

## **Navigating Challenges and Potential Solutions to Address Contentious Topics in the School Setting. Insights From Teachers and School Leaders for Fostering Constructive Dialogue and Mitigating Classroom Polarisation. Case Studies From the Project ‘Participation’**

Davide Lauretta<sup>a</sup>

### **Abstract**

This article reports the specific challenges, contentious topics, and potential good practices for handling risks of toxic polarisation of pupils in the secondary school environment, as experienced by a sample of teachers and school leaders as part of their work with students in six EU countries: Belgium, Greece, Italy, Poland, Romania, and The Netherlands. Data and findings have been collected through explorative research in the field, within the framework of the H2020 Project named ‘PARTICIPATION’. Adolescence is a period of life where pupils are in an ongoing process of construction and consolidation of their identity and values, and school represents a microcosm of society (Haldane, 2004) where different worldviews coexist and can be in contrast. For this reason, training teachers to educate students in democratic values and developing critical thinking and resilience to violence and intolerance are fundamental to preventing toxic polarisation. To present the main issues and potential solutions identified during this research path, this article undertakes a cross-country analysis based on the interaction with the involved groups through the Social Lab methodology.

**Keywords:** teachers, students, secondary schools, challenges, contentious issues, toxic polarisation.

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## 1. Introduction

Education plays a key role in guiding individuals in the process of learning and formulating opinions and worldviews. This is particularly significant for young people during their adolescence, a period of growth and development oriented to building their own identity, especially in terms of personalities, beliefs, values, and motivations (Branje et al., 2021). As societies become increasingly complex and interconnected in the current era, young people may encounter numerous challenges in finding direction and shaping their cultural foundation and values, without discriminating against or being discriminated by the different ones. The difficulty in orientation and the consequent uncertainties, fears, guilt, and anxieties can be effectively exploited by extremist individuals and organisations through specific narratives based on an “Us vs. Them” or a “Them vs. Us” division of the world and related propaganda. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic is a clear example of how extremist individuals and organisations took advantage of the rare phenomenon to exacerbate societal divisions. In this specific case, it happened by spreading conspiracy theories surrounding vaccines, mask usage, the legitimacy of vaccine passports (green pass), and the origin of the virus. Meanwhile, political discourse was becoming increasingly acrimonious and polarised.

Within this context, young people have also faced significant stress due to the necessary restrictive measures implemented to contain the pandemic such as social isolation. It is particularly true for adolescent students who represent one of the weakest segments of society in terms of exposition to the risks and threats coming from toxic polarisation and radicalisation. In this regard, the school itself can be seen as a microcosm of society, encapsulating diverse perspectives, ideologies, and lifestyles, which can generate or raise conflicts.

Consequently, challenges relating to de-escalating harmful forms of toxic polarisation in the classroom and school environment as well as teaching sensitive topics in the school curriculum constitute a matter of concern for teachers and a key issue for the prevention and countering of violent extremism (P/CVE), including their related narratives and tropes, through education.

Teachers must be able to intercept contentious topics potentially triggering polarised and extremist worldviews as well as defined extremist narratives by grasping the uneasiness of their pupils and offering them an alliance to create constructive dialogue, helping them to cope with the complexities they experience by organising appropriate educational pathways. Exploring the challenges, practices, and the (good and bad) reactions put in place by teachers at school to deal with contentious issues in the classroom is a good way to create a dialogue among various contexts and practices in different EU Member States.

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However, the potential issues that could erupt in turmoil and chaos within the classroom and school environment not only concern students in peer-to-peer relationships and interactions but frequently can extend to teachers or arise between them and their students. Consequently, teachers themselves may adopt polarising stances and conspiracy thinking, rather than effectively addressing conflicts among students.

Without adequate training, achieving the goal of educating students to be resilient to toxic polarisation, radicalisation, and violent extremism is challenging. By understanding the lack of knowledge, skills, and tools from teachers and school leaders in facing contentious topics with their students within classrooms and the school environment, it is possible to fill the gaps in P/CVE activities and programmes. Moreover, by sharing good and bad practices, it is also possible to properly re-formulate strategies and recommendations.

For the goal of this special issue, the article presents a comparative analysis of the main results collected within the framework of the H2020 Project named 'PARTICIPATION' and aimed at investigating the specific challenges, contentious topics, and potential good practices for handling risks of toxic polarisation of pupils in the secondary school environment, as experienced by a sample of teachers and school leaders as part of their work with students in six EU countries: Belgium, Greece, Italy, Poland, Romania, and The Netherlands. This analysis is carried out by also reporting successes and failures of the Social Labs methodology in involving and training teachers after it has been developed and translated into practice through horizontal, bottom-up, and participatory approaches.

## **2. Method**

The method followed by the research team of the PARTICIPATION project was aimed at going over the simple results collected from the literature review. To achieve this goal, researchers carried out activities in the field by directly interacting with teachers and school leaders. In this regard, the Social Labs methodology played a key role. In line with the *raison d'être* of the horizontal, bottom-up, and participatory approaches, Social Labs stresses the importance of involving people directly interested in the issues that need to be solved (Hassan, 2014).

The Social Labs methodology allowed teachers to express their opinions, views, and feelings also concerning those aspects that are not easy to share with others. This opportunity is given because of the climate of trust and the level of anonymity at the basis of this methodology. Despite a growing interest in

understanding how challenges linked to controversial issues entered the classroom and school environment in the '80s and '90s, and the increase of scholars' research and publications on this topic in the 2000s, a systematic overview of the challenges and contentious topics teachers and school leaders face in the school environment as part of their work with students was never elaborated at the EU level. Moreover, the previous literature never properly explored the relationship between teachers and parents in dealing with contentious issues relating to toxic polarisation and affecting pupils and children. In this regard, the focus is based not only on the concerns of teachers and parents in discussing sensitive issues with their pupils and children but also on the challenge to discuss the same issues with each other.

