



# History Education and Democratic Memory. An Analysis of the Opinions of Social Sciences Teachers in Initial Training

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## Abstract

It is of great importance to study in depth the determining factors which enable or hinder the study of controversial issues in the classroom. Against this background, along with the bibliographic review of the treatment of conflictive issues in the teaching of history, an investigation was proposed with the main objective of analysing the opinions and perceptions of teachers undergoing their initial training regarding addressing controversial issues in the primary classroom. 659 students (395 women [70%] and 170 men [30%]), studying undergraduate primary education degrees at seven Spanish universities. An ad hoc questionnaire was designed consisting of 15 items, of which 3 were control questions. The political stance of the participants was a determining factor in the results. The differences between universities respond to the different political positions of those surveyed and the difference according to sex also responds to differences in political stances.

## Keywords

Controversial issues · History education · Primary education · Teacher training · Democratic memory

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## Introduction

Teaching and learning practices often branded as traditional have a lingering presence in History classes: teaching which gives priority to the presentation of historical contents by the teacher and assessment methods based on memorisation [1–3]. In addition, the historical knowledge transmitted in the classroom has commonly been based on the narratives of nation building and on discourse which tends to exclude alternative narratives of the past [4, 5].

For several decades, studies in the field of history education have sought to reinvent teaching models, whilst placing more emphasis on the transformation of epistemological conceptions of history. The studies by Monte-Sano [6], Ledman [7], Lesh [8], Reisman [9], Van Boxtel and Van Drie [10] and Wineburg [11] are concerned with historical thinking, historical literacy and the use of primary sources in the classroom. From a different approach, the work of Carretero and Van Alphen [12], Grever et al. [13], López et al. [14], Rösen [15] and Wilschut [16] has focused on issues of historical consciousness, identity and the study of different memories of the past in the classroom.

Recent monographs on history education have shown a significant increase in research being carried out, particularly on a change in the conceptual model of teaching [17–20]. Particularly worthy of note is the research being carried out in the Netherlands, which emphasises evaluative research focused on teaching practice, in which the aim is for students to understand the nature of historical knowledge and its construction [21–23].

However, it is becoming increasingly clearer that progress should be made beyond epistemological issues and a deeper understanding of public history, the processes of identity related with the past and the reception of narratives on the part of students are necessary [24]. It is not only a question of students acquiring skills on how knowledge of the past is built, but teachers must also be able to make their students reflect on the construction of this historical discourse beyond the academic sphere and on why and to what end they should learn history [25]. This approach should combine civic education, historical consciousness and the introduction of burning social issues along the lines of Rösen's (among others) proposal [15]. This model focuses more on social practice than on individual cognitive processes and has been defined by Barton and Levstik [26] as a socio-cultural perspective of history education. To carry it out, it is not only necessary to handle and interpret sources, but students should be given a voice in debates on issues about the past, criticism, reflection and debate should be encouraged and controversial issues should not be avoided [27]. The research carried out shows a significant change in the conceptions of history of students when critical perspectives are introduced via research strategies [28–30].

Research on the use of conflictive issues in the classroom has increased from the beginning of the twenty-first century. In order to measure this growth, a search was carried out on the databases of the Web of Science: Social Science Citation Index (SSCI), Science Citation Index Expanded (SCI) and Emerging Sources Citation

Index (ESCI). Systematic searches have been made of the titles and abstracts of articles with the keywords “Controversial issues”, “History” and “Education”. As can be observed in Table 8.1 and Fig. 8.1, the increase in the number of articles on this issue has been significant in the last five years. Academic production from 2000 to 2009 was extremely low (between 1 and 3 articles per year). A second phase, between 2010 and 2017 showed an annual production of between 6 and 10 articles, with the exception of 2014 (3 articles). From 2017 onwards, there has been a phase of continuous growth, with between 13 and 23 articles being published per year.

