The Importance of Contrary Forces in Education: On the Notion of Conflict in Tagore's Religion of Man

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Abstract

Dealing with conflicts seems to be a great challenge in society today. But not only in society. Higher education displays an air of resoluteness with certainty and security that disguises the conflicts and the fear of conflicts in a substantial number of subjects. If not in a state of denial, higher education avoids taking up conflicts over issues, for learning. The detailed investigation of Tagore's pedagogical writings, with a focus on the importance of conflicts in education, reveals a genuine embrace of conflicts for education. Conflicts are natural and necessary for the development and change of both the individual and society and the start of a 'creative imagination' to solve the problems we face in life. Contradictions in conflicts are not incompatible incongruities that are irreconcilable and mutually exclusive, but to the contrary, in need of each other. Contradictions do not represent different worlds but are substantial parts of one world: together they form a unity. Conflicting forces are necessary to create harmony. Creativity, imagination, love, art, and critical encounters are key elements in Tagore's practical education aimed at finding similarities among people instead of emphasizing differences. Relations between people over the Identity of people. In other words, we need conflicts to become creative and imaginative human beings. The paper continues discussing conceptual and practical issues that seem necessary to get the teaching of conflicts in education off the ground. On the conceptual level, in particular our dealing with uncertainty and fear, the valuation of conflict and the need for uncertainty-researching education. On a practical level, I propose a certain teaching model, a supportive curriculum, a way of choosing genuine conflicts for education and finally, I argue for specific support and education of teachers, acknowledging the vital role teachers play in delivering the education that we need.

Keywords Tagore · Teaching the conflicts · The unity of contrary forces · Counter-speech · And higher education

> *The main object of teaching is not to give explanations,*
> *but to knock at the doors of the mind.*
> *Let us not pray to be sheltered from dangers*

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but to be fearless when facing them.
Tagore

Introduction

Tagore and Dewey are regarded as 'two of our greatest educational reformers and thinkers about the role of education in a pluralistic society' (Nussbaum 2006, 1).[1] In the history of this journal over 500 articles have dealt with investigations into or references to the work of Dewey. However, only three articles refer to Tagore. In this paper, I assess the philosophy of education of Tagore from the perspective of conflict. I aim to show how Tagore values conflict in relation to 'the nature, aims and problems of education' (Siegel 2009). And to find out if and how Tagore uses conflicts in teaching. That is, not to avoid conflicts (consensus-seeking) or resolve them (conflict resolution), but 'to face' them constructively as pedagogical sources for development, learning, and change.

Today conflicts over issues are largely avoided in what is called a 'culture of fear' (to incite fear in the general public to achieve political or workplace goals**)** (Slama, 2003; Furedi 2007, 2018; Nussbaum 2018) or by trying desperately to prevent the emergence of any sort of conflict by establishing a surveillance or prevention state (Peeters 2013), such as censorship, limiting academic freedom; trigger warnings; early diagnosis, early intervention; intervention by risk instead of crime. On the other hand, there are smaller signs of incorporating the use of conflicts in education, by what is called *teaching controversial issues* (Kerr & Huddleston, 2015) or by acknowledging the need for conflicts in politics, through 'agnostic democratic education' (Mouffe 2008) as opposed to a 'deliberative democratic education' as advocated by Rawls, Gutman and Habermas, each in its own way. However, according to Ruitenberg, this deliberative model is also a preventive model that eliminates or oppresses wishes, longings, and emotions, which will therefore not disappear, 'but only defer their manifestation' " … the desire by deliberative approaches to eliminate conflict leads to more destructive antagonistic conflict" (Ruitenberg 2009, 272). She urges us to 'take the conflict serious' and with Mouffe, she acknowledges the power of conflict and dissensus for democracy and democratic education. "People's need for collective identifications will never disappear since it is constitutive of the mode of existence of human beings" (Ruitenberg quoting Mouffe). And thus she criticizes the "individualistic approach which underestimates the fundamental human need to belong to (articulated) collectivities" (Ibid., 273).

However, if these 'smaller signs' are encouraging, and let us hope they are, teachers are not or not well educated in the different aspects that Mouffe, Ruitenberg, and some others indicate as important for this type of education. I have also clear evidence, from my own systematic literature research and empirical studies about teaching controversial issues, where teachers point to this lack of training (Pouwels, 2023b). In general, teachers take a neutral stand and do not articulate interesting conflicts, mainly because they do not know how to do that with respect, intelligence, and courage. In many cases, they are anxious and actually moved to another position or even fired from their job, if they do take conflicts over issues up for education. I find confirmation of my conclusion by a diligent systematic literature review on 'agnonism in education' conducted recently. The authors concluded that 'agonism is discussed in the educational literature mainly from a theoretical point of

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[1] I am grateful for professor Nussbaum's encouragement (per email, December 9, 2022) to write a paper, dedicated to Tagore as a pedagogue.

view' and the use of 'agnostic principles as a tool to help teachers, school leaders, and policymakers (…) is currently lacking in the literature' (Koutsouris, et al., 2022, 1049).

I would argue that maybe the use of conflicts in education should not only be translated and applied to 'controversial issues', or to 'political or democratic education' since this isolates the use of conflicts to marginal or certain areas of education. I would rather consider conflicts as general, genuine, and essential sources for education. I found that Tagore, with his distinct Eastern voice, searched equally for a more generic, more inclusive way of thinking about the value of conflicts and the use of conflicts in education. The reader will also see and feel the different vocabulary Tagore uses, his prose, and his style, to clarify his philosophy of education. A style that reminds us of Alexander von Humboldt and Thoreau, who also seek to connect 'science' and 'the arts' (Walls, 2009; Wulf 2015). A language that seeks to find relations between different people and nature instead of continuously focusing on the different identities, leading to separation and dualism. Certainly quite a different language from what we are used to in Western theory and science today.

To investigate the value of conflicts and the use of conflicts in education is the main objective of my research. To discover the different concepts, perceptions, and views about conflicts and their value for education and upbringing. Tagore distanced himself from conventional education and offered a critical alternative to the upbringing and teaching traditions that were taken for granted in his days. He challenged the existing *certainty-providing education* and gave direction to an *uncertainty-researching education*, with different ideals, content, teaching methods, and interactions.

Method of Research

I have analyzed in particular the primary source: *Religion of Man* (1930),[2] carefully reading and analyzing this text to understand the concept of conflict Tagore uses, the pedagogical ideas coming from this, and if possible, to find also educational practice. Additionally, if needed, I also used *Creative Unity*[3] (1922) and *Nationalism*[4] (1917), two earlier works of Tagore in which I found a deeper understanding of the role of conflicts, and also *Sadhana*[5] (1916). It is important to note that Tagore's philosophy of education developed in an intellectual struggle with a dominant Western philosophy.

Before engaging in the analysis of Tagore's concept of conflict and its pedagogical application, I describe his worldview -to the best of my abilities- in particular his vision of the connection between nature, people, and religion.

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[2] Tagore wrote in the Preface: "In the present volume I offer the evidence of my own personal life brought into a definite focus " Tagore was 69 years old.

[3] Creative Unity consists of relatively independent chapters. I made the most use of the chapters: The Religion of the Forest, East and West, The Nation and An Eastern University.

[4] *Nationalism* consists of three chapters, in fact three lectures that Tagore gave. The first is about nationalism in the West, the next Nationalism in Japan and the last one about Nationalism in India.

[5] Especially chapter one: The relation of the individual to the universe.