Of course, building a safe space for discussion and a trustful relationship with teachers is not automatic and immediate. Researchers have had to properly reflect on how to implement in practice the theoretical aspect of Social Labs methodology to achieve those goals. As also stated in the Social Labs manual (Shanley et al., 2021, p. 19): *“As for a teacher for instance, becoming a member of a social lab will entail additional time and effort on top of a job which is already quite demanding. It is therefore important to think about how participation can be made attractive for these professionals. What kind of support do they need from their directors for instance? What is it that the organizers of the social lab can do to provide them with the support they need?”*.

At first, since the COVID-19 pandemic was still causing issues, disadvantages, and challenges in organising offline meetings, the research team allowed teachers and school leaders to participate also online when needed. Even if the Social Labs methodology was built to be implemented in the offline dimension, it was important to include the online one to reach out to a higher number of participants as possible. Moreover, because of the abovementioned issues, the research team was available to the participating teachers during the whole course of the fieldwork by also answering any additional questions or doubts coming from them. In line with the Social Labs methodology, the activity was coordinated by a 'Facilitator' in each involved country, who was in charge of selecting, contacting, and following the research process with participants.

As stated in the manual (Shanley et al., 2021, p. 18): *“Facilitators are responsible for the conduct of the social lab meetings. Facilitators therefore typically have knowledge or expertise of co-creation techniques, they help to shape, support, and motivate the social lab team as they go through the process. [...]. They play an important role in the social lab methodology, in terms of helping to create a safe space and supporting the group with things like agenda setting, leading the discussions, introducing creative tools, etc”*.

The starting point of the primary desk research was built around two research questions:

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1. What are the main challenges and polarising contentious issues faced by teachers in secondary schools as part of their work with students in Belgium, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, and Romania?
2. What are the main good and bad practices that are possible to list on how to deal with these challenges and contentious issues in the classroom in Belgium, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, and Romania?

In order to understand what the main challenges, contentious topics, potential reactions from teachers as well as good and bad practices, and useful recommendations are, the research activity in the abovementioned six EU Member States has been carried out through three steps:

1. Desk research of the existing literature published in the last two decades on this topic, mainly focused on projects implemented in secondary schools and aimed at handling contentious and polarising topics and curbing young radicalisation.
2. The distribution of an online survey named *Contentious issues in the classroom: teachers' challenges and responses* to teachers in the six abovementioned countries.
3. The conduction of two workshops (a 'Set-the Scene' and a 'Follow-up' workshop). This activity was implemented within the framework of the Social Labs developed by the project PARTICIPATION, following a method based on a participatory and bottom-up approach.

The research path has been led by the European Foundation for Democracy (EFD) and the University of Catania. The research team was also composed by researchers coming from the following organisations: Kentro Merimnas Oikogeneias kai Paidiou (KMOP), Centro studi ed iniziative europeo (CESIE), Stichting Human Security Collective (HSC), Universiteit Maastricht (UM), Polish Platform for Homeland Security (PPBW), and Peace Action Training and Research Institute of Romania (PATRIR).

### ***2.1 The 'Set-the-Scene' workshop***

As already mentioned, two typologies of workshops have been held during the activity in the field.

The first one was called the 'Set-the-Scene' workshop. It was held with teachers at secondary schools in the different countries under investigation after having drafted the first version of the online survey as a structured questionnaire, containing both closed-ended and open-ended questions based on the preliminary findings collected through the desk research. Thus, methodologically speaking, the main objective of 'Set-the-Scene' workshops

was twofold: first, to present the framework and the objectives of the research, but also to start building a trustful relationship with the teachers involved, providing them with a safe space where discussing their experiences and sharing their opinions; second, to discuss with the teachers involved the first version of the survey, ensuring that the questions were clear, and asking them to reflect on possible improvements that could be made to the survey.

Because of reasons concerning the availability and preferences of the teachers involved in this activity, the ‘Set-the-Scene’ workshops have been mainly conducted online.

## ***2.2 The online survey: Contentious issues in the classroom: teachers’ challenges and responses***

The online survey is the result of the first draft of questions formulated by the research team based on the insights collected during the desk research and the additional ones suggested by the teachers and school leaders involved in the ‘Set-the-Scene’ workshops. About this last point, there was a specific request to add more questions containing open-ended answers. Even if the final version of the questionnaire has been standardised for all the countries involved in this activity, it has been translated into each country’s language and adapted to the specific local context (e.g., differences in the educational systems, different roles of teachers in the various countries, different curricula, and levels of education, different terminologies, etc.), ensuring that the meaning of the questions and the answers would have not been affected.

To encourage a larger number of teachers to participate in the survey, participants were assured of complete anonymity and were allowed to answer all or only some of the survey questions. All the involved teachers and school leaders worked with students mainly aged between 12 to 19 in the six EU Member States under investigation and replied based on what they experienced in the last (approximately) five years.

The selection of the teachers involved in this research path, while based on those working in secondary schools, has been interested in the need to diversify the sample as much as possible in terms of their geographical locations, gender, and subjects taught. When possible, schools with a high concentration of different socio-economic and socio-cultural profiles have been prioritised. In some cases, teachers working in schools located in communities suffering from economic or ethnic exclusion and marginalisation, have been specifically targeted. Moreover, a mixed approach has been adopted, involving both teachers and school leaders previously involved in other activities in the project ‘PARTICIPATION’ and new participants, for a total of 156 individuals who

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responded to this online survey.

This questionnaire has been divided into three sections. The first section investigated the most recurrent challenges, and the contentious topics teachers face in the classroom and the school environment, and to what extent teachers experienced them. It was aimed at exploring 1) the teachers' perception of the support they receive from their colleagues and the school management in dealing with these issues; 2) teachers' thoughts about existing educational tools and training for school staff to address challenges and contentious topics in the classroom, and their additional needs in order to strengthen their capacity to deal with these challenges; 3) the kind and grade of relationship with the parents of their students.