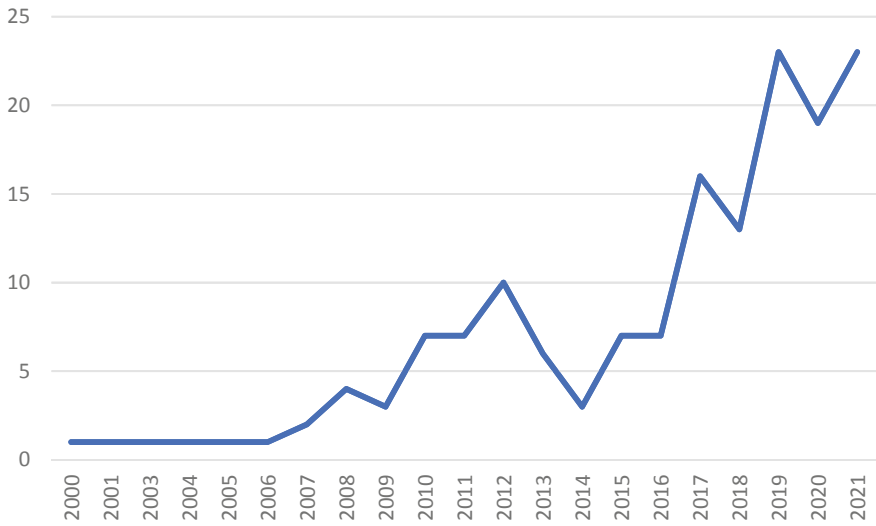
50% of the academic production is concentrated in three countries: USA (40 articles), Spain (21 articles) and England (16 articles). Russia and Germany also muster a significant number of publications (12 and 9 respectively) and Brazil, Australia, Israel, China and South Africa each contribute between 5 and 6 articles to the sample (Fig. 8.2). No journal stands out above the others as having published a very high number of academic studies specifically on these issues. The journals with most publications are “Journal of Curriculum Studies” and “Paedagogica Historica”, with six each (Table 8.2).

The Jewish Holocaust during the Second World War [31] and the way minorities are treated in the teaching of history [32] are the contents most commonly studied by researchers. Another key topic is the use of traumatic memories of the past. In this regard, studies such as those by Najbert [33] in the Czech Republic and Gerber and Van Landingham [34] in Russia demonstrate the difficulties of working with traumatic memories of contemporary events related with ethnic cleansing, torture and other forms of political violence.

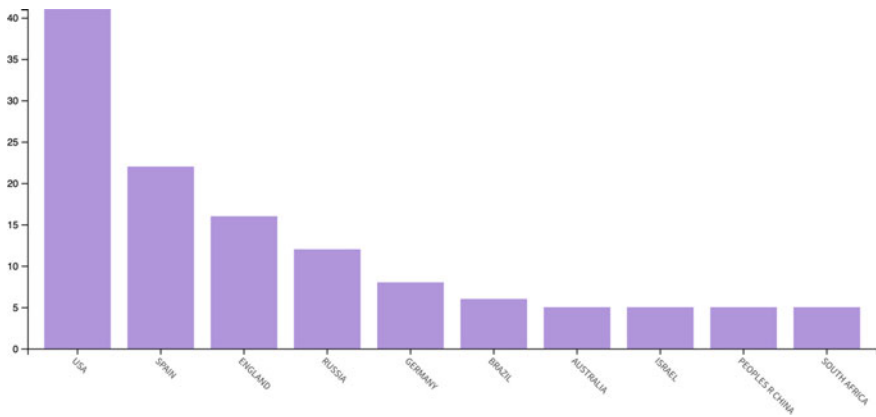
It is of great importance to study in depth the determining factors which enable or hinder the study of these controversial issues in the classroom. Studies such as that by Savenije et al. [35] have explored these elements, comparing certain European countries and Israel. Among these determining factors, these authors point out teachers’ conceptions of identity and the nature of their historical knowledge, along with the local context and the characteristics of the national

**Table 8.1** Evolution of the frequency of publications between 2000 and 2021

Year of publication	Record count	Year of publication	Record count
2000	1	2012	10
2001	1	2013	6
2003	1	2014	3
2004	1	2015	7
2005	1	2016	7
2006	1	2017	16
2007	2	2018	13
2008	4	2019	23
2009	3	2020	19
2010	7	2021	23
2011	7		



**Fig. 8.1** Evolution of the frequency of publications between 2000 and 2021



**Fig. 8.2** Production according to country

**Table 8.2** Frequency of publications per journal

Journal	Frequency
Journal of curriculum studies	6
Paedagogica Historica	6
Science education	4
British journal for the history of science	3
Russian historical journal Blye Gody	3
Educational philosophy and theory	3
Oxford review of education	3

curriculum of each country. Teachers' conceptions of history and how they perceive the relationships with their students' families play a fundamental role, as Wooley [36] has pointed out in the case of United Kingdom. In South Korea, Misco [37] has demonstrated that students' fear of not finding the correct answer to problems posed in the classroom also has an impact. This is due to the fact that they are accustomed to more mechanical tasks found in textbooks. Faced with this reticence on the part of their students, teachers prefer to avoid proposing the study of conflictive issues [3]. The model put forward by Kelly [38] regarding the four teaching approaches for addressing controversial issues in the classroom is still fully in force. The *exclusive neutrality* of those who avoid discussion in the classroom because they consider that the teacher should be neutral and should avoid influencing his/her students is still an extremely generalised phenomenon [39].

