

Empowering the Relationship Between Teachers, Students, and Families to Build Resilience Against Racism, Hate Speech and (Cyber-)Bullying: a Case in Italy

Augusto Gamuzza, Anna Maria Leonora, Giorgia Mavica, Alessandra Scieri

Abstract: This work presents the main insights of the research in schools conducted in Italy within the framework of the H2020 PARTICIPATION project. The analytical path was specifically designed to conduct an exploratory study aimed at gathering data and experiences on the ways in which polarizing opinions enter and spread in the educational environment. To do this, a group of teachers were involved in a participatory social lab focused on exploring the needs and challenges faced by teachers concerning the dynamics of polarization and radicalization within the Italian public school system. Through participatory approach, the teachers played a central role in co-creating the research outputs, identifying possible solutions and strategies through a reflective process of shared elaboration. The research highlighted that the Italian context is marked by increasing inequalities and social conflict, including racism, hate crimes, hate speech, cyberbullying, cultural discrimination, and a lack of a well-defined regulatory framework to prevent radicalization. Although the results cannot be generalised, our work offers insightful comparative elements contributing to designing participative prevention strategies in the educational setting.

Keywords: Participatory research, Extremism, Radicalization, School

Introduction: Radicalization and education an overview in pandemic times (AG)

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused an unprecedented disruption to the education system worldwide (UNESCO, 2020), and Italy has been no exception. As schools were forced to close their doors, teachers and students had to adapt to remote learning, with online platforms becoming the new classroom. However, this new scenario brought with it a host of challenges, and one of the most significant was the increased risk of intolerance, hate speech, and cyberbullying (Bilewicz & Soral, 2020). As many studies noted (Beaunoyer *et al.*, 2020; Paz *et al.*, 2020) the recent pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing social, economic, and cultural inequalities in Italy, and this has had a significant impact on the educational system. With the forced transition to online learning, many students from vulnerable social groups were left behind due to a lack of access to technological equipment, reproducing the link between digital gap and the access to fair educational opportunities (Nguyen *et al.*, 2021). On the other hand, the pandemic has enhanced the risk of unaware access to new radicalization pipelines in the virtual environment, leading users (youth or not) to extreme narratives even starting from daily life activities on the web such as online gaming or looking for short videos, on Instagram or Tik-Tok or Facebook. This process reflects into the new narratives of hate and intolerance with new nuances as recently pointed out by and International Centre for the study of radicalization (Argentino *et al.*, 2022) the emerging narrative and aesthetic convergence between segments of neo-fascist accelerationists and salafi-jihadists represent a crucial target to pay attention to intriguing developments occurring at the borders of these groups. These ecosystems and their accompanying networks are fluid and hybrid while extremism research typically places significant emphasis on a movement's ideological steadfastness, present forms of extreme views are equally significant and grave as the more centralized movements of the past. They also provide new opportunities for threat actors to influence one another by coexisting in digital environments. Rather than indicating a weakened commitment to ideology, this phenomenon reflects an intensified focus on achieving outcomes over adhering strictly to established practices. In this scenario, social media platforms have become a breeding ground for hate speech (Chetty & Alathur, 2018; Bauman *et al.*, 2021; Matamoros-Fernandez & Farkas, 2021), with many students using them to bully and harass their peers. Schools have struggled to deal with this issue, and many have been caught off guard by the sudden increase in cyberbullying cases. In addition to this, the pandemic has exacerbated existing social tensions in Italy, leading to an increase in hate speech and intolerance. As the country faced a health emer-

gency, some people blamed foreigners, migrants, and minority groups for the spread of the virus, leading to a rise in xenophobic and racist attitudes (Bhanot *et al.*, 2021 Marchi *et al.*, 2022) This has had a significant impact on the educational system, with schools struggling to provide a safe and inclusive environment for all students. These issues are deeply concerning, as they threaten to undermine the educational experience of students and have long-lasting negative impacts on their mental health and wellbeing. It is essential to address these challenges head-on and work towards creating a safe and inclusive educational environment for all students.

This work reports on the research path that involved a group of Italian teachers within the PARTICIPATION project and, specifically, within the “social lab” dedicated to the analysis of the challenges and criticalities reported by these teachers in their daily life experience in relation to the dynamics of polarisation and radicalisation within the Italian public school system. To this purpose of description, and understanding of the context, the research was designed to make teachers at the very core of the discussion. The identification of possible solutions and strategies through a participative path aimed at fostering a reflective process of shared elaboration.

