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Civics Courses in the German Democratic Republic: A Case Study in the History of Curriculum and Educational Research

Civics courses in the German Democratic Republic (GDR, or East Germany) were intended to educate students to become socialist personalities. The didactical and ideological structure of the course, however, created internal contradictions that turned civics into an “impossible” course. This case study offers a model for conducting educational research into a single course curriculum using a multi-perspective analysis.

Keywords

Civics, indoctrination, German Democratic Republic (GDR), Marxism-Leninism, opposition, Scientific Communism, Staatsbürgerkunde

1 Research Hypothesis: Education for Indoctrination: A Myth?

Civics was an “impossible” course in the German Democratic Republic (GDR, or East Germany) that was nonetheless taught for decades. In this dual-purposed research study, we demonstrate the validity of this hypothesis through the use of multiple analytical perspectives. Connected with this contextual research question is the second part of this study on methodology. We argue that the analysis of a single course promises results beyond the hypothesis of the study at hand by creating a framework for further research on case studies of a single course. In this manner, our study both analyzes and theoreticizes our subject matter, thus contributing to methodological discourses in educational scholarship.

The GDR made a claim of political education for the entirety of its citizenry. Nowhere was this attempt to educate pupils as socialists more obvious than in civics courses (*Staatsbürgerkunde*), a mandatory part of the secondary school curriculum. From the founding of the GDR in 1949 to its collapse in 1989, students attended civics classes, the core of political-socialist-education.

Relative to other courses, civics courses did not occupy a major place in the school curriculum. Students in the GDR spent an average of 32-36 contact hours a week in school. Depending on only minor regional differences, students attended civics classes for no more than one to two hours a week. The number of hours spent on civics was thus a very small part of a student’s class schedule. How viable is an analysis of civics courses, given that they comprised a relatively small part of the GDR school curriculum? Did civics play a meaningful role in socialist political education? Civics focuses on the question of where to draw the line (if it is even possible) between “political education” – intended to create mature, socialist citizens

– and “political instruction and indoctrination” – intended to create mindless personalities who blindly accept socialist ideology.

Against this background, an explicit focus on what seems to have been no more than a course of little importance promises unique insight into the structure of the pedagogical profession in the GDR. The state’s objectives of civics courses extended beyond the classroom and into other aspects of school life and into all of society (Kreutzler 2001). The state functioned as an educator and treated its citizens like students. Ideologically, civics was more than a course. It was at the core of political education, intended to instrumentalize school in the larger socio-political creation of the ideal socialist personality.¹

Civics lessons, like other courses in GDR schools, came under the purview of the state. The course “was considered by the majority of the people, but especially in the view of the SED, up until the end as the most important instrument of political education in the unified socialist educational system” (Kuhn et al. 1993). The evolution of didactical methodology in civics courses reveals several questions about knowledge acquisition.²

Is the reduction of education to encyclopedic, rote learning a gateway for indoctrination? Or is a reflexive transmission of knowledge the only way to teach students to believe and be convinced of a worldview? Civics, a key course – at least from the state’s perspective – had to legitimize itself vis-à-vis the curriculum canon, and fight for its fair share of contact hours with other courses. Thus, it had to develop unique methods for teaching and learning practices.

2 Research Methodology: A Multi-Perspective Approach

Any qualitative study of a single course leads to questions about the validity of an analysis, particularly when drawing conclusions from normative, official sources or when using only one research methodology (Bradly 1993, 433). With our methodological approach to this case study, we have attempted to address these questions, allowing for a multi-layered analysis that, rather than present a one-sided, prosaic, and thus incomplete picture of the research subject, provides for multiple and even competing voices, written and spoken. We use a variety of perspectives on the teaching and learning of civics in the GDR to problematize both the results of our research and the theoretical underpinnings of conducting educational research in theory and in practice.

Our research material comes from a number of venues, necessitating different methodological approaches. Our findings, using these sources both with and against the grain, allow for a nuanced and differentiated understanding of the teaching and role of civics in the GDR. These sources include both extant and new research artifacts; we will present exemplary passages throughout this article.

¹ The translation “socialist personality” is used in the text for any references to educating or socializing a person within a certain socialist, GDR-specific habitus (see Brock 2009).

² The term “didactics” here loosely designates a “science” of teaching and learning as conceptualized by continental European scholars of education, often overlapping with the Anglo-Saxon use of the term “pedagogy.” In this article both terms are used as appropriate for the context. For a summary of didactics and pedagogy comparisons as terms within historical traditions see e.g. Hamilton 1999.

