Different Communities, Common Concerns: an Analysis of Teachers' Challenges and Practices in Handling Contentious Issues with Students in Belgian Secondary Schools

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Different Communities, Common Concerns: an Analysis of Teachers' Challenges and Practices in Handling Contentious Issues with Students in Belgian Secondary Schools

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Abstract. This article reports on the main findings of the research activities undertaken in Belgium, within the framework of the H2020 project PARTICIPATION, to gather data and provide analysis of teachers' challenges and practices in handling contentious issues with students in Belgian secondary schools. After having synthesised the main data collected through desk research, the article presents the main findings of an online survey administered to thirty-two teachers (22 Belgian French-speaking teachers and 10 Belgian Flemish-speaking teachers) and of the two workshops conducted with them, to make teachers at the very core of this research. The article concludes with a set of recommendations based on the collection of teachers' views regarding challenges, obstacles, and good and bad practices, as well as their perceived needs and requirements, that would improve their skills at addressing challenges and contentious topics in the classroom.

Keywords: Teachers, students, challenges, contentious issues, Belgium secondary schools.

Introduction: country context overview

Belgium sits across the cultural fault line that separates Latin and German civilisations. This explains why the country has three official languages (Flemish, French, and German) and is organised into three different regions and communities (the Flemish Region, the Brussels Capital Region, and the Walloon Region).[1] The Education System in Belgium is separately regulated by, and composed of, these three communities. Most members of the German-speaking community in Belgium enrol in either Flemish or French-speaking educational institutions. Political, linguistic, and cultural diversity contributes to a distinctive, Belgian cultural richness while also posing some challenges. Indeed, as found during the desk research phase investigating Belgium, the country's fragmented society may, in some cases, contribute to the fuelling of grievances and radicalisation processes within its population (Medeiros, Gauvin & Chhim, 2020). Adding a layer of complexity on top of this division, within EU Member States, Belgian cities appear to have the greatest rates of risks resulting from social exclusion and urban poverty (Sealy & Modood, 2020). Furthermore, to ensure the effectiveness of the programmes and projects created to prevent radicalisation and polarisation in the country, they need to be available in the different languages of the target communities and designed to deal with specific cultural issues that each of these communities faces.

Acts of extremist violence and terrorist attacks have a lengthy history in the country (Sealy & Modood, 2020). These attacks have had a wide variety of driving factors and perpetrators; they have included explosions planned by far-left organisations, the Provisional IRA, and violent Islamist groups, as well as assaults motivated by antisemitism and right-wing extremist ideologies (Maniscalco & Rosato, 2019).

Belgium, like many other EU Member States, has experienced an upsurge in the phenomena of foreign fighters who left the country to fight for terrorist organisations in Syria or Iraq. The bulk of them originated from Brussels, which was followed in the Flemish area by Antwerp, Vilvoorde, and Maaseik (EUROGUIDE, 2021).

Following the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, fake news and conspiracy theories have grown in popularity thanks to extremists of different persuasions who fostered the spread of polarising views, extremist narratives, and anti-government stances. Right-wing extremists, for instance, have notably spouted alleged secret plots and conspiracies on social media, and exploited the COVID-19 situation to incite racial tensions or to challenge the legitimacy of the Belgian government (Veiligheid van de Staat/Sûreté de l'Etat, 2020).

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[1] Detailed info in this regard is available here: https://www.belgium.be/en/about_belgium/government/federale_staat.

Furthermore, while some individuals and groups in Belgium were already engaged in promoting pro-Russian propaganda, in February 2022, when the Russian Federation invaded Ukraine, the number of Kremlin-backed narratives and propaganda stories, especially online, seems to have increased, flowing into, and mixing with, fake narratives, sometimes merging with pre-existing conspiracy theories about the COVID-19 pandemic (Willaert & Sessa 2022).

The fact that modern Belgium faces a catalogue of different challenges relating to polarisation and radicalisation-related issues inevitably has an impact on youth, students, and teachers. Desk research conducted on projects implemented at schools in Belgium – from 2015 onwards –[2] to deal with polarising debate issues at school and to curve youth radicalisation, has highlighted a number of specific challenges and contentious issues that teachers face in the classroom. First, it seems that some teachers have difficulty grasping the conceptual and practical distinctions between radicalisation, extremism, and terrorism, due to the many academic disagreements on their definitions. Because of this, some teachers have trouble understanding the intricacy of these phenomena, particularly when it comes to recognising the distinction between violent and non-violent radicalisation, and, consequently, the methods that should be used against both streams of radical behaviour. Secondly, many teachers appear to be unaware of specific techniques, tools, and programmes that had been created to assist them in dealing with these challenges during their work, and even when they were aware of their existence, they frequently struggled to adapt them to the unique Belgian setting. Thirdly, communication between teachers, students and parents was another significant challenge identified in different projects, with a substantial lack of targeting for the issues that stem from this triangular relationship. Fourthly, the need for teachers to receive more specific guidance and training on challenging issues facing some students, including issues around human rights, integration, gender roles, democratic values and norms, was highlighted. Gender equality emerged as one of the main contentious topics that arise in the classroom, with teachers involved in discussing gender issues, particularly those related to the role of women at home and in society, and to the fact that students need to recognise the authority of all of their teachers, regardless of their gender. Finally, managing polarising statements in the classroom, bullying and cyberbullying, extremist ideologies, online threats, integration issues, and the influence of emotions on young people's worldviews, are some

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[2] The analysed projects are the following: Athena Syntax (GO!); *Attention in action*, *BOUNCE*, Project *Connect* (Arktos); *Netwerk Islamexperten* (The network of Islam experts); *Lutte contre le radicalisme* (Fight against radicalism); *The Prevention Pyramid* (GO!); *OVSG Education Cities and Municipalities*; *Catholic Dialogue School Project* (Free Catholic Education Flanders); *Ecopol* (ASBL Bravvo; Prevention service of the city of Brussels); *MINDb4ACT*; *ENABLE* (European Network Against Bullying in Learning and Leisure Environments); *Culture has class/ La culture a de la classes*; *Teach for Belgium*; and The *EUROGUIDE* project.

of the other more frequently occurring difficulties and contentious topics that the examined Belgian projects have attempted to address.