The public and scientific discourse in Italy related to radicalisation, polarisation and extremism appears, since the beginning, to be closely connected with the mass-mediatic ecosystem where jihadism (constantly on the top of the national security agenda), left-wing, right-wing, and anarchist extremism shows growing trend extremism, with a particular focus on the ‘non-jihadi Foreign Fighters – Italian citizens linked to far-right movements who went to fight in the Donbass region in Ukraine’. These trends dangerously interact with the lack of a well-defined and systematic regulatory framework regarding the prevention of radicalisation in Italy. Another significant element, coming from the desk research (Farinelli, 2022), was the examination of research projects that had radicalisation and polarisation as their analytical focus. In this way, it was possible to usefully integrate two relevant sources of information that connected the formal elements of the Italian context with the project responses provided by the creative engagement of researchers within different EU funding frameworks (ranging from Erasmus+ to Horizon2020). The main challenges addressed by the reviewed projects unveiled some relevant trends: a) the recognition of a dynamic of rising inequalities and social conflict; b) the increase of racism, hate crimes, hate speech; c) sexual bullying (also in its cyber declination), and cultural discrimination linked to forms of segregation of the most vulnerable social partners; d) the need to learn how to effectively deal with polarisation, radicalisation and extremism; e) the necessity to actively counteract false and fake news that create a misinformative ecosystem that fuels polarisation and radicalisation phenomena.

Research design and research participants profiles

The elements coming from the desk analysis (projects and policies) allowed the research team to fine-tune the thematic axes and the set of variables that constituted the structure of the online survey administered to Italian teachers.

Within the framework of the PARTICIPATION H2020 project, several social labs (Shanley *et al.*, 2021) were implemented, including one dedicated to analyzing the challenges and critical issues reported by teachers in their daily experience concerning the dynamics of polarization and radicalization within the Italian public school system. In line with the methodology of the social labs, based on a participatory path, two online workshops, “Set-the-Scene Workshop” and “Follow-up Workshop” were organized with the teachers of the secondary schools of our network.

In the specific Italian case, the teachers involved in the survey were selected through a purposive sampling strategy which took into account the geographical location of the respondents' schools. The teachers were selected in Noto, Eastern Sicily, which according to the data released by the Ministry of Education (Ministero dell'Istruzione, 2021), hosts the Sicilian province with the highest concentration of young people with a migratory background enrolled in public schools.

The group of teachers involved in the research path was composed of a total of 29 respondents. With a notable female prevalence (26/29). This majority reflects the gender distribution at national level of the teaching workforce in Italy where 83% (MIUR 2023) are female workers. An interesting aspect is the age distribution of the teachers. Considering that the great majority of involved teachers were in the advanced phase of their career: almost all of respondents were aged between 50-59 years old with a prevalence (10/27) of very experienced teachers, with more than 30 years of activity. Another interesting point is that the majority of respondents work in a medium-sized town, with students aged 12-15 years in a group of students (13/27).

In this context, the figure of the facilitator was crucial, as they were responsible for selecting, contacting, and overseeing the research process with the teachers. In the methodology of the social lab, the facilitator held significant responsibility, coordinating the social lab meetings and aiding in creating a safe space for joint construction and co-creation of knowledge during the workshop process. Moreover, the facilitator had the task of building a trust relationship with the teachers involved in the research and concurrently clarifying the research objectives and highlighting the importance of their involvement, opinions, and viewpoints in this research.

After having drafted the first version of the online survey as a structured questionnaire, containing both closed-ended and open-ended questions based on the preliminary findings collected through the desk research, “Set-

the-Scene Workshop” was organized that allowed to build a relationship of trust with the teachers involved, providing them with a safe space to discuss qualitatively both their experiences in the classroom and the first version of the survey, ensuring that the questions were clear, and asking them to reflect on possible improvements that could be made to the survey. Infact, the pandemic in our case limited the experiences in online settings and making the most out of the digital tools available has been an essential part of social lab preparation. Despite the online mode, the social labs have been adapted to confront the precarity of the global situation regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, thus representing a welcoming and cooperative space where all the participating teachers have felt part of the group, and where they have had the opportunity to experience a reciprocal exchange of their experiences and the challenges that emerge within the classroom (Hassan, 2014; Timmermans *et al.*, 2020).

After receiving feedback from teachers during the “Set-the-Scene Workshop”, the first version of the online survey named *Contentious issues in the classroom: teachers’ challenges and responses* was developed. The online survey asked teachers, through an open question, to list, according to their experience, their main suggestions, and perceived obstacles to deal with challenges and contentious topics.

After the online survey has been administered, these points were then expanded upon during the second event, “Follow-up Workshop” that was organized, during which the main outputs obtained from the analysis of the collected data were discussed and deepened. This was a unique opportunity to re-face some questions and ask for clarification, in particular regarding the open answers collected, and to reach a deeper understanding of the specific Italian context. The experiences and insights shared by teachers shed light on the challenges and obstacles they face when addressing the complex issues of radicalization and polarization within the school context. These key elements, based on their firsthand experiences, suggestions, and perceived barriers, can provide valuable insights for tackling these contentious topics in an inclusive and effective manner. Thanks to the “Set-the-Scene workshop” and the “Follow-up workshop”, teachers had the opportunity to comment and elaborate on their experiences that they reported during the survey. However, not all teachers were willing to share their experience. Infact, during the workshop, and more particularly the discussion of personal experiences, some teachers involved seemed to be reluctant in engaging with polarization, violence, and radicalisation at school, and more concerned about the possible reactions of students to these arguments at school.

The two events were a moment of comparison and feedback with the teachers who had the opportunity to analyze the experiences, practices and reactions (good and bad) put in place to address controversial issues in the

classroom. Thanks to the two workshops, the teachers also commented, elaborated and reflected on their daily life experiences in relation to the dynamics of polarization and radicalization within the class, through a dialogue centered on cooperation, on collaboration and participation.