The extent and kinds of empirical evidence upon which we constructed our theoretical and methodological model include, but are not limited to, the following examples: Curricula, teaching supplements and educational policy documents (for example, protocols of educational conferences, statements and minutes from the Ministry for Education, regional guidelines); educational media such as teaching materials, lesson plans, the use of blackboards and other, similar material; analyses of textbooks by different parties, including not only the state but also institutions critical of the state, such as the Church; school observation findings; 300 videos of recorded classroom observations and their accompanying written minutes; interviews conducted with more than 30 teachers from different regions of the GDR about teaching principles and grading practices in civics courses; entire lessons plans from three teachers covering the material of civics courses in grades 8 (two of the teachers) and grade 10 (from the third teacher); interviews and group discussions with other relevant parties that allowed us to access parents, teacher, and student perspectives; and contemporary student sources, for example, binders from their civics courses.³

The second problem with regard to research methodology in the case study of one course, historiographically and hermeneutically, includes the presentation of a seemingly clear overview of a historical period that was, in fact, in flux. To ignore larger socio-cultural and political contexts, in the case of the history of civics in the GDR, is to assume an unfolding of historical events as if they were pre-determined, even scripted. The adoption of a “script” approach to conducting research in content and practice fails to recognize that history is based on contingencies. Yet, even in a single-party state, no such script exists to direct the roles of teachers and students either in or out of the classroom. Any working script would only become an official script after the actors in the classroom had performed their lines. Researchers cannot assume that the case study evolved according to plan, or a plan. The intention to find proof of an argument at the expense of competing arguments will inherently lead to a study that is neither academically sound nor capable of making a contribution to the literature on the subject.

Third, internal and external value-based perspectives overlap in a case study. Educational scholars and educators are thus faced with one of the main questions in didactics – the question of knowledge transmission. How can the “essence” and “regulation” of social development be taught in such a way that it does not “appear” in the learners’ lives? If teaching is not supposed to be rote indoctrination, though, how does the form of learning not follow an emancipatory model that would provide for contradictions in that which is being taught? To wit: how can a study that involves research on didactics not be a study solely about the efficacy of different pedagogical theories?

As we will demonstrate, the didactics of Marxism offer an exemplary study in terms of the paradox of knowledge transmission and acquisition – the ways in which something can be learned that is not immediately obvious (internal interpretation), or what is not actually “there” (external interpretation). In this light, civics in the GDR was conceived and practiced within an epistemologically aporetic framework. With this course, the state

³ Most of this material is available to scholars online at the “Virtual Educational Library” on the German Education Server. Videodatenbank Schulunterricht in der DDR (Virtual Educational Library): www.fachportal-paedagogik.de/filme/

created paradoxical, structurally impossible objectives: civics was an act in pedagogical futility. This failure of a course, though, reveals a unique intersection between teaching and learning (Gruschk 2002). The case study of civics is not a confirmation of assumptions about socialist education. Instead, it offers an important contribution to the theory of general didactics. The findings can serve as a whetstone of didactic thought, pedagogical ethics, and the foundations of educational policies.

3 Education Communication between Catechism and Dialectics

Communication, in its many articulations, is one of the most important questions in educational research – particularly as regards evaluating evidence obtained from classroom observations. This issue was one of interest for GDR scholars in the 1970s.⁴ The definition of an “authentic” example of classroom communication interested not only researchers, but also how teachers in the GDR perceived their own teaching (Breitkopf 1989, 350). By the end of the GDR, educators saw communication as “built on the construction of contradiction,”⁵ albeit one that could be the result of students perceiving the need agree with their teachers. Methodologically, this case study demonstrates an attempt to access communication in civics classes at the micro-didactic level.

The realm of communication in civics lessons was limited by the framework of Marxism-Leninism (ML), “Scientific Communism” (*Wissenschaftlicher Kommunismus*), and SED (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands) policies. Any action outside of this framework disturbed a “normal” course and became, particularly in the eye of the state, a “special occurrence” to be dealt with. Within this framework, it is possible to identify educational communication structures and teaching styles. Civics teachers moved within two polar-opposite ideals that demarcated the communicative space (Klinberg 1982, 275): teaching to the course, or teaching heuristically.

Many of the video recordings and written protocols that we analyzed showed a tendency towards catechistic teaching practices, that is, the use of a “monologic, hegemonizing master discourse” (Richardson 1989, 856). Of course, teachers and students in our sources were aware that they were being recorded. The recording of a course that was central to political education in the GDR might reflect an ideal lesson as perceived by educators and possibly pupils, thus distorting the picture of what an “actual” lesson looked like.⁶ These distortions can never be entirely eliminated in the evaluation of classroom communication (Schluß, Crivellari 2007). Nonetheless, typical expectations of the structures and processes of communication became apparent in these supposedly exemplary courses. Attempts to present the perfect course ultimately led to failure. Instead, it

4 Symposium zu Fragen des authentischen Erfassens von Unterrichts- und Erziehungssituationen durch unbemerktes Filmen (Deschler 1974, 117).

5 Zur Gestaltung unterrichtlicher Kommunikation – theoretische und praktische Aspekte. Konferenz des Interdisziplinären Zentrums Unterrichtsforschung vom 9./10. November 1988. Protokollband, Teil I, Pädagogische Hochschule Leipzig, ed. 1989. Leipzig.

