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Research Article

’I learned a lot about my classmates …’.

Exploring focus group discussions as learning environment to raise controversial issues in geography and economic education

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Abstract

Teachers of geography and economics address numerous topics in the classroom which are controversially discussed in society and/or affect pupils directly. How they deal with issues such as migration or identity depends not only on the respective curriculum but also on their disciplinary knowledge and pedagogic skills. This paper argues for the need to adapt learning environments depending on educational objectives, content, age and discusses focus groups as one possible way to work with students in secondary education on sensitive matters. Focus groups are seen as a tool to enable real-world complexity in the classroom, and to prepare students for participatory, active citizenship. The paper first discusses current theoretical thought regarding controversy in both society and the classroom. It then goes on to illustrate real-world classroom experiences of focus-group based learning on controversial issues and to discuss its benefits and challenges.

Highlights:

-Debating controversial issues in the classroom enhances skills and competences of learners

-Focus groups are an appropriate learning environment to discuss controversial issues

-A non-interventionist moderation style is essential for the successful implementation of focus groups in the classroom

-Focus group results need to be linked with disciplinary concepts to enhance powerful disciplinary knowledge

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1. INTRODUCTION

"Is it really a good idea to discuss the Covid-19 Vaccination Programme with high school students? This might be very controversial ..."

This quote by a student from a conversation during a course in the teacher training programme in Geography and Economics at Vienna University exemplifies the discomfort of teacher trainees and (future) professional teachers in raising controversial issues at school. The task given to the students was to design a learner-centred geography lesson with elements of active learning (e.g., Weimer, 2002; Bonwell & Eison, 1991) to be carried out with a class of ninth graders (approximate age 14). Within the framework of the school curriculum, they had to address issues of an ageing population and potential inter-generational conflicts. A further demand the students had to fulfil was to approach the topic in a way that it resonates with pupils' lives. Although the students' idea to work with the current socio-political discourse on Covid-19 Vaccination Programmes was very much in line with the course requirements, the group felt highly uncertain whether to follow their idea to discuss the Austrian Covid-19 Vaccination Programme or not, whether it is even possible or "allowed" to involve pupils in potentially controversial, in many cases political, discussions. Research by Kello (2016) or Hess (2004) shows that uncertainty about raising controversial topics in the classroom is common among teachers for various reasons. They fear emotional reactions from the side of the learners, they might be ambivalent about their own role or worry about responses from parents or school authorities (Kello, 2016). Possible consequences are that these issues are either neglected and avoided at all or dealt with in a way that precludes controversies (Hess, 2004).

The aim of this contribution is threefold: Firstly, and based on literature, we argue that it is important to pick up controversial issues in the educational context (Stradling, 1985) with a special focus on the geography and economics classroom (section 2). Secondly, we emphasize the need to create and provide integrative learning environments (Edlinger, 2017) that support teachers in dealing with unpredictable and emotional situations and at the same time ensure that learners can exchange their personal (dissenting) views, experiences or fears without being marked or excluded. We then introduce focus group discussions (Lamnek & Krell, 2016; Morgan, 1996) as one possible learning environment to work on controversial issues in the classroom (section 3). Thirdly, experiences and insights from classroom research (Hintermann et al., 2020) are used to demonstrate the transfer of this research tool into a learning environment (section 4). Finally, we discuss chances and challenges connected with the implementation of the approach in the day-to-day-geography and economics classroom.[1]

2. WHAT'S CONTROVERSIAL IN SOCIETY NEEDS TO BE CONTROVERSIAL IN THE CLASSROOM

"It was interesting to see my classmates' reactions triggered by contentious topics." (F5, see table 2)

Controversies and public and political debates on controversial issues are part of everyday life, even more so in societies of today that have been characterized as super-diverse (Vertovec, 2007), super-complex (Barnett, 2000) and radically unstable (Barnett, 2011). Social coherence and political stability are under pressure and jeopardized by a rise of populist politics as well as tendencies towards radicalization and fundamentalism (Hillebrand, 2017). Ideological polarization, not least aided by communication possibilities of social media, has increasingly divided citizens in many countries. Values and attitudes have been changing considerably over time, are highly contested and differ for instance according to the echo chambers in which people participate or socio-demographic and socio-economic

[1] In Austria, Geography and Economics are taught as an integrative subject in all of lower secondary education (age 10-14), and many curricula in higher secondary education (age 15-18/19).

characteristics (Verwiebe, 2019). Global challenges like climate change, migration or the current Covid-19 pandemic are some examples of highly complex issues with no single problem description or definite interpretations that are commonly shared and acknowledged.

