Teachers' Challenges and Practices in Handling Contentious Issues: Cross-Country Analysis and Recommendations

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Teachers' Challenges and Practices in Handling Contentious Issues: Cross-Country Analysis and Recommendations

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Abstract: This conclusive article builds on the data collected within the framework of the H2020 project PARTICIPATION to provide a cross-country analysis of the main challenges and contentious topics teachers face in the classroom, along with the possible responses they may adopt to address these issues. After having described the whole sample of teachers involved in this research, the article reports on the most frequently experienced challenges and contentious topics in the classroom, including issues relating to the perceived level of support received by teachers when dealing with contentious issues, their relationship with the student's parents, and their feelings about existing educational tools. The second part of the article will focus on training needs, good and bad practices, as well as what are, in the teachers' view, the main obstacles to dealing with challenges and contentious topics at school, and the main suggestions provided by the teachers to tackle these problems. To conclude, the article provides a set of recommendations directed towards policymakers and school administrations to support teachers in handling challenges and contentious issues that arise in the classroom.

Keywords: secondary schools, teachers, challenges, practices, cross-country analysis, recommendations.

Introduction

This conclusive article of this monographic issue builds on the data collected from the research activities undertaken between 2021 and the beginning of 2022, in the framework of the H2020 project *PARTICIPATION*. The use of a standardised online survey named *Contentious issues in the classroom: teachers' challenges and responses*, as well as the coordination among the different research partners in conducting two workshops with teachers in each of the six EU member states under investigation, allowed for a cross-country analysis of the data to be conducted. The research activities, aimed at collecting data on the main challenges and contentious topics teachers face in secondary schools' classroom and on what reactions they can put in place to address these issues, have been conducted in Belgium, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, and Romania.

Before describing the main cross-country findings of this work, it is worth highlighting that the selection of the teachers involved in this research path, while based on those working in secondary schools, also took into account their geographical locations, gender, and subjects taught, with a view to diversify the sample as much as possible. By merging teachers who had previously participated in the research initiatives carried out by the research partners involved in the H2020 project *PARTICIPATION*, a mixed approach has been adopted, which included the involvement of new participants. Furthermore, when possible, schools with a high concentration of different socio-economic and socio-cultural profiles have been prioritised. In some cases, teachers working in schools located in communities suffering from economic or ethnic exclusion and marginalisation, have been specifically targeted.[1]

The first part of this article, after having described the whole sample of teachers involved in the online survey, will report on the most frequently experienced challenges and contentious topics in the classroom and in the school environment, including issues relating to the perceived level of support received by teachers when dealing with contentious issues, their relationship with the student's parents, and their feelings about existing educational tools. The second part of this article will focus on training needs, good and bad practices, as well as what are, in the teachers' view, the main obstacles to dealing with challenges and contentious topics at school, and the main suggestions provided by the teachers to tackle these problems. Finally, a set of recommendations directed towards policymakers and school administrations to support teachers in handling challenges

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[1] For more detailed information about the adopted methodology, please see the first article of this monographic issue, entitled *Teachers' challenges and resilience-building teaching activities in secondary schools: fundamentals of an exploratory research*.

and contentious issues that arise in the classroom is provided at the end of the article by capturing the main needs for improvement in this field based on the analyses presented in the different articles of this monographic issue.

Description of the sample

The whole sample of the online survey was composed of a total of one hundred and fifty-six teachers. Of those who shared their gender, ninety-eight were females and fifty-two were males. Most of the teachers were aged between forty and forty-nine (45 out of 149 who shared this data). The remaining sample was aged between fifty and fifty-nine (43), between thirty and thirty-nine (27), between twenty and twenty-nine (17), and over sixty (17). The online survey was addressed to teachers working (or who have worked) in secondary schools in the different countries under investigation. These schools were mainly located in big cities (as declared by 79 teachers out of 148 who responded to this question) or towns (65), with only a smaller part of them located in small villages (15 teachers). The main age group of students that they have taught is between twelve and nineteen, with a few teachers having declared to have taught younger students (from six to eleven years old), and older (from twenty to sixty years old), in the last five years. The subjects taught by our sample related to both humanities (predominantly) and sciences. Eighty-five teachers in the whole sample have declared to be (or have been) responsible for other activities besides teaching at school, often involving mentorship and counselling activities, and a range of other roles including psychologists, principal and assistant principal, as well as projects coordinators. Finally, with regard to the length of their teaching career, the sample was composed of both teachers with less than five years of experience and teachers with more than thirty years of experience, broken down as shown in the chart below (this information was released by 149 teachers out of 156 in the whole sample):

Figure 1. 'How many years have you been teaching?'.
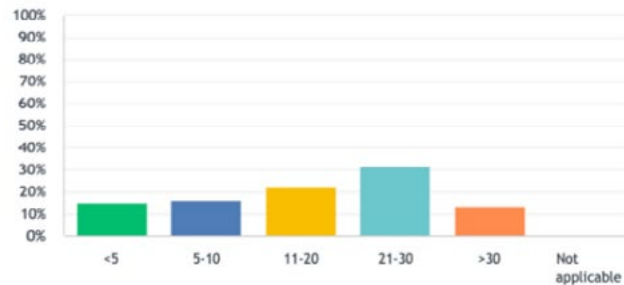
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
<5	15%	23
5-10	16%	24
11-20	23%	34
21-30	32%	47
>30	13%	20
Not applicable	1%	1
TOTAL		149