In fact, in line with the methodology of the Social Labs, the two workshops were based on a participatory path that allowed a circularity of information and sharing of opinions among the teachers. Considering the school as a symbolic place of social differences where various conflicts can arise, a participatory approach such as the Social Labs was an opportunity for participants, in this case the teachers, to increase awareness and quality and quantity of knowledge around radicalisation and to reflect on future actions and activities that could be designed to promote the adoption of social inclusion and implementation of measures and mechanisms to prevent and address radicalization and polarization at school (Hassan, 2014; Papageorgiou, 2017).

Social labs share much in common with other participatory methods such as focus groups and multi-stakeholder workshops. What is unique about this methodological approach is that it is not expert oriented, but cooperative. It is also focused on action, and therefore do not necessarily require a thorough expertise, just shared experiences and a desire to be involved in change-making.

An important thing to highlight is that conducting a social lab in an offline setting can offer several advantages, especially it provides a more intimate setting that allows to build trust and to share knowledge and expertise for the successful functioning of the group. During the Covid-19 pandemic we have all come to recognise, despite wonderful platforms and tools being available, exchanges in an online space are just not the same because body language and non-verbal clues are an essential part of these sorts of exchanges (Braun *et al.*, 2020).

Social labs are conceived as a place where exchanges take place offline, and the activities within social labs take place over a long period of time through numerous sessions. However, the logistical and time constraints resulting from the pandemic period did not allow for the organization of multiple meetings, consequently limiting the opportunities to bring forth conflicting dynamics and potential solutions to such conflicts.

Challenges and contentious topics in the classroom and the school environment

The first part of the survey focused on challenges and contentious topics in the classroom and the school environment. To develop our understanding of the challenges and contentious topics faced by teachers, we listed a

number of issues that had been investigated, or were reoccurring, during the desk research, and asked teachers to comment on these preconceived challenges and contentious topics. In the case of the affirmative, the teachers were then asked to what degree they experienced these challenges and contentious topics in their own work (“very often”, “often”, or “sometimes”). Then, we asked teachers to report any other possible challenges that were not included in the questionnaire but had been part of their experience in the previous five years.

The analysis of the answers clearly showed that the main challenge that teachers are facing is the difficulty of establishing constructive communication with students’ families (Pace, 2021). Teachers complain about the lack of interest and the absence of parents, when it comes to participating in, or supporting the school management in dealing with a student’s problematic behaviours within the school environment. Furthermore, most of the teachers needed to manage difficult situations generated by polarising comments expressed from some students during classroom lessons.

The relationship between school and family strongly affects the school performance of pupils. The comparison is important because school and family not are two different spheres of competence that overlap but it is an asymmetric relationship, because the teacher is the expert of his subject and the parent considers himself the expert of his child. For this reason, many of them were moved to shift, from time to time, from the role of “expert” to the role of “facilitator”, enabling them to better address conflicts and disputes eventually arising among students involved in discussions about controversial and problematic social issues. In these cases, to understand students’ perspectives, regulated debate could be encouraged. It aims to provide tools for analyzing complex issues, explaining one’s reasoning, and evaluating those of other participants. This helps boost student participation, which is often lacking.

With regard to contentious topics, teachers reported that they had to face and to manage ‘*discussions about the government’s measures to counter the COVID-19 pandemic*’ and topics concerning ‘*complex historical national debates (e.g., Holocaust, authoritarianism, totalitarianism)*’, and ‘*intolerance against gender and sexual diversity (e.g., anti-LGBTQ)*’. They also claimed that they need to engage in disputes around ‘*issues relating to clothes at school*’ and ‘*intolerance towards the existing cultural, social, or religious differences in society*’, and to address other issues related to ‘*bullying and cyber-bullying*’, ‘*racism*’, ‘*anti-rom*’, ‘*xenophobia, including polarising narratives on the phenomenon of migration*’.

In relation to ‘*conflicts between students resulting from discussions about geopolitical events and/or foreign conflicts*’, the majority in the cross-section said “never”. The same thing happened with ‘*conflicts between students aris-*

ing from discussions about terrorist attacks’ and with ‘Us-vs-Them’ thinking and rhetoric’.

The teachers were asked if they had noticed any variation, in their experience, with controversial challenges and topics depending on “different groups of students”, “different schools”, “different roles”, and different subjects taught.” Some teachers stated that the age of the students may change their reaction to challenges: fifth-year high school students, for instance, used to show higher awareness about the strong presence of radicalisation in schools. Instead, some of them responded that neither age nor gender influence the propensity to face the aforementioned phenomenon; as an example, a teacher working in a school in Rome related a personal lived experience: few months before, when a migrant student was included in her class group, the new entry provoked the jealousy of one of his classmates who came from the same territorial provenience as the new student.

Additionally, teachers were given the opportunity to report any other challenges or contentious topics they have experienced that were not considered by the online survey or to take the time to expand upon some of the listed challenges. Referring to concrete cases witnessed within the classroom and mentioned by the teachers during the “Follow-up” Workshop, a teacher from a high school located in a neighborhood where migrant communities constitute a strong proportion of the population, said that most of her students considered migrants as people who must be expelled and excluded. For this reason, some migrant students have had confrontations clashes with their Italian schoolmates, showing a violent and threatening reaction.

