



Building Resilience in Schools. A Reflection on Teachers' Needs and Responses to Protect Students Against Violent Narratives and Actions in the Netherlands

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Building Resilience in Schools. A Reflection on Teachers' Needs and Responses to Protect Students Against Violent Narratives and Actions in the Netherlands

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Abstract. This article reports on the main findings of the research activities undertaken in the Netherlands, within the framework of the H2020 project "PARTICIPATION". The goal of this research is twofold: first, to gain insight into the main contentious topics that teachers face in Dutch secondary and vocational schools; second, to provide an analysis of teachers' challenges, practices, and needs in handling these contentious issues. Two online workshops were held during this participatory research: a "Set-the-Scene" in which teachers provided input on the design of the survey administered to teachers, and a "Follow-up" during which the results of this survey were discussed and understanding of these results was deepened. This article presents a synthesis of the contextual data collected through desk research, after which the main findings derived through the online survey (N=21) are presented. The article concludes with a set of recommendations based on the experiences and perspectives of teachers regarding obstacles, good and bad practices and their perceived needs in improving their ability to address challenges and contentious topics in the classroom.

Keywords: teachers, students, Dutch education, polarisation, participatory research

Introduction: Context Overview

The Netherlands has historically been less affected by terrorist attacks than some other European countries. In the mid-1970s, a number of terrorist incidents occurred when young Dutch Moluccans demanded Dutch assistance in the struggle to regain the independence of the south Moluccan islands. The Dutch government's strategy to deal with the Moluccan actions was to maintain dialogue, and to address various underlying issues. Maintaining dialogue as long as possible was important in what was called the "Dutch Approach", while maintaining the option of a hard response (Wittendorp, de Bont, de Roy van Zuijdewijn & Bakker, 2017). At the beginning of the 21st century, the Netherlands was characterised by an increasing public debate over migration and multiculturalism. The association of danger with Muslims was reinforced in 2002 when a young extremist murdered the filmmaker Theo van Gogh. Additionally, from 2012 till 2017, the Netherlands was shaken when over 300 Dutch youth travelled to Syria and Iraq and joined extremist groups including Islamic State (Van Teeffelen, 2019). These events provided the incentive to formulate a national action plan to prevent extremism and terrorism. In this so-called "broad approach", the national government works closely with municipalities, front line professionals, and civil society in countering radicalisation that leads to violent extremism. The Dutch strategy is based on the assumption that the more successful the preventative measures are, the less effort is needed in the other intervention areas (NCTV, 2011:38).

A specific mention of the education sector was made in an action program to tackle Jihadism to help diminish the breeding ground of negative radicalisation (NCTV, 2014:18). Educational institutes have since then been provided with government support to help them work on the resilience of their students. In 2013, the School & Safety Foundation (Stichting School en Veiligheid (SVV)) was assigned by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science to increase a safe social learning environment in schools through providing information on several themes; amongst others, offering teachers more assistance on how to address discrimination, polarisation, and radicalisation in classrooms (Stichting School en Veiligheid, 2021). After the Charlie Hebdo shooting in Paris in 2015, these measures were reinforced as many teachers in schools were struggling to discuss contentious issues in their classrooms. Over the past years, an increasing appeal has been made to schools to address a multitude of contentious issues in the classroom.

In 2022, Human Security Collective¹ (HSC) carried out a participatory research process to address polarisation in Dutch classrooms. This research

¹ Human Security Collective is a foundation that aims to bridge the gap between citizens and policy making on security issues. HSC emphasises the role civil society can play in ad-

is part of PARTICIPATION², which is a Horizon 2020 funded project aimed at preventing extremism, radicalisation and polarisation that can lead to violence. The founding concept of the PARTICIPATION project is to explore the roots of extremism and radical ideologies that lead to the creation of communicative and educational countermeasures. This involves developing policies, tools, early warning systems, and acquiring skills to effectively combat radicalization. The process also includes sharing and validating participation solutions with key stakeholders such as civil society actors, practitioners, and decision-makers. Within this framework, HSC conducted an online survey and workshop activities with teachers in the Netherlands to investigate how teachers deal with contentious issues in classrooms, with the goal of formulating concrete recommendations. Prior to examining and discussing the results of the fieldwork, desk research was conducted to study the main contentious issues dealt with in classrooms in the Netherlands. The following section presents the findings that summarise these main detected challenges, and controversial issues.

Literature Review

Notably, the desk research pointed out that polarisation is on the rise in the Netherlands. There are deep tensions around themes related to identity and culture, such as racism, anti-immigration and Islamophobic sentiments, nativism, antisemitism, gender, and sexual diversity. These tensions have also entered classroom discussions. While for a long time the main focus in Dutch policies dealing with these issues was on Islamist extremism, more recently there has been growing recognition of the problem of right-wing extremism in Dutch society (Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismedebestrijding en Veiligheid, 2022). Right-wing extremist ideology is often spread through international, online, far-right extremist networks, and targeted, in particular, at young people aged between twelve and twenty, a target audience that spends a lot of time on these types of platforms. The desk research uncovered concerns of professionals, including teachers, in relation to increasing tensions and polarisation in Dutch society, not only as a breeding ground for

addressing insecurities. HSC has a history of working with communities to strengthen young and inclusive leadership working on the promotion of human security. For more information, visit: <https://www.hscollective.org/>.

² PARTICIPATION is a research project funded through the European Union's Horizon 2020 programme. PARTICIPATION consists of a consortium of 15 European partners that conducted participatory action research at local, national and international level. The outcomes provide tangible products that contribute to preventative and holistic approaches to polarisation, radicalisation and extremism that can lead to violence. For more information, visit: <https://participation-in.eu/the-project/the>

diverse forms of extremism, but also as a potentially negative influence on young people's social and emotional development (Azough, 2017, p. 8).

