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Intercultural Conflicts, Anti-immigrant Prejudice, and Racist Sentiments Affecting Students: Teachers' Challenges and Reactions in Polish Secondary Schools

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Abstract: This article reports on the main findings of the research activities undertaken in Poland, within the framework of the H2020 project PARTICIPATION, to gather data and provide analysis on contentious issues faced by teachers in Polish secondary schools. Firstly, this article presents the results of desk research on projects implemented in schools to deal with polarising debate and youth radicalisation and highlights the main challenges teachers face in classrooms. In the following sections, the article presents the main findings from the online survey and two workshops conducted with teachers. The last section of the article focuses on reactions and practices to address challenges and contentious topics in the classroom and the school environment and offers a set of recommendations to implement in schools

Keywords: students, teachers, discrimination, radicalisation, racism

Introduction: Country Context Overview

Poland is a country with a homogeneous national and ethnic structure where 97.1% of citizens declare Polish national and ethnic identity (Główny Urząd Statystyczny). Such societies may be more susceptible to manipulation and a crafted perception of the world in a dichotomous manner. Minimal contact with representatives of different religions, nations, and ethnicities might foster a form of extremist nationalism. In such homogeneous societies, differences are easily noticeable, which might contribute to a higher prevalence of hate crimes (Moulin-Stożek, 2021). The radicalisation processes in Poland became particularly visible in 2014 when the European Agenda on Migration of the European Commission proposed distributing 40,000 refugees between EU Member States. Anti-refugee discourse led to the growth of negative attitudes towards Arab and African immigrants. A recent poll showed that in Poland 55% of respondents had prejudices against Arabs (Omyła-Rudzka, 2020), which is not surprising, as political narratives often rely on creating a perceived enemy, and instrumentalisation of conflicts.

The attempt to comprehensively diagnose both the real and potential threat of radicalisation leading to discriminatory behaviour or hate speech was carried out by M. Kordaczuk-Wąs in 2020. Kordaczuk-Wąs was able to describe the current situation in schools and local environments. According to the results of a survey carried out for this study, discriminatory behaviour or hate speech was present in schools where the research was conducted. The behaviours that were observed as happening often were: insulting a group of people or an individual because of their national, ethnic, racial, or religious affiliation or because of their non-denomination (not following any particular religious denomination), and the violation of the bodily integrity of another person, propagating a fascist or other totalitarian state system, or inciting hatred based on the same indicators. On the other hand, the respondents were less likely to point to violent or threatening behaviour based on discriminatory motives, or destruction of a person's property because of his national, ethnic, racial, or religious affiliation or because of their non-denominationalism. It is important to note that 17% of pupils declared having personal experience of discrimination or hate speech. The largest percentage of these respondents indicated an experience of humiliation due to national, ethnic, racial, religious or non-denominational affiliation or violations of bodily integrity (hitting, jerking, pushing, pulling hair, holding, etc.). The results of the survey also show that over half of the surveyed teachers declared the occurrence of discriminatory behaviour and hate speech in their local environment, while indicating the most numerous insults to a group of people or an individual due to their national, ethnic, racial, religious affiliation, or because of their non-denominationalism or for such reasons a viola-

tion of the bodily integrity of another person, propagating a fascist or other totalitarian state system or inciting hatred based on national, ethnic, racial, religious or non-religious differences, violence or threats against a group of people, or an individual, based on discriminatory motives. In addition, nearly half of the students surveyed have identified various other types of radical behaviour that occur in their school. In this regard, the students most often point to the following problems: excessive identification with a specific group or ideology and behaviour indicating being strongly influenced by a given group or ideology, engagement in excessive preaching of ideological or religious content at school or through social media, manifesting 'us' and 'them' thinking, intolerance and polarisation.

The above-mentioned study highlighted a number of problems faced by teachers in Polish schools. To better understand the challenges, trends, and possible practices to deal with the issues of polarisation, alienation, and radicalisation in schools, desk research was conducted on projects implemented in Poland – from 2015 onwards – to deal with polarising debate issues in the school environment and to curb youth radicalisation. It has highlighted a number of specific challenges and contentious issues that teachers face in the classroom which can be summarised as follows:

- The biggest threat appears to be the dissemination of narratives with right-wing extremist ideology;
- Hate speech – intolerance, discrimination, violence, prejudice, stereotypes, and xenophobia;
- 'Us-vs-Them' narratives;
- Tensions resulting from material and social stratification among students, peer aggression, and discrimination on the grounds of nationality;
- Cybercrime is a growing phenomenon among young people, especially around the collection of sensitive text messages and emails, as well as general aggression on social media;
- Projects implemented in Polish schools focus on the types of extremist narratives (religious-inspired extremist narratives, right-wing extremist narratives, left-wing extremist narratives) that are entering into the school dimension, and discrimination, racism, and xenophobia among young people/students/adolescents on the grounds of sexual orientation, religious belief, skin colour or cultural characteristics;
- Occasionally, projects carried out in schools deal with issues such as: violence against women, anti-Semitism, issues related to immigration, polarisation, democratic values and human rights, as well as cyberbullying;
- Hooliganism, especially associated with groups of stadium hooligans and groups of football pseudo-fans.