Tagore's Worldview

Nature and People: Unity and Connection

While Dewey in *Democracy and Education* criticized dualism so characteristic of Western philosophy and kept emphasizing social relations, interaction, and communication about alleged contradictions (Pouwels and Biesta 2017), we may consider the life and work of Tagore as a constant emphasis on the unity of nature and people in the world. Conditions for personal growth and change in society, are brought to a higher spiritual level by Tagore.

According to Tagore, the dominant Western philosophy (attitude) is fundamentally focused on the division of man and nature. This passion manifests itself in highly aggressive behaviour of conquest, control, subjugation, suppression and violence, even destruction and extermination. On the other hand, Tagore argues that the relationship between man and nature in the East and India is one of looking for cohesion, a kind of harmony and unity between man and nature. A form of living together, with love and sympathy for and with each other. This philosophy was born in nature near the lake in the woods (the forest-dwelling, the 'tapovana'), where truth was sought, not by renunciation or isolation, but by simply living and thinking about their share in the world (Tagore 2012, 166–167). Western philosophy, on the other hand, Tagore writes, was born in the city behind walls.

'They find delight in turning by force the *antagonism of circumstances* into obedience' (Tagore 1922, 47, my italics). 'Truth appears to them in her aspect of dualism, the perpetual conflict of good and evil, which has no reconciliation, which can only end in victory or defeat' (Ibid*.).* Tagore believed in the opposite, he fully acknowledged '…the recognition of the kinship of man with conscious and unconscious creation alike' (Tagore 1922, The religion of the forest, II).

Nature, therefore, is not the enemy that should be put under control, conquered, dominated, or even defeated, but nature is part and parcel of, a contrasting identity, that makes it at the same time a unity. Nature is something that challenges us to relate to. *Therefore, all education, according to Tagore, should focus on the unity of people and the world, both in form and goal.*

With this concept of unity and connection, he criticized also his own country: the cast system, the oppression of the poor, the incomprehensible position of the casteless 'untouchables', (the Dalit),[6] the struggle between the Muslims and the Hindus, and especially the second-class position of women in society and education. Tagore constantly tried to demonstrate the unity of man and nature and as a consequence also the unity between people (human races, social castes, men and women) in contrast to the West which, according to Tagore, wrongly, always takes diversity (individual identity, national character, religion, the countries, and the sexes) to the extreme and thereby loses sight of the connectedness and unity of man and nature.

Religion and People: Imagination and Love

The second key aspect of his worldview is religion. Tagore is searching for one binding religion for all people. Not based on worshipping or a docile imitation of an external God or Gods, but based on the blessings and experiences of humanity as a whole. Nussbaum shows convincingly that Tagore's *Religion of Man* is a continuation of the idea of

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[6] It is estimated that there are about 260 million Dalits. https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dalit

Enlightenment, a movement that was already set in motion by Mazzini, Comte, and Mill (Nussbaum 2014, 59–85). It is about fraternity, about compassion over the riddles and surprises of life, about the comfort of inescapable suffering.

Tagore was searching for such a *Religion of Man*, to replace the theistic religions, which he criticized for their lack of spirituality. By emphasizing the sacredness of old texts and fixed rituals, such a religion only led to adaption and conformity. According to Tagore, religions either predominantly study the traditional texts or the expression of religion in all forms and rituals. But that is not the essence of religion. The essence of religion is the desire and the will to transcend one's limitations and to search for an ideal of human perfection. Tagore calls it 'the humanity of our God, or the divinity of Man the Eternal' (Tagore 2012, 5; Mukherjee 2014, 69).

Tagore understands that when the individual transcends his pragmatic necessities and feels love and sympathy for every being, at that point he realizes the Universal Man in himself. This realization is above any kind of provincialism and communalism; it only requires the extensiveness of consciousness and the principle of relationship. The relationship between the elements is more important than the elements themselves, 'The bones are different from the muscles, but they are organically one in the body' (Tagore 2012, 96).

Tagore is very critical of so-called 'realism', which he believes, is 'the animal' in man (Ibid., 124). Becoming human is to imagine what could or should be, what not has been proven but what is already anticipated, and points to the immortal (Ibid, 123). In his spiritual life, man is able to experience unity and love in an existence that transcends all daily obstacles (Mukherjee 2014, 75). The mind of the individual merges and unites with the mind of the universal man. Rational thinking, as important as it may be, limits our possibilities. The realization of human unity is called religion. In his words:

> Somehow man has felt that his comprehensive sense of unity has a divine character which could claim the sacrifice of all that is individual in him, that in it dwells his highest meaning transcending his limited self, representing his best freedom (Tagore 2012, 140).

Tagore confirms that access to the Universal Man (i.e. beyond the individual) is made possible by our imagination. He called imagination 'the most distinctly human of all or faculties'(Ibid., 44)[7] Imagination and love is the key to humanity. But—and this is important for our research- *barriers, limitations, and conflicts are conditional to finding the path to truth and unity*. This realization is possible by renunciation with enjoyment. There is a life that is more true for us than our own physical life. 'Our life gains "value" in those of its aspects which represent eternal humanity in knowledge, in sympathy, in deeds and character and creative works' (Ibid., 143).

> Like Kant, Tagore would admit that the limits of freedom lie in transcending the limits of reason (…) Freedom is only possible for those who have the power to cultivate mutual understanding and cooperation with other individuals. The history of the growth of freedom is a history of the perfection of the human relationship. One can-

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[7] O'Connell, in her paper about Tagore and education, mentions as most important aspects of his education: Creativity, Mutuality, and Survival, which I understand, but in my reading of Tagore, however, I lay most emphasis on creativity and imagination.

not have freedom by disassociating oneself from his or her fellow beings as all ties of relationship demand obligation to others (Mukherjee 2014, 77–78).[8]

Religion, as human religion,—and that might seem paradoxical—is about freedom and liberation which is only possible by cultivating mutual understanding and cooperation with others.

Nussbaum makes clear that both Stuart Mill and Tagore are part of a tradition starting with August Comte. 'His idea of a religion of mankind, a religion with public rituals and other emotional symbols, was enormously influential in the 19th and beginning of the twentieth century' (Nussbaum 2014, 18). Such a religion should comprise more than respect for one another. Love is needed and not the strict social control, homogeneity, and political correctness, proposed by Comte (Ibid., 107). Love is the realization of ourselves in others. 'However, whatever name our logic may give to the truth of human unity, the fact can never be ignored that we have our greatest delight when we realize ourselves in others, and this is the definition of love' (Tagore 1922, 39).

Tagore and Conflicts

The Natural and Cultural Conflict

I will now concentrate on two recurrent descriptions of conflicts that arise from the analysis of the key text *Religion of Man*. The first concept is the conflict of 'the harmony of antagonism of circumstances', which I will call the *natural conflict*, which is conditional for creativity, wondering, imagination, development, and change. The second concept is the conflict between the West and the East, which I will call the *cultural conflict* and is the contradiction between passion and ideal. That is the contradiction between *domination and conquest* on the one hand and *reconciliation and sympathy* on the other.

The value of life, according to Tagore, as we saw above, is determined by the principle attitude you adopt in life. Either you focus on the domination of man over nature or the unity of man and nature (conquest versus union). The cultivation of power or the cultivation of sympathy; separating things (dualism) or connecting them (unity). It was clear from the outset that Tagore focuses on the unity and connection between people and the world.

The Natural Conflict

In *Religion of Man* Tagore very quickly states that conflicts are natural. Conflicts appear more or less automatically and constantly on our path in life. He recounts a story of a little girl – that in a play they played together- where she had locked him up and he, Tagore, had to free himself.