6 The issue of student and teacher behavior during a variety of observation techniques is not limited to education in the GDR (Aptekar 1982).

was the many moments of missteps and mistakes in our source base, and the obvious attempts to act appropriately that allowed for a tenable analysis of the recordings.

The conditions required for dialectical education include participation in a course that is not “difficult” and that encourages students “without shame or timidity” and “without taboos” to say what they think, thereby binding what and how they think into a Marxist-Leninist interpretive framework. The materialist dialectic thus becomes the mode of thinking. The tension between catechism and dialectics points to the Marxist-didactical question concerning the way to knowledge, and not a fundamentally oppositional attitude towards the subject in question. The expected controversy thus remained within the framework of Marxist-Leninism, that is, it was about an “opposing cooperation.”

It is difficult to measure the degree to which civics courses can be considered “successful” within this framework of Marxist-Leninist dialectical teaching. Some students might have developed an “immunization” strategy against lessons that were not part of their worldviews, resulting in a false positive outcome for the civics course. Teaching methodologies in civics courses might also have led to a student’s long-term use of a reflexive thinking mode, independent of whether or not a belief system proved itself to be tenable. Even in a state committed to the socialist education of its citizens, methodological obstacles presented themselves when analyzing pedagogical and socio-political objectives; the state’s ability to understand and reconcile the intersection between theoretical foundations of basic principles and actual practice was at best only partly realizable.

Regardless of the issues raised by the question of short- and long-term successful civics lessons in the construction of a socialist individual, our analysis demonstrates a relationship between teachers’ own belief systems and their teaching methodologies. Based on numerous points of reference from contemporaries, teachers who allowed controversial discussion or even encouraged such an atmosphere pedagogically were not necessarily politically “liberal.” In general, it was those teachers who believed in socialism, who fundamentally remained true to their convictions, who consciously dared to allow problem-centered discussions in class with little, or more often no recrimination.

4 Teachers: Teaching in Lockstep?

Tempting though it may be to assume that a single, national curriculum produces nearly identical teaching practices in any given course, no teacher has the exact teaching method and style as another teacher. Not even the SED, which attempted to tightly control how and what teachers taught, could ensure that every civics course followed the same pattern. Civics teachers in the GDR did not replicate each other’s courses. If teachers did not teach “in lockstep” in the GDR, then research that presumes the existence of strict homogeneity in any context of teaching must be re-assessed (Renner 1965).

To recognize the absence of homogeneity in teaching practices is not to

ignore the presence of differences. To what degree did civics teachers in the GDR differ in their teaching practices, in terms of both content and pedagogy? Civics provides an ideal example of the need to understand the spectrums of teaching practices in educational research, and highlights the methodological challenges of analyzing teachers' classroom practices for any given course. Can national, centralized didactical objectives ever be realized, whether from teachers' perspectives or in the eyes of the state? This question is particularly important for larger theoretical questions about education. After all, state's attempts to control national education through prescribed didactical methodology are not a new phenomenon in educational history (Clark 1984).

No one methodology exists to draw conclusions about how closely teachers followed official lesson plans. It is a combination of sources produced by and about teachers, written and oral, which helps researchers measure the spectrum of didactical practices in classrooms (Lawn et al. 1999). In the course of our research, the interaction of these sources brought out multiple reasons for differences in didactical practices. Some differences resulted from teachers' own conscious and unconscious pedagogical decisions; other differences were based in the nature of the state's expectations of didactical practices.

A consistent variable in our sources was the designation of civics as a "difficult course." Teachers did not have to be informed of any such label; they lived the realities of teaching a "difficult course" every day. Comparative analyses of lesson plans demonstrate the consistent inability of teachers to adhere to the regulations regarding civics courses. Teachers strayed from both the content of lesson plans and showed different teaching practices than those laid out in the official methodological-didactical instructional materials. Indeed, some teachers' notes about their courses suggest that they did not always even comprehend the objectives of the curriculum and instructional aids in terms of content or teaching methodology – an unintentional, meta-didactic outcome.

Some educational observers addressed this issue in positive terms. As one author writing for a journal devoted to history and civics education put it: "There will always be differences between the planned hour and actual events. It would be terrible if life was dearer than a plan." (Drefenstedt 1972). Nonetheless, even in this light, a lesson plan for civics, intended to create a socialist personality committed to the state and its ideology, and "life" are hard to separate. This statement does not suggest, however, that teachers taught whatever they wanted or with any intention of anarchy. Lesson plans and oral history interviews demonstrate that teachers did generally attempt to keep to the curriculum thematically; also evident in some of these plans and interviews is the degree of pressure upon teachers to remain within the prescribed boundaries.

The female teacher M. explained one aspect of the "difficulty" of civics and how it influenced her own attitude about teaching civics. Her perspective on the course came from the interplay between her own lesson plans for civics – an entire year's worth for grade 8 – and oral history interviews. When asked to explain why civics was difficult, she replied:

"Because it was just primarily about politics – or it primarily dealt with

politics, and because by the 1980s a big discrepancy existed between the politics that the media published, and how it [politics] was talked about in reality, there was just a big discrepancy there. And because the students were of the opinion that the course was just not that important. And you didn't need to bother doing anything in that course, you can also get a good grade when you say what the teacher wanted to hear. But that was not that I wanted." (Interview with [Female] Teacher M.).