A major concern relates to the increase in distrust towards institutions and authorities among young people (Platform JEP, Verwey-Jonker Instituut & Nederlands Jeugdinstituut, 2019, p. 8). Furthermore, the desk research shows an increase in 'Us-vs-Them' thinking around identity, which can contribute to extreme viewpoints and messages that are targeted at vulnerable young people. An important example is the frustration felt amongst young individuals perceived as Muslims, with regard to being questioned on terrorist attacks committed by Islamist extremist groups.

Another important resentment felt by young people with a migration background, as well as young people from the provinces outside of the urban "Randstad"³, is the perception that they have less opportunities than others and feel dissatisfaction with those in power. The desk research also points to anti-government groups, possibly with right-wing extremist influences, in which destruction of property, hate speech, and incitement towards violence against the police are actively encouraged, particularly regarding protests and tensions around COVID-19 measures.

The influence of social media appears to be a significant contributing factor towards the increase in conspiracy theories and criticism towards the government's handling of the COVID-19 crisis. Further challenging topics were raised within educational projects on polarisation and radicalisation, including inclusion and diversity, radicalisation, gender and sexual diversity, fake news, conspiracy theories and disinformation, and juvenile delinquency.

The desk research points to some of the challenges teachers experience when addressing contentious topics in classrooms, with one central factor being the high workload of teachers in the Netherlands. Furthermore, the gap in understanding between teachers without a migration background and pupils with a migration background was underlined (Platform JEP, Verwey-Jonker Instituut & Nederlands Jeugdinstituut, 2019, p. 9). This gap may contribute to a sense of insecurity on the part of teachers, who are often unsure of how to deal with difficult issues. Additionally, teachers often experience 'professional loneliness', related to a lack of support and vision from school administrators, as well as a failure to share different perspectives, which might be encountered between colleagues on how to deal with challenging situations (Azough, 2017, p. 7).

The desk research also highlighted some approaches that may be seen as good practices for teachers to address polarisation and radicalisation in the classroom, such as specific facilitation techniques. The 'School and Safety

³ The urban agglomeration of Western Holland.

Foundation' focuses on supporting schools and teachers to create a 'safe social learning environment'. They do so through providing information on their website, their helpdesk that professionals in education can reach out to, and by providing trainings for professionals. Topics range from (cyber) bullying and gender diversity to polarisation and radicalisation. A relevant training provided by SSV in relation to polarisation and radicalisation, developed in 2017/ 2018, is titled *Dialogue under Pressure*, which supports teachers (and other professionals in secondary and vocational education) in facilitating dialogue with students, also when topics are tense and sensitive (Stichting School en Veiligheid, 2021). Another initiative aimed at increasing social resilience against terrorism, political violence, and polarizing events in society is "TerInfo" ("FYI"), an initiative of the University of Utrecht and the Municipality of Utrecht. TerInfo offers material for classroom discussions, helping teachers to discuss terrorism, and political violence in a clear, factual, responsible, and engaged way with different age groups. Materials are developed for primary, secondary, and secondary vocational education. An important component of this approach is to provide a broad socio-historical context to current incidents, based on the idea that one can better understand them when 'zooming out' instead of going along with the 'moral panic' of the day (Ter info, 2021).

Furthermore, the research showed that it is important to make pupils feel heard by creating a safe environment for diverse groups of young people to share their views. Teachers should invite pupils to express their views, while at the same time setting boundaries, so as to remain neutral facilitators. Such discussions must be as inclusive as possible – including 'the silent middle'⁴ (Brandsma, 2017, p. 32) – in order to ensure that attention is given to all different views, rather than focusing on the most polarising statements. At the same time, teachers highlighted the importance of not rejecting a student's world view outright, even though certain statements can be shocking (Wansink, de Graaf & Berghuis, 2021). Making time to end difficult conversations in a positive way is also considered part of a good debate, underlining that different views can co-exist (Wansink, de Graaf & Berghuis, 2021). Another important practice is to create safe environments in which young people can empathise with someone perceived as different. This can be done by introducing the technique of appreciative listening – which is about listening actively and without judgement. Gamification was also highlighted as a useful method which allows young people to experience certain situations, such as allowing them to role play the life of a refugee.

⁴ Bart Brandsma in his book entitled *Polarisation* refers to the silent middle as "a group of people who choose not to take sides" in a polarised discussion.

Compulsory training was reported in the desk research as a bad practice, as it might decrease participants' motivation, generating an environment in which participants do not feel safe and thus hold back during training. Similarly, cutting short discussions between teachers and pupils can have negative effects. The reason is that a rejection can be counterproductive and does not create a good basis for further dialogue.

Methodology

All the above-mentioned issues contributed to the drafting of the first version of the survey and helped the research team prepare the "Set-the-Scene" workshop, in which the first draft of the survey was fine-tuned with the input of teachers. This was part of the participatory action research (PAR) methodology which fosters collaboration between researchers and participants, empowering teachers to actively engage in the research process. This approach enhances the relevance of the findings, to ensure recommendations address issues identified by those directly involved.

The HSC research team consisted of two senior HSC staff members (task manager and lead facilitator), and two junior researchers who contributed to shaping, supporting, and motivating the teachers to share their insights into the research. One of the first tasks of the research team was to identify potential participants, ideally teachers of humanities or social sciences, subjects which, it was assumed, would provide pupils with more opportunity to discuss contentious issues.