What will you do for your freedom? And I answered, 'shout for help'. But however desirable that might be if it succeeded immediately, it would be unfortunate for the story. And thus she in her imagination had to clear the neighbourhood … (Tagore 2012, 14).

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[8] Compare for example the complete opposite view of Rousseau, for whom avoidance, isolation, and obsessive control, were the main means to reach freedom and become 'the natural man' (The Pouwels, Blinded, 2023).

So there was no one there to hear him shout. Then he thought of kicking fiercely at the door. But she made it of steel. But he found a key. But she made it not fit and 'the girl was delighted at the development of the story jumping over obstructions' (Ibid., 15). It is an imaginative story about the forces and counterforces of protagonists and antagonists. A solution -of the conflict- would mean the end of the story, the end of the creative imagination.

The example is included in chapter two called: 'the creative mind' and is also used by Tagore to describe *conflicts as constructive and joyful*. In the process of learning '…eternal is realizing itself through the obstruction of limits' (Tagore 2012, 19). The spirit of Tagore here is Kantian: dare to think, augment yourself, use your imagination, and cross the boundaries that life and others impose on you. Open new doors 'out of the accustomed way'. This will give you pleasure and the desire to spend time on culture and leisure after these victories. The independence is initially physical but becomes mental. This is what Tagore calls *the surplus of mankind*: 'But above the din of clamour and scramble rises the voice of the Angel of Surplus, of leisure, of detachment from the compelling claim of physical need, saying to men, 'Rejoice' (Ibid., 34). Tagore's pedagogy is without a doubt a pedagogy of liberation and joy.

For Tagore, conflicts are not only part and parcel of life, facts of life, but conditional on becoming a person with love, sympathy and the ability to reconcile. Conflicts and natural limitations evoke a creative mind that forms a path in and through freedom to self-realization, a self-realization that always transcends the original self. '' …the infinite imposes limits in its works, not to keep them permanence, but to break them over and over again, and to reveal the endless in unending surprises' (…) 'They are surprises lying in ambuscade provoking revolutionary adjustments' (Tagore 2012, 46–47). Tagore loves these conflicts (surprises), they are natural and help people to liberate themselves with creativity and imagination (the surplus) to a higher level of humanity. Conflicts as surprises create an ongoing regeneration of 'fresh beginnings' and 'continual challenges', that challenge the old to reach a better harmony towards the fundamental ideal of the truth. Freedom, creativity, and imagination will become the core elements of his education in the Bengal ashram Santiniketan (the house of peace).

> Creation is the harmony of contrary forces—the forces of attraction and repulsion. When they join hands, all the fire and fight are changed into the smile of flowers and the songs of birds. When there is only one of them triumphant and the other defeated, then either there is the death of cold rigidity or that of suicidal explosion (Tagore 1922, paragraph IV, 65).

Tagore, I contend, is in line with Herakleitos the ancient philosopher here. It is not easy to understand that you need opposing forces to achieve harmony. It seems that we are more inclined to believe and think that all forces, all noses, and all vectors have to point in one direction to come to harmony. But the opposite is true, according to Tagore. We need counterforces to reach harmony![9] According to Tagore, *this miracle of creation from opposing forces* is realized not through power and one vision, but through love. A love that limits itself, transcends egoism and finds meaning and harmony precisely because of this.

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[9] Our muscles are antagonistic. The agonists and antagonists form so-called antagonistic pairs, which consist of a flexor and an extensor muscle. The flexor muscle "closes" the joint (that is, it decreases the angle between the two bones), and the extensor muscle provides the opposite movement. We need both muscles to move.

And one truth of which he must be reminded, therefore, is that the power which accomplishes the miracle of creation, *by bringing conflicting forces into the harmony of the One*, is no passion, but a love which accepts the bonds of self-control from the joy of its own immensity—a love whose sacrifice is the manifestation of its endless wealth within itself (Ibid., 66, *my emphasis*).

His expression that education and religion for humanity should be aimed at 'reconciling the contradiction' gives an acknowledgement of the value of opposing forces, not only as a force to be accepted as part of life but also as a necessary force to grow, to mature. Embrace these forces for further constructive development and understanding instead of using them for destructive actions.

But the harmony of contrary forces, which give their rhythm to all creation, has not yet been perfected by man in his civilisation, and the Creator in him is baffled over and over again. (Tagore 1922, paragraph IV, 66).

Indeed. We do not know yet very well how we have to forge these contrary forces to harmony, as Tagore has to admit. Others contend that indeed, "most teaching is designed to obscure or minimize the conflicts" (Graff 1993, 9). Meanwhile, these contrary forces (seen as polarisation in today's language) lead to destruction, fear, and chaos. However, this 'unity of contrary forces',—a principle for development and growth -, was a strong fundament of both Tagore and Gandhi and later Nehru to strive for unity in the new country India (which took off in 1930 and led to independence in 1947). The rapid and dramatic separation of Pakistan from the mother country of India was therefore experienced as a great disappointment by those who believed in this idea.

The Cultural Conflict

As for the second form of conflict, the cultural conflict, Tagore is well aware of the destructive character of Western thinking and acting.[10] The massive and inappropriate destruction of Delhi in 1857 (Dalrymple 2009), the brutal repression of the citizens, who have since been called 'natives', and the horrors of WW I,—Tagore, died in August 1941 after WWII had been going on for two years—run through the capillaries of Tagore when he wrote that the West exhibited a fleshed-out plan without humanity. That the West did not come to India with imagination and sympathy, but with a display of power, solely focused on gain.[11]

Tagore was deeply affected by the gross abuse of power, unlimited materialism, and shocking selfishness of the West because 'after all, man is a spiritual being, and not a mere living money-bag jumping from profit to profit, and breaking the backbone of human races in its financial leapfrog' (Tagore 1922, Creative Unity, East and West, 107).

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[10] ' … the relationship of the West with the East, growing more and more complex and widespread for over two centuries, far from attaining its true fulfillment, has given rise to a universal spirit of conflict. The consequent strain and unrest have profoundly disturbed Asia, and antipathetic forces have been accumulating for years in the depth of the Eastern mind´ (Tagore 1922, 169).

[11] The distinctions drawn by Tagore between the East and West and the characterization of each can be disputed. The reality is probably more complex. I have decided not to engage in that interesting discussion here. However, recent studies by Amitav Gosh (2023), *The Curse of the Nutmeg*, and Philipp Blom (2023), *The Submission*, show an even blacker picture of Western dominance and violence than even Tagore could imagine.

Tagore had a huge desire to overcome the violent meeting between the West and the East. That is, to unite the spirit of domination with the spirit of harmony (O'Connell 2010, 69). He lived all his life under the oppression of the West (Britons) despite his position in the highest caste and wanted to resolve the resulting conflicts. 'Shall the twain ever meet?'. Cecil John Rhodes, namesake of Rhodesia, present-day Zimbabwe, in Punch 1893, announced a plan for a telegraph line from Cairo to Cape Town. Rhodes also wrote the foreword in the book: *From the Cape to Cairo,* 1902, by Grogan and Sharp, which is dedicated to Rhodes: 'the greatest and most far-seeing of British Imperial Statesmen'. The book tells the story of the first passage from Cape Town to Cairo. It bears witness to a great European self-righteous and destructive superiority. 'We have stolen this country, now we must steal his limbs' This attitude suited Rhodes, who felt that the British race was 'the first race in the world', the more land occupied by the British, 'the better it was for the human race'. It is these kinds of texts, which Tagore was well aware of and refers to in the chapter *East and West* in *Creative Unity* (1922), that gave substance and form to his image of a passionate and destructive West (Fig. 1).