According to students, migrant communities represent a danger for the entire neighborhood because they have been involved in various criminal incidents. It can be argued that these challenges, conflicts, and confrontations do not depend on the diversity and type of schools, but rather on the social context in particular (Van Alstein, 2019).

Support received from other colleagues and the school management

Regarding the support received from colleagues in addressing these topics, the teachers’ level of agreement on insufficient collaboration is consistent. Most of the respondents (24/29) believe they are well supported in relation to “management”, but 4 teachers believe that cooperation with colleagues needs to be improved, while only 1 teacher feels isolated.

Teachers highlighted, on the one hand, their difficulty in finding colleagues who were able of adopting proper communication with students and their families. On the other hand, they point out, in their colleagues there is a lack of availability for comparison and cooperation. Indeed, some teachers believe that many of their colleagues are not interested in this topic at all. Regarding the level of general support received from the management,

there seems to be a group of teachers who believe that they are receiving an adequate level of support, and a group of equal dimensions, pointing out a complete lack of it. In particular, among the latter, some refer to the complete absence of the headmaster at the school place, and, above all, their erratic participation in the “Teaching Staff Meetings”, where coordinators attempt to solve the problems and issues concerning the pupils. Finally, a group of teachers complained about the headmaster’s lack of skills underlying his tendency to delegate the resolution of certain problems to other professional figures outside the school context. As stated by one of our respondents:

I would like to be supported by a less dictatorial school manager, who knows how to be grateful to his teachers and the entire school administration. A school manager who is more involved and more sensitive to the countless difficulties one encounters daily while doing this job that is as fascinating as it is delicate. The success of a school is not made up of numbers and showcases but of deep humanity and continuous commitment. I would like the less fortunate pupils to be the focus of the teaching action, fully respecting their rights and avoiding using their support according to the daily criticalities that occur at school. Pupils are treated as human beings, with all their countless facets, and not as arid numbers.

Educational Tools

Educational tools are very important in the support of teachers’ everyday life at school when it comes to addressing contentious topics. It’s very important to equip teachers with more tailored and useful educational tools, and ensure teachers know how to find them. In this sense, educational tools can be seen not solely as means for delivering educational content but also as cultural artifacts (McDonald *et al.*, 2005) that provide a unique vantage point for examining the nexus between education and societal constructs. These tools are indicative of the societal valuation of education and reflect existing social stratifications, revealing much about the prevailing educational inequities. Yet, their use in educational settings does not merely mirror societal characteristics; it has the capacity to challenge and reshape educational and social paradigms. With regards the existing educational tools indicated by respondents, the teacher group is equally divided between “considering them adequate” and “not considering them suitable”. However, teachers believe they are not well trained in the use of these specific tools. The latter proved ineffective in resolving conflicts that occurred in the classroom, in relation to cultural and religious differences (Vidino, 2018). In fact, regarding the question of what kind of support, training and/or tools are most effective for strengthening the ability to address challenges and polarize controversial issues in the school/school environment, teachers believe that there is a need for more training, in particular support from specialists. According to the

teachers, it is necessary for managers to create a network with local authorities, by organising effective training courses to combat the phenomena of extremism present in the classrooms.

20/29 teachers said they did not feel sufficiently trained to deal with problems related to polarisation in the classroom or school environment. They were asked what kind of support, training, and/or tools they believe they should use to strengthen their ability to address polarising and controversial challenges and issues in the classroom/school setting.

Teachers reported that they needed, in order of preference, more attractive classrooms, then practical, psychological and sociological training for all teachers; in particular several studies (Franchini, 2015; Kahya, 2019; Widiastuti *et al.*, 2020) have focused on identifying the factors that influence students' comfort in the classroom and the way it is distributed. The adequacy of school facilities and infrastructure acts as a crucial element in the effective implementation of education; classroom facilities and infrastructure, such as spacious rooms, air conditioning or fans, LCD screens, chalkboards or whiteboards, desks, and chinks, significantly contribute to the smooth continuation of the learning process. The availability of these learning facilities fosters a conducive environment for learning, enhancing students' comfort. When learning conditions are comfortable, the learning process becomes enjoyable and efficient, consequently fostering improved communication between teachers and students.

In addition, all the teachers said that it is essential to be able to take advantage of guidelines and materials for the prevention of radicalisation, because the subject is not very well known.

The relationship with the parents

Regarding the support teachers receive from parents, even though teachers highlight the importance of clear and effective communication as the basis of their reciprocal exchange, reality often presents a more difficult and problematic landscape. Specifically, meetings with parents do not take place during teachers' reception hours but they are limited to a few days, set by the school. Of a total of twenty-eight respondents, two declared they have difficulties in reaching out to some of them, and four declared they do not have frequent contact with them. Almost half of the respondents (12/28) of respondents replied "I talk to them mainly during the annual parent/teacher conferences" and "I try to involve both pupils and parents in extracurricular activities at school".