In Spain, one of the burning issues around which most debates are proposed in the teaching of history concerns the Civil War and the period of Francoist dictatorship. The Historical Memory Law of 2007 has led to the controversial issues of this period being identified as "historical memory", and more recently "democratic memory". Recent studies, such as those by Sáez-Rosenkranz and Prats [40] and that carried out by the CIVES Foundation [41] have analysed the presence of these issues and how they are addressed in History classes. There has been a lack of focus on these topics in curriculums and textbooks and, when they do appear, they are usually presented from an apparently objectivist perspective [42, 43]. The article of Martínez-Rodríguez et al. [44], has also revealed the reticence of teachers to deal with these controversial issues in the classroom. However, the evaluation of interventions in the classroom demonstrates a clear improvement among students [30].

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## Methodology

### The present study

In the cabinet meeting of the Spanish Government in July 2021, the Ministry of the Presidency, Relations with the Cortes and Democratic Memory presented the Draft Bill on Democratic Memory. This bill, in addition to establishing the regulatory bases for the recognition of the victims of the coup d'état of 18 July 1936, established that these topics should be present in school curriculums and in informal education via the so-called "places of memory". Against this background, along with the bibliographic review of the treatment of conflictive issues in the teaching of history, an investigation was proposed with the main objective of analysing the opinions and perceptions of teachers undergoing their initial training regarding addressing controversial issues in the primary classroom. This main objective is divided into four specific objectives:

1. To describe the opinions of teachers in initial training regarding the Draft Bill on Democratic Memory passed in the cabinet meeting of July 2021.

2. To analyse the degree of agreement of pre-service teachers with the opinions of the main political parties in Spain with regard to the Draft Bill on Democratic Memory passed in the cabinet meeting of July 2021.
3. To define the position of teachers in initial training regarding the role of teachers in addressing controversial issues based on Kelly's proposal [38].
4. To analyse the variables which influence the position of the pre-service teachers regarding the role of teachers in addressing controversial issues.

## Participants

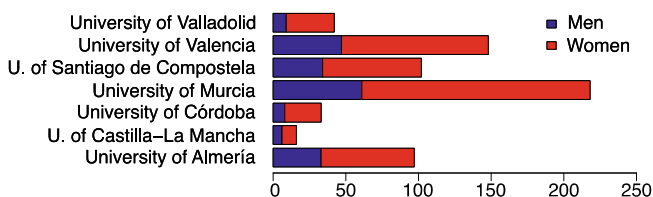
659 students (395 women [70%] and 170 men [30%]), studying undergraduate primary education degrees at seven Spanish universities (97 from the University of Almería [14%], 16 from the University of Castilla-La Mancha [2.4%], 33 from the University of Córdoba [5%], 218 from the University of Murcia [33.2%], 102 from the University of Santiago de Compostela [15.5%], 148 from the University of Valencia [22.6%], and 42 from the University of Valladolid [6.4%]) took part in the study. Figure 8.3 shows the distribution of the participants according to sex and university of origin.

## Procedure

Contact was established with the lecturers responsible for the subjects of the teaching of the social sciences of the seven universities in order to request their participation in the study. Later, they invited their students to collaborate after providing their informed consent.

## Instrument

An ad hoc questionnaire was designed consisting of 15 items, of which 3 were control questions (leading article, university and sex) while the rest (12 items) aimed to evaluate the students' opinions regarding the Democratic Memory Law, according to aspects relating to its timeliness, appropriateness and relevance (section 1, items 1–4), their degree of agreement/disagreement with the opinions of different political leaders concerning the Law (section 2, items 5–8) and their position with regard to its application in the primary classroom (section 3, items 9–12) (Table 8.3). The items from section 3 are based on Kelly's proposal [38]:



**Fig. 8.3** Distribution of the participants according to sex and university of origin

exclusive neutrality (item 9); committed impartiality (item 10); exclusive partiality (item 11); and neutral impartiality (item 12).