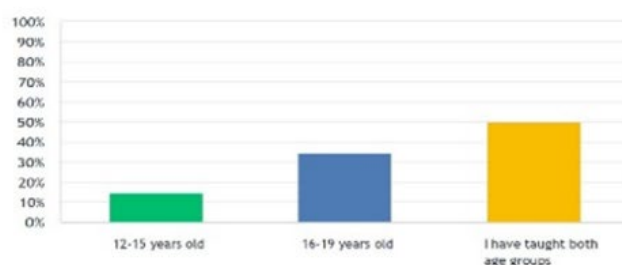
When approaching the teachers, we briefed them with an introductory paper explaining the set-up of the research, so that potential participants were well informed about the methodology and time commitment. Initially, we approached teachers with whom we had previously worked in our own networks, who had specific additional tasks in school as focal points on radicalisation and polarisation. Our assumption was that these teachers would have a higher commitment towards sharing their insights and would also be more knowledgeable on contentious issues. We also felt that approaching teachers through our own network would work better than announcing the research via public channels, such as social media. However, it proved hard to reach the target of a minimum of 20 teachers, as many of the teachers we reached out to were not available. The junior researchers then identified several other teachers via their networks. Another challenge was to organise an online meeting in which all teachers could attend. We therefore decided to offer two "Set-the-Scene" meetings which enabled eight participants to join. During the "Follow-up" workshop, which was attended by eight teachers, it became apparent that participants were able to provide more in-depth analysis, demonstrating the importance of providing a safe space for teachers in

the Netherlands to share their experiences and concerns in order to find new ways to discuss contentious issues in classrooms.

Description of the sample

In total, twenty-one teachers completed the online survey. The chart below highlights the age groups they teach.

Figure 1. Age group taught by the teachers.



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
12-15 years old	15% 3
16-19 years old	35% 7
I have taught both age groups	50% 10
TOTAL	20

A majority of teachers surveyed taught subjects in the areas of humanities and social sciences such as history, philosophy, social studies, and citizenship education. Most of them had other roles besides teaching, often involving mentorship and counselling activities. Among those surveyed, 29% have been teaching for less than 5 years, 33% for 5-10 years, 14% for 11-20 years, 19% for 21-30 years and 5% for more than 30 years.

The Dutch school system divides secondary school into different levels according to pupils' primary school performances.⁵ During the last five years,

⁵ The following main categories exist: VMBO, HAVO & VWO. Although no direct translation of these levels exists, VMBO can be seen as vocational secondary education and is further subdivided, although here it is only relevant to mention practical general secondary education (MAVO) as a sub-category; HAVO as theoretical general secondary education; and VWO as pre-university secondary education comprising two subcategories: atheneum and gymnasium, the latter including classic languages. In addition to including teachers who teach at secondary education, we broadened our scope to also include teachers teaching at MBO, which refers to post-secondary vocational training. This decision was made

nine of the teachers surveyed have taught at a HAVO/VWO school, eight at a VMBO school, one at a vocational school, six at a MBO school and three at a 'gymnasium' school. Some teachers used the 'other' option to indicate, in an open answer, what type of school they teach at. Five teachers teach at schools that incorporate all levels of secondary school (VMBO, HAVO & VWO). One teacher also works at an HBO school, which is generally the continuation of HAVO, and can be translated to university of applied sciences. Three teachers indicated they teach at a VAVO school, and one teacher is undertaking an internship. Of these schools, the teachers reported that fourteen are located in a town, eight in a big city⁶ and two in a village. One teacher teaches at a number of schools throughout the country. In this case, teachers could give multiple answers: for this reason, in the related question contained in the analysis of the survey, the sum of percentages is higher than 100%, as well as the sum of schools is higher than participants who replied.

Results

The following section presents the results of the online survey as well as the findings from the "Set-the-scene" and "Follow-up" workshops. The first part of the results section illustrates the challenges and contentious topics that teachers most frequently face in the school environment; the level of support from colleagues and school management teachers experience in dealing with the challenges; the availability and awareness among teachers of tools to deal with challenges and contentious topics in the classroom; and the role of the relation between teachers and parents in dealing with challenges and contentious topics. The second part of the results section zooms in on the current practices that teachers employ when facing challenges and contentious topics in the school environment.

Challenges and contentious topics in the classroom and the school environment

Challenges and contentious topics most frequently experienced

The first part of the survey focused on challenges and contentious topics in the classroom and the school environment. In this regard, the questionnaire of the online survey provided a selection of challenges and issues, that resulted from the desk research. The teachers were then asked to state if

because pupils who finish VMBO generally proceed to MBO when they are 16 years old. Without including this section, we believed we would have missed important insights from teachers who teach a large portion of Dutch youth.

⁶ A big city in the Netherlands ranges between 100.000 and 1 million inhabitants.

they had experienced this type of challenge or issue in their classroom, and if so, to what extent the issue was raised or discussed. The teachers that participated in the online survey were also asked to share any other challenge or issue that they had experienced in the last five years that had not been included in the initial selection. Through the results of the survey, we were able to identify the five most common challenges faced by teachers as shown in the following table.

Table 1. Most frequently experienced challenges in daily life at school reported by teachers.

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.	3	5	13
Questions related to polarising topics, asked by students, which were difficult to answer.	/	2	17
Managing polarising comments shared by pupils during class.	2	6	10
Handling conflicts and disputes between students, that related to contentious issues within society.	1	3	12
Communicating constructively with the families of the students.	2	6	6

According to the answers provided, the most experienced challenge by the teachers in the sample is the difficulty of changing one's role from 'transferring knowledge' to 'moderating a conversation', when it comes to talking about contentious issues in the classroom. The following table contains the 10 contentious topics most often experienced by teachers in and around the classroom:

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

CONTENTIOUS TOPICS	VERY OFTEN	OFTEN	SOMETIMES
Discussions about the government's measures to counter the Covid-19 pandemic.	5	5	10
Intolerance against gender and sexual diversity (e.g., anti-LGBTQ).	/	4	16
Bullying and cyber-bullying.	1	5	13

Gender	/	5	14
Disinformation related issues (e.g., fake news and conspiracy theories).	2	8	8
'Us-vs-Them' thinking and rhetoric.	1	4	13
Racism	1	3	14
Complex historical national debates (e.g. Holocaust, authoritarianism, totalitarianism, etc.).	1	5	9
Xenophobia, including polarising narratives on the phenomenon of migration.	1	2	13
Intolerance towards the existing cultural, social, or religious differences in society.	/	13	3

During the “Follow-up” workshop the teachers discussed the differences in their experiences regarding challenges and contentious topics in relation to the following variables:

Different groups of pupils

One teacher indicated that the age of the group of pupils plays a major role in what can be discussed (and how it can be discussed): ‘Nuance is of course sometimes lacking in adolescents, to put it nicely. Certainly, among first graders, black and white thinking is dominant, the grey area is not there.’ Another factor is the maturity of the group, which influences the way teachers discuss such topics. Depending on the group, a teacher may take on a leading or facilitating role in the conversation.