Against this backdrop, after having collected the same type of data relating to the other five countries under investigation, the first version of an online survey was drafted and then discussed with a sample of secondary school teachers in Belgium, in order to finetune the drafted questionnaire. A 'Set-the-Scene' workshop was organised for this purpose with thirteen teachers from eleven secondary schools. The organisation and execution of the 'Set-the-Scene' workshop were entrusted to a facilitator who selected teachers of different subjects, from different school profiles (different cities and neighbourhoods, with different socio-economic and socio-cultural profiles), and varying ages. A description of the sample will be provided below.

After this preliminary step, a total of thirty-two teachers filled out the online survey named *Contentious issues in the classroom: teachers' challenges and responses*. Finally, the collected data were discussed with a total of twelve teachers during two different 'Follow-up' workshops set up to discuss and finetune the collected data. All teachers and schools were ensured anonymity in the public dissemination of the research findings.

The survey

The survey has been structured into three distinct sections, each targeting different aspects related to challenges and contentious topics within the secondary school context. The first section focuses on identifying and understanding the challenges and contentious issues prevalent in both the classroom and the school environment. The second section delves into the reactions and practices employed by participants to address these challenges. Lastly, the third section comprises general questions aimed at providing an understanding of the demographic and professional characteristics of the survey participants, contributing to a more nuanced analysis of the research data.

In total, the questionnaire of the survey comprises 32 questions. Among these, 20 questions offer predefined answer options, while 12 questions are designed as open-ended queries, affording participants the opportunity to provide qualitative insights and elaborate on their experiences, opinions, or practices.

Strengths and limitations of research

This study exhibits several strengths, primarily rooted in the implementation of the Social Labs methodology developed within the H2020 project *PARTICIPATION*. In this framework, the research team consistently provided

support to participating teachers during the entire course of the fieldwork, extending assistance and clarification as needed. In this regard, the appointment of a "Facilitator" further streamlined communication and engagement with teachers. Moreover, the inclusion of the 'Set-the-Scene' workshops allowed teachers to contribute to survey refinement, enhancing the research questions' relevance. Likewise, 'Follow-up' workshops post-survey enabled collaborative discussions on survey findings, ensuring a comprehensive understanding and clarification of key points. Overall, the research's strengths lie in its methodological rigour and its emphasis on collaborative and participatory engagement with teachers, thereby fostering a secure environment for discussing sensitive societal issues.

The research also exhibits limitations. Firstly, the sample size utilised in the study is limited, mainly due to the complex conditions under which the research transpired during the COVID-19 pandemic and the sensitivity of the topic in question. Consequently, the limited sample lacks statistical validity in representing the broader population of interest. Secondly, and linked to the above, notwithstanding the commitment to achieving a balanced representation across different demographic variables such as gender, age, teaching experience, and geographical coverage, it is important to acknowledge that the selected sample partially adhered to a convenience sampling methodology, involving social units also based on factors such as their geographical proximity, availability at a specific time, or their expressed willingness to participate in the research to increase the number of the participating teachers. Thirdly, some of the workshops were conducted remotely, a measure taken to facilitate the participation of teachers and mitigate potential issues associated with the concurrent COVID-19 pandemic. Virtual workshops may have limited the interaction among the participants. Finally, although the survey was designed both in French and in Flemish, the workshops with Flemish teachers took place in English. Despite the participants' proficiency in the language, the discussions may have been hindered in addressing certain topics in depth due to language limitations. These limitations collectively underscore the need for a cautious interpretation of the research outcomes and highlight areas for potential refinement in future investigations.

Description of the sample

The Belgian sample of the online survey was composed of thirty-two teachers. Nineteen of them were females, while the other twelve were males (one teacher preferred to not share this information). Most of the teachers were aged between forty and forty-nine, while the entire sample ranged from twenty to over sixty years old.

The Belgian French-speaking teachers taught French, English, ancient languages (Greek and Latin), history, geography, social sciences, religion, computers and communication, philosophy and citizenship, sciences, chemistry, and mathematics. Some of them were also responsible for other activities at school, working as education and guidance counsellors, coordinators for university preparation projects, speech therapists, and school project coordinators.

The subjects taught by Belgian Flemish-speaking teachers ranged from religion, general world citizenship, active citizenship, philosophy of life, Dutch, history and geography, humanities, physics and natural sciences, informatics, and art & culture. Besides teaching these subjects, some of them also cover (or have covered) other roles at school like student counsellors, school project coordinators, and supervisors on end-of-the-year trips.

In the Belgian-Flemish community, secondary education is offered to pupils between the ages of 12 and 18. It is separated into four branches: general secondary schools, technical, art, and vocational. Similarly, in the Belgian-French community, secondary education is divided into three phases, each with a duration of two years. It is conducted through four distinct types of institutions: general education, artistic, technical, and vocational/professional education.

Teachers participating in the survey declared that they teach, or have taught, in multiple schools, located in a big Belgian city (24 respondents), or in a town (7 respondents), in the last five years. None of them have taught in villages or small communities.

Most of the teachers (26 out of 31) teach (or have taught) in general secondary schools, followed by colleagues teaching (or have taught) at technical secondary schools (16), vocational secondary schools (8), and artistic secondary schools (3).

The age group of students that they have taught, is between twelve and nineteen.

Finally, with regard to the length of their teaching career, the sample has proven to be diverse and composed of both teachers with less than five years of experience (8), and teachers with more than thirty years of experience (3), with all the other respondents having between five and ten years (7), eleven and twenty years (6), and twenty-one and thirty years of experience (7). One teacher has not shared their data for this question.

Challenges and contentious topics in the classroom and the school environment

The first part of the survey focused on challenges and contentious topics in the classroom and the school environment. With regard to the challenges

and contentious topics, we listed a number of them which had been obtained during the desk research, and asked teachers to indicate if they had experienced them or not. In the case of a positive reply, they were asked to report the extent to which they faced these challenges and contentious topics (*very often*, *often*, or *sometimes*). Then, we asked teachers to report on any other possible challenges that had not been listed in the questionnaire, but that they had experienced in the last five years. The collected data was then discussed during the 'Follow-up' workshop.