One could also say that Tagore used the derailment of the West, especially in its imperialism, capitalism, nationalism, sense of superiority, and abuse of power, to reformulate his own ideal, the India Ideal, known as the Bengal Renaissance. He needed education to develop that ideal in his own country. Tagore and Gandhi were blood brothers for the sake of education. After Gandhi's return from South Africa, they met regularly for 25 years (Advani 2014).

Tagore founded a primary school, a secondary school, and a university, Visva-Bharati University. Due to the need to bring the two worlds together, there was still much to do in the complex and enormous India, with its many languages and religions, to achieve the desired and necessary unity, the understanding for each other, the unity of man and nature and to guide India in the right direction. I mention three issues that have not been satisfactorily resolved in India to this very day: the huge difference in appreciation between men and women, the fight between the religions (especially Hinduism and Islam), which divided India into India, Pakistan and Bangladesh and third the caste system Tagore and Gandhi detested so much. They have explicitly spoken out against these three gross violations of their ideals. So, in addition to the fundamental criticism of the West, Tagore was well aware of the inherent problems in India, which he attributes largely to ignorance, too little contact with others, and strict adherence to old traditions and rituals.

Recognizing that harmony was only possible by bringing opposing forces together, Tagore was against isolation and closure and in favour of diversity, openness, contact, and communication. His mission was to reconcile the spirit of domination with the spirit of harmony.

Tagore made it clear that unity cannot be achieved through uniformity, which means the domination and submission of one over the other, but that unity must be found in harmony. A harmony that arises from the play of opposing forces with all due respect for the differences that exist.[12]

> … we must know that the great mind of man is one, working through the many differences which are needed to ensure the full result of its fundamental unity. When

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[12] In the conductor's room of the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, world famous for its acoustics, when the first soprano discusses the performance there in consultation with the conductor, the vocalist reads a motto written in mirror writing behind her on the wall through the large mirror in front of her: *all concord's born of contraries*, attributed to Ben Jonson. It is the task of the conductor to forge the different voices in the orchestra into harmony.

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Fig. 1 Image source Edward Linley Sambourne—Wikipedia

we understand this truth in a disinterested spirit, it teaches us to respect all the differences in man that are real, yet remain conscious of our oneness; and to know that perfection of unity is not in uniformity, but in harmony (Tagore 1922, 173).

That is why Tagore founded a university as one of the best means of promoting mutual understanding between the East and the West, where people work together to find solutions not for the race or the country they belong to, but for all humanity.

Tagore and Conflicts

The Pedagogical Value of a Conflict

In all of Tagore's teaching the intention was to meet, critically, rationally, artfully, imaginatively, creatively, and emotionally, all aimed at seeking what connects us with nature, rather than what distinguishes and separates us from nature and people. Tagore was imbued with the idea of unity in all manifestations between humans and between man and nature. The pursuit of every development and civilization was aimed at discovering and understanding the whole. Tagore denounced the lack of ideals in the West and the loss of contact with the rest of the world and in particular with nature. Conflicts between contradictions are necessary to achieve harmony, both at the level of natural conflicts and at the level of cultural conflicts, where conflicts encourage growth and development to transcend egoism and self-interest toward a universal human truth. Tagore in fact embraced conflicts as a road to

growth and development, a road to understanding and harmony. Education is indispensable for this. Tagore wrote:

> In my view, the imposing tower of misery which today rests on the heart of India has its sole foundation in the absence of education. Caste divisions, religious conflicts, aversion to work, precarious economic conditions – all centre on this single factor (Quoted in, Sen 1997).[13]

Tagore and Gandhi, these monuments of modern India (Bhattacharya 2013, 101), found each other in the importance of education. But unlike Gandhi, Tagore placed more emphasis on the *internal* social relations in India itself, Nussbaum's 'passionate humanism', aiming at the development of a strong not submissive but fearless person willing to criticize dead traditions (see the Motto on top). In other words, a person who mixes investigative and critical thinking with emotions of compassion, sadness, and joy. Someone who does not oppose rationality, but dares to question the strong (Indian) traditions. Who values the role of women and allows them to take the lead or let them take the lead, to find themselves in freedom and personal love. His education was light-hearted and gave space to erotic creativity (Nussbaum 2014, 98–106). Education was to help all people, but especially the poor, to have a better life, that would bring about a culture of freedom and imagination and the right to dissent, aimed at overcoming the many oppressive customs and conventions in India, the most important of which, according to Tagore, was the abolition of the caste system. 'He focuses on liberation through education, which introduces reasoning, honesty, and rationality. But most of all, he envisions a truly global society that is not fettered by any petty divisions of parochialism, domesticity or tradition' (Advani 2014, 2).

The Practical use of Conflict in Education

Education should aim at discovering how the human desire for transcendence works in practice, thereby supporting both the individual and society in growth and development. For that, you need a form of disengagement, distancing, which Tagore expressed in the word '*disinterested*'.[14] A concept that Nussbaum also associates with Rawls '*veil of ignorance'*- (Nussbaum 2014, 18–19).

Tagore strongly criticized the monotonous and restricted school life. He felt trapped there like a rabbit in a cage and called the school: 'the brick and mortar arrangement of life, by monotonously mechanical habits and the customary code of respectability' (Tagore 2012, 173). This criticism echoes Dewey when speaking of education that should liberate young people from 'reviving and retraversing the past' and de 'recapitulation of it' (Dewey 2009, 59). But Tagore, equalling Thoreau (1995), also makes an explicit appeal to visualize the 'wild and untamed' aspects of mankind and nature and to keep this precious gift for education.

> The relative proportion of the non-civilized to the civilized in man should be in the proportion of the water and the land in our globe, the former predominating. But the school has for its object continual reclamation of the civilized (Tagore 2012, 173).

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[13] Amartya Sen, was educated at Tagore's University and had first-hand experiences of the education, 'fostering intellectual curiosity rather than competitive excellence'.

[14] Synonym for: unbiased, impartial, objective, dispassionate, or detached.

Only the known is 'stirred up' over and over again, but what do we do with the unknown, the wonderful, the surprising? If we follow Tagore's advice,[15] 71% of our education should be directed to the unknown (the uncivilized), the miraculous in our existence and only 29% of our education should be about what we already know and understand. But the school constantly focuses on reclaiming the known.[16] Tagore considered this education, at least to himself, as an 'aridity' and the 'wildness' in him caused him to turn away from school as early as high school, but not from learning. The development of *creativity and imagination* is, as I already mentioned a few times, the most important characteristics of the practical education that Tagore has shaped over decennia. Creativity instead of control. The arts are very important. There is a lot of singing, dancing, acting, and artistic expression giving shape to thoughts, performances and individuality. Education that was and still is, experienced by the pupils as very liberating (Nussbaum 2014, 100–102).

Reciting and memorizing are the opposites of his practical pedagogy. Subjects and disciplines are taught by skilled teachers in the school of Tagore, but children, students, and teachers learn more by working together and sharing knowledge and thoughts. Boys and girls meet and learn together and from each other. Critical discussions are stimulated based on research and there is deliberately room for diversity and contradiction in education. Aesthetic and ethical world themes, universal social justice themes, the growth of the world as a whole, cultural infusion and cooperation, and the connectedness of people, trade, and culture in the world are the educational themes of Tagore: focusing on knowledge and understanding. Teachers from outside or abroad are welcomed and the school is deliberately outward and internationally oriented. Collaboration, precisely between 'contrary forces' is at the heart of Tagore's practical pedagogy. He disapproves of nationalism and parochialism and calls it 'organised self-interest'. Again: *harmony can only be achieved by bringing opposing forces together in an act of love*.