Issues related to polarisation, discrimination, and radicalisation do not appear in the current education system as central issues and threats in the

educational development of young people. The issues related to polarisation and radicalisation, and their prevention, are introduced in Polish schools mostly through non-governmental organisations that conduct projects, run training courses, and prepare educational materials. However, this content has not yet been widely incorporated into the official curriculum. In addition to non-governmental organisations, the police and local governments are interested in tackling the issue of radicalisation. They see a growing tendency towards radicalisation occurring in local communities, although research has confirmed that radicalisation in Poland appears to be concentrated around groups related to stadium hooligans, and groups centred around a right-wing ideology, based on anti-immigrant ideology or around a nationalist narrative. The education system does not yet record these trends in its educational practice; however, the problem of radicalisation is growing in importance. This was especially noticeable after 2014, with the arrival of migrants in Poland from non-European countries. Intercultural tensions have arisen due to the increasingly common use of hate speech in public spaces and schools. Though, the increase in hate speech has not led to an increase in violence on a larger scale, yet. Poland is also a low-risk country in terms of threats of terrorism or the use of politically motivated violence. There were no terrorist attacks reported in Poland. It can be supposed that the topics of radicalisation, polarisation and extremism are not included in the official school curriculum as the educational system does not see them as presenting, mainly because there were no threats manifested on the national scale.

Against this backdrop, after having collected the same type of data relating to the other five countries (Belgium, Greece, Italy, Netherlands and Romania) under investigation, the first version of an online survey was drafted, then discussed and fine-tuned in a 'Set-the-Scene' workshop conducted with a sample of secondary school teachers in Poland. The 'Set-the-Scene' workshop was of tremendous importance as a starting point for establishing confidence and trust with the teachers engaged in the study and explaining to them the objectives and steps of the research, as well as their fundamental role within the research path. The organisation and execution of the 'Set-the-Scene' workshop was entrusted to a facilitator who selected teachers of different subjects, different regions, different types of schools, and different sizes of cities, towns or villages. After this step, twenty-four teachers completed an online questionnaire titled *Contentious issues in the classroom: teachers' challenges and responses*. Four regions in Poland were mainly selected to participate in the survey: Dolnoslaskie, Lubuskie, Opolskie and Wielkopolskie. All these regions are located in the south-west of Poland. However, these are diversified regions with metropolis, such as Poznan or Wroclaw, as well as medium and small cities, and rural areas. In the final

step, seven teachers participated in the 'Follow-up' workshop to discuss the findings of the online survey.

An important aspect of the fieldwork conducted with teachers, was the guarantee of the protection of the anonymity of teachers participating in the study, by ensuring that people were not linked to their statements. The issue of anonymity showed just how sensitive the topic of radicalisation can be. At the same time, this shows how important it is to continue the discussion on polarisation and radicalisation and to raise awareness about the issue in Poland.

Description of the sample

The Polish sample of the online survey was composed of twenty-four teachers. There was an equal number of women and men who took part in the survey. Teachers aged 40-49 were the largest group of survey participants, making up 36% of the sample. In contrast, 32% of teachers were aged 50-59, those over 60 years old made up 18% of the sample, 9% were aged 30-39, and the remainder of the sample (5%) were aged 20-29.

Professional experience in teaching students from given age groups was distributed in a diversified manner. Exactly 32% of the respondents had experience in teaching children aged between 12-15 years, the same percentage as those who taught 16-19-year-old students. On the other hand, 36% of the respondents stated that they worked with both age groups.

The teachers covered a wide range of subjects from sports, through mathematics, physics, vocational subjects and foreign languages, to Polish literature, history, ethics and civic education. The respondents stated that they covered multiple roles, including acting as school educators and psychologists.

Most of the respondents had long professional experience: 41% between 21-30 years of teaching, 27% with 11-20 years of experience, 18% over 30 years, 9% between 5-10 years, and 5% had less than 5 years of experience. Thus, the majority of teachers participating in the survey were experienced teachers.

As for the types of schools, twelve respondents worked in general secondary schools, eight in technical secondary schools, and seven in high schools. Other teachers represented art schools, vocational schools, and elementary schools, and one person marked a school for adults. This distribution covered all types of secondary schools in Poland.

The majority of schools (thirteen) were located in a big city, six in small or medium towns, and three in villages. In this case, teachers could have given multiple answers: for this reason, in the related question contained in the analysis of the survey, the sum of percentages was higher than 100%, as

well as the sum of schools was higher than the number of participants who replied.

Challenges and contentious topics in the classroom and the school environment

The first part of the online survey aimed at examining challenges and contentious topics in the classroom and the school environment. In order to achieve this, we listed a number of issues and challenges that had been identified during the desk research, and we asked teachers to tell us if they had faced any of these challenges in their classroom and to report the extent to which they faced these challenges and contentious topics (*Very often*, *Often*, or *Sometimes*). Then, teachers were also asked to report on other possible challenges that we had not listed in the questionnaire, and that they had experienced over the last five years. The collected data was then discussed with some of the teachers during the ‘Follow-up’ workshop.

The tables below show first, the five most common challenges faced, and then the ten contentious topics which the teachers had most frequently to address as part of their work with students. In case of different challenges or contentious topics receiving the same score, we have prioritised those that received a higher number of *Very often* rather than *Often* and *Sometimes*, or *Often* rather than *Sometimes*.