Furthermore, although some of the teachers' have tried to involve parents through participation in extra-curricular activities, they fail to obtain relevant adhesion, perceiving a lack of availability for dialogue and collaboration from the parents, instead they consider it very important (Faure-Walker,

2019). The data that emerged highlights the perception of support received by teachers from parents, in the Italian case. Regarding this, according to most of the teachers, cultural barriers are the main factor impacting the construction of an effective relationship with parents. In this direction, the family plays a crucial role for the interviewed teachers underlining the “necessary but unstable” relationship with the parents’ milieu.

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

The main need indicated by the respondents to the questionnaire, emphasises the request of a more specific information, combined with specialised training focusing on the issues of polarisation and radicalisation. This request is motivated, in the words of the respondents, by the complexity of the topic and the inevitable repercussions on active citizenship education that every school activity entails. In this sense, school activities capable of tackling such crucial issues for peaceful coexistence, highlight how the roles linked to the school institution are becoming increasingly important in achieving the objectives of preventing and containing the processes of polarisation and violent radicalisation. In particular, teachers play a central role with regard to classes of students: they are the institutional actors, in direct contact with the new generations of citizens and members of society (Ricucci, 2018; Colombo *et al.*, 2021). They carry out the first concrete experience of social integration in a tolerant and democratic perspective, desirably inclusive, with respect to religious diversity (Daher *et al.*, 2019a; 2019b). They are partly responsible for implementing the transition from a traditional society to a pluralistic idea of belonging, that requires not only professional skills and abilities, but also social and relational skills in a democratic perspective (Antonacci & Galimberti, 2019). However, almost two thirds of the teachers interviewed do not perceive themselves as well trained to address polarisation and related issues. Furthermore, during the “Follow-up” workshop, which was held after the completion of the survey, in order to better understand some of the insights identified by the online survey, teachers stated that challenges to counter radicalisation are usually addressed by school principals; teachers follow directives regarding organisational activities in relation to interreligious and intercultural dialogue and the risks of radicalisation linked to these issues. Unfortunately, teachers claim that school principals are sometimes absent, and they often decide to hire support teachers to deal with students who are facing exclusion at school, and risk facing potential polarising consequences (Lucini, 2021). Within this framework, the group of teachers interviewed identified a set of bottlenecks: a) lack of a common line of activity; b) lack of figures playing

the role of a mediator between teachers in the same school; c) delegating matters concerning pupils or classes to the coordinating teachers, effectively relegating the issue to other professionals outside the school because of a structural lack of specific competences. The survey's section dedicated to the educational tools implementation at school shows some controversy: teachers expect dedicated support and tools to strengthen their ability to handle polarising class disputes but, with respect to the availability and effectiveness of these tools, the group of teachers is equally divided between those who consider them appropriate (11/29) and those who are not convinced (11/29); a part of them (7/29) declare to have no idea about educational tools for preventing polarization and radicalization dynamics. In this perspective, most of them (22/29) claim for more and more qualified training in the knowledge and the use of educational tools. More specifically, teachers want digital literacy and awareness of the risks of online activities to be improved in order to prevent and understand the signs of polarising dynamics (Beršnak & Prezelj, 2021). Young people's critical thinking skills and democratic resilience have proven to be effective factors in strengthening resistance to extremist conspiracy narratives on the internet (Zeiger & Gyte, 2020), but these need to be promoted through education and the application of norms of responsible behaviour, learned and experienced in the school environment (Thorleifsson & Düker, 2021). According to these targets, teachers who are aware of the challenges of today's complex information sphere require adequate training and appropriate tools to respond effectively. From a pragmatic point of view, the teachers involved in the survey indicated concrete tools (practices and didactical materials) for the effective management of radicalisation prevention. These tools show two characteristics considered essential for teachers: they affect the relational and empathic dimension (psychological and emotional component of the students) and also involve collaboration with specialised professionals (psychologists and psychotherapists). Bearing in mind the survey results with regards to the tools, teachers were provided with a list of practices and methods with regard to dealing with challenges and controversial issues and asked to flag if they deemed them good or bad practices.

Among the activities considered 'good practices' we can identify some thematic areas: the dialogical and relational dimension is the most cited; this is followed by the empathic-emotional dimension (trust, resilience, responsibility) and the communicative, informative, and participative skills. First, with collaboration and reference roles inside and outside the educational institution (teachers and parents), followed by specialised training to recognise signs of radicalisation (Samuel, 2020). Among the activities considered 'bad practices', the item '*debating online news that is based on unclear sources or none at all*', showed a clear majority considering it a good

practice, while only 6 respondents marked it as a bad practice. We should point out that this item, even though it is worded in a positive manner, contains an oppositional dynamic. Attempting to find a tangible, concrete answer to polarising issues is likely to foster the polarisation of opinions: teachers' awareness of young people's familiarity with information (even false information) of a social or otherwise virtual nature should be highlighted. Teachers are very careful to not downplay the role that this particular social space plays for young people: it should not be ignored, or worse mocked, but should be approached cautiously.