The second section looked into reactions and practices to address challenges and contentious topics in the classroom and the school environment, by 1) identifying good and bad practices to deal with challenges and contentious topics in the classroom; 2) exploring teachers' main suggestions and perceived obstacles to dealing with challenges and contentious topics in the classroom; 3) collecting any additional comments teachers wanted to share for the sake of the survey.

Finally, the third section of the survey was devoted to collecting information on the sample of teachers who filled out the questionnaire such as teachers' gender, age, country of work, subjects taught, years of teaching, as well as type and location of their schools, age groups of their students, and other roles covered at school besides teaching.

### ***2.3 The 'Follow-up' workshop***

The 'Follow-up' workshops with teachers and school leaders were held in each country after having analysed the data gathered from the online survey. This activity played an important role and was a unique opportunity because led the research team to readdress some questions and ask for clarifications, especially regarding the collected open answers, to achieve a more in-depth understanding of the specific context of each country, and to strengthen the trust-based relationship built with the teachers during the 'Set-the-Scene' workshops. The activities that have been carried out here followed the same criteria at the core of the Social Labs methodology. These workshops have been conducted both in-person and online depending on the teachers' availabilities.

### 3. Description of the sample

The sample of the online survey was composed of a total of one hundred and fifty-six teachers (of those who shared their gender, ninety-eight were female and fifty-two were males), with different ages and years of experience (please see the graphics below).

Figure 1: Age of involved teachers in the online survey who shared this information.

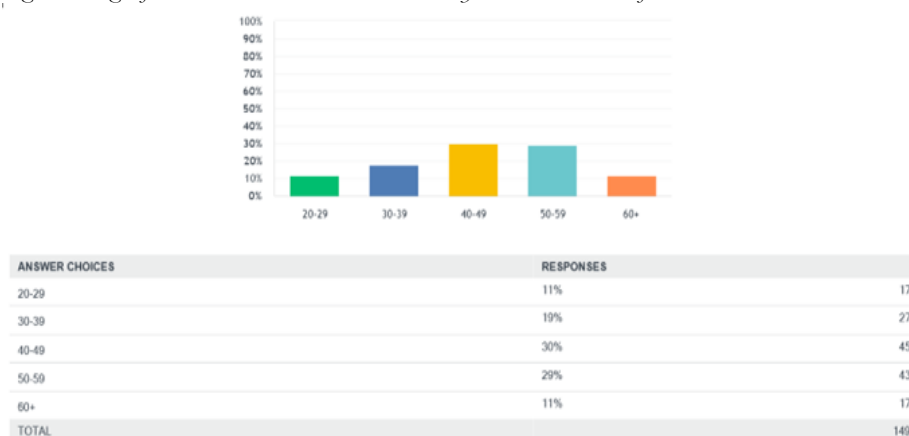
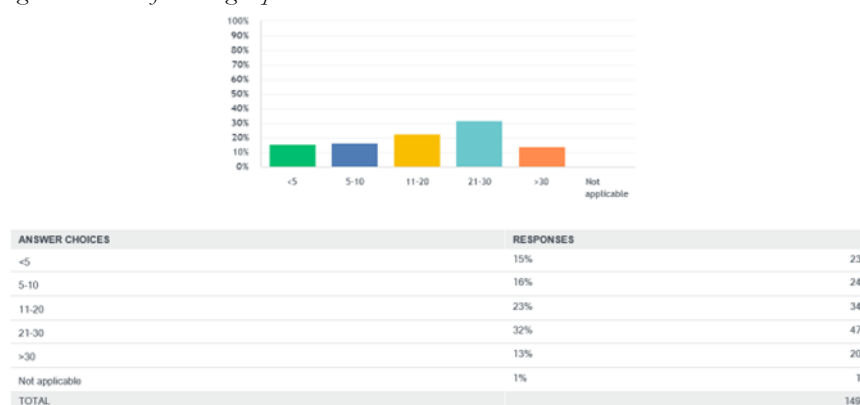


Figure 2: Years of teaching experience



Their schools were mainly located in big cities (79), followed by those in towns (65), with only a low number of them located in small villages (15). Almost all students that teachers have taught are between twelve and nineteen; only a few teachers have declared to have taught younger students (from six to



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eleven years old), or older (from twenty to sixty years old), in the last five years. The majority of surveyed teachers have taught subjects related to humanities studies, followed by sciences. This information was important considering that teachers in the humanity field potentially may have more opportunities to encourage debates on contentious topics. For this reason, understanding their challenges or practices has been relevant to the aims of the research carried out in the project. Moreover, eighty-five teachers in the whole sample have declared to also play (or have played) the role of mentor, counselor, but also psychologist, principal and assistant principal, as well as projects coordinator. Finally, in terms of their teaching experience, the sample was composed of teachers with different years of experience, from those with less than five years of experience to teachers with more than thirty years of experience (responses released by 149 teachers out of 156 in the whole sample).

#### **4. The contribution of the Social Labs methodology in exploring challenges and contentious topics teachers have experienced in their classrooms and school environment**

As already mentioned, the two kinds of workshops that researchers of the PARTICIPATION project carried out for this activity focused on schools were fundamental to building a trustful relationship with involved teachers and school leaders. Moreover, the 'Follow-up' workshop was aimed at readdressing some questions and asking for clarifications as well as achieving a more in-depth understanding of the specific context of each country.

Based on these premises, concerning the first section of the online survey, the participatory approach at the core of the Social Labs methodology lets researchers collect additional and detailed insights about the challenges and contentious topics teachers may have experienced during their work with pupils as well as let them share their thoughts, fears, difficulties in addressing complex situations because of the sensitivity of certain debates and interactions.