This description of the course must also be considered within the context of teachers who "believed" in socialism and how civics should be taught, versus those teachers who either taught the course rote or perhaps with criticism. That is, it is not clear from this statement whether Teacher M. believed in the didactical or content objectives of civics. The point here is not to evaluate whether Teacher M. embraced socialism; rather, Teacher M. was confronted with what "should" have been taught and "could" be taught in a course that could not be decoupled from students' lives outside the classroom. Such evidence points again to the nature of a "difficult" course.

When asked about their experiences as teachers and confronted with these questions, none of the interview partners saw themselves as subjects of the criticisms aimed at teachers who blindly accepted and taught civics lessons. Neither did they see themselves reflected in the examples of catechistic teaching demonstrated in the course protocols. Rather, most of the interview partners repeatedly emphasized their reflective student-oriented pedagogical approach within the given framework. Moreover, many of these interview partners added that what they had taught was not all wrong – without necessarily articulating a definition of "wrong." Numerous strategies for justification could be observed, for example externalization: any critical remarks or suggestions about the course that teachers would have been ignored by their superiors.⁷ Such beliefs about their own agency or lack thereof did not cause the interview partners to question whether they had truly practiced student-oriented teaching.

Ultimately, the very infrastructure of the state's attempt to control the teaching of civics courses explains the reasons for variations in pedagogical practices within the teaching profession. To put it pointedly: the paradigm of a perfect, centrally controlled teaching system inherently includes the possibility of variations within this seemingly closed circle (Burchell et al. 1991). Additionally, our analysis of the documents and interviews suggest that "the" civics course as such did not exist. Given the multitude of teachers, students, courses, and other contexts, no single civics teacher could stand for all civics teachers. The illusion of vertical or lineal control of instruction "in lockstep" evaporates from all perspectives about how teachers taught civics.

⁷ Teachers switched between personal and general pronouns depending on the subject matter. When discussing their own teaching, interview partners used the first-person singular; they used the third-person singular "one" for critical or negative topics.

5 Students: Learning to Believe, or Lip Service?

In the first half of the 1990s, multiple interviews were conducted with former students who were now university students. These interviews provided insight into how students perceived civics, and how the state concerned itself with these attitudes. Students noted that civics had been their least favorite course. This problem had worried the state, in particular, the Stasi (*Ministerium für Staatssicherheit*, the East German secret police, referred to “Stasi”). It seemed that socialist attitudes were not being adequately internalized, and were only a product of rote learning that turned into “verbalism” – that is, students repeating what they heard from their teacher without reflexive thought as to the lessons’ meaning or credibility (Wiegmann 2007).

Civics did not help educate students to become socialist personalities, since civics lessons did not play any role in students’ everyday lives. It might have been nothing more than a practice in lip service.

Interviews with students about teaching and learning processes in civics courses also included interview partners’ memory reconstructions of their time in school. Material for this aspect of the project included asking interview partners to discuss examples of their homework assignments as well as notes that they took during class. The student Thomas K., for instance, looked through his entire binders from his civics courses from the 7th through the 10th grades. Reflecting on these documents, he interpreted them to demonstrate that students learned how to form their own ideas about civics lessons in various ways: “Yes, this is that “leadership and cumminist parties,” and “u” instead of an “o,” terrible spelling. That was somehow my credo, my personal therapy, always consciously not writing something correctly. Others looked for other ways, like whispering about the class.” Thomas K. then looked at two newspaper pictures he had pasted into his notebook:

“A couple of us really messed around with newspaper articles. And since he [the teacher] was always saying “the latest news”, I would put in newspaper articles about earthquakes or people who died from gas leaks, and things like that, and then they were looked at [by the teacher], [who gave] a nod, and ‘nicely done’, and then [he] moved on.”

Thomas had entitled the photograph of the earthquake “Declaration of the Memorial to the Victims of the Fascist Terror in the Berlin Lustgarten, September 22, 1946.” The photograph of the victims of the gas leaks was entitled “Will Lammert’s ‘Statues of The Mourners’” next to the mass grave next to the [concentration] camp wall of the former Women’s KZ [concentration camp] – Ravensbrück.”

Thomas described doing things “between the lines.” By putting in headers about actual memorials and events from the Nazi period, he had “managed to smuggle in the photographs of the people who died from gas leaks and earth quake victims – “since they didn’t belong to civics” (Thomas K., SBÜ, 235).

Interview partners consistently tried emphatically to construct oppositional identities for themselves. In this case, Thomas K. described his 13-year old self as having used a sophisticated method of opposition by purposely misspelling the word “communist.” The student body is described as a system of criticism that showed its unwillingness to believe what they were being taught by such acts as spelling mistakes.