Challenges and contentious topics in the classroom and the school environment

All teachers involved in the online survey were provided with a list of challenges and contentious topics previously detected during desk research, and asked to indicate if they experienced them or not as part of their work with students. In the instance of an affirmative response, they were asked to report the extent to which they faced them (*very often*, *often*, or *sometimes*). All of the one hundred and fifty-six teachers responded to this question. Then, teachers were also asked to report on any additional issues they had encountered, in the previous five years, that were not specified in the questionnaire. In this case, some teachers also elaborated further on challenges or contentious topics that were listed, but that needed further explanations.

The table below outlines the five most frequently occurring challenges faced by the teachers in the whole sample. In case of multiple challenges receiving the same score, we have prioritised those with a larger number of *very often* rather than *often* and *sometimes*, or of *often* rather than *sometimes*.

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

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

Although these challenges can be better understood if placed in their specific country's context, and linked to their socio-political and economic specificities, some common reflections from teachers on these issues, collected during the various workshops, can be observed. Starting with the difficulties in changing their role from experts to facilitators when it comes to moderating a conversation about topics that give rise to polarisation inside the classroom. This is the most frequently experienced challenge in the classroom, as reported by teachers in the whole sample. In this regard, many teachers shared their reflections about the fact that transferring knowledge to their pupils is the main duty of every teacher. At the same time, when it comes to talking about contentious and polarising topics, they oftentimes struggle between the necessity to change their role (e.g., getting out of the teaching routine by putting aside judgments and evaluations and being neutral), and the desire to not undermine the students' attitude in remaining focused during lessons. Indeed, a change in teaching routine has been highlighted as potentially undermining this attitude. Furthermore, on one hand, while adopting a neutral approach and strategy when discussing these topics is generally perceived as a good practice, promoting the rule of law and conveying 'values' and 'morals' is perceived, on the other hand, as part of the teachers' duties, thus creating some difficulties, for teachers themselves, in adopting a well-balanced approach between these two positions. As stated by one of the teachers in sample,

> "[...] having an open attitude and allowing pupils to explore the topic together provides an opportunity to exchange different perspectives. However, this can sometimes pose a challenge: How open do we re-

main, how much do we allow? When should we set that limit of this is no longer okay?"

Finally, separating between personal and professional obligations during these conversations, and managing polarising comments shared by some students in the classroom, is not an easy task for some teachers. Indeed, if not adequately managed, these issues can lead to conflicts and disputes between students who have different views about contentious issues within society. Not by chance, handling these conflicts, as well as managing polarising comments and situations, are the other interrelated challenges reported as most frequently experienced by the teachers in the sample.

Beyond these challenges, the other most frequently experienced challenge within this 'top five' list, is the difficulties in *communicating constructively with the families of the students*. This challenge is closely linked with the difficulties, for teachers, in *managing situations where parents are not being supportive in addressing the problematic behaviour of their children in the class*. Both these two challenges have been experienced by more than one hundred teachers in the sample. In general, many teachers observed a noticeable lack of parental interest in the social behaviours of their children in school, and thus experienced difficulties in parent-teacher communication and collaboration in managing cases of behavioural problems. Moreover, in some cases, polarising statements and comments shared by students have been reported as originating within, or reinforced by, the student's family context, which obviously makes it extremely difficult, for teachers, to establish constructive communications with the family of the student. Despite being closely linked, these two challenges (*communicating constructively with the families of the students* and *managing situations where parents are not being supportive in addressing the problematic behaviour of their children in the class*) have received different evaluations in terms of frequency, highlighting that, the most recurrent and frequently experienced challenge between the two, is the difficulty in communicating constructively with families. This means that, behind these difficulties there may be other reasons beyond the reported lack of parents' interest in the social behaviours of their children in school. These difficulties will be explored more in-depth in the next sub-paragraph on the relationship between teachers and parents.

Other experienced (although lower ranked) challenges by teachers in the sample, as reported in the online survey, are the following: 1) *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.)*. Forty-one teachers declared to have experienced this challenge while one hundred and seven stated *never*; 2) *detecting clear signs and indicators of radicalisation processes in your students*. Seventy-two teachers declared experiencing this challenge while sixty-nine

stated *never*; 3) *understanding how to implement the practices of the legislation regarding the prevention of radicalisation at school (if any exist).* Fifty-four teachers declared to have experienced this challenge while sixty-five said they *never* experienced this challenge.