In the educational context controversial issues are generally defined as "those issues on which our society is clearly divided and significant groups within society advocate conflicting explanations or solutions based on alternative values" (Stradling, 1985, p. 9). The importance of individual values is mirrored in other characteristics of controversial issues put forward for instance by Oulton et al. (2004). They emphasize diverging or contradicting worldviews as one of six aspects that characterize controversial issues and that they "cannot always be resolved by recourse to reason, logic or experiment" (ibid., p. 412). Whilst controversial issues tend to provoke strong emotions (Kerr & Huddleston, 2015), they are contingent as well, meaning that "what is controversial in one classroom is not necessarily controversial in another – depending, for example, on the time and place as well as students' own opinions and experiences" (Flensner, 2020, p. 3).

In social studies and civic education controversial and sensitive topics that address perennial concerns (questions of equality, freedom, liberty and security, power relations or diversity to mention only a few) are omnipresent (e.g., Carretero et al., 2016). Likewise, geography and economics education deals with issues like migration and integration, the effects of climate change, poverty, unequal power relations or sustainability (BMBWF, 2021), which are value-laden and controversially discussed in society. School geography as Mitchell (2017, pp. 224-225) puts it with reference to Slater (1996) is "'shot through' with values" and issues with no definite or single answer but rather offers answers or solutions that go in the direction of "better or worse" instead of "right or wrong".

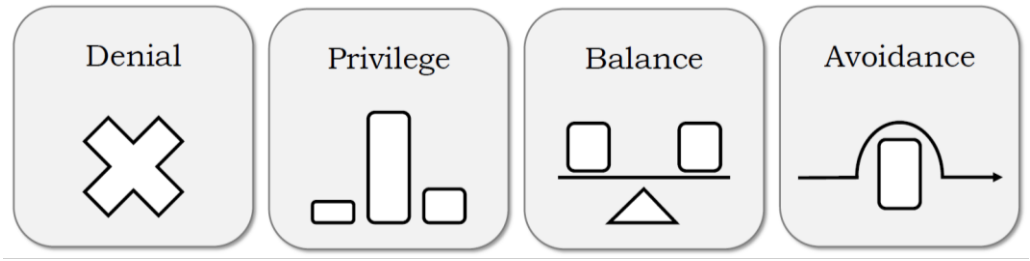
Whereas teachers and schooling tend "to see controversy as a bad thing, as it leads to conflict, and conflict is to be avoided, or quickly resolved" (Mitchell, 2017, p. 227 with reference to Apple, 2004), a number of scholars argue for the necessity to teach controversial issues at school and to integrate controversy and conflict also and especially in educational processes, as basic conditions of human life. Following Stradling (1984), Kerr & Huddleston (2015) identify two main lines of justification for teaching controversial issues: product-based and process-based justifications. Product-based justifications see controversial issues as important and valuable in their own right (ibid.). Learners are and will be confronted with these issues also in their private lives, they need information and knowledge on these topics to be able to take and advance an informed position, make judgements and take responsibility (Kerr & Huddleston, 2015, Oulton, 2004). Not to raise and discuss them "is to leave a wide and significant gap in the educational experience of young people, and is to fail to prepare them for adult life" as is argued in the Crick report (QCA, 1998, p. 57). With the emergence of social online technologies and the fundamental changes in the production and consumption of (mis-/dis) information this argument is even more pertinent today (Hintermann et al., 2020). With regard to a more subject-oriented approach, Biddulph et al. (2020) conclude from their interviews with teachers in five European countries and using migration as an example that the avoidance of controversy and debate might hinder the acquisition of powerful disciplinary knowledge and inhibits students' abilities to critically reflect on their own values and beliefs.

