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The Beutelsbach Consensus – the German approach to controversial issues in an international context

Abstract

In the German tradition of *politische Bildung*, the Beutelsbach Consensus has been a point of reference since its introduction in 1976. The Consensus consists of three principles. The principle that “Matters which are controversial in scholarship and political affairs should also be presented as controversial in the classroom” is at the center. It is framed by two other principles, the prohibition against overwhelming the student (also referred to as ban on indoctrination) and the principle of giving weight to the personal interests of students (principle of engagement and action). In this article, we discuss the Beutelsbach principles along with criteria for controversiality taken from Anglophone theory of education. These include among others an emotional principle, and a psychological principle. The principles are discussed with two cases – one from Denmark and one from Germany.

In the discussion, we show how these principles are relevant as theoretical tools in the analysis of the cases. It is an important task for the teachers and the school to provide opportunities for the students to engage in deliberation on controversial issues, but it is not a simple task to decide which issues are relevant and controversial, and in what sense. The discussion also shows that the Anglophone discussion of controversial issues and the German tradition of *politische Bildung* discuss similar issues and could gain from more interaction.

As a conclusion, we point to the relevance of the Beutelsbach principles being not only a tool of *Didaktik*, but also a tool for the student in order to achieve the ideal of a democratic education.

Keywords: social science education, politische Bildung, controversial issues, democracy, civic education, Beutelsbach Consensus

Beutelsbach-konsensusen – den tyske tilgang til kontroversielle emner i en international kontekst

Sammendrag

I den tyske tradition for *politische Bildung* (politisk dannelse) har Beutelsbach-konsensusen været et referencepunkt siden dens introduktion i 1976. Konsensusen består af tre principper. Princippet at ”emner der er omstridte i politik og videnskab skal også undervises som omstridte” er i centrum. Det er omringet af to andre principper:

forbuddet mod at overrumple eleverne (kendt som forbud mod indoktrinering) og princippet om at lægge vægt på elevernes interesser (princip for engagement og handling). I denne artikel diskuterer vi Beutelsbach-princippet sammen med principper for kontroversialitet taget fra den engelsksprogede pædagogiske teori. Disse inkluderer et emotionelt princip og et psykologisk princip blandt andre. De forskellige principper diskuteres med to cases, en fra Danmark og en fra Tyskland.

I diskussionen viser vi hvordan disse principper er relevante som teoretiske redskaber i analysen af disse cases. Det er en vigtig opgave for lærere og skolen at give eleverne muligheder for at engagere sig i deliberation om kontroversielle emner, men det er ikke nogen enkel opgave at beslutte hvilke emner der er relevante og kontroversielle, og i hvilken henseende. Diskussionen viser også at den engelsksprogede diskussion af kontroversielle emner og den tyske tradition for politisk dannelse diskuterer lignende emner og kunne drage udbytte af mere interaktion.

Som en konklusion peger vi på relevansen af Beutelsbach-princippet som et redskab, ikke blot for didaktikken, men også for eleverne hvis idealet om en demokratisk (ud)dannelse skal opnås.

Nøgleord: kontroversielle emner, undervisningsstrategier, religionsundervisning, samfundskundskab, klasseværelsesobservationer, Beutelsbach-konsensus

Introduction – democracy under pressure

How to deal with controversial issues in education – and what is regarded as controversial in education – is a recurrent question in democratic societies. In the early 1970's, the political turmoil and conflicts following the social movements of 1968 led to heated discussions and accusations of indoctrination in education in Western European countries. In 1974, a top civil servant in the Ministry of Education in Denmark publicly accused teachers of Marxist indoctrination (Nørgaard, 2008, p. 9), which sparked a long-standing debate. In West Germany, one consequence of the debates was the formulation of the 'Beutelsbach Consensus' in 1976, which has become a cornerstone in the German *Didaktik* of political education and continues to be a topic of debate and inspire discussions (Frech & Richter, 2017; Mambour, 2014; Reinhardt, 2016).

In today's world, there seems to be a renewed interest in discussing controversial issues in education. Since sociology declared conflicts to be a positive motor of development and innovation in society, instead of an emphasis on consensus, current societies have been faced with over-complexity, as well as religious, cultural, political, economic and suchlike conflicts. Furthermore, democracy as such is being contested by a populist rhetoric that has gained ground in the public debate, and digital technologies that do not seem to fulfill the optimistic promise of an enlightened citizenry. At the moment, the debate in the digital media seems to be characterized by 'filter bubbles' and the spread of misinformation and disinformation labelled (with a problematic term) as 'fake news'. In this climate of heated public discourse, how to deal with these controversies becomes a challenge for democratic education, including how to decide which

conflicts it is relevant to deal with in education. The answer given by democratic national educational legislation is that the purpose is to set the values of multi-perspectivity and pluralism up against any one-dimensional indoctrination of the younger generation in public schooling. But how does this work?

Research question, method and structure of the article

The research question of this article is then:

- What are useful principles and criteria for dealing with controversial issues in a school culture devoted to democratic education?