Table1. Most experienced challenges in daily life at school reported by teachers, in the Polish sample.

| CHALLENGES | VERY OFTEN | OFTEN | SOMETIMES |
|---|------------|-------|-----------|
| Managing situations where parents are not being supportive in addressing the problematic behaviour of their children in the classroom/the school environment. | 2 | 8 | 12 |
| Handling conflicts and disputes between students, that related to contentious issues within society. | 3 | 8 | 10 |
| Managing polarising comments shared by pupils during class. | 2 | 6 | 14 |
| Communicating constructively with the families of the students. | 2 | 11 | 8 |
| Questions related to polarising topics, asked by students, which were difficult to answer. | / | 2 | 18 |

The above five challenges faced by teachers in the classroom can be broken down into two key challenges. The teachers pointed to the low interest of parents in the educational development of their children’s attitudes. Parents focus on the learning outcomes of their children and neglect their

attitudes, opinions, and relationships with their children's peers. During the 'Follow-up' workshop, teachers talked about the problem of parents treating education as a commercial service, in which they have claims and expectations, and are not ready to engage and participate in the educational process.

The second group of challenges correlated to the shaping of dialogue between students, moderating the debate, as well as responding to the polarising opinions of students. During the 'Follow-up' workshop, the teachers highlighted several problems in this context. First of all, the political scene in Poland has been polarised for almost twenty years, and the associated public debate has been polarised too. The political scene is dominated by two groups that compete with each other in almost every field. The sphere of cooperation between these two groups is either very narrow or is not exposed to the public. Hence the public debate, the media, and actors of social life copy this division. The public debate, therefore, follows the logic of confrontation rather than consensus. During the workshops, teachers pointed to the great potential of polarisation in the discussion of historical topics. In Polish society, the historical debate is of great importance and is often polarised. This applies to the assessment of such historical events as the Holocaust, the communist dictatorship, and the Second World War. Another field of polarised opinions is the attitude to current challenges, such as the influx of migrants to Europe, climate change, social inequalities, the process of European integration, geopolitical tensions, nationalism, etc. In such a polarised culture of public debate, it is difficult for a teacher to remain a neutral moderator of the discussion. The polarisation is so strong that the parties to the dispute often use different terms to describe the same phenomenon. Consequently, based on the wording used, it is possible to determine which side of the dispute the author is on. Hence the difficulty of the teacher to adequately respond to polarising opinions in the classroom. Sometimes the polarising opinions are shared by the parents of the students. In those cases, according to the teachers, the challenge they face is even greater.

Among the challenges identified by the research and asked in the survey all received a score in Poland even though the remaining challenges were pointed out by only a few teachers as occurring often or very often. These challenges were: *changing the role from transferring knowledge to moderating a conversation when it comes to speaking about topics that give rise to polarisation; dealing with students who bring or express extremist symbols in the classroom/the school environment (e.g. performing Nazi salute, wearing symbols such as a swastika on clothing, drawing such symbols, etc.); detecting clear signs and indicators of radicalisation processes in students; and lastly understanding how to implement the practices of the legislation regarding the prevention of radicalisation at school.*

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

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

| CONTENTIOUS TOPICS | VERY OFTEN | OFTEN | SOMETIMES |
|---|------------|-------|-----------|
| Discussions about the government's measures to counter the Covid-19 pandemic. | 1 | 7 | 12 |
| Issues relating to clothes at school. | 1 | 6 | 12 |
| Hooliganism. | 1 | 4 | 14 |
| Disinformation-related issues (e.g., fake news and conspiracy theories). | 0 | 6 | 13 |
| Bullying and cyberbullying. | 0 | 3 | 15 |
| Hatred against institutions and authorities. | 0 | 5 | 11 |
| 'Us-vs-Them' thinking and rhetoric. | 0 | 5 | 10 |
| Hate speech. | / | 2 | 13 |
| Gender. | / | 2 | 12 |
| Intolerance towards the existing cultural, social, or religious differences in society. | / | / | 14 |

During the 'Follow-up' workshop, teachers stated that most of these challenges began with students repeating information they had heard from the media, or from their parents or other adults. Examples concerned the COVID-19 pandemic, the efficacy and purity of vaccines against this disease, or other conspiracy theories about the origin of the coronavirus disease. There were also examples of disputes regarding the attitude towards the authorities, the government and the division created by 'Us-vs-Them' narratives. Most often it was a reflection of a polarising public debate, in which participants unequivocally supported one side of the political dispute. The dividing line between 'Us-and-Them' often manifested through social divisions, such as the poor and the rich, or large cities versus small cities or rural areas. Verbal aggression continued to be an area of concern for teachers. However, a new element, hate speech, related to intercultural issues, is a new phenomenon caused by the growing influx of migrants to Poland. The only example that did not fit with this logic of polarisation, was the question of clothes and appearance.

During the 'Follow-up' workshop, teachers were asked if any of the following variables had an impact on the discussion of challenging topics or controversial issues: different groups of students, different schools, different roles of teachers, and different subjects taught. According to teachers, the

main factor determining the intensity of challenges related to polarisation and radicalisation in the classroom was the age of the students. As a general rule, the older the students are, the more likely that their attitudes will have been impacted by polarised or radical ideologies. The second factor was the socio-economic context. Among students at schools located in poorer towns or districts of large cities, narratives of 'Us-vs-Them', based on social and property divisions prevail, this narrative is associated with the lack of equal opportunities and the prospects of achieving success in life. In schools located in the more prestigious districts of large cities, the so-called elite schools are dominated by identity narratives, narratives related to the assessment of historical events or the attitude towards the authorities or geopolitical trends. Fake news and conspiracy theories are repeated and festered in these communities. In general, there is a qualitative difference between middle-class or working-class youth, not quantitative, in the intensity of attitudes towards different phenomena, that may lead to polarisation or radicalisation.