Indeed, all involved teachers were provided with a list of challenges and contentious topics previously detected during desk research and asked to indicate if they experienced them or not in the abovementioned context and to what extent (very often, often, sometimes, or never). Moreover, teachers were asked to report any additional challenges or contentious topics not mentioned in the survey but that they experienced in the last five years.

The tables below outline the five most frequently occurring challenges and the ten most frequently contentious topics faced by the teachers in the whole sample. In case of multiple challenges receiving the same score, the research

team has prioritised those with a larger number of very often rather than often and sometimes, or of often rather than sometimes.

*Table 1. Most experienced challenges in daily life at school reported by teachers, in the whole sample.*

| CHALLENGES   | VERY<br>OFTEN | OFTEN | SOMETIMES |
|--|---------------|-------|-----------|
| Changing your role from ‘transferring knowledge’ to ‘moderating a conversation’ when it comes to speaking about topics that give rise to polarisation. | 20            | 44    | 80        |
| Managing polarising comments shared by pupils during class.  | 9             | 39    | 94        |
| Communicating constructively with the families of the students.  | 25            | 53    | 50        |
| Questions related to polarising topics, asked by students, which were difficult to answer.   | 3             | 25    | 101       |
| Handling conflicts and disputes between students, that related to contentious issues within society.   | 14            | 39    | 74        |

*Table 2. Most frequently experienced contentious topics in daily life at school, reported by teachers in the whole sample*

| CONTENTIOUS TOPICS  | VERY<br>OFTEN | OFTEN | SOMETIMES |
|---|---------------|-------|-----------|
| Discussions about the government's measures to counter the Covid-19 pandemic.           | 31            | 57    | 60        |
| Bullying and cyber-bullying.  | 10            | 36    | 82        |
| Disinformation related issues (e.g., fake news and conspiracy theories).                | 16            | 51    | 60        |
| Intolerance towards the existing cultural, social, or religious differences in society. | 2             | 27    | 94        |
| Gender.   | 1             | 36    | 82        |
| Racism.   | 1             | 12    | 15        |
| Issues relating to clothes at school.   | 10            | 31    | 73        |
| Grievances relating to social conflicts and inequalities in society.                    | 2             | 38    | 71        |
| Intolerance against gender and sexual diversity (e.g., anti-LGBTQ).                     | 2             | 34    | 74        |
| Juvenile delinquency.   | 5             | 20    | 83        |

The impact played by the Social Labs methodology consisted of confirming or not the results obtained through the desk research and the online survey and of going more in-depth in the discussion with teachers and school leaders to comment on the answers given in the survey. What emerged from the ‘Follow-up’ workshops is that involved participants confirmed they had experienced and still currently experience those main challenges and contentious topics. In this case, the Social Labs methodology was an important litmus test to validate the outputs collected from the literature review and indicate its reliability.

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Starting from the main experienced challenges, it is clear that they mostly refer to the difficulty of teachers to moderate and manage conversations which may give rise to polarisation in the classroom, including answering students' questions related to polarising topics and handling potential conflicts and disputes among pupils. In this case, during the 'Follow-up' workshops, teachers shared their dilemma about privileging neutrality to avoid judging students' worldviews or transmitting values and moral principles as part of their duties. As stated by a teacher (Farinelli, 2022, p. 150), "[...] *having an open attitude and allowing pupils to explore the topic together provides an opportunity to exchange different perspectives. However, this can sometimes pose a challenge: How open do we remain, how much do we allow? When should we set that limit of this is no longer okay?*". This issue is also linked to the boundary between teachers' personal and professional obligations that make teachers difficult to properly address certain debates and conflicts in the classroom and school environment. Moving to the main experienced contentious topics, instead, the Social Labs methodology played an important role in pushing teachers to share many additional themes that had not emerged from the desk research and literature review. First of all, the main contentious topic experienced by teachers who filled in the online survey concerns all the discussions related to the governmental measures to counter the COVID-19 pandemic. During the workshops, teachers better explained the reasons behind their answers. Indeed, the discussion about vaccines exacerbated conflicts among peers in the classroom, also spreading 'Us-vs-Them' narratives. Moreover, after the long isolation due to the restrictive measures, many students experienced strong difficulty upon returning to the school environment, developing and adopting polarising behaviours that are an expression of the other main contentious topics resulting from the online survey: for example, bullying and cyberbullying, racism, intolerance, and juvenile delinquency.

As mentioned before, the Social Labs methodology lets teachers share additional contentious topics and motivate their replies. Among them, the main ones that have been reported concern: 1) conflicts with other colleagues on contentious issues; 2) students' worrying about the treatment of Ukrainian migrants, especially in comparison to the treatment of refugees from Africa or the Middle East; 3) religiously inspired extremist views; 4) me-too related discussions; 5) the influence placed on students "from the neighbourhood" over how they should act at school, with whom they should socialise, and how they should dress; 6) drug-related issues; 7) an increase in physical aggression from students against teachers.

Certainly, the intensity and frequency of such discussions vary from country to country. Moreover, internally in each region, this variety also depends on the maturity of the groups of students, the composition of their

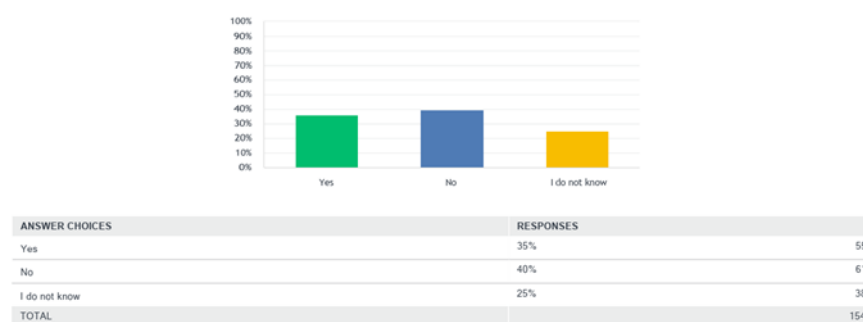
cultural backgrounds, and the classroom size. At the same time, what emerged from the participatory approach at the core of the ‘Follow-up’ workshops is that students seem to be more open to the discussion in the humanities sciences than in the so-called ‘hard’ ones. Last but not least, teachers who also play a mentorship role in the classroom and school environment appear to be more self-confident in debating such contentious and sensitive topics with pupils and let them be more comfortable in sharing their opinions.