That description raises some doubts, including “feedback loops” in memory research. Interview partners’ own biographies themselves retroactively become a means of resistance. This action is subjectively understandable; yet the (re-)construction of one’s own history must be thematized. Here, the interview partners’ age at the time of the civics courses in question – 13-16 years old – must be brought into the calculation of any research findings. To return to Thomas K., a teacher who did not take off points for his misspelling of the word “communist” might have been showing solidarity with Thomas’s skepticism about the civics lessons, or the teacher might have understood the misspelling to be a normal part of the learning process. The question here is not whether Thomas has created a false memory about his attitude towards socialism. Instead, this example underlines the need to use autobiographical documents, whether written or oral, with the same critical analysis accorded any evidence – including respecting the evidence as a valuable document in the attempt to draw conclusions about a given research undertaking.

Similarly, in the group interviews with university students, narratives of resistance and opposition came up regularly. The phenomenon repeatedly showed that the interview partners evaluated the civics teachers who believed in what they were teaching far more positively than those teachers who were opportunists, teaching what was required of them in order to avoid trouble. It seems possible that “believing” teachers could teach the problematic course with the most ease and, practicing the dialectic methodology, allow for a certain level of discussion. As these interviews confirmed, a teacher’s credibility is an important factor for young people in their assessment of what they were learning in class (Alpert 1991).

On the whole, it becomes clear that, in terms of dealing with the course at the micro level, some students learned something “positive” from the course. Civics is thus a prime example of unintentional consequences and limitations to pedagogical intentions. Students understood that civics courses could result in the paradox of lip service, “hypocrisy” and “saying one thing and meaning another.” Students recognized double-speak as the hidden curriculum (Le Compte 1978). In some cases, students had demonstrated forms of reflexive behavior in civics courses, including protest. Nonetheless, the documents and interviews relativizes any generalization about students’ seditious socialization through pathological interactions- and communication patterns. Students’ behavior in civics courses is another example of the uneven experiences and quality of teaching and learning in a course that was part of the canon of socialist education.

6 Parents and Media: "It was sort of like a balancing act"

Parents are always part of a classroom, directly and indirectly; this situation was no different in civics courses. Parents sometimes interacted with teachers personally; more often, parents entered the classroom through conversations with their children. This presence of parents in civics classes could be positive, encouraging cooperation between the school and the family in a child's education. At the same time, parents' potentially negative opinions about their children's teachers affected how teachers decided to teach (Anderson-Levitt 1989).

The possibility of parental criticism became an object of concern and even fear for civics teachers when they taught students who had access to media from western sources, such as radio or television from West Germany. Parents thus became part of the communication process in the classroom. One example from an interview is telling. In answer to the question "What role did West [German] TV play in the classroom?" the female teacher M. stated:

"Yes, a big [one]... It was noticeable in the ways that students with their experiences that they had with Western TV, which showed contradictions that there were in politics, the conveying of politics. Well, the thing that you could use positively was maybe when things about unemployment came up, that a person who is unemployed, who no longer has an apartment, when it was about homelessness and those sorts of things, that the person simply felt that he was no longer valued in society. Those were definitely positive things. Well, but when it was about consumerism and those sorts of things, then it was of course negative. It was just that way around Leipzig, you could get it, and see it, and so it wasn't really an issue if somebody watched or didn't watch."

The interaction between teacher and student was, on the other hand, judged to see if it was motivated by the family or demonstrated one's own opinion. Parents played a key role in a civic teacher's use of Marxist-dialectic practices, especially with the possibility that they might complain about a teacher to school administrators.

Another female teacher O. described her memories of teaching civics:

"Well, and then sometimes I stood in front of the class in the morning and was somehow actually scared. What is going to happen, what will the students say, because I too – sometimes I actually wanted to say something different than what I had to say. But I knew that we were in a State Security [Stasi] area, so that sometimes questions that students asked, you could really tell that they really came from parents, that they were also provocative questions, just to see how she [the female teacher] is going to act, what she will say. So that made the whole thing pretty difficult.... It was a sort of balancing act, I have to say, so, yes, I also had to weigh exactly which questions, which questions you could – where you could tell that they were trying to get at something, really consider what you could say, what you could be candid about and what

you couldn't" (Emphasis added, interview with the female teacher O., SBÜ, 362)

One medium of communication, television, thus influenced, even censored, communication in civics instruction. This example of media furthers our argument that civics courses did not achieve their objectives because they could not. The presence of parents and media in a classroom were not part of the official regulations for the content or objectives of civics, and yet teachers had to bring these (un)-invisible/visible members of the class into account on a daily basis. The structural foundation of an ideal civics course crumbles when the conditions under which a course is taught do not correspond with official expectations.

7 Research on Teaching: Reflexive Methodology for Civics Courses

Even the topic of reflective civics methodology was not a monolithic block. Numerous examples of controversy about "difficult courses" took place throughout the GDR, influenced in part by competing schools of thought in different teacher training and educational theory institutions, for instance at the universities of Halle ever Berlin, or Leipzig. These debates about the appropriate methodology of method of "discussion" can be followed through changes in the publications from the years 1961, 1975, and then 1988/89 (the latter was not published).