As far as the cultural background is concerned, it was difficult to say, because the number of students with non-Polish roots in schools is still limited. Hence, there was a lack of experience among teachers that could be used to formulate generalised conclusions.

The role of the teacher and the subject they teach was also an important factor. The so-called 'class educators' had the most observations related to attitudes of polarisation and radicalisation. These were teachers who are responsible for all educational matters of a given class throughout the entire period of education, of a given group of students, at a given school. Class educators regularly hold so-called homegrown hours, which are used to talk about all topics related to education and the upbringing process at school. The class educators also organise regular meetings with the parents of students from the class they are responsible for. The second important element that can be distinguished, is the subject taught by the teacher. Polarised attitudes were less observed by teachers of science subjects such as mathematics, physics or chemistry, and a little more by teachers of humanities such as history, Polish, and civic education. There is more space to express one's own opinion in these subjects than in science.

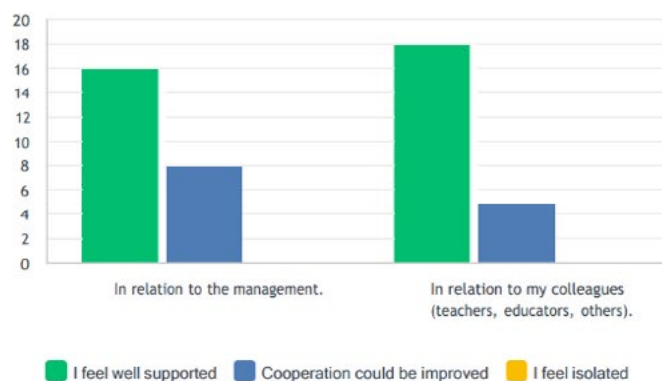
Finally, in the online survey, teachers did not report any additional challenges or topics that they had encountered in the classroom, apart from those we had listed in the online survey itself. During the 'Follow-up' workshop, they declared that the list included in the survey was exhaustive and they had nothing to add.

Support received from other colleagues and the school management

Below is a graphic showing teachers' answers to the question: *When it comes to addressing contentious topics and issues in the classroom/the school*

environment, how do you feel supported by your colleagues and the school administration?

Figure 1. Perception of support received by teachers from colleagues and school management, in the Polish sample.



| | I FEEL WELL SUPPORTED | COOPERATION COULD BE IMPROVED | I FEEL ISOLATED |
|---|-----------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------|
| In relation to the management. | 67% 16 | 33% 8 | 0% 0 |
| In relation to my colleagues (teachers, educators, others). | 78% 18 | 22% 5 | 0% 0 |

Most of the teachers (sixteen out of twenty-four) indicated that they feel well supported in relation to their school’s management. However, eight teachers expressed that the level of cooperation could be improved. The latter group of teachers was asked to expand on their answers and replied as follows:

- “The school’s management reacted negatively to putting up posters encouraging people to help on the eastern border of Poland (migrants from Belarus).”
- “Sometimes an inadequate approach and attention to solving the problem. Sometimes trying to avoid tackling difficult topics.”
- “These problems are not actually discussed among the teachers themselves, and it is even more difficult to talk about cooperation.”
- “Lack of management in the school (often), the management making secrets of many matters.”

During the ‘Follow-up’ workshop, teachers shared additional comments in this regard. The position of a school in rankings and the schools’ good opinion is very important to the school management. Very often it happens that the management is reluctant to discuss polarisation and radicalisation issues because they are afraid of worsening the image of their school, this

is especially true of so-called elite schools. Moreover, the schools' management team pays a lot of attention to the school obtaining high positions in the rankings of the level of education, which determines the position of the school in the environment. As for this, matters related to the attitudes or educational process of students are a secondary priority. According to some teachers the communication problems between school management and teachers, and support for their work are a rather broader problem, concern the entire functioning of the school, and are not specific to issues related to polarisation and radicalisation.

Most of the teachers (eighteen out of twenty-four) declared that they feel well supported by their colleagues. Nonetheless, five teachers expressed that the cooperation could be improved. Open answers collected in the online survey explained that the main reasons why the teachers do not feel support from their colleagues are envy, jealousy and the fact that a large group of the school staff expresses more right-wing and conservative views than the respondents. The issue of a school having a good reputation was another factor why teachers feel little support from their colleagues. In schools which are perceived as good ones, there is no time for an exchange of views between teachers or students. The students, although they have their thoughts and opinions, do not show them and do not stick with their opinions.

During the 'Follow-up' workshop, teachers pointed out that there are no formats where they can share among themselves the problems that they encounter in the classroom. Moreover, teachers and students are under pressure to achieve the best possible learning results as individuals and as a school. Hence there is the tendency to remain silent about tensions, diversity of opinions, polarisation or attitudes leading to radicalisation. Teachers are not only under pressure to achieve the best possible results but they also experience a lot of competition from other colleagues as the educational system rewards teachers whose students achieve better results in learning, take part in knowledge competitions, etc., as well as participate in additional courses and training to raise substantive qualifications in their subjects. This very often leads to attempts to hide the problems faced by the teacher in the classrooms.