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

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

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

The results of the online survey put the *discussions about the government's measures to counter the COVID-19 pandemic* on the top of the most frequently contentious topics teachers had to deal with, including the efficacy and 'purity' of vaccines against this disease, or conspiracy theories relating to the pandemic. During the workshops, some teachers highlighted that this has given room to the spread of 'Us-vs-Them' narratives, and intense discussions on vaccines between students who were vaccinated and those who were not. Both students and teachers faced challenges relating to the remote learning activities implemented to curb the virus, and some teachers mentioned the difficulties experienced by many students upon returning to the

school environment, once remote classes were no longer necessary. As a result, according to some teachers, the manifestation of extreme behaviours (including cyber-bullying, racism, intolerance, and juvenile delinquency), and the necessity for teachers to manage conversations on polarising and contentious themes, increased greatly from the outbreak of the pandemic. Equally, discussions in the classroom and in the school environment relating to *grievances about social conflicts and inequalities in society*, gender roles and norms, especially regarding sexuality, and issues relating to clothes and masks at school, increased. Other examples in this regard are given by bullying and cyber-bullying related issues, especially sexual bullying and cyberbullying, in-person bullying in relation to gender and economic status, bullying against ethnic minorities, and bullying against students with disabilities.

When the teachers were asked to report any additional challenges or contentious topics which were not listed in the options of the questionnaire in the online survey, some teachers highlighted the following: 1) "conflicts with other colleagues on contentious issues; a lot of students were concerned about the treatment of Ukrainian migrants, especially in comparison to the treatment of refugees from Africa or the Middle East"; 2) "religiously inspired extremist views"; 3) "me-too related discussions"; 4) "the influence placed on students "from the neighbourhood" over how they should act at school, with whom they should socialise, and how they should dress"; 5) "drug-related issues"; 6) "an increase in physical aggression from students against teachers".

During the 'Follow-up' workshops conducted in the various countries, there was a general agreement among all the teachers involved that their experience with challenges and contentious topics varies, sometimes greatly, depending on diverse variables: different groups of students, different schools, different roles of teachers, and different subjects taught. Overall, what changes, depending on these variables, is the intensity and the frequency of such discussions, the fact that contentious topics may vary from region to region, and even from community to community within a given country. Furthermore, although contentious topics can be potentially discussed in the context of all subjects, there appears to be more space or opportunity, for students, to express their views in humanities than in the so-called 'hard sciences'. In addition, when it comes to discussing delicate matters, the bond between teachers and students is seen as a significant aspect. In this regard, teachers with a mentorship role appear to have a stronger bond with students, because they have more knowledge regarding their home situation. Finally, the maturity of the groups of students, classroom size, and the composition of the classroom in terms of cultural backgrounds, all influence the way teachers discuss such topics.

Support received from other colleagues and the school administration

When asked how they felt about the degree of support offered by their colleagues and school administration when it came to tackling challenges and contentious topics in the classroom and in the school environment, most of the teachers in the sample declared to be well supported by both their peers and their school administration. However, thirty-six teachers out of one hundred and fifty-three respondents stated that cooperation with colleagues could be improved, and the remaining four feel to be isolated in this regard. Similarly, forty-two teachers out of one hundred and fifty-four respondents stated that cooperation with the school management could be improved, and the other three felt isolated.

Figure 2. Perception of support received from colleagues and school management by teachers in the whole sample.
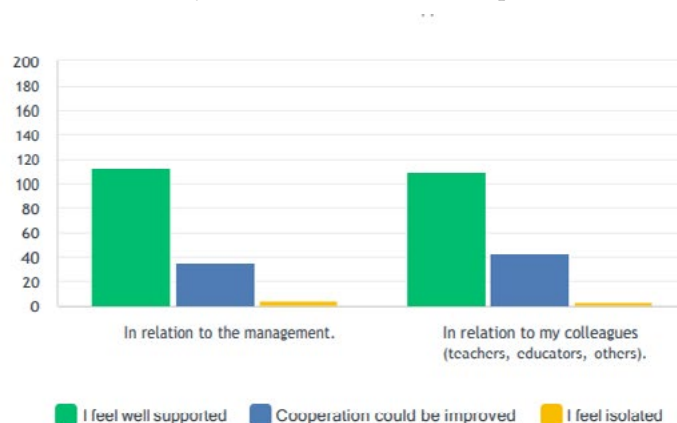
	I FEEL WELL SUPPORTED	COOPERATION COULD BE IMPROVED	I FEEL ISOLATED	TOTAL
In relation to the management.	73% 113	24% 36	3% 4	153
In relation to my colleagues (teachers, educators, others).	71% 109	27% 42	2% 3	154

Teachers who signalled that cooperation could be improved, or that they feel isolated in relation to their colleagues when it comes to addressing challenges and contentious topics in the classroom, expanded upon this subject by sharing some comments, both in the online survey and during the 'Follow-up' workshops. Among the highlighted reasons was a lack of availability for comparison and cooperation between themselves and their colleagues, a lack of essential communication, issues relating to the pressure and the time constraint to complete the established curriculum, competition between teachers, prejudices and inappropriate behaviours stemming from colleagues, difficulty in finding colleagues who were able to adopt proper

communication with students and their families, and the choice, of many colleagues, to remain distant from incidents occurring in the school context to avoid further problems.

Regarding the school management, teachers mentioned issues relating to the absence of the headmaster at the school, the headmaster's lack of skills and their erratic participation in the 'Teaching Staff Meetings', an inadequate approach and level of attention given by the management in efforts to solve these types of problems, a lack of an integrated plan to prevent and tackle these issues, the tendency to find and label a culprit rather than solving the real dispute, and a lack of offers, from the management, in terms of training for teachers on ethical and societal issues as well as on how to address polarisation and radicalisation-related issues in the classroom.