Education must establish relationships, seek cohesion and present all kinds of different manifestations of reality. Education takes place outside, in, and with nature in the world. Even today students come to school or go to Visva-Bharati University on foot or by bicycle. Care and service are daily elements in education focusing on nature and fellow human beings. Fun and joy in life and education are very important. 'Disinterested joy is the source and soul of creation' (Tagore 2012, 84). If you are a little bit 'uninvolved' and not pursuing your interest, you develop freedom and imagination and you will enjoy discovering and understanding things**.** Freedom from yourself (egoism) and from others (social and cultural limitations) is conditional for creativity and imagination. As we saw before, the *Religion of Man* was a further elaboration of Mill's idea of a 'culture of counterspeech' (Nussbaum 2014, 82). At a university, it is inappropriate to indoctrinate people by presenting just one vision of life, on normative matters, Mill claims. Throughout his career Mill was very concerned about the suffocating effect of the tyranny of the majority on individual freedom and hence on the progress of society (Ibid., 78).

The practical application of conflict simply consisted of preventing and combatting isolation and closure and allowing the opportunity to meet each other, by providing space to opposing forces and contrasts in education: boys and girls, knowledge and imagination, own professors and guest speakers. In terms of content, education was about universal themes, through which, creativity and imagination are realized and the building of

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[15] We follow: How Much Water is There on Earth? | U.S. Geological Survey (usgs.gov).

[16] I call this 'certainty-providing education' in contrast to 'uncertainty-researching education'. See the paragraph below. Together, they are -in education- the contrasting forces that could lead to harmony.

connections and relationships can be practised. Education and teaching with pleasure. Education that is directed towards transcending your private self-interest and focusing on the commonality of our aspirations, rather than the extreme magnification of our differences. Harmony is only realized in encounters with differences.

Teaching the Conflicts in Education Today

Introduction

In this paragraph, I will try to paint a picture of teaching the conflicts in education today, with a special emphasis on what the analysis of Tagore's educational writings can add to the positive and constructive power of conflicts in education.[17]

First I go to a few conceptual premises that seems to be necessary to make teaching the conflicts possible. I will focus on three important aspects: to combat the fear of conflict, to the teaching of conflicts beyond Democratic Education and to value *uncertainty-researching* education next to the more common *certainty-providing* education. Then I will engage myself with the practical issues of teaching the conflicts by, showing a specific core teaching model, and the need for an additional supportive curriculum, to make the core model work. Then, I will address the challenge of choosing the 'right or best' conflicts. That is, how to agree on what we disagree about. And last but not least the implications for teacher education from my systematic literature review research and my research. Of course, I will constantly try to show what the spirit of Tagore adds to my proposal of teaching the conflict in education.

PART 1. Conceptual Premises

Combatting the Fear of Conflict

The word conflict and its appearance in life have a very negative connotation. The fear of conflict is so great that the response to a conflict seems to have four dominant forms (behavioural strategies): avoiding, yielding, the (ab)use of power (forcing) or problem-solving (De Dreu, 2017). The opposite of conflict is often phrased in words like peace, equality and consensus, painting a picture of a conflict-free harmonious family, community or society. However, such an idea is way out of line with reality. However much you are going to look at the core of a so-called community there will always remain dissensus. "The picture of an obvious and harmonious community is an illusion. Conflicts, dissatisfaction and threats are considered outside things, affecting the serene harmony of the situation inside. The community is then implicitly seen as a naturally harmonious and solidary whole, in which conflicts and friction are by definition outside influences" (Leerssen 1998, 13). But that is not what a harmonious community is if such a thing ever exists. "…a community is not the unity of joint action where people agree with each other and do and decide things together, no a community is that unity of joint action where people disagree with each other and talk problems over" (Ibid., 13). The Spanish philosopher and pedagogue Fernando Savater is

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[17] Both my reviewers asked me -in their first comments- to go beyond the analysis of Tagore and conflicts and to show how I believe Tagore's pedagogical ideas could be applied to teaching the conflicts in education.

even more convincing or bolder. 'A society without conflicts would not be a society, but a wax museum or a cemetery' (Savater 1998, 15).

In education, -part of and itself a community-, conflicts meet fundamental animosity. Conflicts should stay out of the classroom. Horace Mann (1796–1859), the iconic American education reformer, known for his inimitable energy for public education and good teacher training, was at the same time a strong opponent of introducing controversial topics into the classroom:

> If the day ever arrives when the school room shall become a cauldron for the fermentation of all the hot and virulent opinions, in politics and religion, that now agitate our community, that day the fate of our glorious public school system will be sealed, and speedy ruin will overwhelm it (Steiner 2017, 79).

Steiner delicately adds to this, "We surely owe to such sentiments the often-tame quality of so many textbooks and curricula in the United States" (Ibid.).

We have not learned -in education- to deal with uncertainty, differences of opinion, and opposing views. We allow parents to have their own schools where only their parochial beliefs are taught, transferred and reinforced. We shy away and pretend that others,—and their way of life -, do not exist. We move to a state, to villages in which people are 'like us'. We even built a wall around our property and deny people entrance into our community. 'Nigger, don't let the sun go down on you in this town' (Loewen 2005). And in education, we agree, maybe unconsciously, with Rousseau, that the school should be a beacon, an island of peace and quietness, of control, of unity, of consensus. Graff admires the conservative's skill to call everything that strives for change political, 'but keeping things as they are is not political'(Graff 1993, p. 164). That is indeed a double standard. I also contend, that keeping things as they are is highly political. Education can never be neutral. Paulo Freire called such education 'banking education'. Education that continues the existing power relations and serves the goals of the oppressors. Freire called the opposite of conflict not consensus, but apathy and took the conflicts as a starting point for his revolutionary and transformative pedagogy (Pouwels, 2019). Today, some call it, the 'stability assumption'. That is the idea to educate only for the existing society, "the future should emerge in the same way that a well-prepared cake does from the oven" (Gardner, 2023, 166). According to this philosopher, we need a parallel educational paradigm, based on an "uncertainty principle" disrupting the way we traditionally live, since in real life, 'predicted outcomes are essentially uncertain' (Ibid., 166–167).

I believe it is centrally important, without denying the destructive side of conflicts, that we must acknowledge the positive and constructive side of conflict. My analysis showed that Tagore supports this 'other', this 'also' concept of conflict. If we do not genuinely understand and believe that conflicts are positive and constructive, teaching the conflicts in education will not get off the ground. I have shown elsewhere (Pouwels, 2023a) that the educational philosophy of Jean Jacques Rousseau may be the ultimate foundation of the negative connotation of conflict and the strongest plea to avoid and dismiss conflicts completely from education. And that is, in my opinion, a true disaster for the quality of education.

Beyond Democratic Education

As indicated in the Introduction, the use of conflicts in education is mainly applied in so-called 'teaching controversial issues'.[18] The teaching of controversial issues has broadly been born and grown in the field of social studies, which in many countries of the world has nestled in subjects such as history, geography, environmental education, citizenship education, children's and human rights education and democracy education. (Kerr &, Huddleston, 2015; Oxfam 2018; Pace 2021). Discussing or debating conflicts over political (social and natural) issues is the main road taken (Hess & McAvoy 2015).

The academic discussion about how to teach democratic education and what the role of conflicts are is currently a conceptual struggle between famous leaders in political philosophy about a *deliberative communicative* consensus-seeking way of proceeding or an *agonistic* way of dealing, in which the latter recognises the political in conflicts that people and collectivities hold; full of emotions and passions. This discussion is very interesting and valuable but as I already wrote in the Introduction, has not found its way into teaching practice yet.