Educational tools

When asked if they thought that there is an adequate number of educational tools provided in their country for school staff to address challenges and contentious topics in the classroom and the school environment, teachers participating in the survey answered as follows: 38% said *No*, 20% said *Yes*, and 42% said *I do not know*. The responses to further questions about teacher support tools were similar: *Do you think that these tools are adequate*

for your students? 21% replied *Yes*, 25% replied *No*, and 54% replied *I do not know*.

A third question in the online survey was devoted to investigating if teachers were, in their view, sufficiently trained to use these tools. 29% of the surveyed teachers answered *Yes*, 38% said *No*, and 33% said *I do not know*.

Finally, a fourth question asked them: *Do you think that all of your school staff are sufficiently trained in how to use these tools?* 20% of teachers replied *Yes*, 42% said *No*, and 38% said *I do not know*.

The answers given by the teachers during the survey and the 'Follow-up' workshop appear to confirm the general finding that the subjects of polarisation and radicalisation are not commonly addressed in Polish schools. Hence, teachers answered most of the questions with *I do not know*. In this regard, one of the results of this may be that the teacher, completing the questionnaire for the first time, would start to think about the issues of polarisation and radicalisation. At the same time, this demonstrates how existing educational tools designed to address challenges and contentious issues at school, were not well-known among teachers. The answers provided by teachers seem to highlight a lack of support tools for them, or at least their inadequate quality, with teachers affirming the need to develop support tools for recognising, preventing, and countering polarisation and radicalisation. Indeed, support tools for teachers are often created by non-governmental organisations, external to the education system. Therefore, their use is effective, in those schools that these organisations are able to reach. It would be worth considering how to disseminate the already existing tools on a large scale to schools all over the country. However, this requires cooperation with the education authorities. Most teachers indicated a lack of knowledge regarding available support tools and a lack of support in the search for existing tools.

Teachers who used the support tools indicated face-to-face meetings with anti-radicalisation practitioners and experts representing the civil society sector.

Teachers participating in the online survey provided suggestions on what support tools and training activities they would require, in order to better address challenges and contentious issues in their classrooms. Among those, we can list workshops, meetings and debates with professionals in the field of radicalisation and polarisation and with people dealing with those issues on a daily basis. Teachers also require training on developing soft skills, on the tools available and on how to recognise other challenges that are not exposed in the school space. They would also like to learn how to work with students on specific topics and how to use the taught subject to solve specific issues. Moreover, teachers pointed out that they would require more educational hours with their pupils. They also said that contact of students

with their peers from other countries is beneficial in preventing contentious topics in the classroom. It is also worth noticing that the respondents mentioned that often, teachers do not speak publicly about problems they encounter in the classroom. This is why schools should organise inter-school debates and forums where teachers could share the problems they face in class and get help or advice.

During the 'Follow-up' workshop, teachers emphasised two aspects which were already mentioned in the online survey. Firstly, the need for training by practitioners and experts dealing with polarisation and radicalisation on a daily basis. This postulate results from the need to acquire current knowledge, based on specific examples and models proven to work in practice. The need for training by external experts also results from the awareness that the current educational system lacks practitioners dealing with the issues of polarisation and radicalisation. Secondly, the teachers pointed out the need for a debate on polarisation and radicalisation between teachers within the same school, as well as from different schools within a country, or between different countries. This conclusion is part of a wider problem regarding the functioning of formats, where teachers can share challenges in the classroom in various aspects, not only on polarisation and radicalisation.

Interestingly, the issue of the need to create online tools did not arise. The question of why offline tools are preferable to online tools has not been answered. We can guess that after the pandemic period, there is an expectation that greater emphasis will be placed on direct contact in school practice in every respect. Another explanation may be the generally conservative nature of Polish education, where teachers prefer traditional methods of teaching. Another aspect could be the fact that polarisation and radicalisation are sensitive issues and online tools are difficult to use. However, these are only hypotheses that we were not able to verify during the conversation with the teachers.

The relationship with the parents

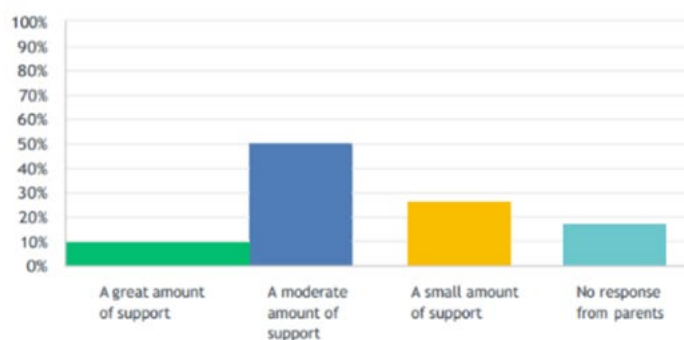
Teachers participating in the survey were asked to choose up to three responses to describe their interactions with students' parents over the school year. Most of them (54%), answered that they have frequent contacts with parents while they have difficulties in reaching out to some of them. Other teachers indicated that they do not have frequent contact with students' parents (17% of the sample), and some of them (17% of the group), declared to talk with students' parents only when there is an issue regarding a pupil's behaviour. Only one teacher indicated that they do not have contact with parents at all.

During the 'Follow-up' workshop, teachers clarified their experiences in this regard more extensively. The teachers pointed out the correlation be-

tween the social, political and economic transformation of Polish society and the following it involvement of parents in the school life of their children. These changes have contributed to the fact that many parents, who are busy with their professional work, do not have enough time to engage in school-work and to have deeper contact with teachers. Many of them are mostly interested in the process of acquiring knowledge by their children, and the problems of attitudes, views, opinions or relationships with peers are relegated to the background.