All of the items were answered on a 4-point scale of agreement (1: Strongly disagree—4: Strongly agree). The reliability of the tool was calculated via the Ordinal Alpha [45]  $\alpha = 0.85$  and McDonald's Omega [46, 47]  $\omega = 0.85$ , with both values being considered good.

Between sections 2 and 3, students were asked to read a leading article from a national newspaper regarding the Draft Bill on Democratic Memory as a control item. At random, half of those surveyed read a leading article from *El País*, which was in favour of the Draft Bill, whereas the other half of the participants read a leading article from *ABC*, which was against this Law. After reading the article and before responding to section 3, the students were asked to put themselves in the position of a teacher in the last year of primary education.

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## Results

First of all, the descriptive analysis (frequencies and percentages) are presented in accordance with the control variables (leading article, university and sex). Subsequently, the relationships between the control variables and the items are analysed and, lastly, an explanatory model of the willingness to address topics relating to democratic memory in the classroom is tested in accordance with the opinions with regard to the Law and the declarations of the political leaders.

Figure 8.4 shows the percentages of the responses in each of the categories in the items. As far as the students' opinion with regard to the Democratic Memory Law is concerned, Fig. 8.4 shows that more than 80% of the participants agreed or strongly agreed on the fact that the time was right to pass the Law (i1 = 82%); on the definition and recognition of the victims in the Draft Law (i2 = 90%); on the Law introducing topics relating to repression and the Franco regime in formal education (i3 = 91%); and on the abolishment of foundations which exalt Francoism (i4 = 87%).

With regard to the students' degree of agreement with the opinions of different political leaders (section 2), around 75% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the leader of VOX (i5); and 75% with the representative of the People's Party (i6). However, 84% agreed or strongly agreed with the representative of the PSOE (i7); and 80% with the Minister of Employment from Podemos (i8).

Lastly, as far as the participants' position regarding addressing contents related to democratic memory in the primary classroom is concerned (section 3, items 9 to 13), 28% were of the opinion that it is preferable not to study these topics in the classroom (i9), while 74% considered that it is indeed appropriate to discuss them in class (i10).

No significant differences were found for any of the variables between groups according to the leading article which the participants read. However, significant differences were found regarding sex in item 4 (Do you believe it is appropriate to

**Table 8.3** Questionnaire items

Section I
i1: Do you believe that now is the right time to pass the Law on Democratic Memory?
i2: Do you believe that the definition and recognition of the victims is appropriate in the Draft Law on Democratic Memory?
i3: Do you consider that it is appropriate for the Draft Law on Democratic Memory to introduce topics on repression, exile and victims of the Civil War, the Francoist dictatorship and the Transition into formal (education curriculums) and informal (places of memory) education?
i4: Do you believe it is right for foundations which exalt Francoism to be abolished?
Section II
i5: Santiago Abascal (Leader of VOX): “[The Democratic Memory Law] attacks coexistence in peace and freedom which we have enjoyed over decades of democracy [...] We are not here to condemn our history but to accept it.” To what extent do you agree with this opinion?
i6: Macarena Montesinos (Member of Parliament for the PP): “[The Democratic Memory Law] fosters a spirit of confrontation among Spaniards. It stirs the spirit of the Civil War, opens up old wounds and imposes its ideological narrative. The Draft Law divides the Spanish people and has the aim of destroying the exemplary process of reconciliation of the Spanish Transition. It is a frontist and totalitarian law.” To what extent do you agree with this opinion?
i7: Félix Bolaños (Minister of the Presidency and Relations with the Cortes): “The main aims of the future law concern recuperation, safeguarding, dissemination and the advocacy of democratic values and fundamental rights, as well as the recognition of all of the victims of the coup d’état of July 1936 and of the dictatorship. This is the first law which condemns and expressly renounces the coup d’état and the subsequent dictatorship, which mark the darkest period of our contemporary history.” To what extent do you agree with this opinion?
i8: Yolanda Díaz (Leader of Podemos and Minister of Employment): “Democratic Memory has long been an unresolved issue in our country. The Democratic Memory Law marks a milestone in the recognition of the rights of the families of the victims of the Franco regime and asserts justice over impunity.” To what extent do you agree with this opinion?
Section III
What would happen if...? <i>You are teaching in a village school. The following story appears in the news: During the course of construction work to extend the local cemetery, unidentified human remains have been discovered. An investigation is opened up and the scientific team responsible conclude that they correspond to a group of people executed in 1939. The news is much talked about in the village and some older people say that when they were younger they had heard the story of a group of neighbours who had fled to the hills during the Civil War (1936–1939) and had eventually been tracked down by the Civil Guard and a group of Falangists, some of them from the village, when the war was about to end. After their arrest, they had been executed next to the cemetery. Fear had prevented anyone from daring to speak out publicly about this incident until now. Discussions are being held in the local council about what to do with the remains and there are conflicting opinions. You are teaching Social Sciences in the 6<sup>th</sup> year of primary education and ask yourself whether you should address this case in the classroom and how to do so</i>
i9: You consider that it is preferable not to deal with the topic in the classroom due to the fact that it is a political issue which divides the local people and teachers should remain neutral. We do not have the right to influence the way our students think. These are matters to be addressed at home. To what extent do you agree with this position?
i10: You decide to discuss the issue in the classroom. You seek to provide all the available information, including the arguments of the different political parties represented in the local