Evenmore, the most interesting items of this table are the most divisive. The item '*trying to find out who is right and who is wrong when students share their thoughts*' showed a clear majority who consider it a good practice, while only 6 respondents indicated it as a bad practice. It should be noted that even though in its wording it seems positively oriented, it too contains an oppositional dynamic. Finding out who is right and who is wrong in an open debate is likely to foster a polarisation of opinions. The feedback collected during the "Follow-up" workshop, in this regard, highlighted the teachers' conviction that listening to pupils and valuing their products helps the development of self-esteem. The dynamics of secondary socialization that take place in school contexts can strengthen positive individual attitudes, with the added aim of preventing possible involvement of young people in radicalisation groups and processes (UNESCO - CCI, 2019): teachers seem to be confident in this conviction. Moreover, with the additional practices listed by teachers who filled out the survey and during the "Follow-up" workshop, the teachers wanted to emphasise the relational dimension of classroom activities even on these controversial topics, pointing out that the prevention of polarisation pathways is linked to the strengthening of the positive points of peaceful coexistence. *Lessons discussing stereotypes* are, therefore, as important as the discussion of taboo subjects as hate speech and cyberbullying (Blangiardo, 2023). Awareness-raising on the prevention of radicalisation can be done by demonstrating solidarity, with examples of good geographical, political, individual, economic and ecological cooperation. Along these lines, it is useful to increase metacognition and emotional literacy practices with the aim to engage students in a process that accumulates experiences and knowledge of the project and does not just replicate what teachers or other authorities have preached (Sas *et al.*, 2020). However, the coagulation of teachers' preference for certain practices tells us nothing about being a 'good teacher'. From the opinions expressed on the activities of dealing with the sensitive topics of radicalisation and polarisation, it cannot be possible to structure a sort of *teaching models* because each context and each classroom is configured as a peculiar and unique relational habit (Argentin, 2018).

Main suggestions and obstacles to deal with challenges and contentious topics

One significant difficulty highlighted by teachers is the challenge of communication and information. They often encounter difficulties in navigating the realm of fake news and unreliable sources that proliferate in the virtual space and social media platforms. This poses a considerable hurdle in providing accurate and trustworthy information to students, as well as promoting critical thinking and media literacy skills. Stereotypes, taboos, and prejudices that already exist among young people and their social circles emerge as another obstacle (Zeyger & Gyte, 2020). Moreover, teachers observe that these preconceived notions can hinder open and respectful dialogue on sensitive topics. Addressing and challenging these biases becomes crucial in fostering a more inclusive and tolerant school environment. Teachers express concerns about the lack of clear guidelines and consistent enforcement, which can contribute to an environment that lacks tolerance and mutual respect. They emphasize the importance of instilling values of respect, empathy, and acceptance through holistic education on these matters. Therefore, the relativism of rules and norms regarding behavior, the struggles for recognition and peaceful coexistence are the most significant challenges (Ricucci, 2018; Daher *et al.*, 2019a; Colombo *et al.*, 2021).

An additional challenge highlighted is the indifference displayed by both parents and students towards these issues. Teachers note that some parents may not prioritize or show interest in discussing topics related to radicalization and polarization. Moreover, the perceived immaturity of young people in understanding and grappling with these complex issues poses a challenge in effectively addressing them within the school environment. Furthermore, teachers note that the limited time available for activities beyond the curriculum leaves little room for meaningful dialogue and freedom of discussion in the classroom. This time constraint restricts opportunities for addressing controversial topics and engaging students in critical thinking and constructive debates (Lagi *et al.*, 2021). Nevertheless, considering that the research participants are mostly composed by women, aged 50-59 years, who have been teaching for more than thirty years, with students aged 12-15 years, these conditions, which are perceived as barriers, show that the relational dimension between social roles and generations is the most problematic dimension as noticed since 2018 thanks to the research OCSE TALIS (Argentina, 2018; Ministero dell'Istruzione, 2019).

The theme of radicalisation and polarisation, debated in the classroom, highlights the critical issues endemic to the educational institution in Italy, including an overrepresentation of gender and a teaching staff that is not very young. Moreover, the so-called “black box” of classroom activities is still inadequately studied, in scientific and systematic terms. However, the

category of teachers, and its social function, oscillates between two equally important poles: transmitting knowledge or fostering socialisation. Above all, with respect to this recurring dilemma, teachers are free to make the choice between one of these two alternatives or, in a creative way, establish a middle ground. Conversely, according to the teachers, these obstacles do not depend on a lack of time, but on a lack of willingness to effectively face these topics and challenges.