Below is a graphic showing the collected answers to the following question: *In your experience, how much support do you feel the parents of your students give you in dealing with polarising statements made by their children in the classroom/the school environment?*

Figure 2. Perception of support received by teachers from parents, in the Polish sample.



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES | |
|------------------------------|-----------|-----------|
| A great amount of support | 4% | 1 |
| A moderate amount of support | 52% | 12 |
| A small amount of support | 26% | 6 |
| No response from parents | 18% | 4 |
| TOTAL | | 23 |

According to teachers' answers, support coming from the parents' side can be described as moderate. Two minorities had opposite views, describing the level of parents' support as high, or completely lacking. The survey responses were confirmed by talking to teachers. According to their experience, parents are primarily interested in their children's learning outcomes, rather than in general behaviour, with issues related to their attitudes and opinions relegated to the background. However, when problems related to polarisation or radicalisation arise, parents generally support the work of teachers in a moderate way.

According to the assessment of the teachers who completed the survey, the parents' attitude can be analysed in two ways. Both are the result of the profound transformation that Polish society underwent in the last thirty years since the fall of communism in 1989. Firstly, due to economic changes, a change in work patterns, more frequent business trips, increased productivity and job instability, parents have much less time to engage in school matters. Secondly, the transformation from a planned economy to a free market has contributed to a change in the perception of the role of the school. More and more parents perceive school not as a public service but as a commercial one that the state is obliged to provide for the benefit of the citizen. And just like a commercial service, it does not require the involvement of the 'client'. This means that the responsibilities lie with the school and teachers and this is why many parents evince the attitude of claim and expectation towards teachers, not a dialogue and participation.

Such a belief leads to claims that schools are required to provide a 'service'. Therefore, many parents do not see the need to get involved in the educational process and participate in school matters. It is worth noting that the situation in this respect differs between large cities and small towns or rural areas. The attitude described above applies to big cities much more often. Attitudes differ when the school acts as one of the many institutions of social life, where citizens have access to many services such as: community centres, clubs, interest circles, sports infrastructure, etc. In this case, parents have the opportunity to follow the interests of their children but can react to problems by using the entire support system available to them, both public and private. In rural areas, schools are usually the only public institution that meets the needs of students. There are a lot of activities at schools. The schools are a place for spending time after class, and participating in extra-curricular activities, cultural offer, and leisure activities. Moreover, in the local community people know each other personally. It is natural for parents to meet and talk to teachers. In a small environment, teachers and parents are not anonymous to each other.

During the 'Follow-up' workshop teachers shared their experiences with regard to the main challenges they have experienced when dealing with the parents of their students. The time constraints and limitations were primarily mentioned by the teachers. Parents are reluctant to meet, to take part in school life, and to help in solving problems as they are busy with work. Very often they share the conviction that the school should solve educational problems with their children and should take care of everything, "they provided the student and they are out of their heads". Parents shed the responsibility for upbringing their children for school. It is also quite common for parents to have little interest in the student's affairs. On the other hand, the problem of involvement of parents derives from the fact that some par-

ents do not trust the teachers and the school and they do not take teachers seriously. The issue of perceiving a school as one with a good reputation was once again pointed out by teachers as an obstacle. As one of the respondents called it the “environmental correctness” when a school is perceived as a good one, so are the teachers and so are the parents. In this case it is believed that there must be no problems with such a school and those issues are not discussed and very often even overlooked. The teachers mentioned another challenge connected to the role of the parents in the school life of their children. Parents often duplicate hidden stereotypes and not always communicate consciously to children. Sometimes those stereotypes are repeated by students during discussions without justifying their own opinion.

Teachers’ answers to the same question in the online survey were very similar and focused on *communicating constructively with the families of the students*. Teachers’ opinions about challenges in contact with parents were repeated. Parents have little time for their children, they expect the school to solve their children’s problems, they do not see the need to be involved in the education process, and they want to be “served” by the school.

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

The second section of the online survey sought to understand the different reactions and practices that teachers have used 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, Polish teachers divided perfectly in half in response to this question. Half of the teachers felt they were sufficiently prepared to address the problem of polarisation in the classroom, the other half believed that their level of preparation was not sufficient.

One of the goals of the online survey was to understand teachers’ perceptions of certain practices with regard to dealing with challenges and contentious topics. In order to gain this insight, we asked the teachers to indicate their view of a list of practices, defining them as either good or bad. The results are shown in the table below:

Table 3. Good and bad practices, in the Polish sample.