The dominant form of the catechistic educational methodology, however, was not criticized as ineffective in its ability to "teach to believe." The reflexive pedagogy of the GDR fought against attempts to standardize methodological approaches. Yet no true alternative to a normalized methodology could be offered: any open criticism could put the transmission of the truth of Marxist-Leninism in to danger. Thus, even within the GDR, civics courses were always recognized problematic, and without an established place within the curriculum. "The teacher cannot adequately prepare his course if he doesn't understand the thoughts and feelings of his students" (Neuner et al. 1967).

By the mid-1970s, it was clear that students in civics classes were increasingly distancing themselves from the course content, questioning what they were being taught. This sort of concern was both an impetus for the creation of new centers of research on young people, such as the Central Institute for Research on Youth in Leipzig (*Zentralinstitut für Jugendforschung*), as well as the result of those groups' findings (Schäfer 1974).

Educational authorities noted increasing discrepancies between the curriculum and students' classroom experiences. This phenomenon seemed to be the result of a new generation of students, and it became a teaching dilemma, particularly in terms of educational policies. The acting director of the department of national education in the GDR, for instance, noted in 1972 that "we must teach socialism to those who were born into to it, who

grew up in socialism” (Parr 1972, 394). It was not enough to just give students information about socialism; any differences between lesson plans and actual classroom teaching would not bring about the desired learner outcome objectives. Authorities primarily worried that this new generation of students did not know how to confront capitalism and “imperialism” with the right attitude. As an anonymous speaker at the tenth plenum of the SED stated: “Sometimes people say that young people don’t know anything about capitalism from their own experiences. That’s true, but it’s also not.”⁸ The speaker went on to argue that the assumption that young people could not understand socialism because they had no opportunity to experience capitalism and imperialism as incorrect and undesirable political systems was false. He noted that students learned about capitalism in history classes, from media, and even by reading.

Interestingly, the speaker – perhaps unintentionally – resolved some of the concerns about generational differences by suggesting that young people also knew about capitalism and its evils from talking with their parents and grandparents. He then named concrete sources for information about capitalism and imperialism. “I am thinking here about the three television and twenty radio programs that make their way daily in to the land of the GDR with about 10,000 minutes of transmission.” There could thus be no question that youth in the GDR were very familiar with the competing ideologies of capitalism and imperialism. Clearly, claims made by scholars after 1989 that there had been no interest by the State to hear blunt analysis and criticism of any kind do not present, at least in the case of young people and socialist education, the entire picture. At the same time, however, official statements about young people claimed that they remained true to socialism.

8 Intended Pedagogical Outcomes: Controlling Civics Education

Within the educational system of the GDR, continuing education for teachers was organized within the District Cabinet for Pedagogy, the Regional Cabinet for Continuing Education for Teachers and the “Teacher’s House” in Berlin. Educational “consultants,” or advisors, were the instructors for the various courses that student teachers would later teach. These advisors also worked with continuing education for teachers. Their role, if initially conceived as a means of supporting teachers in their ability to teach effectively, changed over time. Education in the initial postwar period had been primarily concerned with recruiting and retaining teachers in the wake of massive dismissal of teachers with Nazi backgrounds (Sander 1998). As the education system professionalized, educational advisors saw the bureaucratization of their work and role within the centralized oversight of teachers in the GDR.

Much of this professionalization resulted from demographical changes

⁸ “Der X. Parteitag der SED über die Aufgaben der Volksbildung und die kommunistische Erziehung der Jugend”. (Referat an der Parteischule “Karl Liebknecht” Kleinmachnow vor Agitprop-Sekretären der Kreisleitungen am 8.12.1982). Unpublished ms. SAPMO/BArch (Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR im Bundesarchiv): 34978/1.

within a post-industrial, socialist state (Kreutzler 2001). The 1970s saw a new generation of teachers in the GDR. Many teachers of the immediate postwar period retired – both the so-called “new teachers” (*Neulehrer*) and their older colleagues, many of whom had taught before the war (*Altlehrer*) (Gruner 2000). A new generation of educators entered classrooms, teachers who had been socialized within the specific context of the GDR. This sea-change implied that it was necessary for civics education to prove that political-ideological convictions regarding Marxist-Leninism and the socialist state be taught in a manner that was not affected by teachers’ personal histories or beliefs. This situation led to an explicit mandate to employ course-specific didactic methodologies instead of relying upon civics teachers’ own political convictions. The mandate, as in so many other areas of the regulation of civics courses, did not succeed in major changes in pedagogical practices.

