

Let's talk!

Multidirectional memory in the classroom

Melanie Göttfried *, Gerald Lamprecht *, Georg Marschnig *,

Maria Pasaricek *

University of Graz, Graz

Abstract

This miniature presents the project “The Memory of the Classroom: Multidirectional Remembrance in Graz Schools (MEiK)”. The paper describes the theoretical framework, project structure, and research methodology of the project. The MEiK-project, funded by the Austrian Academic Exchange Service (OEAD) through the Sparkling Science program, investigates the family memories of students in Graz. Following the Sparkling Science approach, the students act as active researchers, thereby gaining agency and being directly involved in the production of the research results. During the project, the young people conducted 45 interviews with their relatives to gain insight into stories that are not anchored in the “official memory” found in textbooks, curricula, or commemorative events. In the end, the miniature also outlines the goals pursued with the project, such as a traveling exhibition already in progress, a scientific conference, a series of publications, and teaching materials.

Keywords

Multidirectional memory; agency; life-stories; historical learning; historians' dispute

1 Introduction

Since 2020, the so-called “Historians' Dispute 2.0” has increasingly challenged German remembrance culture triggered by the controversy surrounding the invitation of political scientist, historian, and postcolonial theorist Achille Mbembe to the Ruhrtriennale. After the Federal Republic of Germany's Commissioner for Antisemitism accused him of relativizing the Holocaust in his writings and denying the State of Israel's right to exist, a broad debate subsequently developed regarding the nature of German remembrance culture, political relations with the State of Israel, the political and public handling of criticism of Israeli politics, as well as the relationship between antisemitism and racism and the connections between the Holocaust and colonialism (Bajohr & O'Sullivan, 2022; Friedländer et al., 2022; Neiman & Wildt, 2022). Key characteristics of these debates include the merging of political, academic, and societal spheres, as well as their highly emotional nature. This was exemplified by the dispute over the “correct” definition

* **Contact:** Georg Marschnig ✉ georg.marschnig@uni-graz.at

University of Graz, Professor of History Didactics and Civic Education, Head of the Institute of History, Graz, Austria

of antisemitism (IHRA versus JDA¹), the “GG5.3 Weltoffenheit Initiative”², the polemical text by A. Dirk Moses titled “The German Catechism” and the reactions it triggered, as well as documents fifteen (Moses, 2021; Bude & Mendel, 2025). With Hamas’s terrorist attack on Israel on the 7th of October 2023, and the ensuing wars in Gaza, Lebanon, and Iran, as well as the massive increase in antisemitism worldwide, all these debates gained further social relevance with implications for schools, history education, and historical culture in general.

At the core of these debates, and with particular relevance to education, lies the postcolonial critique of the government-sponsored and hegemonic culture of remembrance, which has been centered on National Socialism and the Holocaust since the first “Historians’ Dispute” of the 1980s (Axster, 2023, p. 40).³ While some claim that the focus on the Holocaust in the culture of remembrance overshadows or even prevents memories of other (colonial) crimes, others argue the singularity or unprecedented nature of the Holocaust and highlights commonalities and connections between German colonialism and the Holocaust (Zimmerer, 2011). This, however, brought the method of historical comparison to the center of the debates, as the latter was accused of relativizing the Holocaust.

Ultimately, with regard to the project discussed in our paper, the question is whether the memory of the Holocaust still corresponds to the today’s postmigrant social realities (Foroutan, 2016). Is the Holocaust truly still a central component of the historical consciousness and historical narratives of all citizens living in Austria, or are other individual and collective experiences of (colonial) violence taking its place? And related to this, whose history is being told—for example, in historical museums or in history classes—despite professed commitments to diversity (International Council of Museums, 2026)? Do hegemonic historical narratives still correspond to people’s lived experiences, and if not, what consequences must be drawn from this for the politics of memory and the associated values and norms of our society, as well as for education policy?

These multifaceted debates surrounding the German “Historians’ Dispute 2.0” form the starting point of our project “The Memory of the Classroom: Multidirectional Remembrance in Graz Schools.” It takes up the debates outlined above and, in a certain sense, follows the “ethics of comparison” postulated by Michael Rothberg, according to which competition among victims should be overcome and productive solidarity among different victim groups should be brought to the center of remembrance culture (Rothberg, 2009; Rothberg, 2011; Rothberg, 2024).

