

Editorial: National holidays and other socio-political rituals in schools

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1 National holidays and other socio-political rituals in schools – a framework

Socio-political rituals are often used in society to help promote group solidarity and identity. In this issue, we focus on rituals as “formalized, symbolic performances” (Quantz, 1999, p. 495; compare Bernstein, Elvin, & Peters, 1966) that are purposefully incorporated in school experiences as a kind of self-management of cultures. Schools are known as sites of socialisation, and there is rich literature on the impact of school rituals on shaping and perpetuating culture (see Bjork, 2002 for detailed review). The featured articles in this issue focus on days of commemoration as an example of such rituals. These days can take various forms such as national holidays or days of remembrance for marginalised groups (for a list of holidays and special days around the world, see Education World <https://www.educationworld.com/holidays/>)

National holidays and rituals reveal core fundamental aspects of a society or nation, especially when they are celebrated in an educational context. Durkheim’s (2014) three criteria of rituals are: sacredness, improving social solidarity, maintaining social order (Etzioni, 2002; Quantz, 1999). Such practices, often celebrated as the day of independence or the national liberation day¹, help solidify the foundational values of a nation or a given socio-cultural context (Coopmans, Lubbers, & Meuleman, 2015). At the same time, days of remembrance can be used in educational settings to help remind students of past blunders or to promote future justice (e.g., Holocaust Remembrance Day, Earth Day). National holidays and commemoration days could be considered national memory practices and have critical functions in the construction of public memory and national identities (Coopmans, 2018). They aim for emotional impression and commitment to socio-political context. This topic helps us consider how social science education deals with issues like emotions (Michaels & Wulf, 2012), body, performativity, symbols, and pictures in the context of civic, citizenship, social and economic education. In the last decades, comparative educational ethnography



helped to link with the performative and spatial turn of social sciences (Wulf et al., 2010).



Picture 1: 23rd April National Sovereignty and Children's Day celebrations with school children (Bursa, Türkiye - 2012; Photo Credit: Nilay İlçebay)
(<https://www.bursa.bel.tr/bursa-da-23-nisan-coskusu/haber/10045>)

Most of the following case studies concentrate on current practices in recent contemporary history, or a nation and their development until today. How are civic education, emotion, and engagement combined with each other? Are there significant differences between practices in democratic or more authoritarian social contexts?² Methods include all kinds of ethnographic documentation (thick description) and case study method, such as qualitative methodology like pictorial analysis (compare JSSE 2014-1), oral history, discourse analysis, and others.

2 The papers in detail

May 9th is probably the world's most commemorated World War Remembrance Day (Gabowitsch, Gdaniec & Makhotina, 2017; Sauer, 2012).³ Days of memoriam have educational value and provide opportunities for dealing with specific topics. They are of eminent importance to the memory of a society and represent central historical anchor points of the national, European, and international historical narrative. They function as recurring calendrical pillars of the collective memory of a society. In addition, they provide information about the history policy of a time and provide important insights into the historical images and the culture of remembrance of a society. Such days of memoriam can become explicit topic of

social studies lesson, see the exemplary curricular material by the Austrian Demokratiezentrum (<http://www.demokratiezentrum.org/projekte/gedenktage-online.html>).

The articles in the featured topic deal with official and unofficial days of remembrance across the world, and how they are used to help instill better cultural understanding in schools. The first article [“With tears upon our eyes?”](#) Commemorations of Victory Day in the Great Patriotic War in the school practice in the Soviet Union and Russia’ (Andrei Lichenko & Oksana Golovashina) provides a detailed description of practices and ceremonies of Victory Day celebration in modern Russia. As Andrei Lichenko and Oksana Golovashina pointed out “Victory Day” is one of the few national holidays that has been celebrated since the Soviet period and remains in the new Russia. The authors discuss aspects of Russian Victory Day based on Durkheim’s (2014) three criteria of rituals: Sacredness, improving social solidarity, and maintaining social order. They concluded that while most of the Soviet symbols of the holiday have been preserved, the commemorative practices and rituals of celebrating Victory Day in the Russian school differ significantly from the Soviet era due to the growing influence of local practices of family memory. Is these changes in the form of celebration enough to prove historical perspectives have been transformed to a more critical approach in the post-Soviet era? The answer is “No!” according to Natalina Potapova (2015). In her study analysing history text book in the Modern Russia she concluded “ordinary people are denied active political engagement and rendered incompetent for critical activity; they are placed within the field of passive consumption of official discourse” (p.53). Therefore, it may be claimed that although the celebrations of these type of national events and rituals may change from time to time, their nature does not simply change to foster critical educational approach.