Educational tools

A section of the online survey was designed to find out if teachers believed that:

1. In their country, a suitable number of educational tools are available to assist school personnel in tackling challenges and contentious topics in the classroom.
2. That the existing tools are adequate to work on these issues with their students.
3. That teachers and school staff were adequately taught to utilise these tools.

These questions were designed in a *yes/no* format, but also included an option for teachers to indicate their lack of knowledge regarding such educational tools. In relation to question n.1, out of one hundred and fifty-four respondents, fifty-five teachers answered positively, sixty-one teachers answered negatively, and thirty-eight teachers answered: *I do not know*. For question n. 2, out of one hundred and fifty-five respondents, most of the teachers (60) chose the option *I do not know*, while fifty-one responded positively and forty-four negatively. Finally, for question n.3, the large majority of respondents declared to think that teachers (99 out of 154 respondents) are not adequately trained to use these tools, while the remaining fifty-five teachers were divided between those who chose the option *I do not know* (30) and those who answered positively (25). The same goes for the school staff, with the overwhelming majority of teachers (102 out of 155 respondents) having answered negatively.

During the 'Follow-up' workshops, teachers were asked to expand upon their answers to these questions. The discussions that took place during the workshops confirmed that a general lack of knowledge about existing educational tools exists among teachers. Regarding the suitability of these tools for their purpose, recurrent shared concerns were about, first, that it

is difficult to find these tools online since they are spread across the internet, without a central database which collects them; second, they appear to be ineffective, especially in relation to addressing cultural and religious differences in the class; third, there are no specific guidelines, per subject, to follow, and the information packages do not contain information about *what do you do in each specific situation?*. Although some good handbooks exist, these concerns were shared widely by the involved participants.

When asked to report, during the workshops, on what tools they use in their classrooms to deal with challenges and contentious topics, teachers mentioned the following material, although many of them admitted to not knowing about specific methods or material: 1) "the prevention material provided by the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN)"; 2) "the use of a scientific approach to clarify students' doubts and answer their questions"; 3) "empowerment techniques and videos for building up the capability of students to "control elements" in their environment"; 4) "practical handbook created by EU funded projects like Euroguide"; 5) "the support of school psychologists in addressing controversial issues in the school environment"; 6) "face-to-face meetings with anti-radicalisation practitioners and experts representing the civil society sector"; 7) "online resources (videos, documentaries, news, and photographs to facilitate the discussion in the classroom)"; 8) "exercises and games to develop empathy and the knowledge of the other".

Finally, the online survey's last question of this section asked teachers what sort of assistance, training, and/or tools they believe they need more to increase their capacity to cope with challenges and polarising, contentious issues in the classroom and in the school environment. It is possible to summarise these needs as follows: many teachers pointed out the necessity to create a network with local authorities, by organising effective training courses that address the issues not only theoretically, but by proposing concrete strategies and approaches, with the use of real-life examples. Specific workshops and training should be organised around controversial topics, tailored to different students' age groups and for the various disciplines that teachers teach. Receiving training in conversation skills to better support and motivate the pupils has been another recurrent request from teachers. According to some teachers, this kind of training should foresee the participation of all the school's colleagues, so that every teacher can have a better exchange with each other on these issues. The possibility, for teachers, to debate with different professionals about contentious topics in the classroom was deemed, by some teachers, as very beneficial for the teachers themselves. Organising inter-school debates on these matters, having more educational hours to address these topics, being trained on conflict mediation techniques, the use of online tools, information and communications technology, group games, and how to improve students' participation in

methods of teaching, are additional suggestions collected from the teachers in the sample.

The relationship with the parents

The triangular relationship composed of teachers-students-parents, and especially communication and collaboration between parents and teachers in the management of behavioural difficulties of students/children, is a key element in the safeguarding of pupils' school life. The last section of this part of the online survey, devoted to discussing issues relating to challenges and contentious topics in the classroom and in the school environment, focused on deepening the understanding of the ways teachers and students' parents interact, and what obstacles may undermine their cooperation.

The online survey allowed participants to select up to three replies to describe their interactions with students' parents during the school year. The most selected answers were the following: *I talk to them mainly during the annual parent/teacher conferences* and *I talk to them only when there is an issue regarding a pupil's behaviour*. The answer *I have frequent contact with them* was only picked thirty-nine times by the one hundred and fifty-five teachers who responded to this answer. As shown in the chart below, when asked if they felt supported by their students' parents in coping with divisive remarks made by their children, most of the teachers (70 out of 150 respondents) declared to receive a moderate amount of support, although this varies from parent to parent.