### 5. Level of teachers’ knowledge and training in addressing contentious topic, and grade of support and collaboration among colleagues and with their school administration

The online survey contained some questions aimed at investigating teachers’ knowledge of the educational tools at their disposal to address the abovementioned contentious topics, if those tools are considered adequate for teachers, and if these latter and the school staff as well feel well-trained in utilising those tools.

What emerged is that a high number of teachers have a lack of knowledge about the existing educational tools at their disposal to face contentious issues. Moreover, almost all surveyed teachers feel not adequately trained and do not know if the educational tools are effective in working with students on certain sensitive topics.

*Figure 3. Surveyed teachers’ perception about the existing of an adequate number of educational tools to address challenges and contentious topics in the classroom/ the school environment.*



Social Labs through ‘Follow-up’ workshops confirmed teachers’ general lack of knowledge about existing educational tools. In their opinion, the absence of a central database that collects all these tools is the main reason for the difficulty of finding and consulting related material online, and the lack of

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specific guidelines to follow makes the utilisation of these tools more challenging, especially because they do not offer practical examples about what to do in each specific situation. Finally, involved teachers found educational tools potentially ineffective in addressing specific cultural and religious differences in the classroom.

Figure 4. Surveyed teachers’ perception about their being sufficiently trained to use educational tools.

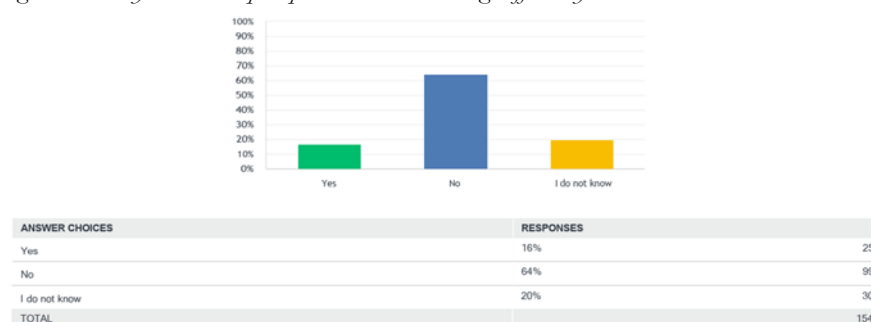
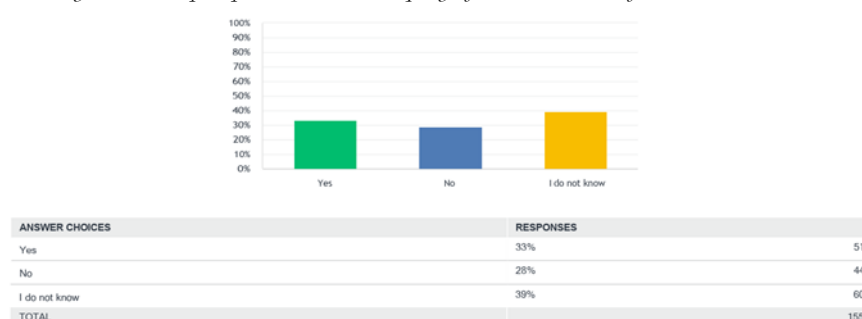


Figure 5. Surveyed teachers’ perception about the adequacy of educational tools for their students.



Despite the lack of knowledge and a perceived inadequate level of training, many teachers during workshops mentioned some utilised tools, even if the major part admitted to not recurring to specific methods and material: 1) the prevention material provided by the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN); 2) the use of a scientific approach to clarify students’ doubts and answer their questions; 3) empowerment techniques and videos for building up the capability of students to “control elements” in their environment; 4) practical handbook created by EU funded projects like Euroguide; 5) the support of school psychologists in addressing controversial issues in the school environment; 6) face-to-face meetings with anti-radicalisation practitioners and experts

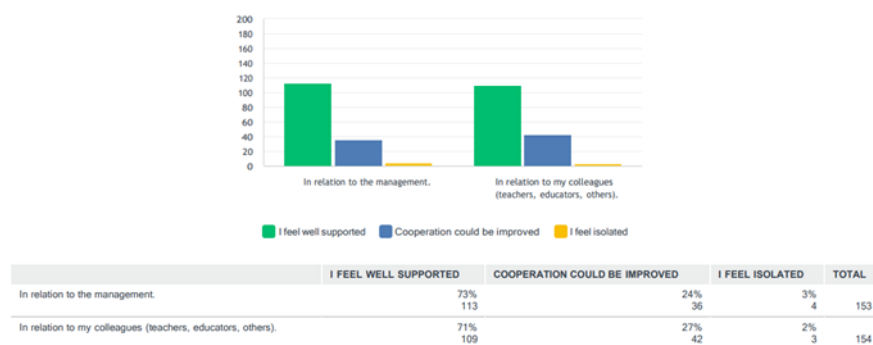
representing the civil society sector; 7) online resources (videos, documentaries, news, and photographs to facilitate the discussion in the classroom); 8) exercises and games to develop empathy and the knowledge of the other.

To increase their capacity to cope with challenges and polarising, contentious issues in the classroom and the school environment, many teachers pointed out the necessity to:

- create a network with local authorities, by recurring effective training courses able to propose concrete strategies and approaches, based on real-life examples;
- organise specific workshops and training around controversial topics, tailored to different students' age groups and for the various disciplines that teachers teach;
- receive training in managing conversation to better support and motivate the pupils.