(continued)



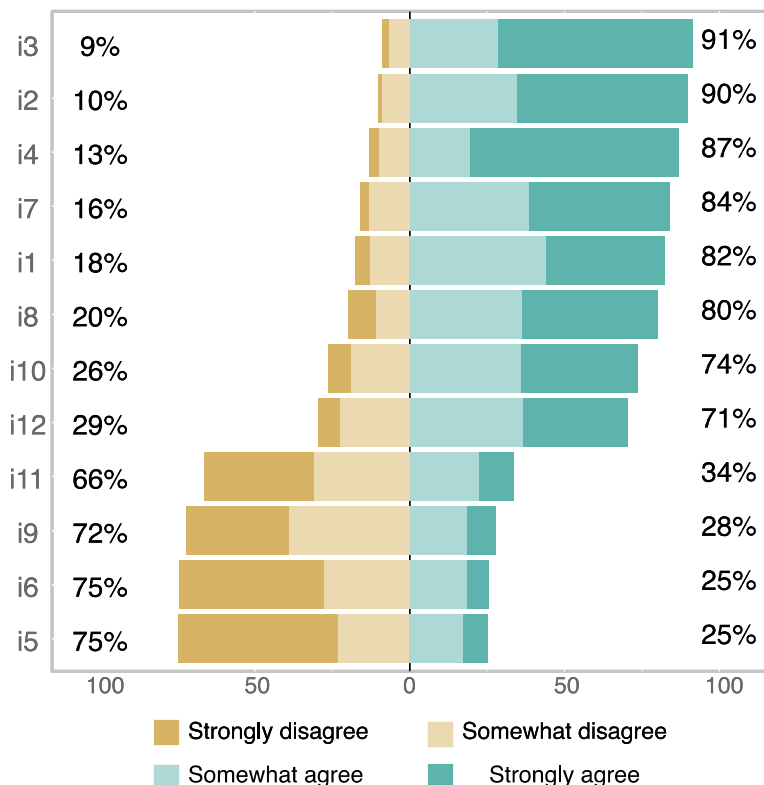
**Table 8.3** (continued)

Section III
council. You ask your students to analyse the two alternatives and to reason the position with which they most agree. When they ask you for your opinion, you present it clearly, you explain why you consider it to be a better option than the alternative, but state that in a democracy everybody should be able to argue an opinion and that yours is just one more opinion. To what extent do you agree with this position?
i11: You decide to discuss the issue in the classroom. You consider that the best option is to present the class with only the information and arguments which in your opinion are ethically desirable because you consider that your obligation is to educate in values. To what extent do you agree with this position?
i12: You decide to discuss the issue in the classroom because you consider that it is educational to teach how to argue an opinion and to learn respect for the rules of a debate. You offer information on the two opposing positions but you stay on the side-lines of the debate. You do not express your opinion because you believe that issues relating to ideology, beliefs and values should be reserved for families and students. To what extent do you agree with this position?

abolish foundations which exalt Francoism?) ( $\chi^2(3) = 8.77, p = 0.032$ ). Specifically, the proportion of men who considered it extremely inappropriate to abolish foundations which exalt Francoism (5.9%) was higher than the proportion of women with the same opinion (1.8%). In the testing of the hypotheses, significant differences were found according to the sex of the participants. Women had a higher appreciation of the words of Yolanda Díaz, more forcefully rejected the position of not dealing with the topic in the classroom and took a position in favour of addressing the topic in the classroom without hiding their own view.