Different schools

A substitute teacher working at different schools across the country indicated that the topics vary per region: ‘When I talk about carrying knives, for example, it is really a different story in the Randstad and certainly the Rotterdam and Amsterdam area than if you are in a border town in Drenthe. But also, for example, how people think about the European Union: in Groningen they are often quite positive about it, while in the Randstad they are less concerned.’

Different roles

Several teachers consider the bond between teacher and student to be an important factor. According to a teacher, entering into a conversation about controversial comments is easier if that bond is stronger. This applies

at the individual level but also at the teacher-group level. It further applies to all roles within the school, though teachers with a mentorship role have a stronger bond with pupils because they are more aware of the home situation and know the parents better. Creating a safe environment is vital to ensuring that difficult conversations can be held in a constructive manner. One teacher explained: 'Creating a safe environment is by definition about the bond you have between pupils and yourself.'

Different subjects taught

One of the respondents indicated that the course that is taught can give teachers a certain authority. Pupils are willing to accept reflections on certain topics from a teacher who has demonstrated professional knowledge of the subject. However, another respondent who teaches 'philosophy of life' expressed an opposing viewpoint, suggesting that authority is not bestowed upon him due to knowledge of a specific field. Instead, having an open attitude and allowing pupils to explore the topic together provides an opportunity to exchange different perspectives. However, this can sometimes pose a challenge: 'How open do we remain, how much do we allow? When should we set that limit of "this is no longer okay", while in other classes we insist so much on respecting that everyone's opinion is allowed to be there.' Another teacher indicated that in subjects which do not directly discuss controversial topics, controversies are easier to avoid. However, she chooses to bring up such topics in her Dutch lessons: 'Which course you teach has a big impact on the extent to which you come into contact with [controversial subjects, *Author's note*]. It also depends on the teacher. One will search for it and the other might avoid it or not pay as much attention to it.'

Furthermore, teachers indicated that a number of additional factors are also important, sometimes even more important, when it comes to their experiences in dealing with controversial topics. One of these factors is group dynamics. One teacher indicated: 'For me [it, *Author's note*] depends not so much on how homogeneous or heterogeneous the group is, but rather on group dynamics. If there is a bad atmosphere, you know that it is difficult to discuss controversial topics. On the other hand, if the group dynamics are very good and someone has a dissenting opinion, it is handled much more sympathetically.' Another factor relates to the different opinions and beliefs held by the teachers standing in front of the class. A teacher explained this: 'I have noticed that it matters what point of view we ourselves have, what feelings we ourselves have on certain controversial topics. Some controversial subjects you can of course keep your distance from as a teacher and with others it comes a little close and then it is very difficult to assess what role we take.'

In the online survey there was an open space for teachers to insert any other additional challenges or contentious topics that they had experienced and that were not listed in the options of the survey. Eight teachers mentioned “Me too”-related discussions, especially in light of the revelations surrounding Dutch TV programme *The Voice*,⁷ and other celebrities as the most frequent additional topic. Seven teachers mentioned questions of guilt regarding historical issues, or the use of particular terms to describe social and historical actions (e.g., police actions or colonial war). Six mentioned the topic of ‘Christian faith’; this was further clarified in the “Follow-up” workshop by one teacher who stated: ‘I notice more tension when there are very religious pupils in the classroom. I also have pupils who were brought up strictly religious and who then have turned their backs on it; if you have a combination of such pupils, it can create tension.’

Five teachers mentioned cyber conflicts and another five mentioned the influence that is exerted ‘from the neighbourhood on pupils about how they should behave at school, who they can interact with and how they should dress.’ The latter related to a specific situation at one of the teachers’ schools. She indicated that the school was becoming a restrictive place, especially for girls, and to a lesser extent, boys, as they felt pressured on what to wear and how to behave, because boys from their neighbourhood at school are watching them and subjecting them to certain expectations. The teacher described the effect: ‘I was quite indignant about it, that is of course just a very unpleasant situation, that the school then becomes so unfree actually.’ This mainly occurred with children with an Islamic background.

The least common contentious topic mentioned in the open space was tackling drug-related crime in big cities.

Support received from other colleagues and the school management

The online questionnaire asked teachers to provide feedback on their perception of support they received from their colleagues and from the school administration when it came to dealing with contentious topics in the school environment. Of twenty-one respondents, fourteen felt well supported, seven teachers thought cooperation could be improved, and none felt isolated in relation to the management. In relation to colleagues (teachers, educators, others), sixteen teachers felt well supported, five teachers thought cooperation could be improved, and none of them felt isolated.

⁷ Dutch prosecutors opened a criminal investigation in 2021 into sexual abuse allegations around the Dutch talent show *The Voice of Holland*.

Figure 2. Perception of support received by teachers from colleagues and from the management.



	I FEEL WELL SUPPORTED	COOPERATION COULD BE IMPROVED	I FEEL ISOLATED
In relation to the management.	67% 14	33% 7	0% 0
In relation to my colleagues (teachers, educators, others).	76% 16	24% 5	0% 0

The online survey also asked teachers to provide feedback on the sense of support they received from their peers and the school administration in relation to dealing with contentious topics in the school environment. Some teachers indicated that the cooperation could be improved in a number of ways. In particular, teachers reported experiencing challenges when it came to topics such as gender and sexuality, extremist violence, and expressions of religious identity, and expressed a need for more support from their fellow teachers and institutions.