| ITEMS | GOOD PRACTICE | BAD PRACTICE |
|--|---------------|--------------|
| Facilitate a space for discussion where every student can talk and be heard, no matter their position. | 18 | 0 |
| Building a trust-based relationship with students. | 21 | 0 |
| Trying to find out who is right and who is wrong when students share their thoughts. | 12 | 6 |
| Peer-to-peer approaches. | 10 | 4 |
| Addressing taboo-related issues. | 14 | 0 |
| Looking for early signs of radicalisation processes. | 16 | 2 |
| Ignoring the challenges and issues facing young people to avoid making matters worse. | 1 | 18 |
| Reporting signs of pupils' radicalisation processes to the school principal. | 14 | 1 |
| Trying to develop a sense of empathy with and among students. | 21 | 0 |
| Strengthen resilience against violent narratives by teaching students critical thinking tools and methods for media literacy. | 19 | 0 |
| Empowering the triangular relationship between students, teachers, and parents. | 19 | 1 |
| Keeping the school management well informed. | 10 | 2 |
| Establishing networks between teachers across Europe. | 14 | 0 |
| Invite experts in the classroom (e.g.: psychologists, CSOs, NGOs, young ambassadors). | 19 | 1 |
| Debating online news that is based on unclear sources or none at all. | 11 | 1 |
| Discussions about democratic values and human rights. | 20 | 0 |
| Provide lessons on the importance of tolerance and anti-discrimination. | 19 | 1 |
| Mock the students who share certain fake sources to incite them to react against disinformation. | 1 | 15 |
| Raise awareness regarding consequences of violence. | 20 | 0 |
| Ask for support from the police. | 15 | 3 |
| Ongoing training for teachers in the prevention of radicalisation. | 15 | 1 |
| Cooperation between schools and representatives of minority groups to push back against "Us vs Them" narratives. | 15 | 1 |
| Teach critical thinking to students. | 17 | 0 |
| Ongoing training for teachers and students to spot fake news and harmful conspiracy theories. | 18 | 0 |
| Increase students' knowledge about active citizenship and the relationship between rights and responsibilities. | 19 | 0 |
| Increase students' knowledge of democratic practices and processes. | 19 | 0 |
| Rely on alternative means of education such as arts, crafts, one-to-one development. | 20 | 0 |
| 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. | 19 | 1 |
| Engage with parents, and request their support in cases of concern, where students are isolating themselves. | 18 | 0 |

The teachers participating in the survey unambiguously assessed the practices suggested in the online survey as good or bad. There were no cases where the votes were divided equally. It can therefore be assumed that an almost complete consensus has formed in the assessment of good and bad practices.

The biggest discrepancy in performance evaluation was for the statement: *Trying to find out who is right and who is wrong when students share their thoughts*. Twelve teachers found it a good practice and six a bad practice. Even in this case, however, it was not a fifty-fifty split, as twice as many teachers rated the practice as good rather than bad.

During the 'Follow-up' workshop's discussion, teachers remarked that any practice that pushed for student participation, creating a space for expressing their views and ideas, was a good practice. Participation of students, and their taking over of some responsibility, was described as an additional good practice. At the same time, the important role of activities such as education through arts or joint action was emphasised as an important element of group integration and worked to counteract attitudes that can lead to polarisation and radicalisation. Furthermore, teachers have pointed out that *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 bad practices to deal with these issues. At the same time, it was found that ignoring problems and tensions is a bad practice, which is taking place in Poland, especially in those schools that are considered elitist (schools that are placed first in rankings for best education levels, schools that are difficult to get into for that very reason). It happens that these schools avoid addressing problems so as not to harm their positive image. Another proposed practice that the teachers considered bad was assessing students' attitudes and views, as well as imposing expected attitudes on students. Imposing attitudes from the outside has a negative aspect, as it takes responsibility off the student and transfers it to teachers. If the student independently comes to a solution to the problem, they take responsibility for the solution at the same time.

In the online survey, teachers suggested the following additional good practices: cooperation with school pedagogic and psychologist, tripartite dialogue, teacher-student-parent, tutoring as one of the systemic good practices that build good relationships with students and trust and asking the student to lead part of the lesson on their own, so that they experience responsibility and can react to criticism from other students. When a student is leading the lesson, the teacher takes on the role of a student. The tool should be used rarely and it should be well prepared. However, as reported by the teachers, it is very effective.

The additional good practices suggested by teachers are based on two principles. First, the importance of building a dialogue with the students, an attempt to understand their needs, attitudes, and motivations. The method is led by the participation of the students in the discussion and in the educational process. Secondly, creating an opportunity for students to seek solutions to problems and take shared responsibility for these solutions. The solutions imposed by teachers are not effective and relieve the student from the responsibility of implementing these solutions.

Additionally, teachers identified bad practices and risks in the online survey, mainly focused on imposing opinions on students, ignoring their problems and stigmatising students' behaviour in public. Downplaying students' problems, their views, their way of looking at the world, direct/public stigmatisation of bad behaviour and taking offence at students by teachers were listed by the respondents as bad practices which instead may lead to the intensification of students' bad behaviour and may lead them towards radicalisation. Another problematic issue indicated in the survey was teacher's support for conspiracy theories and encouraging the students to follow them.

Main suggestions and obstacles to deal with challenges and contentious topics.

The teachers participating in the online survey suggested ways to better deal with challenges and contentious topics in the classroom and the school environment. First of all, it is important to improve education on these issues for teachers, students and parents as very often they know little about how to recognise those issues and how to respond to them. The role of the parents was stressed by one of the teachers who suggested cooperation with parents and a "*common staff policy*". Once again, it was stressed that open conversation with students, building relationships, informing, building trust, not criticising and encouraging them to think are the best ways to communicate with students and respond to contentious issues. It is important for teachers to keep in mind that the discussions are open and that students can openly express their opinions. The teachers should not be provoked, they should stay calm and avoid imposing their own views on students but rather explain the issue and provoke the students to think more deeply about it. Teachers should try to understand the student's motivations behind their behaviour and appreciate minimal positive changes in the attitudes and behaviour of students. The understanding helps to build a relationship between students and teachers. The teachers should be able to say *No* or *I don't know* when talking with students as that makes them more "authentic" in the eyes of students and it may facilitate contact and trust.