Process-based justifications on the other hand emphasize skills and competencies that might be developed and fostered when contentious issues are raised in the classroom (Kerr & Huddleston, 2015) like the ability to discuss disputed topics in a productive way (Hess, 2009) and not being afraid to engage in such discussions. Cross-subject skills can be promoted like critical thinking and communication skills, as well as reasoning and information processing or evaluation skills. Eventually, learners might realize that their own views matter in a democracy, as do those of others (Hess, 2009). Discussing controversial issues in school can thus enhance democratic thinking (Hess, 2004). Empirical evidence also suggests that it influences the political engagement of learners, has a positive impact on the development of tolerant attitudes (ibid.) and promotes democratic education as such (Gutmann, 1999). These aims are central to the "Beutelsbach Consensus" that argues to teach "matters that are controversial in intellectual and political affairs as controversial in educational instruction" (LPB, 1976) and are also codified in the curriculum for geographic and economic education in Austrian high

schools (BMBWF, 2021). In addition, the Austrian Ministry of Education defines civic education as compulsory interdisciplinary teaching principle for all subjects and school types. It includes the so called Kontroversitätsgebot/“imperative to present controversy" (Reinhardt, 2016, p. 11) meaning that issues that are controversially discussed in politics and society have to be debated controversially in the classroom as well in order to promote “the acceptance and support of opposite standpoints and their reasons” (BMBF, 2015).

Despite these justifications and rationales research shows that engaging with controversial issues in school is rather the exception than the rule and that teachers feel uncomfortable and uncertain to raise and discuss intimate, sensitive and controversial issues with their pupils (e.g., Kello, 2016). Hess (2004) identified four approaches of teachers to the (non)teaching of contentious issues in the context of democratic education (see Fig. 1): “denial”, “privilege”, “balance” and “avoidance” (ibid., pp. 259-260).

Figure 1: Ideal types of teachers' engagement with controversial issues



Source: own figure based on Hess, 2004

Those following the first approach deny that an issue is controversial at all and argue that there is a right answer to the question posed (ibid.). Teachers of the second category believe in the controversial nature of a special topic and clearly privilege one perspective in their teaching over others because they are convinced that it is the right one, for instance from a social justice point of view (ibid.). The balanced approach is advocated by teachers who argue that a topic that is controversially discussed in society has to be treated as controversially in the classroom without favoring any perspective (ibid.). Avoidance on the other hand is a strategy used by those teachers who don’t include controversial topics in their teaching for various reasons, among them the fear to cause disturbance in a community or the worry to impose their own views on the pupils (ibid.). Similarly, Kello (2016) summarizes three main reasons why teachers avoid to teach challenging questions and topics: “fear of emotional reaction in the classroom; perception of pressures from school, local community or state; or feeling restrained by their own values, beliefs and identities” (ibid., p. 35). All this empirical evidence demonstrates the strong need to strengthen the professional skills of teachers during teacher education and further training regarding the development and implementation of learning environments to deal with contentious issues.

3. LEARNING IN AND FROM FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

“I liked that no one was excluded from the group discussion.” (F16, see table 2)

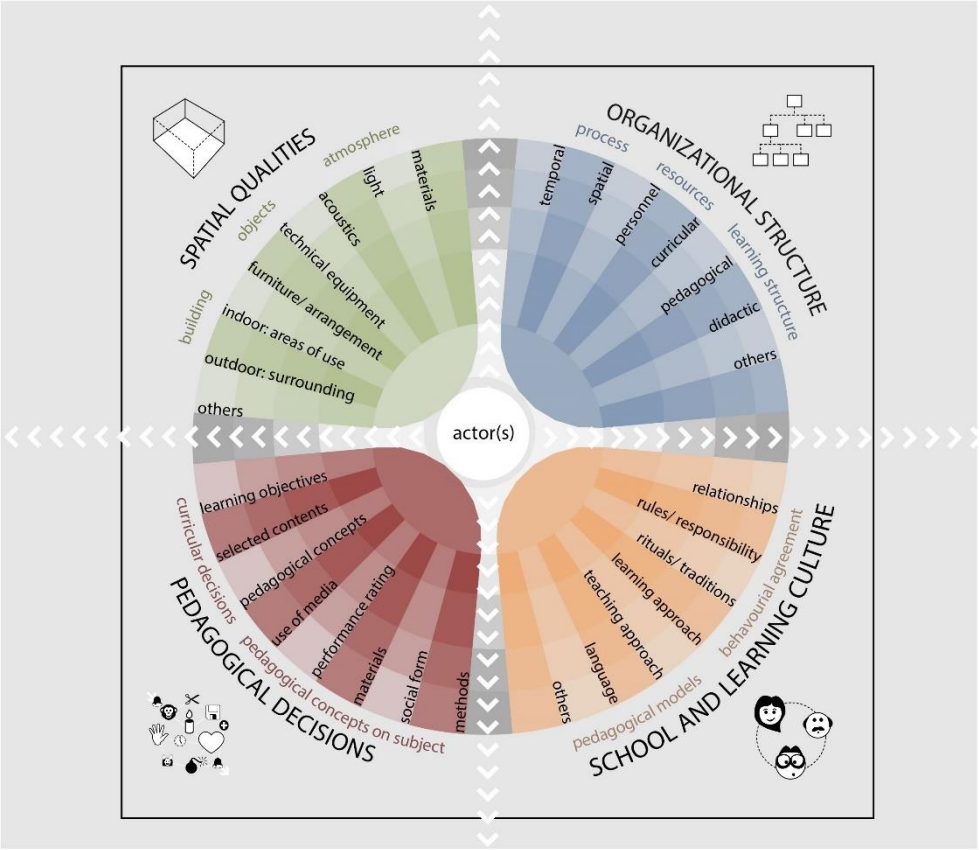
In qualitative research the negotiation and generation of individual as well as collective perceptions, ideas, views and values can be explored by conducting moderated focus group discussions (Dias & Menezes, 2014). In this context the method is deployed as data collection with “the interaction in a group discussion as the source of the data” (Morgan, 1996, p. 130). This is especially useful in exploring controversial and sensitive issues. Research topics like politics and citizenship (Dias & Menezes, 2014) as well as sexual or mental health (Djohari & Higham, 2020) are captured in focus groups with children or young adults. Researchers stress the benefits of focus groups as research tool as they provide access to common beliefs that might otherwise left unexpressed (Raby, 2010, with reference to Bloor et al., 2001) and allows