Many respondents highlighted conversations around homosexuality as being particularly divisive, with vocal minorities of students and also teachers exhibiting homophobic attitudes. While one respondent associated this tendency with Christian schools, other respondents suggested that it was not limited to faith schools but also widespread at public schools. Examples of challenging situations included students calling each other gay in a pejorative manner, groups of students pulling down rainbow flags, or homophobic comments within the classroom. A further example of a contentious topic was the murder of the French teacher Samuel Paty, who had shown his students caricatures of the prophet Mohammed within the context of a class on freedom of expression. The strong mediatization of that particular case meant that teachers and schools felt compelled to address it in their classrooms. Other topics described as contentious included expressions of

religious identity, notably the question of whether or not students may wear the hijab.

Respondents reported varying levels of institutional support around these incidents, ranging from total disinterest by their school administrations to strong backing. One respondent suggested that teachers were generally left to their own devices when it came to dealing with polarizing questions, and that the efficacy with which such conversations were conducted depended very much on the skills and experience of the teacher. Other respondents suggested that schools did not consider socially divisive issues to be a priority, and did not offer guidance to teachers on how to do so. Meanwhile, some respondents highlighted sceptical or even prejudicial attitudes by school management when it came to addressing sensitive social issues. Conversely, some respondents did report a more positive experience, in which school management would use divisive incidents as learning moments and even provided substantive tools to teachers.

Educational tools

In this section, the focus is on the educational tools that teachers are offered when it comes to challenges and contentious topics in the classroom and the school environment. Most of the teachers (ten) answered that they do not know if there is an adequate number of educational tools provided in the Netherlands for school staff to address challenges and contentious topics in the classroom school environment (e.g., online and offline resources, consultancy for teachers and educators, training possibilities, etc.). Eight teachers think that there is an adequate number of educational tools provided in the Netherlands, and two think that there is not. During the “Follow-up” workshop, teachers gave their feedback on their answers to this question. One of the teachers indicated that he filled in ‘I don’t know’, because he knows that there are many tools, some of which he uses. However, he indicated that the materials are often developed by external organisations: ‘Because of this, it is spread across the Internet, and you have to be lucky to stumble upon something that matches the subject you are looking for. So that way I sometimes find it harder to find something good.’ Another teacher commented that ‘there are tools, but there is no one central place where you can find them’. One teacher suggested that it also comes down to the teacher in question. Whether he or she wants to take the time to deal with a particular issue during a lesson, or whether they have an opinion about it. The teacher explained further: ‘I think that every school should at least have certain protocols for this. So, I think every management structure should know about this and have to do something active with it. Because if there is really a problem then it is nice if you know which guidelines to follow. What do you do in each situation?’. Another teacher shared the following: ‘I do

think it differs in which subject you teach. I notice that colleagues come to me more quickly with the idea that I can advise them on how to deal with something in the classroom because I teach social studies’.

When asked, in the online survey, if they thought these tools were adequate for their pupils, seven thought that these tools were adequate for their pupils and only a small minority of the sample (two) thought that these tools were not adequate. In the survey, the teachers were also asked if they thought that teachers were sufficiently trained to use these tools. Most of them (fourteen) answered that they thought that teachers were not sufficiently trained, six answered that they did not know, and only one participant thought that teachers were sufficiently trained to use these tools. Most of the teachers (eleven) did not think that all their school staff were sufficiently trained in how to use these tools, seven did not know and three thought that school staff were sufficiently trained on how to use these tools.

During the “Follow-up” workshops, teachers were asked to report what tool they use in their classrooms to deal with challenges and contentious topics. One of the teachers indicated that there is a lot on offer at his school in the field of training, and that the school has been working on this issue for a number of years. At this particular school, a focal point dealing with polarisation and radicalisation has been officially appointed and is therefore allowed to follow extra training courses. Others can then follow training courses given by the focal point about conversation techniques, and how to deal with these issues. The school management also consults with teachers about tackling polarisation and radicalisation: ‘However, that’s something recent, it’s getting started very slowly.’ In addition, the school organises information meetings. ‘And the website we use as a school, which is new and easily accessible (called school and safety) is a platform where you can find a lot of tools and information’.

What is very important according to him is that there are no set guidelines per subject. ‘It’s not that we all have to say the same thing about a certain subject. But how to deal with that, and that everyone feels heard and can get support from colleagues. Those lines are there.’ According to him, a safety net has been created at his school in recent years which provides answers on what to do in alarming situations: ‘For example, what do I do if a student in my class has made a drawing with the locations of where they are going to place bombs in the school? Is this something serious or not?’. A teacher added on the available material to cover certain specific topics in class: ‘What I also sometimes notice, that [certain material] is developed by external, sometimes private organisations. This means that sometimes you really have to make sure that you are not using material that conveys a certain political message. That sometimes strikes me. As an example, we

get asked to organise something around the 4th or 5th May⁸ to discuss the Holocaust. For this, an organisation sometimes comes to school. Then we also notice that this is discussed from a certain political angle. And I have experienced this several times, when looking for material on difficult topics.’ Another teacher reported a similar story related to this example.

The last question of this section in the online survey asked what kind of support, training and/or tools teachers feel they need more of to strengthen their capacity to deal with challenges and polarising, contentious issues in the classroom and the school environment. The majority of teachers reported a need for a range of tools and support mechanisms, notably in the shape of training courses and information resources on how to handle these types of situations. Most respondents said that they would benefit from training on diversity and polarisation, as well as practical workshops on how to handle difficult conversations. Other suggestions included access to educational websites, and holding cultural days based on mutual learning and appreciation. Many teachers also expressed a need to learn more about current phenomena which lead to division, in the form of teacher training and other workshops. Some also suggested implementing buddy systems in which teachers can attend each other’s classes, learn together, and give each other feedback. It was emphasised that this type of training and knowledge was vital not only for social studies teachers, but also for teachers of other subjects who may also encounter these issues in the classroom. In general, there was a strong consensus on the need to dedicate significant resources, time, and effort to addressing contentious issues in the classroom.