The tables displayed below show the five most frequently experienced challenges and the ten contentious topics which the teachers had to deal with most frequently. In case of multiple challenges or contentious topics receiving the same score, we have prioritised those which received a higher 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 Belgian sample.

Challenges	Very 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.	5	11	16
Managing polarising comments shared by pupils during class.	1	12	19
Questions related to polarising topics, asked by students, which were difficult to answer.	1	10	20
Handling conflicts and disputes between students, that related to contentious issues within society.	1	9	20
Communicating constructively with the families of the students.	1	5	13

According to the answers provided by the whole Belgian sample, the most experienced challenge is the difficulty of changing their role from experts to facilitators, when it comes to speaking about sensitive and/or controversial topics in the classroom. Indeed, moderating a conversation by facilitating a space for discussion, where every student can talk and be heard, no matter their position, was recognised as a good practice by teachers, as we will see in the following pages. Nonetheless, moderating and guiding these discussions, without imposing teachers' opinions on the students, is not an easy

task. In this regard, during the two 'Follow-up' workshops conducted with teachers to discuss the main findings gathered by the online survey, the role of teachers in the classroom was discussed more in-depth. Some of the participants argued that teachers are in a fragile position when it comes to facilitating these types of discussions for the following reasons:

- Generational differences between teachers and students.
- Teachers are part of the students' routine. Even the setting of the classroom, the position of benches, and the programmes followed have an impact in shaping students' attitude to remain focused during lessons and learn from the different subjects. As soon as teachers get out of the routine, e.g., proposing different actions and workflow, or changing their roles, they risk undermining this attitude in their students.
- Teachers inevitably are in a posture of evaluation in relation to the students. As a result, even if the debate is not part of the assessment, students may tend to be afraid of being judged for their words, as well as that this judgment will influence the perception that teachers have of them.

Interestingly, the results for the five most experienced challenges are almost identical in both the samples composed of French-speaking teachers and Flemish-speaking teachers. The only difference is that in the latter sample (Flemish-speaking teachers), the challenge related to communicating constructively with the families, although experienced by these Flemish-speaking teachers too, is replaced in this 'top-five' list by the difficult challenge of detecting clear signs and indicators of radicalisation processes in their students.

Other reported (although lower-ranked) challenges by teachers in Belgium were:

- Dealing with students who bring or express extremist symbols in the classroom/the school environment (14 teachers reported to have experienced this challenge *sometimes*).
- Understanding how to implement the practices of the legislation regarding the prevention of radicalisation at school, if any (6 teachers reported to have experienced this challenge *often* and 3 teachers *sometimes*). This latter challenge is particularly relevant considering that the concept of radicalisation "is not part of any piece of Belgian national legislation" (van der Vet, 2020, p. 8) and is only present in government strategy documents.[3]

With regard to contentious topics in the classroom, the following table outlines the ten contentious topics more frequently experienced in the classroom and in the school environment by the teachers in the Belgian sample:

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[3] See, for instance, the "Plan R" and the "Strategy TER" documents aimed to contain terrorism, extremism and the radicalisation process within society.

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

Contentious Topics	Very Often	Often	Sometimes
Discussions about the government's measures to counter the Covid-19 pandemic.	7	18	6
Intolerance towards the existing cultural, social, or religious differences in society.	1	8	22
Disinformation related issues (e.g., fake news and conspiracy theories).	5	18	7
Issues relating to clothes at school.	3	11	15
Intolerance towards the existing cultural, social, or religious differences in society.	1	15	13
Racism.	1	12	15
Gender.	/	14	15
Bullying and cyber-bullying.	2	12	14
'Us-vs-Them' thinking and rhetoric.	3	10	14
Conflicts between students stemming from discussions on geopolitical events and/or foreign conflicts.	/	8	18

Not surprisingly, *discussions about the government's measures to counter the COVID-19 pandemic* have been highlighted, by teachers in the Belgian sample, as the most frequently contentious topic to be faced in the class-room. Indeed, as pointed out by various scholars, the COVID-19 pandemic was a tie of major social upheaval that heightened levels of uncertainty and social division in society, jeopardizing young people's ability to imagine a bright future and sustain a meaningful sense of purpose in life (Miconi et al., 2022). During the 'Follow-up' workshops, some teachers noted that this has boosted the propagation of 'Us-vs-Them' narratives among youth, as well as heated debates over vaccinations between pupils who had been vaccinated and those who had not. Furthermore, issues relating to remote, online lessons have sometimes paved the way for the expression of extreme narratives and behaviours from students (e.g., cyber-bullying, sentiments of intolerance, and disinformation-related issues).

Below are the ten contentious, most frequently experienced issues broken down between the sample composed of Belgian French-speaking teachers (Table 3), and the sample composed of Belgian Flemish-speaking teachers (Table 4).

Table 3. Most frequently experienced contentious topics in daily life at school reported by Belgian French-speaking teachers.

Contentious Topics	Very Often	Often	Sometimes
Intolerance towards the existing cultural, social, or religious differences in society.	/	7	15
Discussions about the government's measures to counter the Covid-19 pandemic.	6	11	4
Issues relating to clothes at school.	2	8	10
Disinformation related issues (e.g., fake news and conspiracy theories).	4	12	4
Gender	/	11	9
Intolerance towards the existing cultural, social, or religious differences in society.	/	10	10
Bullying and cyber-bullying.	2	8	9
Racism.	1	8	10
Misogynist violence against women.	1	6	11
Conflicts between students stemming from discussions on geopolitical events and/or foreign conflicts.	/	7	11

Table 4. Most frequently experienced contentious topics in daily life at school reported by Belgian Flemish-speaking teachers.