access to shared values, beliefs, 'cultures' unique to peer groups (Bloor et al., 2001; Kitzinger, 1994).

Little literature addresses teachers implementing a focus group discussion in the regular classroom. While Williams and Katz (2001) propose its use to educators, they also focus on research objectives and information gathering (e.g., in decision-making-processes) and do not suggest using it for educational purposes. According to Morgan (1996) such intentions are explicitly excluded from the term "focus group" which should be used in research context only, albeit he admits that "focus groups that are primarily for data collection may have [educational] outcomes as well" (ibid., p. 130). These potential impacts on students and the requirements for designing focus group discussions as research setting show that there are distinct similarities to the design and utilization of learning environments (Edlinger, 2017; Hennessy, 2005): Both are designed to acquire knowledge in terms of educational implementation.

"Learning environment" is a widely used term in current educational discourses. Numerous other terms are synonymously used, such as learning space, learning setting, learning arrangement or learning location, and cannot be clearly distinguished from one another (Edlinger, 2017). Edlinger (2017) developed an instrument to analytically grasp learning environments in a four-dimensional model (fig. 2):

Figure 2: Analytical instrument for learning environments



Source: Edlinger 2017, extended and translated

1. **Spatial qualities [SPQ]:** This dimension specifies certain physical functionalities and includes factors that make up the equipment and the spatial arrangement of objects in school buildings.
2. **Organizational structure [ORS]**: This includes all measures and rules that regulate, influence and control learning.

3. **Pedagogical decisions [PED]:** Teachers are at the centre of interest in this area as active designers of learning environments. Based on pedagogical models and disciplinary concepts, teachers select relevant content and methods in order to develop meaningful teaching and learning processes.
4. **School and learning culture [SLC]:** This dimension comprises principles, attitudes and concepts, social organization and interaction as well the understanding of teaching and learning processes in everyday school life.

We may now compare the concept of learning environments with the research design of a focus group discussion (see table 1). All four dimensions of learning environments are relevant for focus group discussions as well. In order to create a suitable working atmosphere, adequate room qualities are needed [SPQ]. Various parameters concerning the group constellation as well as personnel and pedagogic issues have to be considered [ORS]. Based on a certain understanding of collaboration between the moderator/facilitator and participants [SLC], different methodological accents are set [PED].