The level of cooperation among teachers and between them and the school administration is another key point discussed during the activity carried out in task 3.4 of the PARTICIPATION project. Despite the majority of respondents having expressed positive feedback both towards peers and school leaders against a very low amount of negative responses from teachers who feel isolated, a high number of participants stressed the necessity to improve the quality of these collaborations.

Figure 6. Perception of support received from colleagues and school management by teachers in the whole sample



The 'Follow-up' workshops were a great opportunity to encourage teachers to share their opinions and views about these aspects, especially taking into consideration it is not easy for them to express certain thoughts about colleagues and the school administration outside a safe space for discussion like that of the Social Labs. In this regard, teachers who think cooperation among

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them could be improved or is not sufficient, motivated their answers by testifying about a lack of availability for comparison and cooperation between themselves and their colleagues; a lack of essential communication, also with students and their families; pressure and time constraints to complete the school curriculum; competition between teachers; prejudices and inappropriate behaviours stemming from colleagues; and the choice, of many colleagues, to remain distant from incidents occurring in the school context to avoid further problems.

Regarding the school management, instead, teachers reported an insufficient presence of the school leaders, also concerning their participation in the 'Teaching Staff Meetings'; an inadequate level of skills and attention given by the management to solve contentious issues, especially through an integrated plan, but on the contrary recurring to find and label a culprit rather than solving the real disputes; and a lack of offers, from the management, in terms of training for teachers on ethical and societal issues as well as on how to address polarisation and radicalisation-related issues in the classroom.

## **6. Exploring the complex triangular relationship: teachers – students-students' parents**

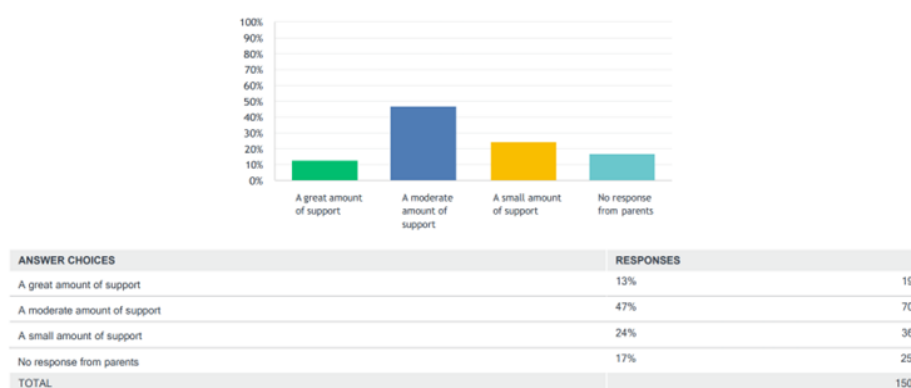
The research path underlined the importance of understanding if and how teachers and students' parents interact with each other to tackle sensitive and/or contentious issues concerning students, and what obstacles may undermine this cooperation. This, considering that their reciprocal communication and cooperation can play a pivotal role in the safeguarding of pupils' school life.

The online survey revealed that the level of this interaction is moderate or even small, taking into account that it varies from parent to parent.

The main issues for this cooperation concern linguistic and cultural barriers, time constraints, a certain reluctance of parents to be involved in extra-curricular activities because more interested in the results and grades than in the educational role played by the school, and a lack of trust in the school system. About the cultural barriers, it also happens that parents exclude women from the discussion and ban their children from participating in sports activities or outings.

The 'Follow-up' workshops were a great occasion for teachers to discuss among themselves and elaborate on some suggestions to cope with these issues. In this regard, many teachers expressed the importance of offering parents a better image of school life, involving more cultural mediators and interpreters to overcome the linguistic and cultural barriers, in order to build a constructive relationship aimed at preventing certain issues before they can occur.

Figure 7. Perception of support received by teachers from parents, in the whole sample.



## 7. Perceived good and bad practices to address challenges and contentious topics in the classroom and the school environment

As part of their work, researchers provided surveyed teachers with a list of practices that could be adopted to tackle challenges and contentious topics by asking teachers if these actions were considered good or bad in their opinions.

Starting from those practices mainly considered as good, it is possible to mention the following ones: trying to develop a sense of empathy with and among students; building a trust-based relationship with students; teaching critical thinking skills; raising awareness regarding the consequences of violence; increasing students' knowledge about active citizenship and the relationship between rights and responsibilities; engaging with parents and request their support in cases of concern, where students are isolating themselves; and facilitating a space for discussion where every student can talk and be heard, no matter their position. On the contrary, mocking the students who share certain fake sources to incite them to react against disinformation, ignoring the challenges and issues facing young people to avoid making matters worse, and trying to find out who is right and who is wrong when students share their thoughts, are the practices mainly considered as negative from the teachers. But the main curious element concerns two practices that have received a similar number of both good and bad evaluations: debating online news that is based on unclear sources or none at all, and asking for support from the police.



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*Table 3. Good and bad practices in the whole sample.*