Contentious Topics	Very Often	Often	Sometimes
'Us-vs-Them' thinking and rhetoric.	2	5	3
Discussions about the government's measures to counter the Covid-19 pandemic.	1	7	2
Disinformation related issues (e.g., fake news and conspiracy theories).	1	6	3
Intolerance against gender and sexual diversity (e.g., anti-LGBTQ).	1	5	3
Antisemitism	1	4	4
Issues relating to clothes at school.	1	3	5
Intolerance towards the existing cultural, social, or religious differences in society.	1	1	7
Grievances relating to social conflicts and inequalities in society.	/	5	4
Racism.	/	4	5
Bullying and cyber-bullying.	/	4	5

During the 'Follow-up' workshops, teachers were asked whether their experience with challenges and contentious topics varies or not depending on the following variables: different groups of students, different schools, different roles of teachers, and different subjects taught. The main findings of this discussion can be seen as follows:

- Different groups of students:
  a. Some teachers stated that challenges and contentious topics frequently arise more often in larger classes. Moreover, in small classes, it is easier to address these topics and to discuss them with students.
  b. Other teachers noted that challenges and contentious topics increase in classrooms with a high number of students from different cultural backgrounds.
  c. A teacher also stated that "sometimes, it happens that two or three male students act as leaders and negatively influence the rest of the class. In these cases, it is crucial to pay attention to these students and act before things can get worse for the whole class".
  d. The ability to "put into words" different thoughts and ideas, was considered an important factor by many of the teachers. For instance, when the vocabulary standard is low, discussions take on a more complicated form, since there is a more violent kind of communication, as well as more misunderstanding.
  e. According to some teachers, when it comes to religion, it is extremely difficult to get some students out of a closed position, even with great effort, and especially if the students come from traditional backgrounds.
  f. Some teachers pointed out that discussion of some topics is more complicated depending on the composition of the group of students. For instance, students coming from patriarchal environments often have difficulties in openly discussing gender issues while students coming from affluent areas often have more difficulties in discussing the topic of diversity and multiculturalism.
  g. Another important dimension that was highlighted during the workshop was the issue of identity. Debates in the classroom become more challenging when some of the students feel that their identities are at stake. According to a teacher, "this is why questions relating to sex or gender are always complicated since we are always all involved in terms of identity".

- Different schools:
  a. According to some teachers, the extent of these challenges and contentious topics may vary from one school to another, and even from one district to another, or from one school section to another. Some

teachers, for instance, said that the so-called "professionalising sections" are more complicated environments in this regard.

b. According to some teachers, the socio-economic milieu of the different schools plays a role. For instance, schools with students coming from roughly the same background and without major socio-economic problems are less likely to present challenges and issues, although some issues or arguments may remain taboo. Schools with a diverse, socio-cultural and economic student body appear to be more likely to present challenges linked to identity issues. Furthermore, one teacher stated that

> "there is a growing social fight between newcomers and second generations because of the social-economic crisis. There is fear about the consequences of the economic crisis of this period after the summer. The socio-economic context makes dealing with the challenges and contentious topics more difficult".

- Different roles of teachers:

  > Having other roles in the school besides teaching (e.g., counsellors, coordinators, speech therapists, etc.) was judged as enriching for the school itself, and an opportunity for teachers to have more chances to spot students' uneasiness and/or difficulties. At the same time, some teachers stated that time constraints may negatively affect their activities, especially when they cover multiple roles at school.

- Different subjects taught:

  > Teachers in scientific subjects highlighted that they do not have many opportunities to discuss these topics, except gender issues, in a scientific manner. On the contrary, other teachers, specialising in humanities studies, stated that their subjects facilitate the possibility to address contentious topics, because it is easy to link the curricula to contemporary, ongoing issues. In some cases, teachers stated that their subject does not require them to mandatorily follow a specific, set programme, and that this leaves room for the teacher to discuss these challenges and contentious topics, selecting articles, material, and sources autonomously.

Teachers were also asked to report on any additional challenges or contentious topics they have experienced that were not listed in the online survey or that they wanted to expand upon, in order to better explain their point by sharing their experience. Seven out of thirty-two teachers added additional topics while the others declared that challenges and contentious topics listed in the online survey had covered all the issues they experienced in the classroom and in the school environment. During the 'Follow-up' workshops, both these additional challenges, and those which had already

been flagged but required further explanation according to teachers, were discussed. The following are the reported issues:

- Very often:
  - Issues concerning female authority. In this regard, a teacher stated: "Compared to the other colleagues, especially peers and males, it is more difficult to face these challenges and contentious topics, being young and a woman".
  - Sexism and discrimination against girls.
  - Group identities, of varying degrees.
  - According to one teacher: "non-violent Islamist extremism is on the rise in Belgium, especially concerning gender issues which is a very recurrent contentious topic at school. It is promoted by some Turkish parties with the aim to reach out to people in an online network".
  - Another teacher stated that, "there is an increase of physical aggression from students. This opinion is based on an experience of 20 years in the school environment".

- Often:
  - Conflicts between teachers, and between teachers and students on contentious topics with, in some cases, feelings of racism or anti-Islam sentiments coming from a teacher against a pupil, or an attitude tending towards extremism on the part of a student against a teacher.
  - Anti-White sentiments: although, as one of the teachers noted, these sentiments are mainly expressed in a humoristic way, these comments could contribute to a polarised environment.
  - The welcome given to Ukrainian refugees was an issue for a number of students, especially in comparison with the treatment shown to refugees from Africa or the Middle East.

- Sometimes:
  - Conflicts between teachers and parents. In this regard, one teacher stated: "I have sometimes been accused of racism by parents whose student was failing at the end of the year".
  - The existing prohibition in some schools to wear the veil remains an issue for some students to accept, especially during school outings.

Support received from other colleagues and the school management

The online survey asked teachers how they felt about the level of support shown by their colleagues and the school management when it comes to addressing contentious topics and issues in the classroom and in the school environment, by choosing between the following answers: *I feel well supported*, *Cooperation could be improved*, and *I feel isolated*.