Figure 3. Perception of support received by teachers from parents, in the whole sample.
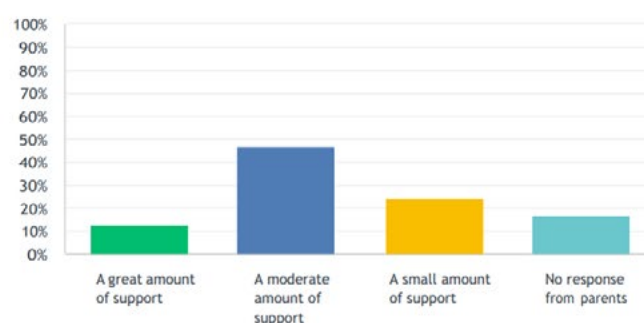
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
A great amount of support	13%	19
A moderate amount of support	47%	70
A small amount of support	24%	36
No response from parents	17%	25
TOTAL		150

Concerning the main difficulties teachers have encountered while communicating with their pupils' parents, the most recurrent highlighted issues are linguistic barriers, cultural barriers, and time constraints impacting communication and interaction. In this regard, some teachers also point out that, at times, a lack of communication and a cultural difference with parents causes some teachers to avoid carrying out some educational activities, out of fear of the reactions of parents. Other recurrent challenges shared by the teachers can be summarised as follows: first, despite the fact that some teachers attempted to involve parents in extracurricular activities, they were unable to get meaningful adherence. Issues relating to parents' reluctance to meet, take part in school life and help in solving problems were very often highlighted by teachers. In this regard, teachers reported that many parents seem to not see the need to get involved in the educational process, they do not participate in school matters and they are interested in results and grades more than in the educational role played by the school. This leads, in some cases, to conflicts between parents and teachers in terms of the students' performance assessment. Second, a general lack of trust from parents in the school system has been reported as well in many cases, with tendencies of some parents to justify *a priori* their children's behaviour and disdain for some teachers or the methods they use. Third, additional issues have been reported with regard to the GDPR rules which sometimes do not allow teachers to approach parents directly: this must be done through the mentor. This contributes to slowdown the communication process. Fourth, some parents exclude women from the discussion, and do not want their children to participate in certain sports activities or outings.

To cope with these issues, teachers involved in the 'Follow-up' workshops suggested that schools should try to offer them a better view of the school's civic life, that having more interpreters and cultural mediators would be important to better overcome linguistic and cultural barriers, and that it is crucial to create a constructive relationship between parents, teachers and pupils before problems can occur.

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

The second part of the online survey aimed to better understand teachers' perceptions of specific practices for coping with challenges and contentious topics. In order to get this knowledge, we asked teachers to rate a set of practices listed in the online survey as either good or bad. In addition, teachers were asked whether they felt adequately trained to address polarisation-related issues in the classroom and in the school environment. As for the latter, ninety-one teachers out of one hundred and forty-four respondents

answered negatively. In fact, as previously stated, a variety of training pro-grammes for teachers, that are currently deemed as lacking or insufficient, have been deemed extremely important by the teachers themselves, in order to assist them in dealing with the identified challenges and issues.

Concerning practices, teachers in the sample evaluated them as good or bad, as shown in the following table:

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

ITEMS	GOOD PRACTICE	BAD PRACTICE
Facilitate a space for discussion where every student can talk and be heard, no matter their position.	133	3
Building a trust-based relationship with students.	144	1
Trying to find out who is right and who is wrong when students share their thoughts.	54	73
Peer-to-peer approaches.	99	11
Addressing taboo-related issues.	112	6
Looking for early signs of radicalisation processes.	88	10
Ignoring the challenges and issues facing young people to avoid making matters worse.	10	128
Reporting signs of pupils' radicalisation processes to the school principal.	105	9
Trying to develop a sense of empathy with and among students.	143	1
Strengthen resilience against violent narratives by teaching students critical thinking tools and methods for media literacy.	131	3
Empowering the triangular relationship between students, teachers, and parents.	135	3
Keeping the school management well informed.	119	3
Establishing networks between teachers across Europe.	96	3
Invite experts in the classroom (e.g.: psychologists, CSOs, NGOs, young ambassadors).	133	6
Debating online news that is based on unclear sources or none at all.	76	50
Discussions about democratic values and human rights.	141	0
Provide lessons on the importance of tolerance and anti-discrimination.	126	7
Mock the students who share certain fake sources to incite them to react against disinformation.	13	117
Raise awareness regarding consequences of violence.	140	3
Ask for support from the police.	70	24

Ongoing training for teachers in the prevention of radicalisation.	102	5
Cooperation between schools and representatives of minority groups to push back against "Us vs Them" narratives.	116	7
Teach critical thinking to students.	141	0
Ongoing training for teachers and students to spot fake news and harmful conspiracy theories.	117	4
Increase students' knowledge about active citizenship and the relationship between rights and responsibilities.	138	2
Increase students' knowledge of democratic practices and processes.	133	2
Rely on alternative means of education such as arts, crafts, one-to-one development.	117	5
Watch for and take action in cases of students with mental health issues, coming from domestic violence, abuse, addiction contexts by referring them to professionals, confidentially.	131	2
Engage with parents, and request their support in cases of concern, where students are isolating themselves.	134	1

By averaging out the number of good and bad judgments received for the practices listed in the table above, it is possible to see that *trying to develop a sense of empathy with and among students, building a trust-based relationship with students, teaching critical thinking skills, raise awareness regarding the consequences of violence, increase students' knowledge about active citizenship and the relationship between rights and responsibilities, engage with parents and request their support in cases of concern, where students are isolating themselves*, and *facilitate a space for discussion where every student can talk and be heard, no matter their position*, are the practices deemed most beneficial. On the contrary, *mock the students who share certain fake sources to incite them to react against disinformation, ignoring the challenges and issues facing young people to avoid making matters worse*, and *trying to find out who is right and who is wrong when students share their thoughts*, are the practices that received the most negative responses from the teachers.