It may be inviting to limit my reflections on teaching the conflict to one subject only: democratic education – as one of my reviewers suggested -, but my stakes are higher. Limiting teaching the conflict to political issues alone does not lead to what I think education needs. Reading Tagore confirms once again my view, that conflicts should be a central paradigm, a 'parallel educational paradigm', next to the dominant 'stability assumption' paradigm in education. And not only for specific, actual issues that divide people, such as the state of our (democratic) society but for the growth, maturation and change of people and society. That is for generic educational use. This necessity of two equally important but contradictory teaching approaches I have come to call: certainty-providing education and uncertainty-researching education.

Uncertainty-Researching Education

I believe that *education has two legitimate but contrasting and opposite tasks*. That is to offer certainty and security about the knowledge and skills we believe in and use in daily life, and at the same time to challenge the existing knowledge and skills to make sure further cultural developments can take place, indeed directed to an ideal which I endorse: the development of liberation, democracy, and humanization. Over time I have called this the double task of education. Again, both are legitimate but contradictory. The first is: *certainty-providing* education (That is the way we do things here!) and the second is: *uncertainty-researching* education (Why are we doing things this way?). I endorse Gerald Graff when he writes that, "

> The modern university has from the beginning rested on a deeply contradictory mission. The university is expected to preserve, transmit and honour our traditions, yet at the same time, it is supposed to produce new knowledge, which means questioning received ideas and perpetually revising traditional ways of thinking (Graff 1993, 7).

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[18] Elsewhere I have argued that 'controversial issues' is a pleonasm. There are no non-controversial issues. I have also indicated that controversial issues are intellectually 'disarmed conflicts' (Pouwels and Biesta 2017).

Equally, I endorse Lea Dasberg, who calls the first function or task of education *socialization* and the second function or task *education*.

> The first, to familiarize yourself with the surrounding reality, is to socialize, to conform, to adapt. The second, ethical task is to educate. (…) The double task of socializing and educating is so difficult that people, especially in the school sector, have provided themselves with countless rationalizations to avoid having to do the educating part (Dasberg 1993, 17).

Understandably, certainty-providing education requires a different teacher-student relation and different didactics than uncertainty-researching education (See for this, Pouwels, 2023b). And also another way of testing. The first is directed to 'that is the way we do things here!" The second to the question "Why are we doing things this way?" This might be seen as a contradiction as Graff rightly argues. But if you understand, like Tagore, that bringing those conflicting forces into harmony is the condition for creativity, you will find opportunities to give way to both approaches in education.

John Dewey makes an important distinction between settled or sure Knowledge and uncertain and creative Thinking.

> "In one sense, knowledge is that which we take for granted. It is that which is settled, disposed of, established, under control. What we fully know, we do not need to think about. In common phrase, it is certain, assured" (Dewey 2009, 226).
>
> Thinking starts from doubt and uncertainty. It marks an inquiry, hunting, searching attitude, instead of one of mastery and possession" (Ibid.) "Thinking (…) is prospective in reference. It is occasioned by an unsettlement and it aims at overcoming a disturbance. Philosophy is thinking about what the known demands of us—what responsive attitude it exacts. It is an idea of what is possible, not a record of accomplished fact. Hence it is hypothetical, like all thinking. (Ibid., 248).

Speaking about the role of disharmony and conflict Dewey states famously: "Conflict is the gadfly of thought. It stirs us to observation and memory. It instigates to invention. It shocks us out of sheep-like passivity, and sets us at noting and contriving". In other words, "conflict is a sine qua non of reflection and ingenuity (Dewey 1922, 301).

About uncertainty and conflict, Max Weber writes in his *Science as a Vocation (Wissenschaft als Beruf)*,

> The primary task of a useful teacher is to teach his students to recognise *inconvenient facts* - I mean facts that are inconvenient for their party opinions. And for every party opinion there are facts that are extremely inconvenient, for my opinion no less than others. I believe the teacher accomplishes more than a mere intellectual task if he compels his audience to accustom itself to the existence of such facts. I would be so immodest at even to apply the expression 'moral achievement' (Weber 2012).

Being confronted with a value system fundamentally different from ours is uncomfortable and precisely because of that very valuable. Discomfort makes you think: in fact, discomfort is a necessary condition for a critical evaluation of your own self-evident principles and assumptions. Ruth Simmons, the first African-American president of any Ivy League university, articulates the need for discomfort and the use of robust counter-speech in her inaugural convocation address.

> You know something that I hate? When people say, "That doesn't make me feel good about myself." I say, "That's not what you're here for". I believe that learning at its

best is the antithesis of comfort. If you come to this campus for comfort, I would urge you to walk through yon iron gate. But if you seek betterment for yourself, for your community and prosperity, stay and fight" (Strossen 2018, 2).

Tagore would have agreed. A critical evaluation does not necessarily have to lead to a change in your principles, on the contrary, it can also make those principles more solid and robust, but without the discomfort, you necessarily remain stuck in the blind self-evidence of your rightness and that does not make a person better and the world neither. Without a culture you cannot see, but closed in one single culture you will be forever blind. Embrace the discomfort. Embrace the conflict. For learning.

I have paid attention to three concepts that need a thorough reconsideration to make the practice of teaching conflicts possible: to diminish the fear of conflict; to use conflicts not only for goals within democratic education and to pay attention not only to certainty-providing education but also to uncertainty-researching education. The latter is now receiving attention. How can it be done?

PART 2. Practical Issues for Teaching the Conflicts

A Model for Teaching the Conflicts

A systematic literature review I did in 2018, and my empirical research (2019; in-depth interviews with eight university teachers, analysed with Atlasti 8) showed that, among other things, teachers lack well-organised and intelligent teaching models to teach the conflicts. Such an intelligent teaching model exists and is for 40 years developed by David and Roger Johnson (Johnson, 1985, 2000, 2007, 2009, 2015). It is called: *Constructive Controversy.*

It claims to be useful and applicable in education – 'a procedure for learning' (Johnson, 2009, 39)- and also in helping make decisions; political discourse in democracies; creativity and innovation and building and maintaining peace. The teaching model was evaluated many times and I have also used it with my students. The most interesting aspects of the model are the combination of cooperative and competitive education, delaying judgement and the possibility of listening well, arguing soundly and most interestingly the intellectual reversal halfway through the learning process. This means that the students have to leave the position they have strongly argued for during the intellectual fight and take the opponent's view (reverse acting) and equally try to find reasons and arguments in favour of the position they have tried to rebut before.

Johnson calls the educational struggle and fight between opponents over an issue: *dancing with the opponent.* The process is not so much focused on finding a resolution, a compromise or the one truth. On the contrary, it is all about, going through the process of trying to achieve a resolution. In other words, and this is the main conclusion: "The expression of contrasting opinions in learning groups was the single most important predictor of learning gain " (Johnson 2015, 88–89). This resonates very well with Tagore who showed that the solution of a narrative -of the conflict- means the end of the creative imagination.

