

TEACHERS VOICE / HANDS-ON ARTICLES

The hands-on section in *Yesterday & Today* is dedicated to providing History teachers at different levels with practical, classroom-ready resources and ideas that bridge the gap between educational theory and day-to-day teaching practice. Designed to support immediate application, this section features, for example, step-by-step lesson plans, reproducible templates, and adaptable strategies that have been tested in real classroom settings. Whether it's through creative pedagogical approaches, low-cost teaching tools, or digital enhancements, the hands-on section offers innovative ideas that cater to diverse learning needs and environments. By equipping History teachers with tangible tools and actionable insights, this section aims to inspire confidence, foster creativity, and promote a collaborative professional History Education community.

History Classrooms across the World: How does Discussing Controversial Issues add to Understanding the Importance of Perspective?

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Positionality

As I am on the road to becoming a history teacher, I had the opportunity to take part in a very special project that I would like to share with you all: “*Teaching controversial issues in History classrooms – a case study of student-teachers in South Africa and the Netherlands*”. Originating from a collaborative incentive between Utrecht University (through Prof. Bjorn Wansink and Dr. Saro Lozano-Parra), and the University of Pretoria (through Dr. Joyce Raanhuis, Prof. Johan Wassermann, and Dr. Pranitha Bharath), this project sought to engage history teachers in training in fruitful discussion. Students from either university would be paired with one another to discuss controversial issues, and *how* you can approach them within the context of a high school classroom.

With the world becoming increasingly polarised, tensions surrounding contentious topics rising ever-higher, and my own personal interest in discussing these issues with other people that find themselves in a similar boat, my interest was immediately piqued and I proceeded to apply to take part in this project. What followed were incredibly engaging conversations, interesting activities, all culminating in a student-led symposium to discuss our findings with other groups.

There were a total of three activities, with two of those being a recorded conversation between you and the student you matched with, where we would discuss a variety of topics related to controversial issues in the classroom. At first, these discussions were relatively broad, as we got to know one another, but soon we would delve into the cultural and practical similarities and differences that exist between the Netherlands and South Africa, and how this might impact our opinion and teaching methods. From the way we agreed on the inherent anxiety that is present for teachers-to-be having to control a classroom, to the way that something as simple as the massive difference in classroom sizes could make a huge difference (my partner was teaching classes of up to 56 children!), we had lots to discuss.

As for the controversial issues in question, the topics revolved around colonialism, apartheid, national identity, and even the contemporary Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We were both grappling with the simple question of *how* to approach these topics with children who might have very little knowledge of any of these issues. And that was not all; how, as a teacher with inherent bias that has to be acknowledged, could you still create a safe space for all opinions, even those you might disagree with yourself? To be able to do all this whilst still learning the ropes of the job itself would make for an arduous task to say the least.

The third and final activity revolved around the creation of a lesson plan surrounding one of the topics in question, to which we chose to discuss the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This was an exceedingly difficult task, given how this is already a challenge to discuss with adults, and now we had to make this work for children, within a single lesson hour! Naturally those were not the only issues we ran into, as my partner pointed out that something we take for granted in Dutch classrooms nowadays, the utilisation of media, was simply not a possibility for her. This simple note emphasized the point of this exercise: perspective, both from teacher and student, but also between the Netherlands and South Africa.

This perspective became the highlight of the student-led symposium which was the culmination of our efforts as a group. We finally got to see what everyone else had

accomplished, and what kind of topic they chose to focus on. It was an incredibly successful meeting, and showcased the great success of this project as a whole. I can only hope that Utrecht University will continue to pursue these collaborative efforts, given their value in a world where perspective is ever-more important.