In order to answer this question, we initially review an instrument from the German discussion of didactics: the ‘Beutelsbach Consensus’. We relate and compare its principles to other suggested criteria regarding controversial issues in education taken from the philosophy of education (Hand, 2007; Yacek, 2018), educational theory (Hess & McAvoy, 2015) and from a publication from the Council of Europe (Kerr & Huddleston, 2015). We then use the set of criteria thus gained in a discussion of two empirical cases involving controversial topics: migration and climate change (one from Denmark and one from Germany), in order to assess whether they are useful as guidelines for educational practices. This leads us to a second part of the research question:

- Can the Beutelsbach principles serve as guiding principles within democratic didactics¹?
- Are they relevant compared to other principles when applied to empirical cases?

The Beutelsbach principles

The ‘Beutelsbach Consensus’ was formulated in 1976. We offer a translation here, based on the translations by R. L. Cope² and by Reinhardt (2016):

The Beutelsbach Consensus:

1. Prohibition against overwhelming the student

It is not permissible to catch students off-guard, by whatever means, for the sake of imparting desirable opinions, thereby hindering them from ‘forming an independent judgment’. This is the difference between political education and indoctrination. Indoctrination is incompatible with the role of a teacher in a democratic society and the generally accepted objective of making students capable of independent responsibility and maturity (*Mündigkeit*).

(continued)

¹ We use the term ‘didactic’ and ‘didactics’ with a similar meaning as the German ‘Didaktik’ for the sake of simplicity.

² <http://www.lpb-bw.de/beutelsbacher-konsens.html>

2. Treating controversial issues as controversial

Matters which are controversial in scholarship and political affairs should also be presented as controversial in the classroom. This requirement is very closely linked to the first point above: a teacher who loses sight of differing points of view, suppresses options, and leaves alternatives undiscussed is already well on his or her way to indoctrinating students. We have to ask whether teachers have in fact a corrective role to play, that is, whether they should or should not specially set out such points of view and alternatives which are foreign to the social and political origins of students (and other participants in programs of political education). [...]

3. Giving weight to the personal interests of students

Students should be put in a position to analyze a political situation and their own personal interests, as well as to seek ways to have an effect on given political realities in view of these interests. Such an objective strongly emphasizes the acquisition of operational skills, which follows logically from the first two principles set out above.

The Beutelsbach Consensus – context and current status

To be able to correctly assess the Consensus, it is necessary to understand the German context of origin. Going back half a century, the post-1968 decade has been depicted as a time of contested democracy reflected in heated debates on educational reforms in West Germany. Post-war welfare society and the social market economy (*soziale Marktwirtschaft*) were challenged by a non-parliamentary opposition in the streets. Domestic policy was busy ruling out socialist or communist faction members (or those who were suspected as such) from public service (*Berufsverbote*). From the mid-1970s, a high teacher unemployment rate increased the pressure on novice student teachers to ‘fit’ the core principles of the democratic constitution. The concept of *Freiheitlich demokratische Grundordnung*, defined by the German constitutional court in the banning of a far-right post-national-socialist party in 1953 and a dogmatic and traditional communist party in 1956, became a legal instrument of defence for a ‘militant democracy’.

In political education in Germany, the 1970s was a decade of intense and somehow trapped ideological battles, the discourse appearing highly politicized. Figures in academic textbooks on political education drew a strict ‘political geography’ line from right-wing nationalist to conservative, liberal and leftist concepts, the latter in turn divided into numerous sub-groups, such as more traditional social democrats, critical theorists of the Frankfurt school (Horkheimer, Adorno, Habermas), GDR-affiliated dogmatic Marxists, Leninists, and even Maoists. A few years later, Euro-communists and green alternatives took the stage. The recipe for *politische Bildung* theory was: “Tell me the most recent social and political theory, and I will deduce the ultimate new normative concept of political education from it.” This battle for ideological hegemony in political culture was reflected in heated public debates on social studies curricula (*Rahmenrichtlinien Gesellschaftslehre*) which could jeopardize a social democratic and liberal government, as was nearly the case in the federal state of *Hessen* in 1974 (Mambour, 2014, p. 96).

In the light of these debates, leading German political educators were invited by the Federal Agency of Political Education to a conference in Baden-Württemberg, one of the 16 federal states in Germany. The newly established director, Siegfried Schiele, a History and Latin teacher and member of the Christian Conservative Party (CDU), took the initiative in 1976. The conference did not take place in the state capital, Stuttgart, but at the premises of a cooperative partner in a small village nearby – Beutelsbach. The diplomatic purpose of the conference was to revive *pedagogical* discourse about subject matter in the field and to debug a *culture* of dissent – ‘agree to disagree’ as a possible minimum consensus (*Minimalkonsens*), written in the spirit of a liberal-pluralist, democratic culture.