| ITEMS  | GOOD<br>PRACTICE | BAD<br>PRACTICE |
|--|------------------|-----------------|
| Facilitate a space for discussion where every student can talk and be heard, no matter their position.   | 133              | 3               |
| Building a trust-based relationship with students.   | 144              | 1               |
| Trying to find out who is right and who is wrong when students share their thoughts.   | 54               | 73              |
| Peer-to-peer approaches.   | 99               | 11              |
| Addressing taboo-related issues.   | 112              | 6               |
| Looking for early signs of radicalisation processes.   | 88               | 10              |
| Ignoring the challenges and issues facing young people to avoid making matters worse.  | 10               | 128             |
| Reporting signs of pupils’ radicalisation processes to the school principal.   | 105              | 9               |
| Trying to develop a sense of empathy with and among students.  | 143              | 1               |
| Strengthen resilience against violent narratives by teaching students critical thinking tools and methods for media literacy.  | 131              | 3               |
| Empowering the triangular relationship between students, teachers, and parents.  | 135              | 3               |
| Keeping the school management well informed.   | 119              | 3               |
| Establishing networks between teachers across Europe.  | 96               | 3               |
| Invite experts in the classroom (e.g.: psychologists, CSOs, NGOs, young ambassadors).  | 133              | 6               |
| Debating online news that is based on unclear sources or none at all.  | 76               | 50              |
| Discussions about democratic values and human rights.  | 141              | 0               |
| Provide lessons on the importance of tolerance and anti-discrimination.  | 126              | 7               |
| Mock the students who share certain fake sources to incite them to react against disinformation.   | 13               | 117             |
| Raise awareness regarding consequences of violence.  | 140              | 3               |
| Ask for support from the police.   | 70               | 24              |
| Ongoing training for teachers in the prevention of radicalisation.   | 102              | 5               |
| Cooperation between schools and representatives of minority groups to push back against “Us vs Them” narratives.   | 116              | 7               |
| Teach critical thinking to students.   | 141              | 0               |
| Ongoing training for teachers and students to spot fake news and harmful conspiracy theories.  | 117              | 4               |
| Increase students’ knowledge about active citizenship and the relationship between rights and responsibilities.  | 138              | 2               |
| Increase students’ knowledge of democratic practices and processes.  | 133              | 2               |
| Rely on alternative means of education such as arts, crafts, one-to-one development.   | 117              | 5               |
| Watch for and take action in cases of students with mental health issues, coming from domestic violence, abuse, addiction contexts by referring them to professionals, confidentially. | 131              | 2               |
| Engage with parents, and request their support in cases of concern, where students are isolating themselves.   | 134              | 1               |

The last one was revealed as a sensitive topic. In this regard, the Social Labs methodology encouraged teachers to motivate their replies and opinions through the trustful relationship and the safe space guaranteed in the ‘Follow-up’ workshops. Indeed, for some teachers, the level of trust felt among young

people towards the police is very low in some cities and communities. It seems that the police are not necessarily better equipped than teachers to manage these discussions. For this reason, some involved teachers have highlighted the need to build trust between youth and the police, provide police with adequate pedagogical training before working with students on these topics, and avoid interferences in the educational relationship between teachers and students.

Furthermore, the boundary between good and bad in the abovementioned practice depends on the types of support that the police can provide. For some teachers, indeed, it could be positive to involve police in meetings to discuss contentious subjects recurring in dialogue. On the contrary, many teachers are afraid to involve the police in possible cases of radicalisation among their students, since this could undermine the trustful relationship between teachers and students and make things worse for their pupils. In this last case, involving police should be the last option after having discussed it with other experts.

Moving to the feedback on the practice of debating online news, many teachers are aware of the role that the online social space plays for young people, including on an emotional level. A cautious approach is required, in order to avoid fostering the polarisation of opinions: in this regard, teachers think this kind of issues should be addressed indirectly by working with students on the importance of the value of sources and performing 'live research'.

The Social Labs also gave the occasion to comment and discuss more in-depth the additional good and/or bad practices the online survey encouraged teachers to share in some open questions. These practices were then further discussed during the 'Follow-up' workshops. As good practices, teachers mention any activity encouraging students to share their thoughts and opinions in a safe space for discussion, including on an individual level, is a beneficial practice. More specifically: 1) the usage of activities such as *Walk in my shoes*, which help students to put themselves in the shoes of 'the other', as well as allowing students and teachers to discuss sensitive themes on a regular basis; 2) a positive relationship inside the classroom, to prevent toxic polarisation and guarantee peaceful coexistence; 3) examples of successful geographical, political, individual, economic, and ecological cooperation that might help raise awareness of toxic polarisation and radicalisation-related issues; 4) the importance of understanding students' needs, attitudes and motivations; 5) creating an opportunity for students to seek solutions to their problems and take responsibility for these solutions to avoid making students feel relieved from the responsibility of the choices they make.

## 8. Main suggestions and obstacles to dealing with challenges and contentious topics

The 'Follow-up' workshops also encouraged teachers to comment on certain open answers more properly than they offered in the online survey concerning two specific questions about suggestions and obstacles to deal with challenges and contentious topics.

The first question was: *If you were to give three suggestions on how to successfully deal with challenges and contentious topics in the classrooms and the school environment, what would you suggest?*

In line with the previously collected feedback, teachers reiterated the need for 1) a higher (practical) preparation for them and the school administration as a whole; 2) a more fruitful collaboration among teachers and the whole school staff, but also including external experts and students' parents; 3) a constant and continuously updated training on how to address challenges and contentious topics; 4) a clear, school-wide, normative framework to address toxic polarisation at school to act in a more cooperative, structured, and cohesive way through the different subjects thought; 5) a more clear understanding of the role of emotions in generating certain behaviours and actions in pupils, especially when they become easily affected by disinformation, polarisation and radicalisation-related issues.