Table 1: Comparing research and educational use of focus groups

Exemplary decisions to be taken when planning focus group discussions (Lamnek & Krell, 2016)		**Classification according to learning environment-model** (Edlinger, 2017)	
Basic conditions	How many focus groups are conducted?	ORS	
	How many persons participate in a group?	ORS	
	What is the length of the discussion?	ORS	
Moderation	Should the moderator have high or low content knowledge?	SLC	
	How are moderator, his/her role, topic, conversation rules and participants themselves introduced?	SLC	
	What form of stimulus is used as incentive for the discussion?	PED	
	Is the discussion structured or open, directive or non-directive?	PED	
	How can a pleasant atmosphere be created?	SPQ	SLC
	What strategies increase participants' motivation to engage in the discussion?	PED	SLC
	What interventions allow the return to a common thread?	PED	SLC
	How to deal with different types of participants (e.g., silent ones and talkative ones)?	PED	SLC
Participants	Are participants selected specifically or randomly?	ORS	
	Is the group composition homo- or heterogenous?	ORS	
	Should participants have weak or strong relationships?	ORS	SLC

Hennessy & Heary (2005) describe the set-up of a focus group discussion in a similar way. In addition to factors regarding group composition and the role of the moderator, aspects such as "arranging the location/setting" or "introducing the group" are also described as relevant and can be linked to SPQ and SLC, respectively (pp. 240-247).

When planning geography and economics lessons on controversial issues teachers can benefit from the conception of focus group discussions as a research method. The broader approach of the four-dimensional model, which goes beyond focussing content (controversial issues) and teaching method (discussion) is important (Edlinger, 2017). This includes additional sub-parameters of learning environments, such as furniture alignment, a flexible time management and the perceptions of the teachers' role. The integration of the focus group

concept with the four-dimensional model for learning environments allows for insights regarding the following points (Edlinger, 2017):

- to contrast the perspectives, perceptions and ideas of different groups of actors with regard to learning environments and the learning processes they intend to achieve;
- to illustrate the different scopes of individual interventions in the design of learning environments;
- to describe the effects of individual factors and their relationships with each other (goal harmony, goal neutrality and goal conflicts of factors);
- to reduce or expand this instrument for different educational contexts.

Most of these considerations are difficult to realize in instruction-based school systems. We therefore present an example and experiences from a real-world classroom implementation.

4. CASE STUDY: NEGOTIATING IDENTITIES THROUGH FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

"You could talk about really controversial topics without provoking instant outrage." (F2, see table 2)

In a research project carried out between 2017 and 2019 focus groups were used as a complimentary research tool to a quantitative survey in order to gain a deeper understanding of how young adults negotiate processes and practices of identity construction among their peer-groups, their strategies of self-positioning and othering as well as their use of identity markers. For the purpose of this paper, we will concentrate on aspects that are relevant for the transfer of the research method into a learning environment according to the dimensions specified in chapter 3: organizational structure, spatial qualities, pedagogic decisions and school and learning culture. The aim of the chapter is to exemplify the discussion of a sensitive and controversial topic like "identity construction" and to identify effective parameters for the successful implementation of focus groups as learning environments. In the project we cooperated with three different schools of higher secondary education in three different districts in Vienna. The participants were aged between 15 and 19 years, 57% out of the 79 students were male, 43% female, and approximately two thirds had a migratory background.

Starting points for our reflections were experiences during the research process as well as evaluations and feedback from the students involved about their learning gains as a result of the focus groups. In their feedback they addressed advantages by taking part in the focus groups with regard to the topic (A), the interaction with their fellow classmates (B) and their communication and discussion skills in debating controversial issues (C).

In their statements pupils clearly depicted benefits of raising controversial topics in the classroom that were also present in the literature (c.f. chapter 2). Focus groups were - in their perceptions and experiences - an appropriate vehicle to enhance these skills. The paper now uses the four-dimensional model to investigate the possible transfer of the research method into a learning environment.

Organizational Structure

In our research, a number of decisions had to be made regarding organization and framing that are also decisive when focus groups are implemented as learning environments. The group size is an important feature (e.g., Kitzinger, 1995; Bloor et al., 2001). The number of participants was kept low with group sizes ranging between eight to ten students. The groups were created at random in order to avoid close friendship circles. Group discussions in one school were organized simultaneously during the morning period. A period of two school lessons (100 minutes) was dedicated for the discussions. Two members of the research-team acted as facilitator and minute-taker respectively, the minute-taker being responsible to take notes on group dynamics or disturbances of any kind without taking part in the discussion as

such. To encourage the participants to speak frankly about their identity, the participants' teachers did not attend the group discussions. Most importantly, guiding principles for the discussion and discussion guidelines as well as moderator rules were established.