At the time, this text was nothing more than minutes taken at the conference by political scientist Hans-Georg Wehling (1977), which none of the participants disagreed on afterwards. It was probably its informal status that enabled the ongoing success of the conference communiqué. It took about a decade for the Beutelsbach Consensus to become increasingly cited in conference papers in Germany (Schiele & Schneider, 1987). Above all, on German reunification in 1990, when former teachers from the GDR had to undergo re-educational teacher training, the Consensus became practical in replacing Marxist-Leninist indoctrination by a pluralistic approach in education. Although the Consensus never became a formal decision, or any kind of educational law, it more and more infiltrated official documents, such as educational legislation, in most of the 16 federal states. In 2016, the Beutelsbach Consensus could not only celebrate its 40th anniversary, but started a fresh debate about political education (Frech & Richter, 2017; Widmaier & Zorn, 2016). Unintended effects of the Consensus have been questioned, as it may be seen as a sword of Damocles, threatening to make the practice of democratic education anxious, ‘neutral’ and ‘unpolitical’ (Eis et al., 2016).

The Beutelsbach Consensus – illuminated from an international context

Until today, the Beutelsbach Consensus has been translated into English, French, Spanish, and Italian on the homepage of Landeszentrale für politische Bildung Baden-Württemberg³. Danish (Grammes, 2017), Polish, Chinese, Korean, and Japanese versions can also be found. Taking this into account, the Consensus might be expected to be one of the rare export hits from German political education literature; but this is not the case, as the latter translations are more hidden in disperse academic texts. Thus, the Beutelsbach Consensus became a national whetstone for professional discourse on education and didactics in Germany, but is scarcely mentioned in international educational theory on controversial issues or global citizenship education. In this article, we discuss to what

³ <https://www.lpb-bw.de/beutelsbacher-konsens.html>

extent the Consensus is in line with international didactic debates, or stands for a kind of German *Sonderweg*.

At first glance, the Consensus is no more than “three dull points”, as the founders admit (Schiele & Schneider, 1987)⁴. From a broader international perspective, each of the principles is more or less common in manuals of educational philosophy. Ideas such as the approach to controversial issues, or education for critical thinking, are well established and have become part of national educational legislation in many countries. There is a considerable, but also disparate, amount of literature in English about which issues ought to be treated as controversial in democratic education. In the course of this discussion, various criteria for what are to be regarded as controversial issues in education have been developed; first of all, by Diane Hess and Paula McAvoy, whose book ‘The political classroom’ is based on both educational theory and empirical research (Hess & McAvoy, 2015). This is in contrast to a more theoretical discussion by Michael Hand based on the philosophy of education and moral education (Hand, 2007; compare Yacek, 2018 and Sætra, 2019). A different view is provided by an influential training pack for teachers from the Council of Europe (Kerr & Huddleston, 2015). Together, these perspectives offer five criteria for controversial issues (see figure 1) which can be compared with the Beutelsbach principles.

Table 1. Criteria for controversial issues

Criterion	Characteristic
Epistemic	Genuine scientific disagreement
Political	Debatable beyond the basic values of democracy
Politically authentic	Genuine political debate in relevant forums
Psychological	Intellectual tension experienced by the students
Emotional	Arousing strong feelings in society and the classroom

One basic distinction is between an epistemic and a political criterion of controversiality (Hand, 2007). Hand defines the *epistemic criterion* as defining an issue as controversial if “contrary views can be held on it without those views being contrary to reason”. In this case, ‘reason’ is defined as “the body of public knowledge, criteria of truth, critical standards and verification procedures which at any given time has been so far developed” (Dearden, 1984, p. 86). The other criterion that Hand identifies is the *political criterion* according to which “moral questions should be counted as controversial when answers to them are not entailed by the public values of the liberal democratic state’ (Hand, 2007, p. 71).

⁴ This is already clear from the German context, where the contradictory method (*kontradiktorische Methode*) emerged in a time of contested democracy during the heated ideological debates in the Weimar Republic, when it served as a demarcation criterion for the founding of civics as a subject matter, not just History which traditionally covered the subject domain. Only two years before the seizure of power by the Nazi dictatorship, one of the republican teachers put it as follows: “Political education [...] is achieved, when I confront the student with conflicting or contradictory statements, allegations, claims/demands and judgements. Here he is in the midst of the struggles of the presence.” (Paul Hartig, 1931, cited from Busch, 2016, p. 381).

The non-hierarchical distinction between the spheres of academic (epistemic) and political reasoning is reflected in the Beutelsbach wording, which refers to “matters which are controversial in scholarship and political affairs” (see above). The concept of knowledge in the field of social studies given by the Consensus is not that of a given body of positive facts and information. The Beutelsbach Consensus distinguishes between different forms of knowledge:⁵ ‘science’ and ‘politics’.

Hess and McAvoy (2015) distinguish between political issues and empirical issues, which can be either open or settled. Empirical issues are questions that can be answered with evidence. If they are open, there is still room for a scholarly debate because of insufficient or conflicting evidence. Policy issues are questions about policies, and they define them as ‘open’ if there are multiple and competing views, and ‘settled’ if the choice of appropriate policy is considered non-controversial. Issues can also be on the ‘tipping point’, either if they have been considered as settled, and are being viewed as open, or if they are in the process of becoming open again. This is probably more often the case with political questions than with empirical issues.