The relationship with the parents

In order to better understand the teacher-parent relationship, the teachers were asked to select up to three answers out of the nine options which best describe their relationship with the parents. Most of them, eleven teachers, stressed that they talk to parents mainly during the annual parent/teacher conferences. Of a total of twenty-one respondents, eight declared that they only talk to them when there is an issue regarding a pupil’s behaviour and six respondents answered that they have frequent contact with parents. Three teachers have sporadic contact with parents.

The figure below points out how much support teachers feel from parents in dealing with polarising statements made by their children in the classroom and the school environment.

⁸ The National Remembrance Day is observed in the Netherlands on May 4th. On 5th May the Dutch celebrate the freedom they have been enjoying in the Netherlands since 1945.

Figure 3. Perceived support received from parents by teachers.



In the online survey, respondents were asked to list the main challenges that they had experienced when dealing with the parents of their pupils. Of the twenty-one respondents, eight did not mention any additional challenges, while the remaining respondents highlighted a number of specific challenges. On a practical level, many teachers reported that language and cultural barriers often hindered an effective communication with parents. Often, these two barriers go hand in hand. One respondent suggested that relationships between schools and parents should be prioritised before problems arise, to ensure that conversations around particular incidents can be conducted smoothly. If there is a pre-existing positive relationship between teachers, mentors, and parents, then it is much easier to handle challenging situations. Another respondent pointed at bureaucratic obstacles as a factor which complicated the relationship with parents, as privacy laws may restrict direct contact between teachers and parents, thus hindering effective collaboration. Finally, some respondents suggested that parents themselves may be part of the problem when it comes to polarisation, as they sometimes encourage divisive behaviours and discourses.

During the “Follow-up” workshop, several of these challenges were commented on by the teachers. With regards to overcoming the language barrier, one teacher suggested: ‘An interpreter, only if it is really necessary, you are not going to hire or arrange an interpreter for everything and everyone. Sometimes this is possible with colleagues who also speak other languages. Often you can figure it out.’

To create a constructive relation between parents, teachers and pupils before problems occur, one teacher recommended ‘Getting to know each other,

parents and pupils. Keep short lines of communication. I also call parents of pupils who do not have a failing grade. Just a chat, to share that their child is doing well. Short lines of communication, then almost all difficulties can be discussed. Even though sometimes a huge argument arises, it will often be okay afterwards. You can accept a bit more of each other, mutually so.' One possible solution to 'like attracts like' according to two teachers is to mix up classes 'in order to try to get a better group dynamic. You could do that, but that's a pretty extreme measure.'

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

Good and bad practices

The second part of the survey inquired about the different reactions and practices teachers employ to address challenges and contentious topics in the classroom and school environment. This part aimed to discover the practicalities teachers face when dealing with the topics discussed in the first section of the survey. Here, we intended to learn from teachers' experiences and practices, as well as to provide more open space to elaborate on their suggestions and advice.

First, teachers were asked whether they feel well-trained to address polarisation, radicalisation, and extremism related issues in the classroom. The results display that both answers received almost equal responses with ten teachers responding positively and eleven teachers negatively. A recurring suggestion from teachers is to provide training and a school-wide framework on how to discuss contentious topics with pupils. Teachers indicated that learning how to facilitate a conversation between pupils while remaining neutral as a teacher would be beneficial.

Second, teachers were provided with a list of practices and methods with regards to dealing with challenges and controversial issues in the classroom. The results are shown in the table below and only display the good and bad practice responses:

Table 3. Good and bad practices.

ITEMS	GOOD PRACTICE	BAD PRACTICE
Facilitate a space for discussion where every student can talk and be heard, no matter their position.	20	0
Building a trust-based relationship with pupils.	20	0
Trying to find out who is right and who is wrong when pupils share their thoughts.	3	17
Peer-to-peer approaches.	13	2
Addressing taboo-related issues.	18	0
Looking for early signs of radicalisation processes.	13	1
Ignoring the challenges and issues facing young people to avoid making matters worse.	1	19
Reporting signs of pupils' radicalisation processes to the school principal.	17	0
Trying to develop a sense of empathy with and among pupils.	20	0
Strengthen resilience against violent narratives by teaching pupils critical thinking tools and methods for media literacy.	19	1
Empowering the triangular relationship between pupils, teachers, and parents.	17	1
Keeping the school management well informed.	17	1
Establishing networks between teachers across Europe.	7	1
Invite experts in the classroom (e.g.: psychologists, CSOs, NGOs, young ambassadors).	18	1
Debating online news that is based on unclear sources or none at all.	17	3
Discussions about democratic values and human rights.	20	0
Provide lessons on the importance of tolerance and anti-discrimination.	17	1
Mock the pupils who share certain fake sources to incite them to react against disinformation.	3	15
Raise awareness regarding consequences of violence.	18	1
Ask for support from the police.	6	3
Ongoing training for teachers in the prevention of radicalisation.	7	2
Cooperation between schools and representatives of minority groups to push back against "Us vs Them" narratives.	16	2
Teach critical thinking to pupils.	21	0
Ongoing training for teachers and pupils to spot fake news and harmful conspiracy theories.	16	1
Increase pupils' knowledge about active citizenship and the relationship between rights and responsibilities.	20	1
Increase pupils' knowledge of democratic practices and processes.	20	0
Rely on alternative means of education such as arts, crafts, one-to-one development.	15	2
Watch for and take action in cases of pupils with mental health issues, coming from domestic violence, abuse, addiction contexts by referring them to professionals, confidentially.	21	0
Engage with parents, and request their support in cases of concern, where pupils are isolating themselves.	20	0

The table above shows which practices are considered good or bad by the surveyed teachers. Teaching critical thinking skills to students, watching for and taking action in cases of pupils with various problematic backgrounds by referring them to professionals confidentially, discussions about democratic values and human rights, increase pupils' knowledge about active citizenship, the relationship between rights and responsibilities, increase pupils' knowledge of democratic practices and processes and engage with parents, and request their support in cases of concern, where pupils are isolating themselves, appear to be the practices deemed most beneficial by almost the whole sample of teachers. Practices that are more frequently noted by teachers as bad practice are 'trying to find out who is right and who is wrong when pupils share their thoughts', 'ignoring the challenges and issues facing young people to avoid making matters worse' and 'mocking pupils who share certain fake sources to incite them to react against disinformation. Interestingly, one of the above-listed practices 'asking for support from the police' triggered a debate among the surveyed teachers on whether this is a good or bad practice.