Based on the experiences of teachers, several suggestions have been put forward to address the challenges of radicalization and polarization within the school context. These suggestions aim to create a conducive environment for learning, foster empathy, critical thinking, and open dialogue, and equip students with the necessary skills to navigate the complexities of information in the digital age. The first point highlighted by respondents is fostering the empathic dimension and cultivating a serene, respectful, cooperative, curious, and inclusive environment: Teachers emphasize the importance of creating a positive emotional atmosphere that encourages empathy, respect for others, and a genuine curiosity about diverse perspectives. By nurturing these qualities, students can develop a deeper understanding of the consequences of radicalization and polarization and cultivate a sense of shared responsibility in promoting a harmonious society. To this point, teachers suggest incorporating historical data, videos, and films that can serve as educational tools to explore the roots and consequences of radicalization and polarization. By analyzing and discussing these materials in the classroom, students can gain insights into the complexities of these issues and develop a critical awareness of the historical and social factors contributing to them. Another relevant point connected to the previous is the importance of providing students with specific skills to discern fake news and misinformation prevalent on social media platforms; thanks to this strategic skill students can critically evaluate sources, verify information, and identify biases and manipulation techniques. In this way, students can become more discerning consumers of information and less susceptible to the influence of misleading content. Furthermore, teachers suggest fostering collaboration and interdisciplinary approaches among educators. By working together, teachers can share their expertise, perspectives, and strategies for addressing radicalization and polarization. Collaborative efforts can lead to more comprehensive and effective educational approaches that integrate various subjects and promote a holistic understanding of these issues. This virtuous circle can be activated providing dedicated time and space for students to engage in open and respectful discussions on sensitive topics. By encouraging dialogue that nurtures critical thinking, students can develop the skills to express their opinions, consider different viewpoints, and challenge their own biases. This promotes a culture of inclusivity, intellectual growth, and mutual

respect within the classroom. The teachers underscore the need for ongoing and practical-preparatory training to address the aforementioned challenges. This aligns with recent statements by the UNESCO - CCI (2019), which emphasizes the role of the education system in fostering critical thinking and a comprehensive understanding of contemporary reality. The teachers emphasize the importance of serious and continuous training to cultivate open-mindedness in approaching sensitive topics, recognizing the evolving nature of the world and the need for adaptive approaches with students. They highlight the necessity for change and the embrace of evolving practices, particularly in the context of the institution's relationship with civil society and young individuals. In consequence of this, the complexity of addressing issues like youth radicalization presents a challenging and conflicting role for school staff, including teachers and principals, who serve as the interface between the educational institution and society. For instance, as clearly indicated during the "Follow-up" workshop teachers specified that responsibilities related to countering radicalization are often placed on school principals. However, these principals are sometimes absent and tend to delegate complex matters, such as those involving interreligious and intercultural dialogue or the risks of radicalization, to support teachers or class coordinators. This delegation, unfortunately, exacerbates teachers' feelings of isolation, especially due to two organizational nuances: firstly, the lack of interaction between principals and teachers, as principals do not regularly participate in Class Councils; and secondly, the tendency to externalize the issue to other professional figures outside the school, often due to a structural lack of specific competencies within the institution. Despite these organizational and institutional constraints, teachers themselves propose that an ongoing dialogic educational approach could serve as a potential solution. This approach would provide opportunities, spaces, and shared tools for debates that promote clarity of ideas without creating a polarization of opinions. By engaging in constructive dialogue, this approach aims to foster understanding among different social stakeholders, thereby alleviating some of the challenges and conflicts between the roles of school staff in addressing radicalization.

Final Remarks

This article provided some interesting elements to be taken into account in respect to the experience and needs reported by the teachers living their daily life experience in the Italian educational context. Nevertheless, it seems necessary since the beginning of the final remarks to recognize the limitations of the present study, particularly concerning number of participants and the representativeness of the selected social units. The teachers who par-

ticipated in this research are experienced professionals primarily from specific geographic and demographic segments within the Italian educational context. Their viewpoints may not be entirely generalizable to other educational settings within Italy or internationally. Given that the involved social units consisted largely of teachers with over 25 years of experience, the perspectives of younger or less-experienced educators are underrepresented. This limitation is significant considering that younger teachers may have different attitudes towards digital engagement and the digital threats that accompany it, such as cyberbullying, hate speech, and radicalization (Gazzelloni 2023). The inherent limitations of the participants' numerosity also caution against overgeneralization of the findings. While the study offers critical insights into the complexities of teacher-student-family dynamics in dealing with polarization and radicalization, these findings should be interpreted within the contextual constraints of the interviewees. Furthermore, the data should be considered primarily exploratory and directional, offering foundational perspectives that may inform broader, more generalizable studies in the future. We recommend that subsequent research employs a more diversified social units that includes teachers from varied educational levels, geographic regions, and years of experience, as well as a more balanced representation of gender and ethnicity. A further mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative and qualitative methodologies could also offer a more comprehensive understanding of the issues at hand. Such an approach would provide a more nuanced view of the sociological dynamics that influence teacher-student-family relationships in the educational setting (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