The distinction between factual questions and questions of value is of course a central distinction, whether the former are labelled as ‘epistemic’, as Hand does, or as ‘empirical’, as do Hess and McAvoy. The Beutelsbach Consensus does not touch on this point. In another important document from the German tradition, the proposal on standards in political education from the GPJE⁶ states that the goal for students is that they should be able to make both empirical judgments (*Sachurteil*) and value judgments (*Werturteil*) (Detjen et al., 2004).

A further criterion argued for by Hess and McAvoy is the ‘*politically authentic*’ criterion, which entails questions that have “entered the authentic sphere of democratic decision-making” (Hess & McAvoy, 2015, p. 168). German didactics of political education acknowledges the principle of actuality (*Aktualitätsprinzip*), which the Beutelsbach Consensus reflects in some way when it underlines “giving weight to the personal interests of students”.

In his article, Hand discusses the question of whether homosexuality should be taught as a controversial issue, and his conclusion is that it should not, because “the only view that enjoys rational support is the view that homosexual acts are morally legitimate” (Hand, 2007, p. 85). Though we would agree on his conclusion, the version of the epistemic criterion that he offers in the end does not seem to be satisfactory. Even if we agree that moral issues can be discussed rationally, it does not follow that all moral issues can be resolved using the epistemic criterion. Douglas Yacek argues that these distinctions overlook an

⁵ This can be compared to the model of forms of knowledge in social studies developed by Tilman Grammes, which has found some use in social studies curriculum discourse in Scandinavia (Långström & Virta, 2011, p. 22; Christensen, 2017, p. 20).

⁶ Die Gesellschaft für Politikdidaktik und politische Jugend- und Erwachsenenbildung (The Society for Civic Education Didactics and Civic Youth and Adult Education); see <http://gpje.de/en/introduction-front-page/>.

important psychological condition for the issues that are relevant in teaching – that the students experience an intellectual tension between two positions:

[...] the psychological condition understands controversy by reference to the existence of intellectual tension between at least two of the positions within a controversial issue, which positions must seem plausible options for belief according to the individuals considering the issue. This is a ‘necessary condition’ for teaching controversial issues, [...] (Yacek, 2018, p. 81)

The psychological condition has been taken into account in comments on the Beutelsbach Consensus from the very beginning. Sibylle Reinhardt distinguishes between different roles of the teacher, according to whether the learner group is ‘politically heterogenous’, where the teacher only needs to act as a moderator, ‘politically polarized’, where the teacher must ensure a minimum consensus of rules, ‘politically homogenous’, where the teacher must introduce other points of view, or ‘uninterested’, where the teacher might provoke students with her own opinion (Reinhardt, 2015, p. 31).

It seems likely that it is relevant to combine the political and epistemic criteria with the psychological criterion⁷, but this still leaves up for discussion the questions of which issues to regard as relevant, and to teach as controversial. At this point, a further criterion enters the discussion: one that has been used by the Council of Europe in a training pack for teachers, and has also been translated into Danish by the Ministry of Education and the Nordic Council. In this publication, controversial issues are by definition “issues which arouse strong feelings and divide opinion in communities and society” (Kerr & Huddleston, 2015, p. 13). This is an interesting definition for an *emotional criterion*, which adds an important aspect to the above-mentioned criteria, but it does not distinguish between different kinds of controversies, such as political, ethical, cultural or scientific. The inclusion of ‘strong feelings’ about issues can be taken as a criterion, and it is especially interesting to discuss what happens when the issues arouse strong feelings in the classroom. These feelings might be shared by the students, but can also be oppositional, and the latter case, of course, poses the biggest opportunities and challenges for the teacher (Blennow, 2018). The Beutelsbach Consensus might reflect the emotional criterion in its first principle, the prohibition against overwhelming the student. Being overwhelmed by something, for example a natural disaster or the sheer number of dead refugees in the Mediterranean, can be either a strong emotion, or a ‘cold’ fact, which leaves the student uninvolved. The heaviest emotional pressure in a classroom might not come from the teacher or biased teaching materials, but from peer group pressure.

⁷ The prominent case of two teachers, Tim and Dawn, discussing with their students the moral requirement to vote in general elections (Hand, 2018, p. 38f) could be better analyzed bringing the psychological criterion and the respective learner group in. Regarding the epistemic criterion, the case neglects that voting absence can be a strong means of political participation. We cannot discuss this case in depth in this article.