Most of the teachers (23 out of 32) indicated that they feel well supported in relation to their school's management. Seven teachers out of thirty-two

expressed that cooperation could be improved, and two teachers stated a feeling of isolation. The two latter groups of teachers were asked to explain why they felt isolated or why, in their view, that cooperation had to be improved. According to the responses received from these teachers, the main reasons are the following: 1) The direction appears to be always overwhelmed; therefore, there is a brake to disturb it for certain issues. 2) Problems tend to be circumvented to find a culprit more than to solve the real dispute. In this way, the core of the issue is never really considered and addressed. 3) Lack of joint training on ethical and societal issues. 4) Some school managements allocate little space on how to address these issues and seem not able to insert any actions in the different courses although these polarising questions arise, most often, in the form of a digression during courses. 5) The fact that there is no consistent framework sometimes makes a teacher think that he or she is the only one with controversial subjects in his or her class. 6) The absence of a systematic prevention plan against discrimination that should vary according to the age of the pupils. 7) The absence of a clear established procedure for crisis management.

Alongside the high feeling of support felt by teachers in the sample regarding the school management, most of the teachers in the whole sample declare to feel well supported in relation to their colleagues. However, in this case, a higher number of teachers (11 out of 32) declared that the cooperation could be improved, or that they feel isolated. The reasons behind this, have been explained by the concerned teachers in the online survey as follows: 1) since the school has not a clear vision and project on these matters, there is a kind of polarisation in the teachers' room. This induces a fear of collaboration. 2) There is a lack of initiative from colleagues. 3) There are problems of inappropriate behaviour of colleagues (e.g., racism, and sexism). 4) Some teachers do not seek to understand the conflict either because it is not their responsibility, it does not interest them, or they are not competent to resolve it. 5) Not all teachers are open about their experiences in the classroom. More dialogue and exchange of experiences would strengthen cooperation and would allow quicker identification of problems. 6) Lack of training.

Educational tools

A section of the online survey was designed to investigate if, in their views, teachers thought that:

3. In their country, an adequate number of educational tools are provided to help school staff in addressing challenges and contentious topics in the classroom.
4. That the existing tools are adequate for this purpose.
5. That teachers and school staff were sufficiently trained to use these tools.

These questions were asked in a *yes/no* format. In relation to question n.1, thirteen teachers answered positively, twelve teachers answered negatively, and seven teachers answered: *I do not know*. For question n.2, most of the teachers answered that they did not know if these tools are adequate for the purpose, while ten responded positively and five negatively. Finally, for question n.3, the overwhelming majority responded that teachers and school staff are not sufficiently trained in the use of these tools.

During the 'Follow-up' workshops, teachers were asked to give their feedback on their answers to these questions. In this regard, two main reasons were given to explain the negative replies: first, there is a general lack of knowledge among teachers about existing educational tools; second, there is a gap between, on the one hand, many schools which simply do not have access to the tools and, on the other hand, a lot of associations which have produced useful tools, and would like to use them in classes, but are not able to find enough schools willing to participate.

According to some teachers, these gaps are linked to at least 3 factors: 1) A school world that often has no time for proper collaboration: both internal and external collaboration. There is no time to process all the requests for collaboration from the various associations. 2) In the education world, there is many times the perception that these tools are not useful, and that they are not a priority for the school staff. 3) In some cases, the "associative world" appears to have an insufficient understanding of the "world of teachers". As a result, they have difficulties in adapting these tools to classroom settings. A lot of associations, for instance, appear to have built projects that are ultimately not suitable for the school environment, as there is a lack of understanding and knowledge of the practical sides of teaching. Moreover, during the 'Follow-up' workshops teachers were asked to report on what tools they use in their classrooms to deal with challenges and contentious topics. In this regard, the following material was mentioned:

- The prevention material provided by the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN).
- The use of a scientific approach to clarify students' doubts and answer their questions.
- Empowerment techniques and videos for building up the capability of students to "control elements" in their environment.
- Practical handbooks created by EU-funded projects like *Euroguide*[4].

Finally, the last question of this section in the online survey asked teachers about what kind of support, training and/or tools they feel that they need more of, in order to strengthen their capacity to deal with challenges

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[4] The website of this project can be accessed through the following link: https://www.euroguide-project.eu/

and polarising, contentious issues in the classroom and in the school environment. The teachers in the sample answered as follows: 1) Training on conversation techniques for dealing with polarisation in the classroom. 2) Training to enhance digital skills. 3) Material tailored to students regarding gender and LGBTQ+ topics. 4) Training on how to deal with religious issues that may polarise the classroom. 5) Training and tools on how to deal with and discuss fake news and conspiracy theories. 6) Concrete tools to analyse the veracity of news broadcast by the media and courses in geopolitics. 7) Material linking topics related to the foreign fighters involved in the past in the First World War and in the Second World War to the ones who leave their countries today to fight in Syria, Iraq, or Ukraine. 8) Annual training with coaching sessions focused on concrete issues that teachers face involving also the most experienced teachers. 9)Training courses on communication and philosophical questions. 10) Training based on concrete cases, question-and-answer types, and the provision of relevant and usable support. 11) Training on managing a debate. 12) Need for knowledgeable and reference persons and organisations teachers may contact to receive support on how to deal with sensitive issues in the classroom. 13) Modules on how to deal with contentious topics at school designed for new teachers who are at the beginning of their teaching career. 14) Training on education by 'peers'. 15) Training on group games and group management. 16) Need to have a psychotherapist in the field (more than a psychologist) within the school on a daily basis. 17) Training courses that can provide adequate answers with concrete examples to specific cases (e.g., face-to-face training offering practical scenarios and simulations).

The relationship with parents

The relationship between teachers and parents in relation to the behaviour, and the school performances of the students, is a crucial aspect in the management of students' school life and may present several challenges. The last section of this part of the online survey devoted to discussing challenges and contentious topics in the classroom and in the school environment focused precisely on this aspect. Below are the findings of question 5a, which asked teachers to choose up to three responses to describe their interactions with students' parents over the school year. It reveals that most of the teachers (18 out of 31 respondents) talk to the student's parents mainly during the annual parent/teacher conferences. Thirteen teachers declared to talk to them only when there is an issue regarding a pupil's behaviour, and seven teachers stated that they have no frequent contact with them. When asked whether they felt supported by students' parents in dealing with polarising statements made by their children, the majority of them declared to

receive a small amount of support, as shown in the chart below, although this greatly varies from parent to parent.