The article [“Patriotic Celebrations in Educational Commemoration Practices in Ukraine”](#) (Polina Verbytska, Robert Guyver, & Petro Kendzor) discusses how national holidays have changed in the last three decades in Ukraine after the collapse of the USSR in 1991. There are two embedded videos and several pictures and website links in the article that provide vivid examples of the celebrations of these national days for the readers. Several political and socio-cultural changes have occurred in these new states since then. The influences of these changes are echoed in the way national holidays are celebrated and in the formation of new holidays in the post-Soviet era. For instance, one of the national days that has its roots in the Soviet era, “Victory Day”, is now focused on the victory over Nazism in WWII in Ukraine. This change emphasizes the European and international perspective against Nazism, which widens the narrower Soviet nationalistic perspectives on this issue. In their article, Polina Verbytska, Robert Guyver, and Petro Kendzor discuss how democratic citizenship has been developed in Ukraine and should continue to evolve by means of putting democratic values in the core of commemorative practices.

The [article on the phenomenon of banished soldiers in Polish schools as an example of the politics of memory](#) (Ewa Bacia) presents the analysis of a very meaningful process of political reshaping of collective memory in contemporary Poland, implemented by the ruling Law and Justice party. The expression of “banished soldiers” shows up in the new core curriculum for teaching history. The case may be seen as specific to Central and East European countries or post-communist countries, keeping in mind the history of politicised teaching curricula during



communism Poland until 1989. Thus, questions arise if such figures as "banished soldiers" and their political usage bear any resemblance to the past usage of cognitive concepts like "good Russian soldiers helping to free Poland from German occupation". Do we now have to deal with a similar "at-school-propaganda" but with different symbols involved, or is this a brand-new phenomenon? The case of "banished soldiers" is exemplary, as presenting forgotten "heroes" to youth at school serves as a good lens to provide insight into the politics of memory in general. Given the broader changes that are now taking place in Eastern Europe, the theme is also relevant internationally. Politics of memory is shown as a political instrument of a governing party. On the other hand, it is essential to avoid the trap of Eastern European exceptionalism, an assumption that this region's experiences are too unique to render them comparable to the rest of Europe (Pakier & Wawrzyniak, 2015; Segert, 2016).

Before discussing such questions in a broader comparative perspective, the country report on ["Civic and Citizenship Education in Polish School"](#) (Violetta Kopińska) provides a detailed contextualisation and gives an excellent supplement. The author highlights that Polish civic education is adaptive and reconstructive, focused on historical knowledge, patriotism, and national issues while civic participation, and issues of diversity remain marginalised. Violetta Kopińska points out that the new Polish model of civic education is based on thin and functionalistic conception of democracy. According to the author this model is quite similar to previous one, however, there has been a change in the political context (as well as in educational policy) in which civic education has been taking place.

The next series of papers leave the former Soviet Union influence sphere and extend the use of rituals as an educational tool to different contexts. After giving a sound theoretical background about school rituals, ["An Evaluation on the Changing Educational Policies and Sociopolitical Rituals in Turkey"](#) (Filiz Meşeci-Giorgetti) discusses major changes of school rituals in Turkey by the current administration in the last two decades. Abolishing the student pledge in 2013, which had been recited every day in all elementary schools since 1933, is one of the major changes that has been criticized by the opposition political parties and one teacher's union in Turkey. Adding and removing the ceremonies of Holy Birth Week [Kutlu Doğum Haftası - the celebration of the birth of Prophet Mohammed] in the same decade is another odd action done by the current administration which is discussed by Meşeci-Giorgetti in this paper. This article provides an interesting overview of the current political debates and changes of socio-political rituals in the Turkish educational system with the aid of audiovisual sources. One of the embedded short videotape can give readers a vivid impression from such a national ceremony in 1967 while another one can illustrate a contemporary debate about abolishing the student pledge (i.e., grown people reciting the student people as if they are at a school morning ceremony on the anniversary of Republic Day in 2013.)