However, in 2015 Johnson published an overall summary of the theory, research and practice, and included a chapter called: *Conditions Mediating the Effects of Constructive Controversy*. While the teaching model was successful, -I can confirm this when we applied the model-, and was repeatedly evaluated positively (Vollmer, 2013; Tjosvold, 2019), it was not much used in high school or higher education: "Far from being

a standard instructional procedure in most college classes, however, intellectual conflict is the exception, not the rule", (Johnson, 2000, 32). And nine years later, "Discussion remains a rarity in US schools" and"… intellectual conflict among students is conspicuously lacking in many classrooms" (Johnson, 2009, 38). In that particular chapter, Johnson elaborates on the necessary conditions to make the model work. He discusses a great number of conditions regarding the social context such as adequate communication of information, the need to feel safe, heterogeneity among members, skilled disagreement, to value controversy, positive goal interdependency, interest in disconfirming information, competence threat, the problem of downward social comparison, perceived bias and the problem of confirmation bias (Johnson 2015, 108–118) There are so many things to consider before you begin.

An Additional, Accompanying or Supportive Curriculum

The teachers (see below) and students are not experienced in discussing and researching conflicting issues. When preparing content and procedures to apply the model of *Constructive Controversy* for what we called 'Conflict Education', we realized that students are not well prepared,—very badly prepared- to make the most out of this teaching model. So we came up with what we called an additional or accompanying curriculum. We decided to prepare five smaller courses before we could start with the core curriculum 'conflict education'. These courses focused on.

- The rules of the game
- Learning to listen
- Learning to argue
- Delivering constructive responses
- Looking for disconfirming information

I can only be very brief, here in this paper that mainly focuses on Tagore's possible conceptual and practical contribution to the teaching of conflicts.

We developed 18 rules for discussing, competing and cooperating. We made a poster *dancing with the opponent* and discussed all the rules with the students. To give an indication. The first five rules are: I postpone my judgment; I listen to everyone's views; I do not judge people; I encourage everyone to participate in the discussion and My opponent is not my enemy.

Listening to other people, especially if they have strong opposing views, more precisely, diametrically opposed opinions, is not easy (Paul, 2017). With the help of Hermans (2001), the Dialogical Self and the so-called Listening thermometer,[19] students were educated to listen to others and to listen to the different voices inside themselves which makes listening so difficult.

To support students in learning to argue, we made use of They Say, I Say (Graff & Birkenstein 2010). A method that starts with what others think and say about an issue before coming up with what I think and believe.

Responses to arguments can be very destructive. A fourth course focused on recognizing so-called active and passive destructive responses (e.g. winning at all costs and avoiding) and practising active and passive constructive responses instead (e.g. expressing emotions

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[19] Harthorend – Luisteren voor professionals – reflectiesite.

and delaying responding). We made gratefully use of Sal Capobianco's 'conflicts dynamic profile' from which these examples are from (Capobianco, 2005).

And finally, five, with the help of our librarians we delivered a small course on how to find disconfirming information in a world in which all our search items are directed to confirming instead of disconfirming information, reinforcing the famous *confirmation bias* that is always a threat to critical thinking.

These courses were not only very interesting and joyful, but they helped us enormously to go into the core curriculum later. Again, I believe Tagore can be discerned here since he valued and implemented openness, cooperation, mutual care, diversity and opposing forces in education.

What Conflicts to Choose?

Having genuine and validated professional conflicts that open up and motivate education for students is of great importance. But can we agree on what 'real and genuine' professional conflicts are? A problem facing everyone who wants to engage in teaching the conflict is to determine what conflict -there are so many-, to take up for education. In my empirical research, so-called, focus group interview research, I brought three groups of stakeholders together (mature students of a profession, their teachers and field experts). The profession was Social Work/Pedagogy at a well-known National Institute for Higher Education. Together the three groups decided what the genuine professional conflicts currently were. With the help of a definition of conflict, a list of ten professional conflicts was made and described in terms of the name of the Issue (conflict), Statement, Rationale, the Contradictions involved, the Implications and a Concrete Example of the issue. Conflict is defined as a conflict is an issue about which there exist major contradictions and various parties that struggle or fight 'over the issue'.

After confirmation in a group discussion, three national experts were named by the group. The list of ten items was sent to the experts asking them to rate the conflicts on a 5-point Likert scale. After returning, four of the ten conflicts were rated 4 or 5 by the experts and the group decided to take out one of the four to use in the experiment of conflict education. The name and the statement of the conflict was: *Privacy or sharing information. Is the privacy legislation*[20] *in healthcare to protect the client a blessing or a disaster for care providers and society??*

Coincidentally, the country was tossed about in this conflict because an incarcerated psychiatric patient was moved to another stronghold and the new employees were not allowed or insufficiently informed about the patient's file because of the new law. Safety risks for society were insufficiently estimated. A young girl -Anne Faber- was raped and killed in the woods while driving on her bike. It turned out that the escaped patient was the perpetrator. One of our chosen professional conflicts -sharing personal data- became unexpectedly very alive.

Within the core curriculum of teaching the conflicts, along the line of *Constructive Controversy*, students had to go through the different steps by arguing in favour or against the European Privacy Law. Before the case, we took a practice case in which students were

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[20] The European Privacy Law (GDPR, 2016) regulates the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data.

asked to speak in favour or against the day or the night on the statement: "Within a day, daytime is more important than the night!". Of course, halfway through the course students had to change their position from ardent supporters into adamant opponents.

We have evaluated the course by using teacher's journals, student learner reports (De Groot, 1980) and final queries. It is understandably too much to recall or discuss the findings in detail here.

The students were remarkably positive about the education offered which they partly constructed. Their rating exceeded our modest expectations. More specifically they reported that they learned more in two weeks about the content and the conflicts that come with privacy regulations and social care than they could have learned in 8 months of lecturing. They learned that to discuss is difficult, without getting personal and they now understand better the need to be informed. They developed skills like listening and especially refuting arguments and at the same time keeping the rules of the game in mind (respecting your opponent). Overall they feel much more confident in engaging in a discussion now.

The experimental course is not continued mainly because of the pressing and prescribed mandatory part of the 'certainty-providing' part of the curriculum that is fixed by national and international standards and strongly regulated. There is currently no place, nor room for this kind of teaching.

The Role of Teachers

Let us assume, as many do, that education is the best place to practice dealing with discomfort. Of course, education is also about money (provision), buildings, like schools, libraries and computers, teaching materials like books and curricula, and teaching strategies, such as teaching models and didactics. But at the very end of all these conditional items, there is teaching and the teacher. The teacher might be the problem but at the same time, he/she is also the solution.

According to an extensive survey by the OECD, teachers do matter. "The broad consensus is that "teacher quality" is the single most important school variable influencing student achievement" (OECD 2005, 2). And when it comes to teaching the conflicts they are even more important. His or her skills, knowledge, and approach are "the key ingredient to the creation of high-quality issues discussions" (Hess 2009, 55). "The skill of the professor matters quite a bit" (Hess & Gatti 2010, 25).

The idea that education is not neutral, never can be neutral, is not new. Nor that the teacher plays a decisive critical and normative part in the education of future people and citizens. We saw earlier, that Max Weber passionately expressed the moral achievement of a teacher to teach the 'inconvenient facts'. A few years later, Theodore Litt in Germany, fully aware of the national socialist sentiments curtailing the teacher's opportunity to take the risk of teaching the conflicts in society, warned us, in the aftermath of World War One and later after World War Two, to make sure that the teacher has '*geschichtliche Standortbewustsein*',[21] and that he will not slavishly carry out the will and curriculum

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[21] "Historical location awareness' (translation, JP). Litt sets high standards for the teacher. He must be able to stand above the 'human hassle'. Such a position is difficult, but not impossible. Litt believes that the teacher can act in a way that brings up the conflict over tense issues, but that he should resist the temptation to participate in the battle of opinions. According to Litt, *'anyone who thinks they can't do that, should not become a teacher'* (Litt 1965, 125–126). However, Litt did not explain or help teachers, how they could do this (Pouwels, 2023a). This seems similar to whether the confusing political performance of Donald Trump should be discussed in American schools. McLaren, almost 100 year later, comes to the same conclusion as Litt: *"If you feel compelled to ask this question, then perhaps teaching is not the right calling for you"*, (McLaren 2020, 1244).

of the suprapersonal powers, but takes an independent co-responsibility, which Litt found extremely important and one of the major causes of the demise of the German spirit under National Socialism.