Interestingly, two practices have received a similar number of both good and bad evaluations: *debating online news that is based on unclear sources or none at all*, and *ask for support from the police*. Regarding the involvement of the police in the discussions of polarising issues and debates with youth, the 'Follow-up' workshops have highlighted that, according to some teachers, the level of trust felt among young people towards the police is very low in some cities and communities, and that the police are not necessarily better equipped than teachers to manage these discussions. To start good cooperation in this regard, some teachers have highlighted the need to build trust between youth and the police, and that police should receive adequate pedagogical training before working with students on these topics, avoiding interferences in the educational relationship between teachers and students.

Furthermore, some teachers mentioned that, in order to know whether or not asking the police for support is a good or bad practice, it is necessary to distinguish between the types of support that the police can provide. For instance, some teachers see the value in requesting police assistance in presenting a lecture on a contentious subject but are afraid to involve the police in possible cases of radicalisation among their students, since this could undermine the trustful relationship between teachers and students and make things worse for their pupils. In this regard, some teachers stated that they use other communication channels with experts to discuss such cases before involving the police.

Concerning the practice of *debating online news that is based on unclear sources or none at all*, feedback collected during the workshops, underlines that many teachers are very careful to not downplay the role that the online social space plays for young people, including on an emotional level. They think that this kind of news should be approached, but cautiously, in order to avoid fostering the polarisation of opinions. In sum, this type of news should not be disputed strictly speaking, but rather used in class to work with students on the value of sources and perform 'live research'.

The online survey encouraged teachers to share any other additional good or bad practices they have encountered that were not included in the questionnaire. These practices were then further discussed during the 'Follow-up' workshops. First, teachers remarked that any activity that encouraged student engagement and provided a space for students to share their thoughts and opinions, including on an individual level, was a beneficial practice. The usage of activities such as *Walk in my shoes*, which help students to put themselves in the shoes of 'the other', as well as allowing students and teachers to discuss sensitive themes on a regular basis, was found effective in this respect. Second, teachers emphasised the nature of the relationship inside the classroom, and the effect that this can have on certain activities, even in the discussion of contentious topics, pointing out that preventing polarisation is connected to enhancing the good features of peaceful coexistence. In this regard, lessons on preconceptions are deemed as necessary, particularly on lessons discussing taboo subjects. Third, some teachers commented that expressing solidarity with examples of successful geographical, political, individual, economic, and ecological cooperation, might help raise awareness of polarisation and radicalisation-related issues. Fourth, the importance of building a dialogue with the student(s), attempting to understand their needs, attitudes and motivations, was considered of tremendous importance. Fifth, within the framework of this dialogue, some teachers deemed it important to highlight that these dialogues should create an opportunity for students to seek solutions to their problems and take responsibility for these solutions since teacher-imposed solutions are deemed

ineffective, and risk making students feel relieved from the responsibility of the choices they make.

Main suggestions and obstacles to deal with challenges and contentious topics

Finally, the online survey asked teachers to summarise their key recommendations and perceived barriers to dealing 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 answer this question, teachers provided a number of suggestions, that were further discussed during the workshops. Although the different surveyed countries highlighted their peculiar needs relating to their specific context, some common points, within the provided suggestions, can be identified: first, teachers across the different countries under investigation have emphasised that the identified challenges and contentious topics require, for teachers and the school staff, more constant preparation, especially on a practical side. Second, improving collaboration among teachers and the whole school staff is deemed essential, by many teachers, to foster a continuous dialogic exchange on these issues. In this regard, the involvement of external experts, and closer cooperation with the student's parents would be, according to many of the surveyed teachers, very beneficial for developing a relationship of trust among all the school actors involved. Third, and closely linked to the previous point, being constantly trained and updated on how to address these issues is seen as an urgent need by almost all the teachers who participated in this research project. Fourth, having a clear, school-wide, normative framework to address polarisation and contentious topics in the classroom, has been deemed as an essential pillar to act in a more cooperative, structured, and cohesive way, with a view to establishing more integrated actions through the different subjects taught. Fifth, both the online survey and the various workshops, have highlighted the importance of understanding the student's motivations behind their behaviour, while taking into account the role played by emotions, potentially motivating such behaviours. This understanding should be implemented during the potential actions or projects introduced to protect students from possible risks linked to disinformation, polarisation, and radicalisation-related issues.