The comparative view

Comparing the international, Anglophone discussion and the Beutelsbach Consensus, the three Beutelsbach principles and the five internationally discussed criteria of controversy coincide to a large extent. Obviously, the Beutelsbach text has the topic of controversy in the middle position, but frames it with two other topics: the prohibition of indoctrination and the empowerment to participate. The international debate tends to discuss the question of controversiality more as a separate question. If we take the three Beutelsbach principles: ‘non-overwhelming’, ‘controversiality’ and ‘the interests of students’, the two principles of ‘political’ and ‘politically authentic’ deal with the same question as the principle of controversiality – and the Beutelsbach principle adds that it is not only political issues, but also issues of scientific disagreement, that should be treated as controversial, thus adding the ‘epistemic’ principle. The other two criteria, the ‘psychological’ and the ‘emotional’, at the first glance seem to point to aspects different from the Beutelsbach principles. The psychological principle can work as a didactic tool (see above), and the emotional criterion points both to a necessity and a challenge education must face in the shape of issues that arouse emotions, but they can also be difficult to deal with. The Beutelsbach principle that political education should always be in the interest of the student, adds an important aspect not covered by the international criteria. The psychological criterion, and in a way the emotional criterion, do so in one respect only, stating that the subject of teaching must in some way be able to awake the interest of the student, but the concept of ‘interest’ in the sense of the Beutelsbach Consensus is broader, as it is not only something that the student finds interesting (which can be seen as a psychological or emotional aspect of the issue) but also that it is in the interest of the student to work with this issue. To give an example: It can be regarded as in the interest of students with a minority background to understand how structures of society may tend to disfavor minority groups, in order that they might be able to act for a change in these structures.

In a comparative view, what are regarded as relevant topics for teaching can vary according to pedagogical traditions (and the curriculum), and to the political situation. Issues such as the death penalty and abortion are politically contested and controversial in the US, while they are not hot issues in the Danish political debate. This is just another way of saying that what is a politically authentic issue is relative to the political discourse within a society. The second Beutelsbach principle – matters which are controversial ... should also be presented as controversial in the classroom – establishes the idea of structural homology in modelling the respective learning environment; it has to re-present the structures and relations of scientific or public debate correctly. And these structures may differ from country to country.

In the context of German and Danish education, we can look at the legislation and traditions. Referring to the political criterion, in Germany the Constitution

provides a very detailed account (compared to other countries) of the foundation of liberal democracy. Core values (*Grundwerte*) such as gender equality and religious freedom are clearly spelled out. Therefore, it can be argued that the Constitution may serve as a foundation for core values in teaching.

In Denmark, the Constitution is less liberal. For instance, the Monarch plays an important role, and though there is freedom of religion, all religions are not equal. For a discussion of questions of core values in schools, it is more relevant to go to educational legislation, which states that the aim of the school is to prepare for life in a society with freedom and the rule of the people, and therefore the school and the activities of the school must be “conducted in a spirit of intellectual freedom, equality and democracy”⁸.

These formulations place some limits on what can be considered as politically and morally controversial. This equals the political criterion, even though the Constitution, especially not in the Danish case, does not provide a clear answer. If we stick to the Constitution in the German case, and educational legislation in the Danish case, it is clear that the school curriculum and culture aim to promote democratic values, but on the other hand, these core values must themselves be up for scrutiny in a democratic school.⁹ Democracy also means questioning democracy, especially for persons in the process of growing up. This aspect adds to the psychological and emotional criterion and draws the whole field of developmental psychology into the discussion. Finally, this leads to an important question regarding one class of controversies: How do the school and the teaching deal with undemocratic or anti-democratic views?

What are politically authentic controversies, and is it relevant to discuss this in a comparative perspective? Political controversies always have both specific and general aspects – a local discussion about a new building in an area of conservation is an example of a general struggle between interests. Some issues are similar, but take different forms and shapes in different countries, while others are global, such as climate change, but also these promote different interests in political discourses in countries like Greenland, Australia or Switzerland.

From political science we can use the concept of position issues and valence issues. Valence issues are issues where there is widespread consensus at least on the goal – quality education, or economic stability and low unemployment rates, which indicates that there is little difference in the policy proposals from the different political parties. Position issues, on the other hand, are issues involving major differences in political opinions among the political parties. This must also be seen in connection with issue salience – how important the issue is for voters.

⁸ <http://eng.uvm.dk/primary-and-lower-secondary-education/the-folkeskole/the-aims-of-the-folkeskole>

⁹ This does not imply falling into the trap of relativity. The opinion that dictatorship is better than democracy, need not be a controversial topic, according to Dearden (1984) and the epistemic criterion. Questioning core values means to critically apply them to undemocratic practical cases. The controversial debate does not relativize or even replace the core value, but uses the value to criticize the practice and to develop measures for improvement. However, even democratic core values, e.g. freedom and equality, can conflict with one another and requires priorities to be set – which can lead to severe controversy.

Using this terminology, the issues that satisfy the ‘politically authentic’ criterion are position issues that are also salient. In the 2019 Danish elections, climate change was the most important issue for voters, and it seems to have shifted from being a position issue to being a valence issue, with all parties trying to gain issue ownership. Even though there might be no parties that are against the environmental agenda, there are differences and conflicts of interests in the means the parties support.

In a comparative view, the epistemic criterion appears to be the one that would most easily cross borders, as science follows global quality criteria. Nevertheless, there might be local differences as to when the ‘tipping point’ is reached when it comes to applying socio-scientific issues. Again, climate change might be the example – in the US there are still official reports questioning the science, while this is not the case in Denmark and Germany at the moment.