> Educating does not mean obediently carrying out the commandment of supra-personal powers: it means taking part in the ruling of these powers out of one's own insight and responsibility. It is only for the sake of this joint responsibility that the knowing look of the educators is so desirable.[22]

So Litt attached a personal co-responsibility to the teacher, fully aware of his historical position and awareness.

Currently, Claudia Ruitenberg, when reviewing the importance of Chantal Mouffe's agonistic concepts of the political, morality and emotions in political education, writes.

> Obviously, this must also go further ''upstream'' into teacher education: students cannot be taught political literacy by teachers who, themselves, have been educated to believe that the political left/right divide is no longer relevant. Likewise, they cannot be taught political emotions by teachers who do not see the emotions as having a legitimate place in education or public life; nor can they be taught the difference between political, moral, and economic disputes by teachers who do not understand these distinctions themselves (Ruitenberg 2009, 277).

Gandhi and Tagore were convinced that education was the key (Bhattacharya 2013, 101). For Tagore, teachers are very important. He was not very pleased with the available teachers and was desperately looking for the best gurus (more than just a teacher) in his school. Tagore believed the relationship between the teacher and the students should be close. "Knowledge and efficiency are like hotels", he wrote, "it is clean and nice, but the host is missing".

Indeed teachers are very important in addressing contradiction, discomforting facts and social and political conflicts that shape reality. Yet, they run into many problems. Contextually, educationally as well as personally.

A systematic literature research, I conducted in 2018, reveals that the main problems that 'teaching controversial issues' faces are: ambiguity about what conflicts exactly are and what exactly is aimed at; what conflicts are relevant and should be dealt with (trying to agree on what we disagree about); teachers doubt if they fully understand the issue; insufficient education and experience to execute tense full discussions; lack of adequate teaching methods; no pedagogical-didactical tradition or training; uncertainty about taking a position as a teacher or staying neutral; lacking policy and support by school management or government; political sensitivity of the issues; diversity among parents and the local and regional sensitivity towards believes, religion and politics. (Stradling et al. 1984; Jungst, 2003; Oulton et al. 2004a, 2004b; Cotton 2006; Levinson 2007; Reich 2007; Byford, 2009; Chikoko, 2011; Weinberger & Dreyfus 2013; Kuş, 2015; Darr 2016; Goldberg & Schwarz 2016; Chen et al. 2017; Wilkerson, 2017; Kötter 2018; Pollak et al. 2018).

My research (in-depth interviews with eight University Teachers) covered five categories:

the personal relationship to private and professional conflicts; the degree of knowledge of and about professional conflicts; the experiences and expectations with (professional)

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[22] "Erziehen heißt nicht das Gebot der überpersönlichen Machte gehorsam ausführen: es heisst aus eigener Einsicht und Verantwortung an dem Walten dieser Mächte teilnehmen. Nur um dieser Mitverantwortung willen ist der wissende Blick der Erzieher so sehr zu wünschen." (Litt 1965, 122–123). Litt was one of the few professors that protested and took a stand against the Nazi-ideology and was dismissed from his office.

conflicts in education; the skills to organize and guide conflict education and the role students play in conflict education. My conclusions on these five categories convey a need for systematic attention to how to teach the conflicts over issues. I show briefly the main conclusions in the five categories.

It has become clear from the theoretical and systematic literature research that neither the theoretical studies on conflict education nor the empirical studies on teaching controversial issues pay any attention to the personal relationship of teachers to conflicts and the significance of this for a professional dealing with conflicts or controversial issues. Oulton et al. (2004a and 2004b), is the only source that pays brief attention to this. They concluded with astonishment that teachers sometimes have strange ideas about conflict and that the emotional aspects associated with conflict should not be neglected. But it is only this! I was surprised and started my interview with a few questions about this. I found it very significant that all the teachers I interviewed (men and women and no exception) confirmed the great influence of their socialization and upbringing in the family, the social environment, the friends and school, on the way conflicts are valued and acted upon in personal and professional conflicts.

Secondly, most teachers have a good idea of the existing conflicts in the profession, they declare, which is 'the clash between people about different and sometimes opposing interests, visions and/or opinions about matters'. That was a fine result.

However, teachers have no experience with the use of conflict education in their teaching. Nevertheless, teachers have many positive expectations of future 'conflict education', especially in learning how to argue, think critically, adapt and understand the positions and perspectives of the other person and put one's own views into perspective. This type of education is also expected to create more student involvement in the content and process of the education itself.

The creation of the classroom security deemed necessary to enable robust discussions is not designed systematically or methodically. Teachers base their actions on their own experiences, insights and character. This includes the use of self-mockery and self-relativisation, humour, setting rules and communicating with each other respectfully. Initial training or further training for professionally creating an atmosphere of safety—a risk-accommodating environment- (Jansen 2010) and professionally guiding and leading discussions was not part of their training and is therefore rarely mentioned.

Lecturers would prefer a heterogeneously composed class with sufficient diversity for conflict education, which is certainly not always the case in higher vocational education. Depending on the form of education, supervision, tutorials or lectures, they do spend more or less time on discussion, a discussion that is not systematically filled in, however. Discussion skills and the use of correct argumentation with students are not practised systematically. The quality of discussions and arguments depends on the chance presence of involved and competent students, not on educational planning and educational organization.

Conclusions

From my analysis of Tagore's ideas on conflicts, more specifically his *Religion of Man*, I found that.

Tagore explicitly embraces conflict as the realization of harmony through contrary forces. Conflicts, not for their own sake, but for their fundamental and indispensable role in the development, growth and change of people, are the start of creative imagination to

solve the problems we face in life. That is, wondering about the abundant diversity of life and the pleasure to discover and understand the magnificent unity in the world we live in. For liberation and enjoyment.

Establishing and valuing the relationship between people and nature is more important than pursuing autonomy and identity perse. Tagore was against isolation and closure and in favour of diversity, openness, contact, and communication. An education in and with nature, including different and contrasting voices towards the ideal of 'the infinite man'. Tagore embraces the constructive and creative power of discomfort.

Applying these findings to the teaching of conflicts in education today, we may recognise in Tagore the idea that the solution to a conflict, resolving a conflict, might not be 'educational'. After all, resolving is not only the end of the story but -more importantly-the end of creative imagination, learning and pleasure, as he explains through the example of the girl who locked him up. Conflict resolution is not necessarily educative and might lead to 'rotten' compromises (Margalit 2009; Engbers 2021). Uncertainty-researching education is a good way to practice dealing with discomfort, as experienced by my students when they discussed and researched the pros and cons of privacy law and social care. Conflicts over issues spark imagination and creativity. Such education, to deliberately make use of contrary forces in life, however, is not well organised. Not in Tagore's days nor ours. Neither students nor teachers are educated in Tagore's spirit of contrasting forces. Teachers lack sufficient education in *uncertainty-researching* education next to the dominant *certain-providing* approach.

The little girl, in Tagore's example, who locked him up and came up with all kinds of barriers and obstructions to keep him from freeing himself, practised in a playful, imaginative, creative and joyful manner, 'the harmony of contrary forces', that is, 'robust counter-speech' in a 'risk-accommodating environment'.

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