Figure 1. Perception of support received by teachers from parents, in the Belgian sample.
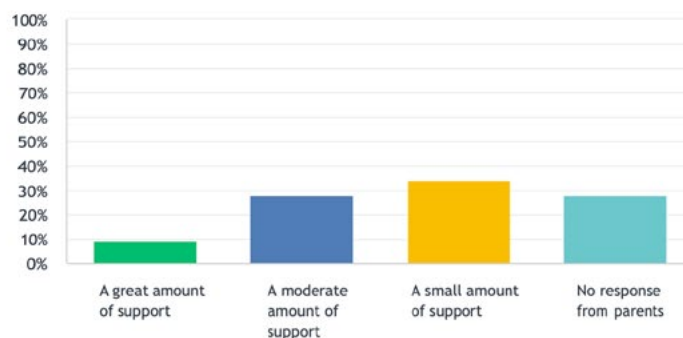
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
A great amount of support	10%	3
A moderate amount of support	28%	9
A small amount of support	34%	11
No response from parents	28%	9
TOTAL		32

With regard to the main challenges teachers have experienced when dealing with the parents of their students, the most recurrent highlighted issue is the linguistic barrier. A French-speaking teacher, for instance, stated that in her school: "one parent out of two does not speak French. It is a real problem to be able to communicate with them". Similarly, a Flemish-speaking teacher stated that: "not all parents speak the Dutch language". Other teachers mentioned the challenge of a cultural barrier, especially in relation to parents who exclude women from the discussion, and do not want their children to participate in certain sport activities or outings. In this regard, one teacher stated that students' desire for emancipation and the traditional cultural heritage of their parents is oftentimes a reason for conflict, which sometimes reverberates upon teachers. Others mentioned the following challenges to be faced: 1) Different values between parents and teachers. 2) Prejudices and parent's emotional reactions. 3) The social situation of parents who often combine several jobs and cannot make time for school contacts. 4) Parents views about the role of the school which should not be linked to the discussion of the codes of society. 5) Time constraints. 6) Shame, taboo, and ignorance on the part of parents, but also sometimes on the part of teachers, make it difficult to talk about poverty, mental or physical illness, family vio-

lence, multimedia use, game addiction, gender, LGBTQ+, sexually transgressive behaviour and sexuality in general.

Participants in the 'Follow-up' workshops reiterated that one of the bigger challenges with parents is finding time to talk to them: "It's super important and we don't have time!". Some teachers also point out that, sometimes, the lack of communication and the cultural gap with parents, leads some teachers to refrain from carrying out educational activities due to their fear over parents' possible reactions. The participants, therefore, reflected on how to better involve parents and stressed that if the school would be able to cooperate more with the parents, offering them a better view of the school's civic life, the State would have an indirect, but powerful means of creating a form of continual education for parents, who make up a good part of the population. This reflection leads us to the second part of the online survey, which focused on detecting good and bad reactions, as well as practices that teachers may adopt to deal with challenges and contentious topics.

Reactions and practices to address challenges and contentious topics in the classroom and the school environment

The second section of the online survey enquired about the various reactions and practices that teachers deploy in the classroom and in the school setting to address challenges and contentious topics.

When asked whether they felt adequately trained to address polarisation-related issues in the classroom and in the school environment, Belgian teachers' replies were almost equally divided between positive and negative answers. Sixteen teachers out of twenty-nine respondents replied negatively while the remaining thirteen replied positively. On average, Flemish-speaking teachers had a higher number of positive replies (6 out of 9) than their French-speaking colleagues (7 out of 20). As previously seen, a number of training activities for teachers have been considered tremendously important by the teachers themselves, to help them deal with the highlighted issues. However, these activities should be focused on concrete issues affecting teachers, so that the tools and the methods can be useful in the specific classroom settings.

In the online survey, teachers were provided with a list of practices and methods with regard to dealing with challenges and controversial issues and asked to flag if they deemed them good or bad practices. The results are shown in the table below:

Table 5. Good and bad practices in the Belgian sample.

Items	Good Practice	Bad Practice
Facilitate a space for discussion where every student can talk and be heard, no matter their position.	25	/
Building a trust-based relationship with students.	30	/
Trying to find out who is right and who is wrong when students share their thoughts.	/	25
Peer-to-peer approaches.	20	3
Addressing taboo-related issues.	23	1
Looking for early signs of radicalisation processes.	12	5
Ignoring the challenges and issues facing young people to avoid making matters worse.	1	28
Reporting signs of pupils' radicalisation processes to the school principal.	19	4
Trying to develop a sense of empathy with and among students.	30	/
Strengthen resilience against violent narratives by teaching students critical thinking tools and methods for media literacy.	26	1
Empowering the triangular relationship between students, teachers, and parents.	26	/
Keeping the school management well informed.	25	/
Establishing networks between teachers across Europe.	17	1
Invite experts in the classroom (e.g.: psychologists, CSOs, NGOs, young ambassadors).	27	1
Debating online news that is based on unclear sources or none at all.	16	10
Discussions about democratic values and human rights.	27	/
Provide lessons on the importance of tolerance and anti-discrimination.	20	5
Mock the students who share certain fake sources to incite them to react against disinformation.	3	23
Raise awareness regarding consequences of violence.	30	/
Ask for support from the police.	12	6
Ongoing training for teachers in the prevention of radicalisation.	21	1
Cooperation between schools and representatives of minority groups to push back against "Us vs Them" narratives.	25	/
Teach critical thinking to students.	30	/
Ongoing training for teachers and students to spot fake news and harmful conspiracy theories.	24	/
Increase students' knowledge about active citizenship and the relationship between rights and responsibilities.	28	/
Increase students' knowledge of democratic practices and processes.	27	/
Rely on alternative means of education such as arts, crafts, one-to-one development.	26	/
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.	24	/
Engage with parents, and request their support in cases of concern, where students are isolating themselves.	26	/

From the table above, it is possible to understand what practices are considered good or bad by the surveyed teachers. Teaching critical thinking skills to students, raising awareness regarding the consequences of violence, trying to develop a sense of empathy within and among students, and building a trust-based relationship with students, appear to be the practices deemed most beneficial by almost the whole sample of teachers. On the contrary, trying to find out who is right and who is wrong when students share their thoughts, ignoring the challenges and issues facing young people to avoid making matters worse and mocking the students who share certain fake sources to incite them to react against disinformation, are the practices more frequently judged as bad by teachers.