The field of History Didactics has so far dealt with postcolonial approaches quite reluctantly (Grewe, 2016; Marschnig, 2024). However, a number of contributions have recently emerged that strive to integrate “postcolonial critique” (Bernhard, 2024; Kühberger, 2025) into the “science of historical learning” (Rüsen, 2013, p. 254). It is evident, that research in History Didactics must continue to evolve within a “postmigrant society” (Foroutan, 2019), particularly in light of “Geschichten im Wandel” (Georgi et al., 2022), as narratives are continuously being reshaped.

Here, subject-oriented approaches (Ammerer et al., 2015), which conceptualize “personal significances – specifically those related to biography, identity, and lived experience – as initiating moments and motivational catalysts for independent historical thinking” (Kühberger, 2014, para. 3; own translation from German), can be described as highly effective. Despite valid criticisms regarding their terminology (Völkel, 2022), these approaches open up avenues for investigating processes of historical sense-making more directly – specifically by taking individuals and their social positioning as a starting point.

From the perspective of History Didactics, the way in which these individuals engage with history – viewed as a practice of subjectivation – also lies at the heart of the project “The Memory of the Classroom. Multidirectional Remembering in Graz Schools”. The aim of the project is to uncover narratives that remain untold in the public sphere, and to contrast these with the hegemonic historical narratives of Austrian historical culture.

We understand historical culture, following Holger Thünemann, as an “ensemble” (Thünemann, 2023, p. 48) of fluid historical representations, which is constantly redesigned, challenged and further developed; therefore, in our view, it is indispensable to adopt a qualitative approach to research this ensemble. In the following text, we present this methodological approach, discuss challenges and address further goals of implementing multidirectional memory in the classroom.

1 IHRA = International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, JDA = Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism

2 This initiative unites a wide range of public institutions and individuals from the fields of science, art, and culture in Germany that share a commitment to cultural diversity and critical reflection

3 The “Historians’ Dispute” of 1986 refers to a public debate about the uniqueness of the Holocaust and its significance for German society

2 Project phases

MEiK was structured into three project phases, with its core centered on students from participating schools conducting life story interviews with members of their families. To broaden our understanding of how multidirectional memory is addressed in Austrian education, we complemented this empirical work with an analysis of the relevant curricula for the respective year groups, as well as all 17 history textbooks approved for 8th grade in Austria in the 2024/2025 school year. In addition, to incorporate the perspectives of educators, we conducted interviews with the seven participating teachers.

In total, six schools in Graz participated in the project. The project was launched through an initial meeting with the involved teachers, followed by a kick-off event in January 2025 at the University of Graz with approximately 200 students. This served as an overview of the project to the students and to motivate their active participation. After the kick-off event, we conducted two to three workshops at each school throughout 2025. The first workshop served as an introduction to the project and to the method of oral history, while also guiding students in selecting a suitable family member for their interview. The second workshop familiarized students with examples of oral history interviews, addressed the guidelines of the interviews, and provided instructions and a practice session on how to use the equipment — camera, microphones, tripod — properly. When necessary, we visited the classes for a third “Q&A” workshop to clarify issues that arose.

Following these workshops, students were invited to sign up for specific dates on which they would conduct their interviews. Given that only one set of equipment was available, the interviews had to be scheduled individually. As their selected date approached, we contacted each student to arrange a specific time and place for the handover of the equipment. In most cases, this took place at school or in a public location. Students were then given approximately two to three days to carry out their interviews. During this period, they were encouraged to reach out to the project team if they required support. After completing the interview, the students returned the equipment at a previously agreed-upon location.

Given the relatively young age of the participating students, the project team developed and provided a structured interview guide consisting of sample questions organized by thematic categories. As Henke-Bockschatz (2014) has demonstrated, younger participants in particular benefit from clearly defined guidelines when conducting interviews. The interview guide was introduced and discussed collaboratively during the second workshop, ensuring that students became familiar with both its structure and its intended use. At the same time, we preserved a degree of flexibility, as students were explicitly encouraged to formulate and incorporate their own questions (Helfferich, 2019). The guide comprised several thematic categories, including basic biographical information such as date and place of birth, childhood, family and work life, values and beliefs, life in Graz, memorable events, as well as leisure activities. Where relevant, questions addressing war experiences were also included. While students could choose what to ask, one question was compulsory: interview partners were asked to reflect on what historical event(s) of the 20th and 21st century they considered to be insufficiently addressed or absent in Austrian history education. This question incorporates one of the overarching premises of the MEiK project.