Table 2: Students' Feedback on their Experiences from Focus Groups on Identity Formation (translated from German: authors)

A, B	"You could talk about really controversial topics without evoking instant outrage" (Feedback 2)
A, B	"It was interesting to see my classmates' reactions triggered by contentious topics. Noticing the segregation of different opinions was very exciting too" (F5)
B, C	"Talking freely and openly was much easier for me because everybody could contribute with their own opinion about the discussed topic. […] I've learned to respect and accept any opinion and to pay attention in dealing with others." (F6)
A	"I enjoyed that we could outline our thoughts and knowledge about identity. Although I did not talk very much, I thought a lot of things for myself at the same time." (F8)
A	"I was very impressed by the diversity of my classmates' opinions." (F9)
A	"I liked the group discussion because one's own identity and personality were addressed" (F11)
A, B	"Due to the discussion […] I realized what constitutes me. We could engage with our own identities and discuss about the most important things in our lives. I have learned a lot about my classmates, which was very helpful. The discussion brought to my mind that I must appreciate things like religion, family, friends, etcetera." (F12)
A, B, C	"Learning about identity in the group discussion was very helpful. We were able to talk and exchange. Everybody got the chance to talk while the other participants were listening. No hard discussion or fight occurred because we accepted other opinions. We talked a lot about culture, people and the world and had enough time to mention things near to our hearts" (F13)
B, C	"I liked that no one was excluded from the group discussion." (F16)
A, B, C	"You could reveal your own and hear other opinions. The freedom of speech was hardly limited, everybody was very open and honest." (F22)

Spatial Qualities

We organized separate rooms for each discussion with enough space to arrange a circle of chairs which allowed for direct face-to-face contact between the participants as well as the facilitator. The setting provided a break from a familiar classroom interior and created a more focussed atmosphere. All the rooms were quiet, bright and airy without desks between the pupils and no school supplies around.

Pedagogical decisions

In the course of the preparation of focus groups a number of decisions had to be made. Some of these decisions can be interpreted as pedagogic options. This concerns the choice of the (controversial) topic "identity" which is inherently relevant to young adults. In addition, a preparatory assignment "What's my image of myself?" had to be carried out by the learners in advance. To get focus groups started, we used a picture, the so called "identity-head", an illustration that shows the profile of a drawn head, containing various symbolic representations of potential identity markers, such as hobbies, sexual orientation or religious symbols (Hintermann et al., 2018). The strategy to use stimulus material has been widely recommended (Wibeck et al., 2007; Barbour & Kitzinger, 1998; Oulton, 2004). A set of guiding questions (such as "What does identity mean for you?" "How do you know that other people belong to the same group(s) as you?") was prepared to help structure the discussion.

School and learning culture

We have argued before that school and learning culture is the fourth important dimension to describe and analyse learning environments. Major elements include guiding principles, attitudes and concepts pursued in a school, the way all school partners (democratically) interact with each other as well as the (shared) understanding of teaching and learning processes in everyday school life. In the research context school culture played an important role for the selection of the partner schools. All of them had prior experiences in university-school-cooperation and welcome new educational approaches.

For our focus group discussions, we decided on the following guiding principles that were communicated at the beginning of each discussion and might be contradictory to regular teacher-learner-interaction:

- Nobody was forced to speak; participation was strictly optional. This also meant that individual participants might remain silent for the whole length of the discussion and were not individually requested to share their thoughts.
- There were no true or false statements during the discussion and statements were not sanctioned by the facilitator.
- Participants talked among themselves and not with the facilitator. Compared to one-to-one-interviews the purpose of focus groups was to explore or further develop common experiences and ideas. Thus, the interaction between participants, their exchange of opinions and their questioning of each other's' ideas was at the centre of the process and not the dialogue between researcher/moderator and participants/learners (Kitzinger, 1994). This might cause unanticipated issues and provide researchers/teachers with alternative perspectives (Skop, 2006) on the topic.

Besides these basic principles, discussion rules were agreed upon with the students:

- One person talks at a time, we try to avoid cross-communication and murmuring.
- We listen respectfully to each other, without interrupting.
- We do not judge or assess statements of colleagues.
- We try to advance the discussion with a statement and not to spoil it, e.g., by using phrases like "I agree with you, but…." or "I don't agree with you because….".
- If a statement was not understood correctly, asking and checking is possible.
- Smart phones are switched off during the whole discussion.