From a critical pedagogical approach, the national holidays and rituals in education described above all seem to contradict the acquirement of *Mündigkeit* (civic maturity), operationalised as the ability to speak for oneself and in your own voice. It seems possible for symbols and rituals to replace political education (Schörken, 1987), in a post-modernized mode, they even can turn out to be a kind of educational edutainment (Eis, 2016). On the other hand, one should keep in mind that educational rituals are deeply rooted in international progressive

education practices, developed in the various youth movements in the first two decades of 20th century (*Reformpädagogik*, see Rülcker, 2013). Combined with “rituals” in education, again and again conflicts have been reported, not only on the level of educational policies, but in the ceremony itself. There have been reports of students that (have to) stand aside or actively refuse to take part in a ceremony. For example, in the United States, there is a long history of students refusing to stand for the pledge of allegiance for political or religious reasons (see Martin, Lauzon, & Benus, & Livas, 2017 for more detail).

As these examples show, educational rituals also provide an occasion for counter action (Bjork, 2002, for exemplary case studies from educational history see Schriewer, 2009) and counter-socialisation, as a way to break the performative power of rituals. In the same way that days of memorial can be leveraged for political aims, rituals can be created or adapted in order to achieve similar goals. As a current example, the *School strike for climate*, also known variously as *Fridays for Future*, *Youth for Climate* and *Youth Strike 4 Climate*, develops as an international student movement who decide to skip classes so as to take part in [demonstrations](#) to demand [action](#) to prevent further [global warming](#) and climate change. Publicity and widespread organising began when the climate activist [Greta Thunberg](#) staged an action in August 2018 outside the Swedish [Riksdag](#) (parliament), holding a sign that read *Skolstrejk för klimatet* (*School strike for the climate*). The movement is a civil society form of youth protest, not intending to be a “ritual” per se. But since headmasters and educational ministries will likely interpret ongoing weekly Friday absence a type of truancy, adult authorities could label the movement as “ritualistic” action. Ritual in education can be clearly used as discursive argument in educational policy battles.

One such inspiring (and controversial) example is the Day of Silence (DoS). In her in-depth case study: [“Our Silent Day’ One Gay Teacher’s Exploration of Agency in Counter-Socialising Students during the National Day of Silence in a Detracked U.S. Classroom”](#) (*Jenni Conrad*) the author follows a teacher in an American high school in his own participation of the National Day of Silence. This one-day “event” is a ritual adopted by many schools in countries around the world. Typically, students who choose to participate will stay completely silent for an entire school day in order to build awareness for the silencing that occurs to many LGBTQ individuals in society. While this ritual can be very powerful and is adopted in many places by students, teachers typically do not actively participate in this ritual, given the necessity of speech in teaching. However, Conrad examines the decisions and experience of one gay teacher who chose to be actively silent for the day, and engages his students in a discussion (albeit through writing) about the importance of building awareness. This insightful article showcases how schools can serve as a site for socialisation and counter-socialisation through rituals like the Day of Silence, and how such learning might occur through teacher actions.

So, can democracy be exhibited? The press report [“Austria is celebrating itself”](#) (*Bernhard Trautwein*) focuses on aspects of museum education in the case of the recently opened House of Austrian History in Vienna. In the long-standing and often heated debate, it had to be reassured that there would be “no politicization” in the exhibition.⁴ To better understand the cultural-political atmosphere in Austria these years, the reader could return to the case called “Linzer Fall”⁵ (see the report of Judith Breitfuss and Isabella Schildt in JSSE 2-2018