The primary aim of the interview design was to enable interview partners to speak as openly as possible about topics of their own choosing. Therefore, students were encouraged to open the interview by inviting their family member to recount their life story starting from birth (ER-INNERN:AT, 2024; Plato, 2019). This approach sought to foster what Alexander von Plato (2019, p. 277) conceptualizes as an *Erzählnetz* (narrative net), in which individual memories and themes emerge organically through interconnected lines of narration rather than through rigid questioning. This notion of a flexible network of prompts proved central to the development of the interview guide employed in this project. As students were free to conduct the interviews in a language of their choice, the interview guide was discussed individually with those who did not intend to work in German. Additionally, family members were invited to include an object of their choice in their interview, serving as an anchor for their narration and as a stimulus for recalling memories that might otherwise have been forgotten (Plato, 2019). The inclusion of objects gave us access to the unique archives of stories transmitted within Graz' families (Schilling, 2013).

The data generated within this project constitute the empirical foundation for both a master's thesis and a dissertation. In addition, a range of scholarly outputs are planned: results are presented at numerous conferences, workshops are conducted, and articles will be published.

The project's central output, however, is an exhibition. The collaborative work with the participating schools, the students, and their family members culminates in the creation of an exhibition at the Graz Museum. The artistic curation is led by Erika Thümmel. The exhibition "Unsere Geschichte(n). Grazer Jugendliche beforschen ihre Familiengeschichten" (engl. "Our history(ies). Young people in Graz explore their family histories.") displays the project's findings within an institutional setting and makes them available to a broader audience beyond academic contexts. In doing so, it contributes to extending the reach of our research and situates its outcomes in a wider public sphere.

At the core of both the exhibition and the broader MEiK project lies the aim of creating a space in which participating students — and, by extension, their families — can make their own narratives visible within educational and institutional settings. In this way, the project foregrounds students and their families as active contributors to knowledge production rather than positioning them solely as research subjects. By showing parts of their interviews on screens, every family member who participated is represented and finds themselves actively included in the exhibition. This participatory approach is further reflected in the exhibition design: each student was invited to compose a brief reflection on their individual interview experience and provide a picture of their choice which will be integrated into our exhibition. Following its initial display in the Graz Museum, the exhibition is designed to travel between the six participating schools.

In November 2026, the conference "Multidirektionales Erinnern – im Klassenzimmer und darüber hinaus!" will take place at the University of Graz. The project's findings will be presented in an academic context through a conference volume, while also being made accessible to a broader public through an accompanying exhibition publication and the development of teaching materials. This volume is designed to support educators in adapting and implementing similar projects in their own classrooms. Each student will receive a complimentary copy of the exhibition's publication.

3 Methodological reflections

Overall, a total of 45 interviews were collected, translated and transcribed. For the initial transcription we used the AI based software aTrain, which was developed and provided by the University of Graz. The data was then transferred to MAXQDA for analysis. Within this program, an initial set of base codes was developed using a mixed-methods design and applied in the first round of coding. Deductive codes were generated from the conceptual framework of the study, whereas inductive codes emerged directly from the interviews. The coding scheme was continuously refined throughout the analysis to capture both anticipated and emergent themes such as experiences of historical events, employment and education. Subsequently, a second round was conducted to further differentiate the coding scheme (Kuckartz, 2010; Rädiker & Kuckartz, 2024). This coding process enabled a systematic interpretation of the interview data.