In sum, the above-reported suggestions are based on the importance of the participation of students, creating space for their own initiative, assessing students' attitudes, and providing the possibility to express their own opinions. It is also important to understand the students' motivations and the needs they satisfy through their group behaviour. On the other hand, bad practices like imposing views and solutions should be avoided.

The second question of this section in the online survey focused on perceived 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 teachers mentioned the following issues as obstacles: lack of communication, lack of knowledge of the subject on the part of teachers and students, and lack of skills to deal with those issues by teachers. The respondents also mentioned the problem of insufficient time. The teachers are overworked and have *"no time to focus on the individual needs of students"* and the students are overloaded as there is *"too much study material"* which makes it difficult to find the time for discussions with teachers. Another important problem mentioned by the teachers was *"the lack of a culture of conversation and no respect for the interlocutor"* and *"the problem of openness to the way of thinking of another person"* which make discussions very hard if not impossible. Moreover, those topics are very often considered as taboo and teachers are avoiding them, quickly cutting conversations about them and punishing controversial views. Another challenge mentioned by the teachers is the lack of trust, lack of respect towards students and underestimating the role of empathy.

Furthermore, the online survey invited teachers to share any additional comments that they deemed useful for the results of the survey. Teachers postulated for *"reconstruction of the entire educational system in Poland"* as in their opinion *"it is outdated, it does not meet the problems of today's world and contemporary youth in any way, it is feudal, fictitious, demanding, destroying rather than supports"*. Moreover, they stressed that it is *"important to restore authority to the teaching profession as there is a decline in the importance and prestige of the teaching profession"*. They also pointed out the problems of contemporary schools and their management, among which we can list *"the dependencies of education management, ranging from the curator, headmaster, governing body to the teacher"* and the fact that *"competitions for school principals are 100% set up. In order to win, you need an anointing and the support of an organ education management in the local government. It is very bad, - the problem is the selection of people for the profession, it is entirely negative, it does not take into account the skills that should characterise a teacher - treating students at school as children (regardless of whether or not is primary or secondary school)"*. The teachers suggested not only to reform the education system from the operational perspective, but also to change the content that

is thought at schools. The suggested to “*incorporate these [contentious] issues into classroom curricula so that you can have time and space to introduce this to students and listen to their views on it*”.

Conclusions

Overall, the findings from the desk research were confirmed by the Polish teachers participating in the online survey. The survey was helpful and enriching, as it allowed for the formulation of practical recommendations. The main thesis formed after conducting the desk research and the conclusion of the survey is that the problem of radicalisation is not seen as a critical issue in Polish schools. This is not a priority problem for teachers. However, the symptoms of the phenomenon are increasing, hence the need for greater attention.

Based on the main findings from the desk research and the conclusions of the online survey and the workshops with teachers, the following conclusions can be drawn: radicalisation is not a common issue in Polish schools. Hence, the education system treats this issue as marginal. The issues of polarisation and radicalisation in Polish schools are most often addressed by non-governmental organisations, that conduct projects, training, and prepare educational materials. However, this content has not been widely incorporated into the official curriculum. In addition to non-governmental organisations, the police and local governments are also interested in the prevention of radicalisation. They see a growing trend of radicalisation occurring in local communities, although research confirms that, right now, radicalisation mostly affects groups related to stadium hooligans, and groups centred around a right-wing ideology, based on anti-immigrant sentiments and nationalism. The education system does not yet record these trends in its system; however, the problem of radicalisation is growing in importance. This is especially noticeable after 2014 when a greater influx of migrants arrived in Poland from non-European countries. Moreover, the situation in Polish schools changed drastically after the start of the war in Ukraine in February 2022, because the number of refugees arriving in Poland was huge the schools were forced to rearrange and accommodate Ukrainian kids. The scarcity of resources and the feeling that Ukrainian students are treated forgivingly led to tensions between students. Intercultural tensions are manifested through the increasingly common presence of hate speech in public spaces and in school. However, they have not yet led to an increase in violence on a larger scale.

Building on the findings of the desk research, the online survey, and the fieldwork conducted with teachers, it is possible to formulate the following recommendations:

1. Gradual introduction of the issues of polarisation, discrimination and radicalisation as content in the educational curriculum of schools. It is important that these topics are introduced gradually and judging the political and social situation and attitudes. Taking into account that radicalisation is a growing problem in Poland, but still not posing a significant threat to social cohesion.
2. Developing teacher support and creating tools to recognise, prevent and respond to attitudes that may lead to discrimination, polarisation, radicalisation and violence. It is important to sensitise teachers to the topic of radicalisation, because they often fail to recognise attitudes that may lead to radicalisation or ignore these symptoms.
3. Creating platforms for the exchange of experiences between teachers, school management and methodologists, who are supporting and training teachers in the field of current practical methods to prevent discrimination, polarisation, and radicalisation.
4. Strengthening cooperation between the education system, schools, and non-governmental organisations in order to transfer knowledge and experience from practitioners and experts to teachers, educators and school psychologists.
5. Flexible response to changing narratives and trends in radicalisation.
6. Supports for schools, such as: mediation emergency service or intercultural assistants, which schools can use to diagnose and solve problems of conflicts and peer violence.
7. Monitoring and implementation of effective support tools for the integration of migrant children in Polish schools. The presence of migrants in the Polish educational system is a relatively new phenomenon and requires the adoption of appropriate integration support strategies, in order to prevent and avoid tensions and conflicts that could lead to violence.

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