Interestingly, two of the above-listed practices have received a high number of both good and bad responses from teachers, therefore, during the 'Follow-up' workshops, the facilitators asked teachers for clarification in this regard. The first practice which falls within this context is the following: *Asking for support from police.* During the discussion, Flemish-speaking teachers stressed that although collaboration with the police may be useful in some contexts, asking for support from the police at this very moment may not be a good practice, since there is no existing level of trust between them and young people. According to a teacher, "police should receive pedagogical training before working with students on these topics". A second teacher highlighted that "there is a lot of suspicion towards the police in some communities of the city where the school is located", while a third teacher pointed out that this bad view of the police is "actually spread across the entire city and not just with students/young people", due to the "heavy-handed approach of the police on certain communities and neighbourhoods". According to a fourth teacher, this is partially a result of the so-called "war against drugs". On the same topic, some French-speaking teachers stressed that, with regard to polarising issues and debates, the police are not better equipped than them to manage these discussions. On the other hand, some teachers think that there must be a collaboration with the police. In this regard, the additional following points have been highlighted by these teachers: 1) Cooperation should take place in a preventive way, to cultivate the debate on certain themes and by working on the relationship with the police to build trust between youth and the police. 2) It is possible to collaborate with the police also in the framework of restorative justice, in an educational way. 3) Collaboration with the police is deemed negative when it interferes with the educational relationship between teachers and students.

A second practice has been judged both good and bad by the same number of French-speaking teachers: *Debating online news that is based on unclear sources or none at all.* In this regard, participants in the 'Follow-up' workshop clarified that, in their view, this kind of news should not be debated strictly

speaking, but rather used to work with pupils on the importance of sources and do some "live research" in class. This would be a way to teach students about the importance of asking the 'right' questions, and then seeking out reliable sources. In sum, the focal point of their reflection was that teachers should never discuss this kind of online news, without having planned how to help students to find more sources, cross reference the data, and interrogate themselves on the reliability of the content.

The online survey also allowed the respondents to flag any other additional good or bad practices they have experienced that were not listed in the questionnaire. In this case, teachers shared some additional practices they deem as good: 1) Individual discussion with the student concerned in a friendly context and allowing time for sharing views. 2) The use of online games can be very catchy and allow students to put themselves in the shoes of 'the other', to show empathy. 3) Leading students to share current topics that challenge them, and to document them, inviting students to compare sources, to obtain information differently. 4) Increasing students' knowledge of their worldview in relation to democratic practices and processes, active citizenship, and the relationship between rights and responsibilities. 5) Changing the narrative when noticing that the current one is running into students' resistance, to be able to come to the same conclusions or reach a similar understanding with them. 6) Have the pupils debate the controversial topics on a regular basis. 7) Frequent check-ups with colleagues.

Main suggestions and obstacles to deal with challenges and contentious topics

To conclude, the online survey asked teachers to sum up their main suggestions and perceived 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?* To respond to this question, the surveyed teachers suggested a number of practices that could be summarised in the triad "Empathy - Critical thinking - Regularity". More specifically, the following suggestions were provided:

1. How to facilitate an open discussion: here the importance to listen to each other, showing tolerance and benevolence (by establishing a climate conducive to dialogue and respect for each other and by avoiding humiliation for the student who makes contentious remarks), and the necessity to play the role of moderator who encourages reflection were stressed. Teachers also highlighted the need to not take a dominant position as teachers, by remaining non-judgmental and by helping students find the answer by themselves to help them develop the spirit of criticism in a safe environment. Helping students to clarify and argue their thinking,

by relying on recognised external sources and by providing them with various documents, and external sources before any debate was deemed equally important. In this regard, teachers stressed the importance to take into account the part of the student's cultural heritage and to be well prepared to discuss the subject, setting up a structured system of speech, in order to avoid distracting moments during debates. In this regard, it was also suggested that the use of the table to show that each statement is taken into account, and that the debate is organised and structured can be a good practice. Finally, the necessity to recognise possible teachers' own biases, as well as the possibility to invite experts recognised by the students to discuss these issues were additional suggestions deemed as useful.

2. Practical suggestions to avoid things getting worse: in this regard, the necessity to always point out inappropriate comments or attitudes ("I always tell the students that they can say anything but that at no time can they use words that could hurt anyone present") was deemed crucial. In some cases, especially in front of a difficult situation that makes teachers feel unsure about what the best responses are, some teachers suggested postponing the discussion and then coming back to it at a later moment, after having gathered additional information or with the collaboration of the management and/or of external experts. Distinguishing facts from causes, consequences, questions, and opinions, and inviting students to reason against their own a priori opinion in order to understand the logic of the other were additional important practices suggested by some teachers. The necessity to raise awareness of the consequences of violence for both students and parents was stressed as well by some teachers as very important. Regarding the relationship with students' parents, some teachers highlighted the risk that, in some cases, parents can contact teachers on their own initiative, following a difficulty encountered by their children and that on these occasions they tend to be initially biased and aggressive. In these cases, the starting point of the dialogue is often painful, and it is important that the teacher can reassure them by showing empathy before entering into the details of the issue. Finally, the need to not "play solo" and to cooperate with colleagues, as well as the suggestion to address contentious topics on a regular basis by having, for instance, a weekly dialogue moment, also to avoid these discussions coming up from students, not for a real necessity but because they want to distract teachers from curricular activities, were deemed as very important practices.

3. The importance of training: concerning training activities, teachers underlined the importance to be trained on how to develop critical thinking skills in their students while paying attention to the role of emotions in

shaping the student's world of knowledge. Being trained in the practice of active listening, practices of "connecting communication", in "philosophical conversation", and in "how to create space for conversation, dialogue, and discussion in the classroom" were the additionally reported suggestion in this regard.