By actively involving students and their families in the research process, the project fosters *agency*. In this context, *agency* refers to the capacity to mobilize historical knowledge and practices of historical thinking in ways that inform and enable action. Therefore, *agency* is not reduced to an individual's ability to act but is instead conceived as the possibility to become actively involved in processes of action. It is thus understood as something that is not primarily rooted in personal competencies but emerges from conditions created by society that open and structure spaces in which action becomes possible (Chmiel, 2024). This dimension is particularly significant in pluralistic societies that are shaped by diversity and by enduring structures of inequality. Such inequalities extend into the realm of memory and narration, where societal hegemonial structures influence which histories are recognized and valued, and which are marginalized or silenced. While it may be argued that opportunities for participation exist, these often remain limited to confined spaces in which individuals can contribute to their memories without substantially shaping the broader narrative. *Agency*, however, would entail that memory culture and historical narratives at a societal level are meaningfully influenced by minority groups. Only under such conditions can a truly inclusive "us" emerge (Yildirim, 2024). Our project aims to give families the opportunity to act and be capable of telling their own stories and making them visible, thus giving them the opportunity and the room to act, which is often refused by the hegemonial and societal structures we live in (Yildirim, 2024). At the same time, many of the students do not perceive themselves as capable of acting. Despite their potential for *agency*,

their experiences lead them to believe that their voices have little to no impact. This becomes evident in the case of one student who chose not to participate in our project, explaining that their teacher would never address the history of Chechnya in class.⁴ The student ultimately decided against participating. Their statement reflects a broader issue identified in the literature: numerous perspectives and histories of people who live in Austria remain underrepresented in classrooms (Kühberger, 2021).

This example underscores how curricular gaps can shape students' willingness to participate and highlights the need for more inclusive research practices. Hence, in order to ensure greater participation, students were given the opportunity to conduct their interviews in their preferred language or use multiple languages. This approach allowed them to express themselves in a linguistic context in which they felt most comfortable; therefore, while this fostered inclusivity and meaningful participation, it simultaneously required careful methodological reflection on the implications of translation for the analysis and interpretation of the data. As several of the languages used in the interviews were not shared by the research team, parts of the translation process had to be outsourced in order to make the material accessible for analysis. Thus, it has to be considered that translation constitutes an interpretive act in which translators inevitably make decisions about meaning and nuances of expressions. Such decisions can shape how narratives are represented and understood in the research process. Moreover, as language is deeply embedded in cultural contexts, meanings are often not fully transferable across linguistic boundaries, which further complicates the translation of interview data and raises questions about equivalence and interpretation (Freeth & Trevino, 2024). However, despite these challenges, enabling participants to speak in their preferred language remains essential, as it fosters more authenticity and gives them spaces to participate in the research process without being held back by linguistic limitations (Yildirim, 2018).

The students participating in our project were around 13–15 years old, which is a comparably young age for conducting oral history interviews.⁵ For this reason, some students were not able to fully grasp the concept and value of oral history as well as concentrate on the interview process as they treated the interview guide primarily as a checklist, quickly moving through the questions without allowing time for their interview partners to respond at their own pace and without asking follow-up questions (Henke-Bockschatz, 2014). However, since compulsory schooling in Austria ends after the 9th grade, we chose to implement the project in 7th, 8th and 9th grade. This ensured that we reached students regardless of their subsequent educational trajectories after compulsory schooling.

For future research, it would be valuable to extend the age range and explore how similar approaches function with older students. It would also be of interest to extend the project beyond an exclusively urban context by implementing it in rural schools. Moreover, as MEiK currently offers insights limited to schools in Graz (Styria), expanding the project to other Austrian federal states would open up further avenues for comparative analysis.

One of the central challenges we encountered as a project team was the limited engagement of both teachers and students. MEiK was frequently perceived as an additional and somewhat dispensable task, for which teachers felt they lacked the necessary time within an already dense curriculum. From our perspective, this was less a question of individual motivation than of structural constraints shaping how the project was positioned within everyday school practice. Among students, this dynamic was reinforced by the absence of tangible incentives. As participation was rarely integrated into grading schemes or otherwise acknowledged — such as through compensatory time off⁶ — many students experienced the project as additional homework, which in turn reduced their willingness to engage with it.⁷ Our observations align with Donald Ritchie's argu-

4 “[...] Und was hat das mit Tschetschenien zu tun? Halt Geschichte. Das checke ich nicht. Ich weiß, dass mein Geschichtslehrer das nie im Leben machen wird – mit Tschetschenien als Thema. 100%” (Engl.: “And what does that have to do with Chechnya? History. I just don’t get it. I know there’s no way my history teacher would ever cover Chechnya as a topic. 100%”) (Whatsapp: ST-M, 03/18/2025).