Concerning obstacles, the related question in the online survey asked teachers: *What is, in your view, the main obstacle to successfully dealing with challenges and contentious topics in the classrooms and the school environment?* Inevitably, most of the main common obstacles, highlighted by the teachers, are linked with the provided suggestions, starting with the issue of a general lack of collaboration between the family and the school sys-

tem. Moreover, starting from the assumption that the school environment reflects society's different and conflicting perspectives and that, therefore, it is necessary to approach sensitive issues from several angles, the lack of universally recognised methodologies in dealing with such topics, as well as a lack of effective training for teachers, constituted some of the major concerns for the surveyed teachers. A lack of relevant educational tools, or the lack of knowledge of these tools among teachers, impacting the limited time that teachers have at school to address such issues, together with the matter of work fatigue, have additionally been signalled as barriers that frequently result in a lack of confidence on the teachers' side to discuss contentious topics in an open manner with students. Finally, students' immaturity-related issues, the role of teachers as evaluators of pupils' performance at school, and the fact that there is a decline in the importance and prestige of the teaching profession, have all been reported as issues that are increasingly impacting on the dialogic relationship between many teachers and students.

Regarding the specific topic of radicalisation, during the 'Follow-up' workshops, teachers discussed the role of schools in this context and the related obstacles they experience. The lack of a universally agreed definition of radicalisation, and the dispersive way in which the prevention material is distributed online, has been highlighted as a major issue. Furthermore, a more comprehensive and holistic approach to the prevention of radicalisation, has been deemed as crucial to avoid putting too much pressure on schools, and creating the illusion that schools alone can solve the issue:

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

Final remarks and recommendations

A sense of insecurity and uncertainty, while dealing with challenges and contentious topics in the classroom and the school environment, shines through much of the data collected during the online survey and the fieldwork conducted with teachers. Although each of the six countries under investigation has its own characteristics and peculiarities, common concerns and difficult experiences can be found among teachers across these countries: difficulties in detecting clear indicators and signs of radicalisation processes; difficulties in understanding how to implement the practices of the legislation regarding the prevention of radicalisation in the school envi-

ronment; difficulties in enhancing constructive dialogues in the classroom; difficulties in handling conflicts and disputes between students, that related to gender and other contentious issues within society; difficulties in building productive communication between teachers and students' parents; difficulties in finding and implementing existing educational tools that teachers could use in the classroom when dealing with contentious topics; difficulties fitting any 'prevent material' into the specific classroom settings; difficulties in coping with disinformation-related issues affecting their pupils; difficulties in finding effective training to enhance teachers' skills in dealing with these issues; difficulties in cooperation with colleagues and the school management, difficulties due to the necessity to remain neutral and, at the same time, convey democratic values and the importance of the rule of law during the discussion of contentious topics in the classroom, and, above all, difficulties in changing their role from 'transferring knowledge' to 'moderating a conversation' in the classroom.

In this context, the COVID-19 pandemic, the recent Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, the ambiguities in the terminology surrounding radicalisation and extremism, time constraints and the pressure to finish the school curricula, the delicate phase in the lives of students, concerns regarding the discussion of sensitive topics in the classroom, and the progressive decline in teachers' authority within society, certainly increase the complexity of this multi-layered scenario.

Desk research conducted at the beginning of this research path has proven to be of tremendous importance in facilitating the collection of data, particularly through the online survey and the workshops conducted with teachers. Indeed, providing teachers with a list of challenges, contentious topics, and possible practices stemming from the existing literature, has been crucial in facilitating discussions, and comparing their recent experiences with data collected from previous studies. In this regard, an interesting point that emerged from this work, is the fact that all the challenges and the contentious topics that were listed by the research team in the questionnaire, have been found to have been experienced by at least some teachers in all the surveyed countries, although with different degrees of intensity. Considering that many of these challenges have been reported in the existing literature, at least since the 1980s,[2] this means that policies and measures to respond to these challenges, support, and train teachers, and protect stu-

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[2] See, for instance, Stradling, R., Noctor, M., Baines, B. (1984). *Teaching Controversial Issues.* London, UK, Edward Arnold; Harwood, A. M., Hahn, C. (1990). *Controversial issues in the classroom.* ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education Bloomington IN; Levitt, G. A., & Longstreet, W. S. (1993). *Controversy and the teaching of authentic civic values.* The Social Studies 84 (4): 142–47. Taylor and Francis Ltd; Soley, M. (1996). *If it's controversial, why teach it?.* Social Education, 60 (1), 9–14.

dents in this context have been insufficient and/or partially ineffective. Furthermore, although many projects investigating the school environment and its relationship with contentious issues have taken place from 2015 onwards, producing educational tools and a number of insights in terms of good and bad practices, a large number of the surveyed teachers stated that they were unaware of these materials, partially due to the lack of a centralised collection point.

Against this backdrop, the collected findings allow us to provide a set of recommendations addressed to policymakers and school administrations to support teachers in dealing with challenges and contentious issues entering the classroom, build stronger resilience in secondary schools against polarisation and radicalisation-related issues, and protect pupils from violent extremism. The recommendations are as follows:

1. The need for consistent frameworks and a clear vision

It is pivotal to systematise teachers' responsibilities and tasks as frontline preventative actors, in order to help them to effectively cope with polarisation and radicalisation-related issues at school. Both the national and local governments, as well as school management, should give teachers a more uniform framework and clear picture of what they expect from them in this respect, and particularly by: 1) establishing uniform procedures at school for dealing with relevant challenges and incidents relating to polarised views and contentious topics, so that the entire school community can take a holistic approach to prevent and address these issues more effectively; 2) creating clear guidelines, including pedagogical methodologies, for addressing contentious topics in the class, dealing with polarising behaviours and/or statements by pupils, and actions that should be considered when concerns relating to radicalisation arise; 3) systematising a whole-of-school approach to promote certain elements (e.g., values, ways of teaching, etc.), and encourage the engagement of parents in these activities.