<http://www.jsse.org/index.php/jsse/article/view/861>). One of the most showy objects of the exhibition, the monstrous “[Waldheim horse](#)” became a political stumbling block, and not the only one in public debate. However, after opening of the museum students decide to make their own learning journey out of the exhibition visit. The report gives first impression from explorative student interviews. As for social studies lessons, such political quarrel over a planned House of Austrian History can turn out as excellent occasion to initiate reflective historical-political learning process in classroom (<http://www.demokratiezentrum.org/projekte/gedenktage-online.html>). It is the current black-blue coalition consisting of the Christian-Conservative People’s Party and the right-wing populist Freedom Party (ÖVP-FPÖ), that announced a new school subject called “*Staatskunde*” (information on the institutions of the state) in the 2017-2022 coalition agreement with the significant slogan *Zusammen. Für unser Österreich (Together. In favour/for our Austria*, see https://www.bundeskanzleramt.gv.at/documents/131008/569203/Regierungsprogramm_2017%E2%80%932022.pdf/b2fe3f65-5a04-47b6-913d-2fe512ff4ce6). JSSE will monitor the civic education in Austria and prepare future country reports on state of the art in theory and practice of social studies education in European countries (see call for papers <http://www.jsse.org/index.php/jsse/announcement/view/27>).

Another article, apart from the featured issue, but in some sense linked to the question of such socio-political rituals necessary in education is “[Character Education for Social Action: A Conceptual Analysis of the #iwill Campaign](#)” (*Michael Lamb, Emma Taylor-Collins & Cameron Silverglate*). The paper connects to the articles on character education and citizenship education in a previous issue (JSSE 3-2017 <http://www.jsse.org/index.php/jsse/issue/view/82>). The topic of the article is important and timely because participation and social action of young people is seen as functional in public discourse when democracy is seen under pressure. The case of the #iwill campaign is worth studying as a potential model for similar campaigns. The project brings in an Aristotelian perspective as a conceptual framework instead of using a Foucaultian perspective, which might see it as prioritising performance over moral reflection. The Foucaultian critique suggests that the #iwill campaign reinforces an achievement culture that overemphasises recognition and undermines intrinsic motivation. However, the paper clearly shows that such criticism misrepresents character education, which is learning by thinking about what we are doing, not mere habitualisation. Deliberating this may be ambiguous or controversial, as the evaluation of the campaign projects can reveal. Thus, the paper provides some important clarifications about an appropriate way of conceiving character education within citizenship education: an Aristotelian account of virtue is definitively corrective to a purely behavioural conception of mindless habit or routine as it is fundamentally developmental; it gives proper weight to the communal contexts in which social action takes place. It can cultivate social and emotional intelligence, as it is focused around the universal virtue of justice.

Don’t miss the paper by *Johan Sandahl*, as it grasps the question of the #iwill campaign and continues in classroom, regarding a content of core curriculum. The question “[Studying Politics or Being Political? High School Students’ Assessment of the Welfare State](#)” contributes to a key controversy of the subject didactics of social science education. Are social studies primarily about acquiring disciplinary knowledge and competences, or do they provide space and



opportunities for developing a social science based worldview and for becoming a political being? Sandahl makes use of the relevant and well-known example of the welfare state in order to analyse students' understandings with respect to the difference between 'politics' and 'the study of politics'. His study highlights the tension between academic, mainly disciplinary goals which he calls 'intrinsic' and approaches stemming from the political field like political deliberation and engagement in political issues which he names 'extrinsic' (one could, however, put it just the other way round). Against this backdrop, teachers and students find themselves confronted with a dilemma of academic disciplinarity on the one side, political commitment and normative reasoning on the other. His data are written documents from tenth-year students who comment on two different views of the best welfare state. Sandahl shows that students regard the welfare state primarily as a political issue which has to be addressed from the perspective of political beings rather than that of social scientists. The study found out four typical ways of understanding a political issue: the social-science stance, the politicising stance, the political-rhetoric stance and the non-political, descriptive stance. Sandahl concludes that students "provide their own political and ideological understanding when confronted with discussions of contemporary issues" and that they "experience difficulty in recognising the differences between politics and the study of politics". He suggests to develop a "social-science education that integrates disciplinary thinking and the life-world".