Within the GDR’s extensive system of surveillance, the Stasi concerned itself with its perceptions of young people’s seditious educational – and thus societal –opposition (Wiegmann 2007). The inability of the state to control all aspects of education did not deter the SED from creating new modes of observation of teaching and, implicitly, control of educational practices. In this vein, educational advisors became an integral part of a centralized system that practiced regulation with district-level bureaucracy. One major source about the role of educational consultants comes from approximately 50 advisors’ reports in the Brandenburg district from the mid-1980s. The reports, usually two pages in length and hand-written, summarized classroom observations of approximately 100 teachers and included brief suggestions for instructional improvement.

Methodologically, the question arises of how and with what intentions the consultants wrote these works. Reports with harsh criticisms might have been an attempt for advisors to legitimize their work: consistent suggestions for improvement necessitated the consistent employment of educational advisors. Likewise, advisors might have portrayed their colleagues positively in order to keep their colleagues out of trouble, or to ensure job security: a teaching cohort with a grudge against an educational advisor could jeopardize that person’s career. Evaluations of teaching were not a one-way street (Koschitzki 1983).

Despite the potentially different motivations involved in the writing of these reports, they were consistently based upon numerous modes of evaluation, lending credibility to the overall picture they portrayed of civics courses. Advisors used such evaluation methods as classroom observations and interviews with teachers and administrators. Based on teachers’ lesson plans, advisors also tested students’ comprehension of the course content and objectives. Educational and political authorities regarded these reports as providing valuable insight into civics courses. Based on these reports, authorities took corrective measures to improve the teaching of civics where they perceived problems. It is therefore possible to trace the didactical changes for civics teachers and the rationale for them.

9 Civics Courses and Opposition

Responsible and ethical research practices mandate the need to look for documentation on educational practices regarding civics that did not remain within the framework of Marxist-Leninism, or at least problematize it (Kowalczyk, Sello 2006). We were able to find many instances of individual behavior. Nowhere, however, there was any documentation of actual opposition in our study of civics courses. This lack of documentation of opposition, within the context of the GDR's attempts to monitor and control all aspects of political and social realms, is in part a result of how opposition was treated and reported. Any action that fell outside of acceptable behavior immediately became the object of the Stasi's scrutiny, and treated – at least publically – as an isolated case of asocial behavior and actions (Wiegmann 2001).

Indeed, opposition, however conceived, was only possible in extremely difficult conditions. Institutions and organizations were more or less directly under the control and direction of the State or the SED (Betts 2010). This situation was not entirely the case for church organizations, which enjoyed a certain degree of autonomy. The Protestant Church (*Evangelische Kirche*) in the GDR, for example, was actively engaged in the teaching and learning of civics – which did not translate into having an effect on civics courses necessarily (Wegner 1996).

Since the GDR did not permit religious instruction in schools, the Protestant Church had no meaningful influence within general school policymaking (Koschitzki 1983). Nonetheless, the Church organized congregational discussions of education, modeled on the anti-Nazi Protestant group, the “Confessing Church.” Within the context of its own research and work on education, the Protestant Church considered the question of the socialist educational system and its relation to the Church. Of importance here is the motivation of Church investigations into civics courses. Authors of reports, for instance, were not motivated by an attempt to bring down the state, but rather to consider the question of the role of the Church within a socialist society.

Church commissions examined civics textbooks, for example, and questioned what children from Christian homes learned in school.⁹ One finding was the absence of meaningful discussions about the family. Civics textbooks and methodologies treated the family as a social good, rather than as a place of care and acceptance. Moreover, civics courses ignored fundamental questions about the individual and society beyond ideological platitudes.

Civics lessons did not include discussions, for example about how a family should function within a society based on Marxist-Leninist principles. Real-life questions about family life found no answers in civics textbooks, not least because such questions – ethical behavior, life-altering events, positive and negative, such as marriage, pregnancy, loss of loved ones – were not asked in the teaching and learning of civics. Single mothers, for example, despite claims of the GDR to have ended gender discrimination, had needs specific to their situation that went unaddressed in public spheres.

9 Analyse der Schulbücher für Heimatkunde, Geschichte, Staatsbürger-Kunde, Deutsch (Literatur) an den allgemeinbildenden polytechnischen Oberschulen in der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik nach dem Stand Schuljahr 1986/87 für kirchliche Arbeit mit Kindern, Jugendlichen, Familien – Nicht zur Veröffentlichung bestimmt. In: Personal Archive of Henning Schluß. 1998. Berlin [East].

Civics treated the citizenry as a single body; the Church brought individuals in as individuals. This discrepancy revealed civics as a marker of a state that wanted only to homogenize its many parts. The Church, because it did not permit itself to become part of the continued attempts of the State to eliminate or ignore institutions that remained outside its hegemonic realm, recognized civics as a course with no content relative to individual lives, and made these evaluations known. No state reaction to these analyses, which were available to anyone within church communities, was forthcoming.

10 The Failure of Civics: An Impossible Course? A Contribution to Educational Theory

On October 31, 1989, the Ministry for Education eliminated the civics curriculum that had been in place since 1988 and eliminated the teaching military training from schools. Consequently, in numerous schools, civics courses were taught from a different methodological practice, or else disappeared entirely from the school curriculum.