5 Other projects with a similar premise have chosen to work with older students. For instance, Georg Traska conducted a Sparkling Science funded project, working with students in 9th to 12th grade, who conducted Oral History interviews with their grandparents. Manfred Seidenfuß, Andreas Spiziali and Corinna Link conducted research on the way students tell the story of “their nation” to each other in the form of life-story-based narrations.

6 This is an option in Austrian schools to recognize students' additional engagement and effort. Typically, students can be granted up to two days off as a form of reward.

7 For instance, the student showed little interest in her grandfather's narrative and was primarily concerned with meeting the time requirement of the interview, repeatedly asking how much time was left and reacting to the limited duration rather than engaging with the content of the story. (S-S, Pos. 35-40).

ment that school-based oral history projects are most effective when they are embedded within the formal curriculum. Only when such projects are institutionally anchored and recognized as pedagogically valuable do they cease to appear as a burden and instead become a meaningful part of classroom practice (Ritchie, 2003).

The central focus of the project lies in the interviews conducted by students with members of their own families, with the intention that they do so without being accompanied by members of the project team. The interview was designed as a safe space between the participating family members without the presence of any researchers. Although the project team offered to accompany students to the interviews upon request, this support was ultimately not taken up. The interview equipment and recording setup were provided, and students were instructed in their use during a school workshop. The audio-visual recording of oral history interviews introduces additional methodological dimensions that require critical reflection. In contrast to audio-only recordings — where participants may at times become less aware of the interview situation — the presence of a camera foregrounds the interview as a staged and mediated encounter. Audio-visual material captures not only spoken narratives but also body language, facial expressions, and spatial dynamics (Lichtblau, 2018).⁸

4 Conclusion

The project presented above is not only a specific approach of researching the stories that shape the memory of Graz based families and a search for subject-oriented settings that transform young learners into active researchers with *agency*. Moreover, for the young participants, the project is a unique opportunity to recognize that their own lives are shaped by their family histories. This can foster deeper forms of historical learning. The participating students connect their present with their families' past, thus, understanding that "the past is present in the present" (Runia, 2006, p. 1). Historical learning takes place when the teenagers are "piercing through layers of time" (Völkel, 2016, p. 112) in course of the interviews. The process of "meaning-making through experience of time" (Rüsen, 2008, p. 65) unfolds through engagement with the stories of their relatives.

Drawing on Rothberg's concept of *Multidirectional Memory* introduced at the beginning of this text, a multidirectional and subject-oriented approach to history is essential for engaging with young people's family memories in today's schools. Interestingly, preliminary findings indicate that participants are aware this approach, which some explicitly mention themselves. They seem to be aware that their stories and the contexts that underlie them are underrepresented in history lessons. This awareness of underrepresentation is therefore another commonality among the stories collected in this project, alongside a focus on childhood, migration and significant turning points in their own biographies. It seems obvious that paying closer attention to these interconnections could be a promising didactic strategy for addressing *Multidirectional Memory* in schools.

8 The student asked his grandmother whether he could pose a specific question in order to ensure that it would not make her uncomfortable. She responded affirmatively, indicating that he could ask freely and without concern: "Ja, sag, frag, kannst eh." (Engl.: "Yes, you can ask me that.") (L-J, Pos. 65-66).

To cite this article

Göttfried M., Lamprecht G., Marschnig G., & Pasaricek M., (2026) Let's talk! Multidirectional memory in the classroom. *Historical Thinking, Culture, and Education*, 4(1). <https://doi.org/10.1268/htce.2217>

Review

This miniature has been reviewed by the editors of the HTCE journal.

Acknowledgements

This paper was written as part of the Sparking Science project (SPSC_02_017) "The Memory of the Classroom. Multidirectional Remembering in Schools in Graz," funded by the Federal Ministry of Education.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Ethical statement

The project complied fully with all of the University of Graz's ethical guidelines. All interviewees were fully informed about the project's background and objectives, and confirmed their participation by signing a declaration of consent. AI was not used to prepare the article.

ORCID iD

Melanie Göttfried  <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-1788-1058>

Gerald Lamprecht  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9622-9269>

Georg Marschnig  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4862-0124>

Maria Pasaricek  <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-1848-8639>

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