There were significant differences between universities, but these were due to the different evaluations of the words of the politicians. The data collected from the Universities of Valladolid, Almería and Córdoba were more favourable to the words of Santiago Abascal and Macarena Montesinos, and, at the same time, they were more in favour of not dealing with the specific case in the classroom. On the other hand, the data collected from the Universities of Santiago de Compostela and Valencia pointed in the opposite direction.

A profile analysis was carried out via Agglomerative Hierarchical Clustering (AHC), with the results showing three profiles. There is an intermediate profile (in green, 43% of the sample), which normally responds to a score of 3 in almost all of the items, with the exception of the evaluation of the opinions of the conservative and far-right politicians (close to a score of 2). The other two profiles are conflicting. One of them, in blue and representing the majority opinion (almost 50% of the sample), scored section 2 (opinions of the Draft Law) between 3.5 and 4, scored the opinions of the progressive politicians (PSOE and Podemos) extremely highly and gave a very low score (between 1 and 1.5) to the opinions of the conservative and far-right politicians. In section 3, the teacher profile advocated addressing topics of democratic memory in the classroom and clearly rejected the position of exclusive neutrality. On the other hand, there was a minority profile (7% of the sample), which is shown in red. This profile gave the lowest scores in



**Fig. 8.4** Responses to each of the items

section 1 (evaluation of the Draft Law), scored the opinions of the conservative and far-right politicians extremely highly and gave extremely low scores to the opinions of the progressive politicians. This profile, although it also scored the position of addressing these topics in the classroom relatively highly, is that which gave the highest score to the teaching approach of exclusive neutrality (Fig. 8.5).

Last of all, an ordinal logistic regression model was tested in order to explain the probability of discussing issues related with democratic memory (item 10) and not addressing them (item 9) in the classroom. The degree of agreement with the declarations of the political representatives and with support for the Democratic Memory Law were included as explanatory variables. In the proposed model, it is assumed that the ordinal variable observed (item 9 or item 10) originates from the categorisation of a continuous (unobserved) latent variable.

The only variable which proved to be significant in explaining the response to item 9 (You consider that it is preferable not to deal with issues relating to democratic memory in the classroom) was agreement with the declaration of the representative of the People's Party (i6). As is shown in Fig. 8.6, the probability of strongly agreeing with item 9 increases in line with the increase in agreement with

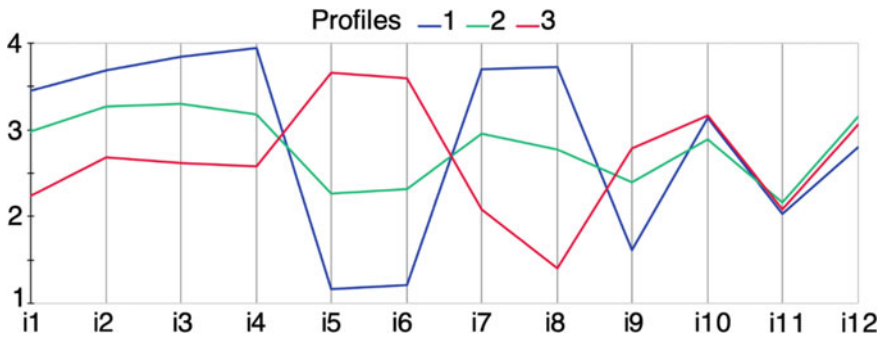


Fig. 8.5 Representation of the profiles of the classes

item 6 (Macarena Montesinos: “[The Democratic Memory Law] fosters a spirit of confrontation among Spaniards. It stirs the spirit of the Civil War, opens up old wounds and imposes its ideological narrative”). Likewise, the probability of strongly disagreeing with item 9 increases in accordance with an increase in the level of disagreement with item 3.