Of course, the question of whether students intellectually engage with an issue depends on age and intellectual development; it also depends on the salience of the issue, and on whether it is an politically authentic question in their society. Teachers and educational theorists would add that it is important to take the life-world of the students as the point of departure, while also confronting students with topics and conflicts alien to their life-world. Otherwise, the life-world can function as an echo chamber, as is increasingly becoming the case with social media, where you are not confronted with views outside of your peer-group. The actions called upon by the teacher can be dependent on the group of students: in an apathetic group the teacher might present more controversial points of view (Reinhardt, 2016). This is in accordance with the Beutelsbach principle of “giving weight to the personal interests of students”. Some issues will be perceived as important to students in one country, while students in another might find them less interesting. This might be because the problem does not exist, or because there are other issues that gain their interest – the issue of climate change has affected youth across national boundaries, and another issue – animal rights and veganism – has moved from being a fringe issue to being something that sparks off heated debates in schools.

Application on two cases (Denmark and Germany)

In the following, we use the principles and criteria developed so far to review two cases from a Danish and a German context. The cases are presented as short vignette-like stories. The aim is to show how the Beutelsbach Consensus and the five above-mentioned criteria can be useful when we discuss current controversies in education.

Case 1:**Climate change – everyone is entitled to their own opinion**

The first case is from a large empirical study of Danish continuation schools (*efterskoler*) (Graf & Jensen, 2020) and serves as an example of an issue which seems to be moving from scientific controversy to consensus – which again sparks new political and societal controversies. In this study, it was found that ‘climate change’ and ‘sustainability’ are predominant among questions of societal interest raised in teaching. This is in line with these questions being regarded as important by students in a recent survey¹⁰, and they were the issues at the top of the voters’ agenda in the general elections in Denmark in 2019.

Vignette (Denmark)

In this example, there is a teacher of Danish, who uses two documentary films as teaching material. The first is ‘An inconvenient Truth’, which presents the view of the former U.S. Vice-President, Al Gore, in which the ‘truth’ of the title is that: “global warming is real, man-made, and its effects will be cataclysmic if we don’t act now”¹¹. The second film, ‘Cool it’, dates from 2010, and features Danish political activist and global warming skeptic, Bjørn Lomborg, who has been a strong proponent of the view that global warming should be prioritized lower than other challenges facing humanity. With these two films, the teacher presents two sides of this issue to the students, and by doing this she represents the issue *as* controversial.

After showing the two documentaries, the teacher works with them in class, using methods and concepts from Danish film analysis, which means that the students are urged to look at the rhetorical devices used in the films. As she tells the students, her aim is that they should sometimes say:

Wow, this is not necessarily the objective image, but there are some mechanisms at work, because they are trying to tell me something, and they do it in certain ways. So the cinematic techniques of the documentary are something that we want to take a closer look at.

This sentence, from the transcription of the classroom discussion, shows how the teacher regards knowledge about cinematic techniques and rhetorical devices used in information and propaganda to be useful tools for the students to navigate in the political discussion of climate change.

Case 2:**Migration and refugees – involvement versus, or even instead of, reflection?**

The rise of populism, linked to the ongoing, so-called ‘refugee crisis’, has aroused a lot of involvement in German civil society, including numerous projects and

¹⁰ <https://www.altinget.dk/artikel/arla-unge-kan-stole-paa-at-vi-tager-groen-omstilling-alvorligt>

¹¹ <https://www.algore.com/library/an-inconvenient-truth-dvd>

activities in schools. We have chosen the following award-winning project¹² from a community school in Hamburg as an exemplary case, as the project seems very successful in terms of student involvement but is obviously *not* controversial, as it takes sides and is partisan. What *is* controversial here, is the public debate about such projects.

Vignette (Germany)

The students visited the protestant church next to the school in June 2013, and afterwards they were shocked about the living conditions of the refugees there. To support them, they opened a Facebook website which instantly got many thousands of clicks. Furthermore, they collected donations in the local district of St. Pauli, mainly food and clothes for the refugees. In the classroom, the topics 'Escape, Expulsion and War' were taken up. The young people also researched the German asylum legislation in the Constitution. They met at regular intervals with the refugees from the St. Pauli church. When asked why nothing had changed in the circumstances, they could find no answer. Thus, the plan was to offer the *Gymnasium*, which in contrast to the church is heated, to the refugees in the winter months. To this end, the young people gathered supporters. After collecting signatures at the school, one student created an online petition to find supporters from all over Germany. The press became interested in the young people's demands; there were interviews and contributions in newspapers, the radio and on the ZDF television channel. They wrote a letter to the relevant Hamburg minister, and invited him for a discussion. To prevent the police from entering the *Gymnasium* for the refugees, the idea arose that the *Gymnasium*, like the church, should be consecrated by the bishop. They wrote a letter to the bishop. Both the minister and the bishop agreed to meet and thanked the students for their commitment.¹³

Apparently, such a project could cause heated public debates. A parent from the St. Pauli school, using the online discussion platform the students had created in the social media, comments: "We are not responsible for the whole world! We live here under our own laws, to which we, as well as the refugees, are subjected!"¹⁴

¹² The project won a prize in a nationwide competition called *Demokratisch handeln* (www.demokratisch-handeln.de), sponsored by Federal and State Ministries of Education together with several civil rights organizations.