The moderators played a key role in conducting focus group discussions. They were responsible for establishing an inviting atmosphere, for encouraging discussions without predefining lines of the debate and for making sure that the participants comply with the shared discussion rules and the guiding principles. In the project all facilitators were provided with a moderation guide with pre-set questions that were raised in each of the eight discussions, and moderation rules. These included:

- Ask open ended questions: Questions that can be answered with "Yes" or "No" do not initiate discussions.
- Interrupt student's discussions only in two cases:
    - Students transgress the discussion guidelines heavily.
    - Students are talking about topics that have no relation at all with the broad topic identities and belonging.
- Otherwise only interfere when it is necessary to keep the flow of the discussion: This can be done by rephrasing questions, summarizing standpoints, asking for further explanation, or opening up a new topic when the discussion between the participants reaches a final result or a deadlock
- Do not engage in dialogues with individual students; questions go to everybody in the group, not to a specific person.

In our focus group discussions, participants engaged in controversial debates on different facets of their own identities, on the notion that identities are socially constructed, on the possibility of multiple national/ethnic/cultural belonging or on the question which aspects of one's own identity should be exhibited in public. Even though the topics were sensitive and emotionally laden, pupils articulated agreement as well as disagreement and explained their

viewpoints to each other in a fair way, usually sticking to the rules and principles which were agreed upon at the beginning.

While aspects of all four dimensions played an important role in the successful implementation of the group discussions, discussion and moderation rules proved to be fundamental. The non-interventionist and modest moderation style shifted the focus away from the researchers to the participants who were all equal partners in the debates. While pupils were obviously a bit unsure about the role of the moderators in the early phases of the discussions and tried to involve them into the debate by talking into their direction or by facial expressions and gestures, they directly addressed their fellow discussants without relating to the moderator later on, also in discussion episodes characterized by disagreement.

The following short sequence is taken from a discussion phase about the role of nationality regarding one's identity construction where the participants disagree (translation from German by: authors).

A: In my opinion, many people take nationality far too seriously.
B: Well...
A: Like... if I am, let's say Chechen, I am a far better person than a Turk or so... especially in the 10th district this is very popular.
B: This is nonsense.
A: Because, lately in the tram an Austrian wanted to take a seat and pushed away a Turkish child from the seat. That's only one example for what you call nonsense.
C: I was very proud of my nationality in the past.
A: National pride is nothing bad by itself.
C: No, but I was too proud, really. I can tell because I think differently now. Now I have a Muslim girl-friend. In the past, I thought badly of other religions. And then, fortunately, I started to think differently. And since then, I see no problem there. Because a human is a human. [...].
A: Aside from that, another nationality is no reason not to get along with other people. In our class, there are people from everywhere, Filipinos, Turks, Moldovans, people from God knows where, and we get along reasonably well with each other.
D: It doesn't matter, where a person comes from. What counts are his personality and his qualities. How he is, so to speak, and how he treats you.

"Everybody got the chance to talk while the other participants were listening. No hard discussion or fight occurred because we accepted other opinions." This summary of a student underlines the importance of clear discussion rules and addresses one of the main reasons why teachers avoid to raise contentious issues (cf. section 2): the fear of emotional reactions in the classroom. From our experience it was not possible to discuss an intimate and controversial topic like identity and belonging without emotional involvement and dispute among the participants, the spectrum of controversy ranging from disagreement or differing opinions based on individual experiences (like in the example above) to heated and tense discussions for instance in the context of homosexuality.

A: But if one of us [in the class] were gay, I bet you wouldn't be friends with him.
B: I would bet nobody of us would be friends with him.
A: Yes, might be that way. Yes...
C: I had a gay classmate in my former class. Okay. Well, and he was a friend of mine.
B: Why were you friends with him?
D: Why not?
C: ... he wasn't like, you know ... he was all-male, had an ordinary male name and all that stuff. He never showed any gay behaviour when I was with him.
B: Well, that's okay, if you are gay at home. [...]

The students then controversially discussed whether homosexual people should kiss or hold hands in public as well as the need for pride parades. The sequence ended with following statement of (B) addressed to the moderator: "You see, we disagree very much on that issue."

A number of aspects that have been specified as relevant for the research setting “focus group discussion” can easily be transferred one-to-one into a learning environment. Others need to be adopted for the daily use in the classroom.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

So far, we have argued for the need to engage with controversial issues in the geography and economics classroom and suggested - based on the experiences of a cross-institutional research project - focus groups as appropriate learning environment to tackle this challenge. We suggest they might reduce certain anxieties and uncertainties of teachers connected to dealing with sensitive topics in the classroom. We identified and specified parameters in four different dimensions to analytically grasp learning environments and compared these with the set-up of focus groups used in recent research. Preconditions for planning focus group discussions differed, albeit only slightly between the provided frameworks in research and secondary education. However, a number of aspects outlined in section 4 need adaptations to deploy the concept in school. Thus, we identified possible problems and offered approaches for implementation in the geography and economics classroom. These interventions can be at different scales and degrees of complexity. The argument here is structured along the dimensions of learning environments outlined above.