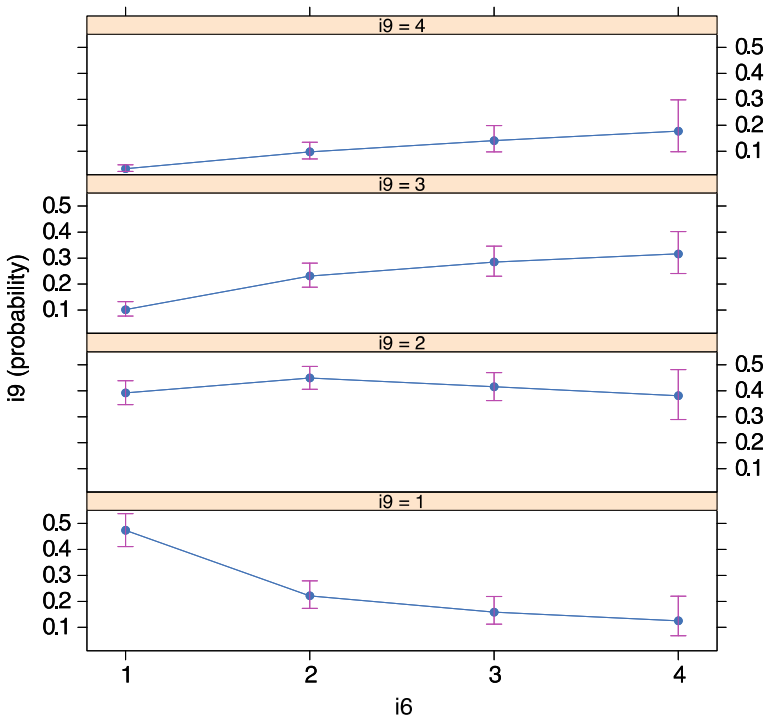


Fig. 8.6 Item 6 effect plot

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## Conclusions

When asked about certain specific aspects of the Draft Law on Democratic Memory, the teachers undergoing initial training demonstrated relatively broad support for this Law (between 87 and 91%). The most highly valued item is that which states the intention of the Draft Law that topics concerning the Civil War and Francoism should be present in both education laws and in informal education via the places of memory.

In spite of this support for the Draft Law, one in four participants surveyed (25–26%) positioned themselves in favour of the declarations of conservative and far-right politicians, who are clearly against this legislation.

The political stance of the participants was a determining factor in the results. The differences between universities respond to the different political positions of those surveyed and the difference according to sex also responds to differences in political stances. While only one in ten of those surveyed stated that they were against these topics being included in the curriculum, when the specific topic was proposed, this figure multiplied by 3 (28%) after reading the declarations of the political leaders. The ordinal logistic regression analysis demonstrated how support for the declarations of the politician from the People's Party (a conservative party) is what determined the teaching position regarding the introduction of these controversial issues into the classroom.

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## Implications

The political stance of teachers should not be the variable which influences the students' possibilities to learn, reflect, debate and reason regarding issues of democratic memory when they are presented from a controversial or conflictive perspective. This does not only lead to an imbalance between classes or between schools, but can also bring about imbalances between different territories due to support for one political party or another.

In order to mitigate this situation, it is necessary to carry out a significant intervention in initial and on-going teacher training. The introduction of these topics is a necessity in Education Faculties, both in undergraduate primary education degrees and in secondary education master's degrees. In order to do this, they should be approached from updated historiographic methods and via strategies which enable teachers to address them in the classroom. This should be carried out both from a cognitive perspective (historical thinking, handling primary sources, etc.) and from memory (historical consciousness, analysis of informal narratives and an emphasis on identity issues). On the other hand, this should be an urgent task for the Instituto Nacional de Tecnologías Educativas y de Formación del Profesorado (National Institute of Technology and Professional Development, INTEF) and the Autonomous Communities, in collaboration with research groups in the fields of education, historical memory and the ongoing training of in-service teachers.

It is also necessary to pay more attention to alternative memories. The majority of the victims of the Civil War, and particularly of the repression of the Franco dictatorship, has been silenced for many years. These long processes of inequality created through the terrible repression of Francoist times must be examined in depth. It is also necessary to broaden the current conception of democratic memory in order to highlight the history of those who have traditionally been forgotten by curriculums and textbooks (slaves, working women, people in situations of dependence, etc.).

The contents identified regarding democratic memory should also be analysed from the perspective of their long duration and of social, economic and cultural inequalities forged over the course of centuries. Is it possible to understand the different allegiances in the Civil War without understanding the differences which took shape over decades between the rural and urban worlds or the differences between the patronage and family relationships of the large landowners in relation to the land? We should escape from the short-sightedness of immediacy and of interpretative biases based only on political cultures. Insisting on this fact may lead to the ideological bias of certain teachers hindering the addressing of these historical topics in the classroom.

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