¹³ This information is collected from the project description at <http://www.demokratisch-handeln.de/dh-data/show.php?id=4921> . For a similar case, which became a kind of prototype for German debate, compare (Sammoray & Welniak, 2012).

¹⁴ <https://www.openpetition.de/petition/online/macht-die-turhalle-fuer-die-fluechtlinge-aus-der-st-paulikirche-auf>, 15-3-2018.

The cases in the light of the Beutelsbach principles and criteria

What happens if we look at the two cases in the light of the criteria of controversiality (see table 1) and the Beutelsbach principles taken together?

If we look at the first case, when we take the political and the politically authentic criteria, we can see that climate change is definitely an issue which is high on the political agenda. And it might have changed status from the time of the case study (2017–2018) to 2019, when it almost became a consensus issue in Danish politics after the elections and with the passing of climate legislation in the autumn of 2019, with all the parties in parliament agreeing on a set of principles with the aim of adhering to the principles of the Paris agreement¹⁵. In this way, the question of climate change has moved beyond the ‘tipping point’ as a political issue and might not be politically controversial anymore, or it has moved from a position issue to being a valence issue.

As an epistemic question, it could also be argued that climate change has moved from being a controversial issue at the time when Bjørn Lomborg wrote his book, ‘Cool it’, and the film of the same name from 2010, to being an issue concerning which the scientific evidence is overwhelmingly in favor of the conclusions of the UN climate panel. Viewed in terms of the psychological and the emotional criteria, climate change is an issue which raises strong feelings among young people, as shown by the turnout to the ‘Fridays for future’ demonstrations in 2019.

Regarding the first and second Beutelsbach principles, the teacher is aiming at assuring that the students are not overwhelmed by propaganda by providing them with tools for critical assessment of communication. She also aims at treating the issue as controversial by providing information from two opposing sources.

Regarding the third Beutelsbach principle, it can be argued that it is in the interest of the students to learn about climate change and the debate about it. It is an issue which both defines the political debate globally, and which is going to have an impact on their lives in the future. And this is perhaps the most powerful of the Beutelsbach principles, as without this the issue of climate change might not be regarded as of that much importance, being a ‘consensus issue’ and not so much a controversial issue. But the first case goes beyond an ‘all sides are a partly right’ position, the arbitrary garland of opinions, inviting relativism or the illusion of ‘neutrality’. Students should learn how to learn and how to analyze media products. By doing so, they gain a kind of meta-knowledge and competence. This is in line with the teacher seeking to “strongly emphasize the acquisition of operational skills”, as the Beutelsbach Consensus states at the end. Here, the Beutelsbach Consensus bends back towards the beginning: the principle of non-overwhelming is applied by the teacher in the sense that she seeks to give students tools that enable them to see through propaganda. Instead, students should become

¹⁵ <https://kefm.dk/Media/1/D/aftale-om-klimalov-af-6-december-2019%20FINAL-a-webtilg%C3%A6ngelig.pdf>

competent to speak in their own right, what could be said to be a definition of autonomy (*Mündigkeit*). The first principle is the only one that has negative wording. Turned into a positive wording, it could be formulated as a principle of meta-learning and second order thinking, students participating in the ongoing curriculum debate, the public controversy about controversies (Warnick & Smith, 2014).

The German case takes up a different issue which is also high on the agenda – that of the policies towards refugees in Europe. As a political issue it is also ‘politically authentic’ in the sense of Hess and McAvoy. But the case is quite different from the Danish one, in that it shows the example of students being politically active in public, beyond the school context – and yet as part of their education. If we look at the issue of refugee politics, it satisfies the criteria of controversiality. As an empirical or epistemic question it cannot be decided upon by adherence to ‘facts’. There are, of course, many facts and misunderstandings in the debate about refugee politics, but the question raised by the students in the case – whether the city should help these refugees better than it does – is a moral and not an empirical question.

When we see it as a psychological and emotional question, it is clear that in this example the students were acting on the basis of an emotional impulse; they were angry and felt the need to act. “Political Education is itself part of the political”, states the Frankfurt declaration of critical emancipatory political education (Eis et al., 2016). Thus, the classroom itself will for a moment be part of the public sphere and the discussion a form of social practice. On the other hand, sceptical teachers reported from similar projects in which the risk of failure ended up increasing political apathy instead of nurturing democratic principles!¹⁶ In recent years, a German far right-wing political party, the AfD (*Alternative für Deutschland*) criticizes such projects as breaking the ‘neutrality rule’ for public schools and as being partisan and politicizing. Seen in the light of the Beutelsbach principles, this is a misconception, as the principle of controversy does not mean ‘neutrality’. Again, we lack information from the vignette as to whether the group is heterogeneous or homogeneous about the issue of their engagement. Nevertheless, we should assume that the group voted for their active involvement beforehand, and no student was forced to participate. Imagine that another student group initiated a competing information campaign about the misuse of German asylum laws and welfare state monetary benefits, promoting more efficient policies of returning purportedly predominantly illegal immigrants to their homelands. It becomes obvious that in any serious project students could only get involved in *one* definite project at a time. The target of a successful involvement project is by definition non-controversial in itself. If a controversy crops up during

