoy provide a set of criteria for framing various political issues (pp. 166-169):

- Behavioral Criterion (some people in our society seem to be disagreeing about this topic)
- Epistemic Criterion (are standards of moral and political philosophy met/reasonableness)
- Politically authentic (issues need to have traction in the public sphere)

This set of criteria needs to be seen as complementing each other: "While the behavioral criterion is critiqued

for being too broad, the epistemic criterion is too narrow for the political classroom. Moreover, reasonableness is *an* aim of the political classroom but not the only aim. Teachers also want students to learn to treat each other as political equals by deliberating across their political, moral, cultural and religious differences. Toward that end, students need to learn to respond to views that appear unreasonable (and to be open to the possibility that their own views do not hold up under scrutiny). (p. 168)

Thirdly, Hess/MyAvoy discuss how to decide when best to avoid or deliberate a topic. Of course it is not only important to determine which issues to discuss and how to frame them in the classroom. The 'flipside' is then being able to determine which issues to omit or avoid in a particular setting. Here the authors also provide a set of considerations and guidelines. This likewise represents a balancing act between taking up controversial issues, omitting inappropriate ones but also not conflating the latter with mere conflict or controversy avoidance. "If students did not talk about these issues in school, it was unlikely they would build the political literacy needed to weigh in on them when called upon to make decisions as participants in the political sphere. Moreover, avoiders tend to underestimate the ability of their students to engage in meaningful discussions and overestimated the sensitivity of their students." (p. 175)

These pedagogical choices need educational professionals who feel they can handle challenging classroom situations that are likely to occur when teaching controversial issues in heterogeneous classes: "These teachers knew that bad behavior could occur, but they viewed correcting students about the civility of their comments as part of their educational responsibility and part of the learning process itself. That is, instead of shutting down discussions that were not going well or avoiding hard issues in the first place, these teachers felt it was up to them to address the problems head-on by encouraging vulnerable students to stand up for themselves and by helping students who make insensitive comments learn how to express themselves in ways that do not exact such a high price from others." (p. 176-177)

When to disclose your own political view?

Furthermore, teachers ought to think about disclosing and withholding their political views as pedagogical tools that should be used intentionally and with good judgment. (p. 182) Transparency, explanation of the politics teacher's unique role and communicative skills seem to be of particular relevance: "One of the most salient aspects of this research was how much disagreement we encountered among students in the same classroom about whether their teacher was sharing personal political views." (p. 186)

Based on their evidence, Hess/McAvoy argue that too much neutrality "ignores the ways in which schools are and should be institutions committed to democratic values." (p. 191) At the same time, "too much of the teacher's view undermines classroom deliberation." (p. 192)



Outlook

The authors' awareness of their project's own limitations sharpens the view for the true potential of the *Political Classroom*: "We want to be clear that we do not believe that merely teaching young people to deliberate will transform society; social inequality and political polarization are problems far too complicated to be corrected by schools. Nevertheless, deliberative principles can transform individuals, as these values can promote more productive classrooms, friendships, families, workplaces, and community organizations and can also shape how young people evaluate what is appropriate behavior in the public sphere." (p. 9) Furthermore, they state: "Teacher skill certainly matters, but our data show that even with teachers [...] who set clear norms for respectful discussion, model those norms, and explicitly teach and enforce them, students will make comments that offend and anger others, and students will come away from the same discussion with very different experiences." (p. 126-27)

The true democratic potential might therefore be found with regard to soft skills when Hess/McAvoy refer to Danielle Allen's concept of political friendship to point out the communicative and also emotional, cultural dimension of discussing controversial issues in class: "Debates over these issues (unemployment, welfare, taxes, affirmative action, monetary policy and other social-justice issues) are politically divisive not only because they are substantively difficult but also because they give citizens superb opportunities to reveal what their fellow citizens are worth to them." (Allen 2004: 96; in: Hess/McAvoy 2015: 127)

For non-US readers, *The Political Classroom* offers food for comparative thoughts; typologies and structures that can be easily related to German academic discourse such as on the *Beutelsbach consensus*, a minimum standard of civic education that is widely agreed on. (http://www.confusingconversations.de/mediawiki/index.php/Beutelsbach_Consensus) Having said this, up to now there is hardly any reference to how teaching concepts similar to the political classrooms are contextualized in political systems beyond the United States. The inclusion of research and studies outside the US context would have certainly proved beneficial, both in pointing out particularities there but also of course for gauging the scope of transferability of their study to other countries. However, regarding the increasingly polarized societies in many European countries - including Germany -, *The Political Classroom* can offer effective support for educational professionals when dealing with culturally sensitive questions such as:

- How should we live together in Germany?
- How should we live together in Europe?

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