The second question of this section focused on obstacles: *What is, in your view, the main obstacle to successfully dealing with challenges and contentious topics in the classrooms and the school environment?* The surveyed teachers mentioned the following obstacles, highlighting how the lack of time and some gaps may significantly hinder their possibility to protect their pupils: 1) Time constraints: the course schedules and the difficulty of following the programmes do not leave much room for other activities. As a result, it is sometimes difficult to notice and address contentious topics. 2) The lack of human resources to develop a good relationship and take the time to truly listen to students who state contentious remarks. 3) The gap between the world of the teacher and the world of the pupils. The fact that students seem sometimes living closed in their bubbles. 4) The strength of prejudice in the individuals and the fear of questioning oneself. 5)Education at home and among peers can be very challenging, especially regarding cultural/religious issues and barriers. 6) The barrier between the institution (school in the service of the state) and the students who are not always in tune with our society (politics, laws, values, etc.). 7) The information collected on social networks, the emotional reactivity of young people to them, and their difficulty in taking the time to analyse sensitive issues. 8) The composition of the classes, especially when there is an unsafe classroom climate, and a huge size of the class. 9) The fact teachers are sometimes hesitant to act since they fear of getting involved. 10) Lack of trust between teachers, students, and parents.

Conclusion

The online survey and the 'Follow-up' workshops have validated and expanded upon many of the findings collected during the desk research on polarisation and radicalisation-related issues in Belgium. Regarding the validation of data detected through the desk research we can mention: first, the fact that the complexity of the phenomena related to polarisation and radicalisation was identified as a challenge during the desk research, is mirrored by the challenges detected in the online survey relating to the difficulties, for teachers, in detecting clear signs and indicators of radicalisation processes in their students, and to the difficulties in understanding how to implement the practices of the legislation regarding the prevention of radicalisation in the school environment. Indeed, as previously stated, the concept of radical-

isation is not covered by any piece of Belgium's national legislation and is only reported in some government strategy documents. Furthermore, some teachers reported that "the fact that there is no consistent framework sometimes makes you think you are the only one with controversial subjects in your class". Second, the online survey and the 'Follow-up' workshops confirmed some gaps in knowledge among teachers, already identified during the desk research, about existing educational tools, as well as the difficulties of using many of them in the classroom settings. Third, difficulties in enhancing constructive dialogues in the classroom, and in building productive communication between teachers and students' parents, are further key challenges detected throughout both the desk study, the online survey, and the 'Follow-up' workshops conducted in Belgium. Fourth, the necessity for teachers, identified during desk research, to receive more specific guidance and training on how to deal with challenges and contentious topics in the classroom, was validated and reinforced by the data collected through the online survey, especially regarding the difficulties in handling conflicts and disputes between students, that related to contentious issues within society, and about difficulties in answering questions related to polarising topics which were by students.

Regarding the contentious topics, all the topics listed in Belgium's contextual report have been recognised, by at least some of the teachers, as being part of the polarising views and obstacles, they face in the classroom and in the school environment. Both the online survey and the 'Follow-up' workshops have allowed for an expansion in the series of challenges and contentious topics previously detected, to gain additional knowledge on what are the most recurrent problems, and, above all, to understand these issues more in-depth, by placing them inside the frame of a teacher's classroom experiences, assisted by the feedback received from teachers. Furthermore, the fieldwork conducted with teachers, allowed for a better understanding of their real needs, and to produce an additional list of practices, methods, and other suggestions to better address the highlighted issues.

The collection of teachers' views regarding challenges, obstacles, and good and bad practices, as well as their perceived needs and requirements that would improve their skills at addressing these issues, can be summarised through a number of recommendations, based on the Belgian context:

1. To allow teachers to better deal with polarisation and radicalisation-related issues in the classroom, it is critical to systematise their roles, and possible duties as first-line prevention actors. In this regard, both the national and the local governments, as well as the schools, should provide teachers with more consistent framework and clear visions on what they expect from them.

2. A large majority of the teachers report a lack of sufficient time that could be devoted to tackling contentious topics in the classroom. Inserting these activities into the official school curricula would allow teachers to better deal with time constraints, and to work on these issues on a regular basis.

3. There is a lack of effective dialogue between schools and civil society organisations (CSOs) engaged in the production of educational, preventative tools. As a result, teachers often have difficulties in adapting these tools to classroom settings. Enhancing dialogue between teachers and CSOs in this regard would strengthen the possibility for the school staff to have more tailored and useful educational tools.

4. Effective cooperation between teachers and the school management is pivotal to ensure that every student feels seen and heard. In this regard, dialogue between teachers and the school management about students' issues should happen on a regular basis. This would allow for a reduction in feelings of isolation in teachers, who are confronting contentious issues in the classroom, enabling the insertion of planned and targeted actions within the different courses to better address these issues, and enhance the cooperation among teachers.

5. Teachers need to be trained. First, they need to be better informed on both government and school strategies to protect their pupils from physical and psychological violence. Second, they need to receive more specific guidance and training on how to create space for conversation, dialogue, and discussion in the classroom, cope with disinformation-related threats, understand non-verbal signals in their students, and communicate more effectively with them.

6. Empowering the triangular relationship between students, teachers, and parents by enhancing communication and reducing problems relating to linguistic and cultural barriers. In this regard, translators and cultural mediators would help both teachers and parents to better understand each other, build trust, and consequently better protect students. Also, it is paramount that the school management is able to involve parents in school policy and activities devoted to raising awareness of the consequences of violence for both pupils and their families.

7. Having a psychotherapist within the school, on a daily basis, would be of tremendous importance when it comes to supporting teachers in addressing sensitive issues with their pupils.

8. Involving trustful external experts, to help the classroom debate on contentious issues, would be a useful way to enrich the dialogue, and expand students' knowledge and horizons.

9. Enhancing the communication between teachers, students, and the police, could be a very important practice, benefitting from an integrated exchange of views, among different actors, on violence-related issues. In

this regard, training police officers to deal, pedagogically, with students (e.g., in the framework of restorative justice) would enhance the possibility of building some level of trust between students and police.

10. Sometimes, problems could arise from teachers instead of students, with some teachers showing narrow-mindedness and inappropriate behaviours. In these cases, the school management and the teacher's colleagues should promptly intervene by calling school board meetings, to openly discuss the issues and prevent students from being harmed.

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