The second question, instead, was: *What is, in your view, the main obstacle to successfully dealing with challenges and contentious topics in the classrooms and the school environment?*

Coherently, the collected answers are linked to the suggestions that had been shared previously and concern 1) a lack of collaboration between students' parents and the school system; 2) a lack of universally recognised methodologies in dealing with such topics; 3) a lack of an effective training for teachers; 4) linked to the previous one, a lack of relevant educational tools and/or knowledge of these tools among teachers with a consequent lack of confidence to discuss such topics with students in an open manner; 5) students' immaturity-related issues; 6) the role of teachers as evaluators of pupils' performance at school; 7) the decline in the importance and prestige of the teaching profession; 8) a lack of a universally agreed definition of radicalisation and the dispersive way in which the prevention material is distributed. All these obstacles merge with an agreed consideration among interviewed teachers: a more comprehensive and holistic approach to the prevention of radicalisation is essential to avoid putting excessive pressure on teachers at school, with the illusion that this latter can solve all the abovementioned issues among adolescents. As a teacher stated during Social Labs (Farinelli, 2022, p. 208): *"There seems to be an assumption that the school must be the place where radicalisation is*

*combated. I think that education can indeed play an important role here, but it is an illusion to think that schools can offer a complete solution. The lives of young people and the influences they receive do not all take place at school. In my opinion, their home situation, their secondary job, their sports club and the approach of the government, play at least as big a role”.*

### **9. Successes and failures of the Social Labs methodology applied to this case study**

As already affirmed, the Social Labs methodology developed in the framework of the H2020 project PARTICIPATION has provided the methodological foundations for the process undertaken. Being local hubs that support local experimental learning processes, Social Labs unite individuals who are directly impacted by complex societal issues in numerous ways, involving them in a secure environment conducive to learning through participatory experimentation. The creation of a safe space for discussion lets participants share their opinions and feedback freely and go over fears and hesitations, also thanks to the guarantee of their anonymity. Moreover, horizontal and participatory approaches make teachers feel comfortable playing an active role in finding and building strategies and solutions in dealing with challenges and contentious topics with their students in the classroom and the school environment.

However, some points of weakness were not missed. Indeed, carrying out Social Labs in an offline dimension offers several advantages, not only because the in-person meeting provides a more intimate setting to build trust and share knowledge and expertise for the successful functioning of the group, but also because body language and non-verbal clues are an essential part of these sorts of exchanges to understand reactions, behaviours and states of minds of the participants involved in these interactions (Braun et al., 2020). Moreover, the Social Labs are conceived as a place where exchanges take place over a long period through numerous sessions.

Unfortunately, the logistical and time constraints resulting from the pandemic period consequently limited the opportunities to meet participants many times and bring additional relational dynamics and potential solutions. Thus, when they were held online, workshops did not allow researchers to easily observe non-verbal signs and re-adapt the discussion based on these potential teachers' and school leaders' reactions.

Despite these limitations, which did not occur in all workshops because some of them were held in person, the Social Labs methodology brought successful practices in order to collect significant insights, opinions, and recommendations from and for teachers, school leaders, and policymakers on

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how to address challenges and contentious issues with pupils in the classroom and the school environment. It was possible thanks to the trustful climate of interaction promoted by the research team of the PARTICIPATION project, the already mentioned safe space including the guarantee of anonymity, and the availability of researchers to support teachers over the whole duration of the activity to clarify potential doubts and provide additional information when required.

#### **10. Final remarks and recommendations**

The collected data and insights from the desk-research until the workshops, through the online survey as well, showed a common and shared sense of insecurity and uncertainty among teachers in terms of dealing with challenges and contentious topics in the classroom and the school environment. Despite the different characteristics and peculiarities among the six EU-involved countries, it was possible to find common concerns and difficulties. The main ones are related to the challenges in detecting clear indicators and signs of radicalisation processes; finding and/or creating educational tools and effective training to deal with contentious topics; understanding the best way to implement the practices of the legislation regarding the prevention of radicalisation in the school environment; enhancing constructive dialogues in the classroom and handling conflicts and disputes between students regarding contentious issues within society; building a productive communication between teachers and students' parents, but also a strong and effective cooperation with colleagues and the school administration; fitting any 'prevent material' into the specific classroom settings; remaining neutral and, at the same time, conveying democratic values and the importance of the rule of law during the discussion of contentious topics in the classroom, and, above all, changing their role from 'transferring knowledge' to 'moderating a conversation' in the classroom. These aspects met additional criticalities concerning the specific current era: the COVID-19 pandemic, the recent Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, the lack of a common terminology surrounding radicalisation and extremism, time constraints the pressure to finish the school curricula, and the progressive decline in teachers' authority within society.

The collected findings allowed the research team to provide a set of recommendations addressed to policymakers and school administrations to support teachers in dealing with challenges and contentious issues entering the classroom. These recommendations can help build stronger resilience in secondary schools against polarisation and radicalisation-related issues, and protect pupils from violent extremism.

Based on the difficulties reported before, the recommendations formulated through the activities carried out in the PARTICIPATION project are the positive translation of those needs and challenges and are as follows:

- 1) The need for consistent frameworks and a clear vision: this recommendation can be translated into the introduction of a holistic approach consisting of uniform procedures and clear guidelines, including pedagogical methodologies, on how to address issues concerning toxic polarisation and radicalisation as well as a whole-of-school approach to encourage certain practices and values and better involve students' parents.
- 2) Insert discussions on contentious topics into the official schools' curricula: it could be a solution against time constraints.
- 3) Tailored and easily accessible educational tools: properly equipping teachers with them requires a) a fruitful and enhanced dialogue with civil society organisations to facilitate the transfer of knowledge and experiences; b) clear guidelines on how to use educational tools; c) to build neutral tools which do not convey political messages; d) to disseminate these tools through a central EU online library in order to facilitate access to teachers.
- 4) Cooperation between teachers, the school management, and the whole school staff: in this regard, it is important a constant dialogue on a regular basis, giving more space to non-formal educational activities and participatory consultations, involving psychotherapists, and adopting specific targeted actions within the different courses and their integrated dialogues.
- 5) The need for training through the material, tools, and practices organised in a systematic and consistent framework.
- 6) Empower the triangular relationship between students, teachers, and parents.
- 7) Establish networks of cooperation, also involving outside experts who could assist teachers in managing classroom debates on contentious issues, such as local governments, trustworthy organisations from the civic society, and the police in those specific cases when their contribution could be useful for the expected aims (e.g., in meetings to discuss contentious subjects recurring in dialogue).
- 8) Expand the range of activities for students at school, including non-formal ones in scope, such as collaboration activities, project-based learning, etc.

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