Klaus Beyer, civics methodology theorist at the MLU in Halle, asked himself the “self-critical question:”

“Why did I allow that? Why did I not oppose anything? I won’t try and justify it by not having been given any power or because of the resulting personal consequences. Rather, I acknowledge: I generally agreed with the policies for the objectives and contents of the curricula and saw enough methodological leeway for the construction of an attractive course that would be guided by an attitude of focusing on difficult questions, relevant to everyday life, ... I blindly trusted SED politics ... Today I know whom I trusted, and what the consequences were” (Beyer 1990, 134).

In the June 1989 academic journal *Geschichtsunterricht und Staatsbürgerkunde (History Teaching and Civics)*, the director of the Institute for the Social Science Education of the APW in the GDR, Horst Riecher, wrote an article entitled “*What Should, What Can Civics Courses Do?*”

“Civics courses is also a course like many others. It involves systematic education about societal information and facts, about societal connections and processes; it is learning with a determined and necessary carefulness. It is about fundamental theoretical and political knowledge, a knowledge that “takes”, that can be built up, that can be built upon... In her novel *Vertrauen* [Trust], Anna Seghers wrote more or less: Trust, complete trust, can only be won once you understand something entirely” (Riechert 1989, 469).

- *Micro-didactics*. Didactics, as part of a humanistic-educational theory,

implies student autonomy and the transparency of teaching and learning rationale; it rejects the use of manipulative teaching practices. For civics teachers, this foundation of didactics presented a professionally ethical paradox: civics was supposed to be an element in the socialist education of a society, although “civics” remained a moving target. Teachers who wanted to teach the framework of Marxism-Leninism convincingly needed their students’ trust.

In hindsight, this situation created – perhaps necessarily – a breach of trust in the hindering of students’ opportunity of self-development and – awareness. Only a few teachers demonstrated a critical assessment of their role in this part of the GDR’s educational system. Other teachers retreated in to the safety of remembering themselves as “good” teachers who worked well and effectively in the teaching and learning of civics, basing this claim on their excellent teaching skills, which included a rich variety of highly interactive and student-oriented teaching methods.

Civics methodology had to fail on a string of self-contradictions, based in part on the participation of students in the learning process, who were not made aware of the inherent misuse of their development of critical thinking in civics classes. In terms of pedagogical ethics and the underlying theories that inform professional conduct, it becomes clear that a course-specific methodological teaching practice, mandated by the course’s didactical paradigm that restricts the selection and rationale of the course’s curricular content, produces a course that makes its participants blind to the dangers of indoctrination. Claims of general educational reform of pedagogical principles such as autonomy and self-responsibility lose all credibility for teaching practices and beliefs under these conditions. This, then, is the professional, political moral to be taken from the case study of civics.

– *Macro-educational policies.* The “case study civics” demonstrates the possibilities and limits as well as the resulting consequences of a centralized, institutionalized state pedagogy, especially as regards its play for legitimacy. Civics, and with it the State and its pretension of the socialist education of its citizens, failed. The GDR remained ignorant, perhaps consciously, of the pressure of modernity on the individual and society towards ever-increasing realms of self-actualization and independency. A course that aimed towards the homogenization of society ultimately helped bring about the same state’s failure that had created the course. The SED’s institutionalized monopoly of power led to the absence of differentiation amongst and within institutions and thus to a narrowing of diversity, so that bureaucratic decisions became routine decisions – and the state collapsed under the weight of its own system (Lepsius 1994).

Are there, and were there, limits to indoctrination, since every form of knowledge transmission contains the possibility of a reflexive moment? A “good” teacher-student community can at any time be misused to introduce a societal ideology into the consciousness of the learner. Disciplinary methods without disciplinary didactics can at any point become a technique for the manipulation of students, a didactical fundamentalism.

With our analysis of a wide variety of sources in breadth and depth, the case study of civics courses also becomes a case study in conducting educational research of a single course subject. Clearly, the literature on educational theory and philosophy is enriched by new and evolving models of research

into the role of didactics and teaching practices in macro and micro contexts. Our case study has demonstrated that there is no such thing as a course that is taught within a vacuum; the socio-political contexts must always inform the research into any aspect of education.

We have suggested several means of accessing these contexts, starting with a broad methodological approach that is rooted in multiple perspectives, in terms of sources and in terms of multi-disciplinary applications of other methodologies. Many questions remain to be examined, including the limitations of this case study. What other perspective, or voices, might be found, and how? The absence of our interview partners' discussions of some subjects, including gender and religion, underline the need to develop methods of delving into absences as presences. Finally, this case study has had its own "balancing act" of approaching a topic with as little pre-existing moral judgments as possible. We have argued that the failure of civics was also an ethical and moral failure of an educational system vis-à-vis a society's citizens, a conclusion that is most credibly drawn from careful use of evidence, and not of hindsight.

Abbreviations

GuS Geschichte und Staatsbürgerkunde

DLZ Deutsche Lehrerzeitung

ELH English Literary History

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