3 Future Topics and research perspectives

In many European countries, national holidays relate to religious cultural practises, which are celebrated at school, just to mention St. Patrick's Day in Ireland as an example. Other topics and research perspectives on socio-political rituals could be the emerging forms of supra-national and trans-national event; for example, various forms to celebrate European (Union) Day within school culture (see for a European school the photo reportage Fronz, 2014), and how these celebrations have changed over time. On the level of school culture, quite showy are opening or closing ceremonies of a term, the latter sometimes combined with ritual to hand out the constitution to mature electoral citizen student.

More tacit socio-political rituals may be detected by an ethnographic approach (Bergstedt, Herbert, Kraus, & Wulf, 2012; Kraus, Budde, Hietzge, & Wulf, 2017). On a micro-level there are many examples like the controversial issue of wearing a school uniform. Rituals as routines are linked to questions of classroom management, as the hidden order of a school parade (Benincasa, 2019) or the "civilising" rules organising food distribution and eating during lunch time in a school community. Tacit knowledge in hidden citizenship curriculum are symbols represented in wall decoration or other material objects, like picture or statue of famous statesman or moral role models. The nameplate with the name giving patron of a school has symbolic function and impact (compare the photo reportage from Denmark, Germany, Poland and Japan in JSSE 2014-1 <http://www.jsse.org/index.php/jsse/issue/view/68>).





Picture 2: The President of the Provincia Autonoma di Trento, Bruno Dorigatti, delivering the book of the Italian Constitution to the new voters (18 years old; compare the country report of Olga Bombardelli and Marta Codato in JSSE 2-2017 <http://www.jsse.org/index.php/jsse/article/view/826/928>).

Outside schools, nationalisation ceremonies can be seen as civic education rituals (Wagner, 2011). Practices in children or youth culture movements contribute to political socialisation and culture and are either synergetic or disruptive with the official curriculum at schools (Rülcker, 2013). One could think about coming of age ceremonies as rites of passage in child and youth development, which are often connected with religious education or their secular pendant (*Jugendweihe*, youth consecration). Competitive youth sport festivals or international debating club competitions or political socialisation rituals in the democratic army could be another thematic focus.

On such a broader basis of topics and related cases, a comparative analysis can be made across various cultural contexts and type of rituals. At the same time, the focus of these comparisons should be on intentional and normative educational goals and the public controversies about, as well as on the empirical disruptions in the performing of such ceremonies and their potential effects on political and socio-moral socialisation of the students.

The editors want to express their special thanks to all authors of this issue, for their patience with changing the open journal system software during ongoing publication, their struggle with attaining copyrights for expressive illustrations and photos, as well as their overall contributions to helping the international readership digest the complexities of utilising rituals

in schools. We hope this issue will strongly impact our broader understanding of how schools continue to be places of socialisation and be shaped by rituals and holidays alike.

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Endnotes

¹ Some holidays have a post-colonial tradition, like Columbus Day (HER) in Hispanic context, see <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/uk/17/10/columbus-day-problem>. Controversial is if it should be named as Dia de la Hispanidad or Dia de la Resistencia? (see García Sebastiani & Marcihacy, 2017).

² Here, people's republic of China gives a prominent example of educational state, see for flag raising report Zhou, 2015 and Ouyang, 2010. In other countries these celebrations may be less structured and informal as volunteer people are involved in the organizations and celebrations of national days (see Coopmans, 2019).



³ For example, in Germany, the day of re-unification of Germany is a national holiday (3rd of October), whilst 9th of May is not and is even discussed if it is seen as day of liberation or day of unconditional surrender after “lost” war? An alternative date, the 9th of November, would have the benefit to touch three democratic key points of German history in 20th century – first the revolution of the marine troops in the end of WW1 1918, second the commemoration of the pogroms against Jewish neighbourhood (“Reichskristallnacht”/night of the broken glasses 1938), and thirdly the night when the wall came down in 1989. As well as with 27th of January, the global memory day of the Jewish and other victims of German fascism, there has been no parliamentary majority yet to achieve either of these dates as national holiday.

⁴ Compare the dispute over the Museum of the Second World War opened in 2017 in Poland, reported in the article by Ewa Bacia above.

⁵ When the politician Roman Haider of the party Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ – Freedom Party of Austria) caused the interruption of a lecture about political extremism in an Austrian school in spring 2017, a heated debate erupted over the place of politics in school education.

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