Considered these points, we will try to summarize the most remarkable in terms of operative hints coming from the whole research experience. Firstly, it is important to report that since the beginning of their involvement into PARTICIPATION research it became soon evident that teachers, who generally declared a relative reluctance to engage with their students in the digital realm, expressed a need for specific training in this domain. This request was motivated by the necessity to deal with radicalization and polarisation in the digital environment, as well as hate speech, cyberbullying, fake news, and misinformation. In this direction, the teachers claim for a renewed relationship between schools, families and institutional stakeholders. This insight is consistent with the recent hypotheses proposed by Ragazzi and Walmsley (2020) emphasizing that the implementation of P/CVE programs in schools had the unintended consequence of disempowering educators, who increasingly felt their role was inadequate in addressing the complexities of the contemporary youth condition, including its contradictions, languages, and rituals. The call for specific training, along with the inclusion of specialized figures (such as psychologists, social workers, and cultural mediators) with-

in the school staff, as proposed during the follow-up workshop, further reinforcing this point. According to the teachers, the challenges faced by Italian educational institutions regarding polarization and radicalization still revolve around Italian historical tradition of terrorism, which stems from feelings of social and political unease, leading to intolerant and violent behavior by socially marginalized lone actors with psychological fragility. Additionally, the teachers highlighted the problem of the absence of a well-defined and systematic framework for the prevention of radicalization in Italy and in the Italian educational system in particular. Our research highlights several emerging strategies that can be employed to redefine the triangular relationship between schools, teachers, and families in order to effectively address polarization and radicalization within the educational environment. The first one involves enhancing linguistic knowledge (L2) to establish a shared interactive background among students. By improving language skills, students can better communicate and understand one another, creating a foundation for dialogue and mutual understanding. Another strategy focuses on fostering debates with students that emphasize the value of differences as educational resources. Encouraging open discussions where diverse perspectives are respected and appreciated can contribute to a more inclusive and tolerant learning environment. Furthermore, encouraging students to describe their family circles and communities can help highlight the integrative potential of different cultural habits. By exploring and sharing their cultural backgrounds, students can develop a greater appreciation for diversity and recognize the commonalities that exist across various cultural traditions. Improving students' critical thinking skills through teamwork competencies is another crucial strategy. By engaging in collaborative activities, students can learn to analyze information critically, evaluate different viewpoints, and develop well-rounded perspectives, enabling them to navigate complex societal issues more effectively. Additionally, implementing the intensive use of engaging materials such as books, movies, and games can promote dialogic understanding of differences, rooted in European fundamental values. These materials can provide opportunities for students to explore diverse narratives, challenge stereotypes, and develop empathy towards others. By adopting these strategies, schools can create a more inclusive and supportive environment that actively addresses polarization and radicalization. It is important to note that these strategies should be tailored to the specific needs and characteristics of the local context, involving collaboration between schools, teachers, and families to achieve their full potential in preventing and countering these issues. Teachers involved in this research path seemed to display a double tendency: on the one hand, the participative nature of the research provided participants with the opportunity to share and reflect on their experiences reported during the survey but, on the other hand, during

social labs and workshops, teachers appeared hesitant to engage with polarization, violence, and radicalization at school, expressing more concern about potential student reactions to these topics. In this regard, the request for specific training courses emerged as an exit strategy aiming to externalize this controversial issue through structural collaboration with experts. It is important to note that the teachers in this study consisted of experienced professionals with over 25 years of teaching experience. The evolving dynamics of polarization in schools necessitate a careful but necessary understanding in the realm of youth relationships. Obviously, the generational gap between teachers and students play an inescapable role in their ability to be attuned to their students needs and concerns. Considering this, in light of the findings presented, an additional layer of complexity that merits attention pertains to the empowerment of the relational dynamics among teachers, students, and families for building resilience against racism, hate speech, and (cyber-)bullying. This target aligns with the teachers' call for a renewed relationship among schools, families, and institutional stakeholders. Addressing these issues, therefore, is not merely an addendum but an essential component in holistically countering the aforesaid problems. One possible element to be considered is the inclusion of socio-emotional learning modules in teacher training programs that aim to equip educators with the skills needed to nurture an inclusive and respectful classroom environment (Jagers *et al.*, 2019). Such modules could be designed with the help of sociologists and psychologists, adding a multidisciplinary approach to the training. By doing so, educators can become more able at identifying early signs of racism, hate speech, or (cyber-)bullying, and take appropriate action before these behaviors escalate. Similarly, schools should consider involving families more directly in anti-bullying initiatives through regular communications and workshops. Given that familial engagement is often cited as a critical factor in students' academic and emotional well-being (Hill & Tyson, 2009), schools can create an extended support network for students by bringing families into the fold. This would enable a synergistic approach where teachers, students, and families collectively work towards fostering an environment resistant to divisive attitudes and behaviors. Such collective action can be particularly potent in combating the issues of racial hatred and cyberbullying, both of which frequently manifest beyond the school's physical boundaries. Furthermore digital literacy programs must be adapted to include education on responsible online behavior, the impact of hate speech, and the ethical use of technology. Given the increasing digitalization of young people's social worlds, equipping both teachers and students with these skills is not just advisable but indispensable. In this regard, collaboration between educational sociologists, IT experts, and educators can provide an innovative pedagogical framework tailored to meet the challenges posed

by the digital realm (Cress & Kalthoff, 2023). In integrating these additional strategies to address racism, hate speech, and (cyber)bullying, it becomes clear that the solutions are multifaceted and require a collaborative, multi-disciplinary approach.

Schools need to create renewed synergies with families and a range of experts, from sociologists to psychologists and pedagogists, to foster an environment that is not only intellectually nurturing but also emotionally and ethically secure. By empowering these relational dynamics, the educational system can lay a more robust foundation against the perils of polarization, radicalization, and other societal issues that manifest within the scholastic environment.

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