Though **spatial qualities** aren’t explicitly covered in this article, we stress their importance as they can have multiple effects on the progress of focus groups. In her model of learning environments, Edlinger (2017) shows that especially the atmosphere and the arrangement of (classroom) infrastructure can be influenced by teachers. Both have an impact on students’ wellbeing and the possibilities to explore their views on certain topics. Based on our experiences we suggest to organize a circle of chairs, so that students have eye contact with each other, in an airy and quiet room with enough daylight. Students may also sit on the floor with seat cushions or around a circular table which might support adolescents who feel less self-conscious (Hennessy & Heary, 2005). A change of location is recommended to generate a different atmosphere.

Regarding **organizational structures**, group size needs specific consideration. The class has to be split in smaller groups that each need a moderator. Following Djohari & Higham (2020) we therefore suggest peer-led focus groups, where students act as facilitators and take responsibility for the process. The teachers’ role is to prepare, supervise and post-process the discussions. That means, firstly, to identify controversial issues, train the ‘moderators’ (concerning guiding questions, conversation rules, intervention techniques) and assign suitable tasks to learners to introduce the topic in advance. Secondly, for the time of the focus group discussion teachers should only support student facilitators as supervisors, but not interrupt the discussion. In another scenario a colleague takes over the supervision. As colleagues may be interested in conducting focus groups themselves, classes might be switched for the time of the discussion. Since controversial issues are part of most school subjects, e.g., History (Kello, 2016), Religion (Flensner, 2020) but also Science (Drummond & Fischhoff, 2017) there is no need that these colleagues should be Geography teachers as well. Thirdly, and regarding post-processing it is necessary that the responsible teacher and students analyze the focus group discussion together.

Concerning **pedagogical decisions**, the transfer of the general concept of focus groups in research only needs minor adjustments. These can mainly be linked to the selection of the controversial issue (the research topic) and the educational re-interpretation of scientific reporting. With regard to the topic, the main point is to identify an issue that is relevant to students on the one hand and secondly a topic on which students possess sufficient pre-knowledge. This is usually the case with everyday experiences of students. This pre-knowledge may be supplemented by minor interventions for instance through material (graphics, statistics, texts) should the discussion get stuck. Bringing educational value to focus group discussions is more complex and comprises two main aspects. The first is related to the development of discussion skills, reasoning and the acceptance of arguments, as well as

the identification of conflict and consensus. The second aspect is more strongly related to the school subject and stresses the need to link the focus group results with disciplinary concepts, aiming to "distinguish between sound and unsound reasoning, facts and emotions and strong scientific evidence from weak" (Oulton, 2004, pp. 417-419). Here, we suggest that it is the teacher's role to identify these links to key concepts of the discipline that may or may not be part of the curricula (Jekel & Pichler, 2017; Fögele, 2016), and systematically relate these to current scientific evidence. It is important at this stage to present scientific conceptions as another construct, not as superior to students' perspectives. The result would be to develop a collective meaning of different discourse elements both lay and scientific. In terms of a research paper, this would be the equivalent to discussion and conclusion.

The widest - and least easily influenced by single teachers - is the field of the general **school and learning culture** in a specific school. Providing a school environment that allows for controverse and conflict, for the acceptance of and valuing students perspectives is a high aim. Combining this with the necessity to let students' perspectives interact with scientific reasoning needs to be explored further, as has the possibilities of support through online discussions that may help both documenting as well as giving other students the option to speak out than is the case in face-to-face discussions. This development needs a reconsideration of the teacher's role from an instructor towards the role of a professional enabler with a sound disciplinary knowledge, as has been described in the capabilities approach (Lambert, Solem & Tani 2015).

Beyond the suggestions mentioned above, we consider two questions important: The first is the kind of necessary disciplinary knowledge of teachers and their methods to rapidly and systematically relate them to key concepts. This also relates to the necessity that teachers need access to appropriate resources with reliable and contestable knowledge to support their professional agency (Biddulph et al. 2020). The second topic we suggest is to explore the support available through the use of online focus groups for educational use.

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