2. Insert discussions on contentious topics into the official schools' curricula

The vast majority of the surveyed teachers noted a shortage of time to discuss and address controversial issues in the classroom. By incorporating these discussions and activities into the official school curriculum, teachers would be able to better deal with the time constraints.

3. Tailored and easily accessible educational tools

Educational and preventative tools are of tremendous importance in the support of teachers' everyday life at school when it comes to addressing contentious topics. Equipping teachers with more tailored and useful educational tools, and ensuring teachers know how to find them, is pivotal.

In this regard, the conducted research has highlighted the importance of: 1) enhancing dialogue between schools and civil society organisations in the various EU Member States, to facilitate the transfer of knowledge and experience between the different actors, so that the educational tools that will be created, may benefit from wider know-how and be more in line with the classroom settings; 2) ensuring that all the educational tools are provided with clear guidelines on how to use them; 3) ascertaining that the educational tools are neutral and do not convey a specific political message, having in mind that these are developed by external, generally private, companies and organisations; 4) effectively disseminate existing tools through a central EU online library, gathering all suitable material that has been developed by the various competent organisations, so that this material will be easily accessible for teachers.

4. Cooperation between teachers, the school management, and the whole school staff

Effective collaboration between teachers and the school management is critical for ensuring that every student feels seen and heard and may find safe spaces for discussions at school. The following are the main collected suggestions that could enhance this cooperation: 1) ensuring that dialogue between teachers and the school management regarding students' issues take place on a regular basis; 2) facilitating the insertion of planned and targeted actions within the different courses and their integrated dialogues, to better address challenges and contentious topics with students; 3) building new avenues for teachers within the school, to collaborate on both formal and non-formal education activities; 4) establishing regular, participatory consultations on how to deal with contentious topics in the classroom, held between teachers and school management to strengthen and build a trustful relationship; 5) having a psychotherapist within the school, on a daily basis, to support teachers in addressing sensitive issues with their pupils.

5. The need for training

Teachers need to be trained on how to interact with their students on contentious topics more appropriately and effectively, while simultaneously adhering to any rules that have been instated. A current lack of suitable training in this sense has been strongly highlighted by the surveyed teachers. To fill this gap, implementing the following training and actions for teachers has been deemed extremely beneficial by teachers themselves: 1) facilitate access to training courses, resources, and lifelong learning techniques for teachers, through a systematic and consistent framework; 2) provide training and seminars to enhance teachers' awareness and understanding of the issues at hand. Such events should involve experimental activities, real-life examples, and actual initiatives that teachers may take; 3)

provide training on how to facilitate open conversations on contentious topics among students, in a safe environment, how to remain impartial, how to allow room for varied perspectives, and how to strengthen empathy among both students and teachers, so that diverse opinions are discussed rather than feared; 4) provide training to help teachers better navigate the position of facilitators of conversations, rather than knowledge holders, when it comes to addressing contentious topics; 5) provide training to cope with disinformation-related issues entering the classroom, including courses on communication and how to address students' existential questions; 6) introduce mixed and new approaches into the teaching system, by encouraging co-teaching and phenomenon-based learning.

6. Empower the triangular relationship between students, teachers, and parents

Many of the surveyed teachers experience issues in communicating with their students' parents and in managing this triangular relationship. The following actions have been suggested to reduce these difficulties: 1) establish methods to improve collaboration among teachers, parents, and children by providing time for teachers to invest in this relationship; 2) involve parents in school policies and activities aimed at raising awareness of the dangers of violence for both students and their families; 3) having interpreters and cultural mediators cooperating with schools on a regular basis, would be of great help for both teachers and parents in better understanding one another, building trust, and so better protecting students.

7. Establish networks of cooperation

Teachers frequently feel isolated while dealing with challenges concerning their students' school lives. Involving outside experts who could assist teachers in managing classroom debates on contentious issues, would be a useful way to enrich the dialogue and broaden students' knowledge and horizons. In this sense, cooperative networks might be developed to serve as a bridge of collaboration between schools and trustworthy organisations, with recognised competence.

Furthermore, improving communication between teachers, students, local governments, and the police, might be a very important practice, benefiting from an integrated exchange of perspectives on violence-related topics among various players. In this sense, training police officers to deal pedagogically with students would increase the chance of improving communication and trust between these groups.

8. Expand the range of activities for students at school

Adding more activities for students in the school system, although non-formal in scope, such as collaboration activities, project-based learning,

educational trips, creation of start-ups, and so forth, would help students to enhance their problem-solving skills, and would place schoolwork alongside issues that have real-world contexts.

To conclude, we would like to quote the poet Mark Van Doren. Students are individuals on their own journeys, discovering the multiple shades and streaks of life. As stated by Van Doren, "The art of teaching is the art of assisting discovery".[3]

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[3] Mark Van Doren, 'The Art of Teaching is the Art of Assisting Discovery', Independently published, September 12, 2019.