During the "Follow-up" workshop, the facilitators asked teachers for clarification in this regard. There were mixed reactions. For example, one of the teachers considered the question about requesting police support to be unclear. The examples provided by this teacher explained the following: 'you can interpret it as asking the police for support by providing information about a certain controversial subject; in that case, a teacher certainly sees the benefits. However, you can also involve the police in a negative way if there is an issue about controversial topics'. Another teacher considered it a good idea to consider whether the time is appropriate to invite the police. He provided the example of a local police officer who has been invited to school and was respected by the students. However, he also enquired the following open question: 'if you suspect a student wants to commit an attack or says things that are unacceptable, then you have to ask yourself when it is time to involve the police?'. In this regard, there was concern about involving the police too soon: 'If you say: gosh that student is going to do scary things and he is going to radicalise. Then her/his name can be included in a file. That is a stamp that a student carries, you do not want that'. Teachers pointed out the dilemma of interfering with the educational relationship between teachers and students. If cooperation however takes place in a preventive way, to build trust between youth and the police, the surveyed teachers agree that this is part of good practice.

When asked to provide examples of additional good practices, the teachers provided a variety of responses, focusing primarily on modelling positive values and creating a trusting classroom environment. Many respondents highlighted the need to be honest and open in communicating with pupils,

giving them the feeling that they could safely address their concerns and issues while being taken seriously. The need to make students feel appreciated and recognized was expressed by multiple respondents. Sincerity in dealing with students and their concerns was also mentioned by numerous teachers as a good practice. Students need to feel heard and treated as equals, rather than having their ideas dismissed. Practical suggestions included conducting one-on-one conversation with students who exhibited worrying behaviours or ideas, and organising student panels to give students a chance to express their opinions and expectations.

During the “Follow-up” workshop, the relationship between teacher and parents was elaborated on. It was said that this relationship is crucial according to some of the teachers. One teacher stated: ‘Research shows that engaged parents are immensely important for pupils’ success at school. The more successful pupils are at school, the less polarisation you get, I think. [...] The connection between school and parents, being there for the student and wishing the best for that student together, that’s a very powerful thing.’

However, teachers warned against involving parents too quickly, as this might damage the trust between student and teacher. Teachers elaborated on the issue of asking the police for support, indicating that asking for this type of support is a sensitive and context-specific topic. One teacher also mentioned that their answer depends on the type of support asked from the police: ‘I see the benefits of asking the police for support in delivering a presentation on a certain controversial subject.’ Another teacher added that they had a community police officer who regularly stopped by the school and had a positive relation with the pupils. On the other hand, teachers warned to be cautious when involving the police for more serious matters. One teacher said: ‘If you suspect that a student wants to carry out an attack, or makes unacceptable statements, when do you go to the police? If you say: that student is planning to do scary things and is going to radicalise, their name will end up in a file. That’s a label that the student will carry from that moment on, you don’t want that as a teacher’. In such situations, the same teacher explained that they have another communication channel with experts to discuss such cases, without directly involving the police.

Main suggestions and obstacles to deal with challenges and contentious topics

In addition to receiving teachers’ opinion on the listed practices, in question 7a of the survey, the teachers were asked to provide three main suggestions on how to deal with challenges and contentious topics in the classroom and school environment.

Among the responses, certain notions appeared repeatedly. Notably, the respondents encouraged their fellow teachers to create an open and safe

space for discussions in which everyone can express themselves freely without judgement, regardless of their position. There was also an emphasis on peer learning, based on the premise that students learn well from each other, while it was also recommended to invite external experts such as psychologists or civil society representatives into the classroom. The teacher's role, according to respondents, should be to facilitate group dynamics and build trust, ensuring that rules are respected, while remaining neutral, taking students seriously, and giving space to everyone's voice. Many respondents emphasised the importance of building good relationships with students, while also maintaining professional boundaries. Critical questions were encouraged in order to stimulate learning, although these should not be influenced too much by strong personal convictions. Instead, teachers should be able to facilitate spaces in which constructive debates can be held in a climate of empathy.

No additional comments were made on this section during the "Follow-up" workshop. However, some themes in the list were repeated frequently:

1. *Respecting a diversity of opinions.*

One teacher, although fully supporting this suggestion, shared experiences in which he faced a dilemma: 'How much do you tolerate and where do you draw the line?'

2. *Remaining neutral as a teacher.*

As an answer to an open question posed earlier in the survey, one teacher noted: 'It is also crucial that the teacher does not get personally involved in discussions and tries to be as neutral as possible to focus on her or his pupils'. One teacher shared, at another point in the survey, a dissenting opinion to this: 'Openness [is important]. If I am open about how I view certain topics, which opinions I have myself, my pupils will feel more inclined to be open about how they view certain topics.'

3. *Creating a safe space, based on trust and respect to facilitate open dialogue.*

Teachers stressed the importance of building trust and creating a safe space: 'I believe the connection between you [as a teacher] and the group to be one of the most important things.' Another teacher responded to this: 'I completely agree with this, in the end it's about creating a safe environment [...]. Creating that safe environment is all about the connection that exists between the pupils and yourself.'

Then, the teachers were asked to share, from their perspective, the most important obstacles to successfully dealing with challenges and controversial issues in the classroom and school environment. The responses emphasised the lack of guidance and training for teachers as a major obstacle, as

well as a lack of confidence to discuss such issues effectively. Some teachers reported the lack of a safe learning environment, which can be shaped by the attitudes of teachers themselves, students, or the lack of school-wide frameworks to address certain topics. The disproportionate influence of social media and resulting disinformation was also highlighted as a significant hurdle. In general, teachers did not feel well equipped or competent to handle the delicate conversations which are needed.