¹⁶ In post-1989 reunited Germany and in the aftermath of a (first) asylum crisis, a debate between more traditional political education (*Politikdidaktik*) and a newly established democratic education (*Demokratiepädagogik*) arose. The first underlined independent judgment by students in political matters, apart from direct action and experience; the latter underlined additional social and political action to foster engagement for democracy as a goal of education.

such a project, then it will involve strategic discussions *within* the project goals: What could the most efficient public communication strategies look like? How can limited financial resources be used? How can partial failure be coped with?

Does the Beutelsbach Consensus forbid project learning as non-controversial? Is the second principle a verdict against political action as an unfavourable mode for reflection and rational judgment? The generic productivity of the Consensus is that there is a *structural* tension between the second and the third principle, between reflected controversy and social engagement. The ideal citizen is able to decide on a case-by-case basis, *whether* and *when* they want to be personally involved or rather observe from a distance. It is the balance between reflection and engagement as action, the ability to stand up for a certain goal and at the same time to be able to accept contingency. The political culture of democracies expect from their members an ambivalent, if not impossible and contradictory self-image. On the one hand, they should take positions and have opinions and claim these to be true in public. On the other hand, they should regard these positions as fallible in principle. The didactic task in terms of constructing a meaningful learning environment, is to make this dynamic tension become productive for a transformative student learning experience. The Hamburg students should be able to act within their interests, and this may mean acting politically as part of their education, but this should not be used as an ‘excuse’ to hide the controversial nature of an issue under a blanket of consensus or majority rule. From the standpoint of education, the reflexive standpoint of the student is more important than political action. But if action is a pathway of reflection and a way of learning by (thinking about what we are) doing, it can be relevant in political education.

Conclusion:

Beutelsbach and other principles as tools for educational reflection

The research questions of this article were:

- What are useful principles and criteria for dealing with controversial issues in a school culture devoted to democratic education?
- Can the Beutelsbach principles serve as guiding principles within democratic didactics?
- Are they relevant compared to other principles when applied to empirical cases?

We have seen that the Beutelsbach principles correspond with criteria in international discussions to a high degree; the principles and criteria add to, enrich and specify each other. This is in a way surprising, as they do not at all refer to each other in academic articles. This result could be a value in itself as to overcome fragmentation in international didactics (Meyer & Hudson, 2011).

The three Beutelsbach principles – prohibition of overwhelming, principle of controversiality, and student interest – have been seen as interconnected,

providing a dynamic backdrop for the discussion of five criteria for controversiality: the political, politically authentic, epistemic, psychological, and emotional. Applying the principles and criteria to two empirical cases, we have shown that they can shed light on important didactic questions when dealing with issues that are controversial in education. Thus, the Beutelsbach principles could function as a process standard and make professional sense only if they are regarded in connection with each other. As such, they can foster a pedagogical standard for political and democratic education.

In the German case of the school being a place for political action on a controversial issue, it is clear that both the political and psychological as well as the emotional criteria are satisfied. When seen in the light of the Beutelsbach principles, there is no clear answer, but new aspects are added to the discussion by the principles: Is it in the interest of the students to perform a political action as a school activity? At first glance it clearly is, as this is a case where the students felt engaged and wanted to act. But what if the actions do not have the desired outcome, or when the students as a group disagree? The first case was about the teaching of climate change, the second case was about migration issues. Discussing the principles and criteria in the light of these cases, we argue that the teachers adhere to the Beutelsbach principles, but that when it comes to climate change, we have a topic that is moving from being a political question to perhaps becoming a consensus issue (valence issue).

The Beutelsbach principles and the criteria of controversiality we have presented and discussed, do not provide a checklist for the teacher that can fix any question of a democratic education. The principles and criteria do not determine the cases (Sætra, 2019, p. 333f: deductivism), but they provide a valuable and relevant tool for didactic reflection. In this regard, there is one more lesson to be learned from the Consensus, as the final sentence deserves more scrutiny: the role of ‘operational skills’. What is seen as controversial in the classroom, has to be on the agenda on a meta-level in the classroom too. In the end, the principles of controversy should become a tool in the mind and decision of the teacher, but also of the students. Thus, students should gain a gradually increasing competence to co-decide on the selection and legitimation of school knowledge. This indicates the need for second-order thinking, critical thinking skills, and meta-learning. In this sense there is an intricate connection between didactics – the science of selection and the legitimation of knowledge – as the teacher’s privilege and the student’s rights as a learner in a democratic society. In the end, the student should also be able to co-decide on the selection and legitimation of school knowledge.

Our discussion also shows that there is a need for further research in different approaches to controversial issues across countries and pedagogical cultures. To move ‘beyond fragmentation’, an international archive with cases, like the ones used in this article, being collected, examined, and commented by scholars, could be a valuable tool.

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