During the “Follow-up” workshop, no additional comments were made by the teachers regarding this specific list. Nevertheless, a few of the answers correspond to the following obstacles that were mentioned at earlier stages during the survey and the “Set-the-Scene” workshop.

1. *Lack of a school-wide framework on dealing with polarisation related issues*

One teacher’s statement illustrates this obstacle: ‘I am not aware of any guidelines at my school when dealing with certain subjects.’ Another teacher shared their concerns with regards to a lack of support and training in the aftermath of the murder of teacher Samuel Paty: ‘Teachers of social studies and philosophy were supposed to discuss this, without any guidance on how we are supposed to do that. Just talk about it or discuss it [they said, *Author’s note*], but they didn’t provide us with support in how to go about this.’

2. *Teachers’ own judgement.*

‘It really matters which views we hold, we as teachers are also biased of course.’ Which is not necessarily a bad thing, more inevitable, however, it can have negative effects on dealing with controversial issues and challenges in the classroom and school environment. For example, one teacher shared their experience when dealing with a taboo surrounding homosexuality at a school with a religious background: ‘I believe that some pupils, but also teachers, have certain opinions on it that have nothing to do with religion.’

3. *Time scarcity.*

This issue has been recurring and very visible throughout the entire process of the research. At the moment, teachers in the Netherlands have particularly heavy workloads. This obstacle is exacerbated by a development that multiple teachers experienced, namely that a lot of responsibilities related to societal issues are shifted to school: ‘Education is not a patch that can be used to fix a number of issues just like that. Teachers are not wizards. I’d like to see whether there are possibilities in which pupils, together with each other, come into contact with other opinions without that being the explicit goal outside of the classroom.’ Another teacher added a similar statement: ‘I believe that education can play an important role in this [radicalisation pre-

vention *Author's note*], but it is an illusion to believe that schools can provide a comprehensive solution to this problem.'

Conclusion

Many contentious topics detected during the desk research were in line with the findings of the survey. A few noteworthy points are intolerance against gender and sexual diversity, disinformation related issues as a contributing factor towards the increase in conspiracy theories, 'Us-vs-Them' thinking around identity, xenophobia and polarising narratives on the phenomenon of migration, and intolerance towards existing cultural, social or religious differences in society. The survey, and particularly the "Follow-up" workshop, deepened our understanding, as teachers were able to provide further clarification on how they handle these issues in classrooms, group dynamics in a classroom, the type of school, the various roles they have within a school (e.g., mentor or focal point), the relationship built with pupils, both at the individual and group level, and the level of demonstrated subject knowledge to discuss contentious topics.

Apart from the recurrence of many contentious topics detected during the desk research in the survey, some additional contentious topics were identified. Teachers mentioned the "Me Too" movement as being part of their discussions, questions of guilt regarding historical issues, the use of particular language to describe social or historical actions (e.g. police actions or colonial war), Christian faith, cyber conflicts, the influence that is exerted 'from the neighbourhood' on pupils about how they should behave at school, who they can interact with and how they should dress, and finally tackling drug-related crime in the big city.

Both the desk research and the survey demonstrate the high workload of teachers in the Netherlands, a sense of insecurity among teachers in dealing with contentious issues, and professional loneliness related to lack of support and vision from school administrators. The survey was, however, more nuanced on the latter, by showing that of the twenty-one teachers, fourteen teachers felt well supported and seven teachers found that cooperation could still be improved, and none of them felt isolated in relation to the management. The survey pointed out that most of the teachers do not know whether the number of educational tools provided in the Netherlands is adequate to address challenges and contentious topics in classrooms, as the tools available are spread over the Internet and not centralised. Another important point made by the teachers is to make sure that all the available educational tools have clear guidelines, something which is often missing. Also, there is a need to ensure that educational materials do not contain harmful political messages, especially if they are made by external organisations. The need to

invest in facilitation techniques to handle contentious issues was mentioned both in the desk research report and the survey. These techniques revolve around leading conversations without resorting to one's own opinion and facilitating a space for discussion in which every student can talk and be heard, no matter their position. Further approaches include listening with empathy and practising appreciative listening, while at the same time setting boundaries. In terms of identifying topics listed as high priority, teachers mentioned discussions about democratic values and human rights, the importance of tolerance and anti-discrimination, critical thinking, knowledge about active citizenship and the relationship between rights and responsibilities.

Recommendations

1. The above conclusions have led to the following set of recommendations on how to deal with challenges and contentious topics in the classroom and the school environment:
2. Improve communications between the schools and the Ministry of Education on existing guidelines and available educational tools to address polarisation in the classroom and/or school environment.
3. Put more emphasis on dealing with contentious topics and challenges in the classroom into teachers' education, not only for prospective teachers in big cities or those in the field of social sciences, but mainstreamed and nationwide.
4. Acknowledge the extensive roles already fulfilled by teachers, and do not place upon them the additional expectation of singlehandedly preventing radicalisation
5. Create one platform in which all the educational tools that exist are centrally located and easily accessible for teachers.
6. Ensure all available educational tools are provided with clear guidelines on how to use them.
7. Ensure that a diverse range of topics are developed into educational tools to adhere to context-specificity.
8. Ensure that the educational tools do not convey extreme or polarising political messages, keeping in mind that these are created by external, often private, companies.
9. Create a school-wide framework on 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.
10. Provide training courses to teachers on how to facilitate open conversations on contentious topics, in a safe environment, between pupils; e.g. on

how to remain neutral, provide space for diverse opinions while simultaneously adhering to any rules that have been instated, and strengthen a sense of empathy on the side of both pupils and teachers, so that diverse opinions are welcomed, rather than unwanted.

11. Provide time for teachers to invest in the relationships they have with both pupils and parents. Establishing this bond is a very important step to take before challenges arise and should therefore be mainstreamed.

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