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Teachers in Romanian Secondary Schools: Challenges and Responses in Preventing Polarization and Extremism

Dana Dolghin, Isabella Pirlogea

Abstract: This article discusses the main findings on the role of teachers and schools in preventing polarisation and extremism collected during the research undertaken in Romania within the framework of the H2020 project “PARTICIPATION”. The article analyses primary data collected through surveys, focus groups and interviews with primary and secondary school teachers on teaching complex issues in schools. It correlates the findings with research on the role of formal education in preventing polarisation and radicalisation. Specifically, it looks at the challenges faced by teachers when encountering contentious issues in classroom or school discussions and the ideation of their roles in these circumstances. The article concludes that, although there is an awareness of the role of teachers and the school environment in helping youth make sense of social and political issues which have competing and often sensitive interpretations and trigger fierce public debate, conceptions of the available resources and affordances of schools in these situations are limited and hindered by the system of formal education. Furthermore, interpretations of the needs of youth are systemically different between students and teachers. This leads to a decreased role of the traditional education system in responding to dynamics of polarisation and/or extremism among youth. Overall, it also weakens the role of formal education and schools’ role in preventing polarisation and extremism.

Keywords: formal education, contentious issues, anti-polarisation, anti-discrimination

Introduction

The issues of polarisation and extremism have been increasingly flagged in public discourses, popular culture and among youth in Romania (Champions survey, 2020). Although some narratives and discourses are not new, new dynamics have seen radicalisation and (violent) extremist narratives spreading through the transnational influence of radical right, revamping older narratives that promote intolerance, discrimination and hate speech, xenophobic attitudes, especially against Jews (antisemitism), Roma communities, the Hungarian community, refugees, migrants and asylum seekers, as well as opposition to gender politics and misogyny. These are increasingly happening in the context of the contestations and alternatives to liberal democracy also emerging in the region. Furthermore, Romania, as many other countries in Europe, is witnessing new far-right groups, be they mainstream parties (AUR) or transversal, grassroots movements, operating also in the online environment (Wondreys&Mudde, 2022). This radical-right influence has seen a rise in popularity for authoritarianism and hateful messages and speech associated with Euroscepticism and “illiberalism” (Dragolea, 2022). For instance, more recently there has been renewed attention to the spread of false information and conspiratorial thinking in public discourses (Buturoiu et al.,2021). These opinions promote the idea there is a shadow LGBTQI group, protected by Brussels, that uses ‘LGBT+ ideology’ to impose a foreign will to family, social and political institutions and therefore trigger a demise of the (Romanian) nation, emphasising an ontological insecurity that different political and cultural actors easily hijack. This argument was documented (Norocel& Pettersson, 2023) across the political divides in interventions from both radical-right populist representatives. These have been examined in conjunction with the politics of the knowledge-sharing environment (eg. Press, digital platforms), which, in the last five year, have seen a rise in conspiracy theories, closely connected with feelings of powerlessness (Paap et al., 1999) or anxiety and uncertainty (Van Prooijen, 2020). Research has shown these stem from people’s need to restore a threatened sense of security and control (Douglas, 2021). Different factors such as (lower) socioeconomic status (Douglas et al., 2019), partisanship and news media exposure (Hollander, 2017) encourage conspiracy thinking and denialism (Uscinski et al., 2020), or personal traits (Swami et al., 2011) may explain people’s tendencies to embrace conspiracy belief and validate fake news. Information fatigue as a result of an unstable global and regional environment has also contributed to this phenomenon. The proliferation of online educators amongst the youth, acting as myth busters or pseudo-psychology gurus, using impact imagery and semi-romantic language to spread their influence has been exacerbated by information fatigue and the need to consume rapid

and short-form content. TikTok is the best example of rapidly spreading fake education, oppositional cultural narratives and far-right ideology. This landscape is very relevant for Romania as well (Balaban, Constantinescu&Mușăța, 2018)

Compared to some decades ago, current fringe ideas of the far-right, specifically from youth groups, use conservatism, which expands to various issues such as societal and economic issues, capitalism and non-interventionism, and neo-reactionaries whose philosophies are anti-democratic and anti-egalitarian (Ebner, 2023). This has encouraged local Romanian radical right youth groups that operate with Christian narratives or feel disenfranchised.

Also, there is a clear intention of illiberal and radical-right actors to interfere in education policies, restrict particular specialisms (eg. Gender studies, social science) or restrict the school curricula in certain topics (religion, reproductive health). These issues have been persistently flagged as an area of concern for Romania and Central and Eastern Europe more broadly, in relation to the “mainstreaming” of extremism, with a widespread circulation of symbols and narratives connected with sentiments of hate and marginalisation (Pytlas, 2016). These tend to seep into the daily interactions of youth.

Scholarship on mainstreaming of polarisation and extremism generally investigates factors that explain individual behaviours and tries to identify social contexts that aggravate these conditions (Caiani&Weisskircher, 2021). One of the frequently mentioned factors leading to such phenomena has been the levels of education of the respondents of surveys, wider public as detected in various analyses (Harper, 2018, Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2019a;). Although studies looking into the choices of individuals for a radical or extremist public discourse do not always find equity between a lower level of education and such attitudes, the education ecosystem remains a pivotal conduit. Often, those displaying such radical social attitudes and those who follow movements professing these values enjoy privileges and access to education, even higher levels of education (Sas et. al., 2020). This discrepancy begs the question of whether some of the conditions, contents and methods of education cannot prevent such situations or even themselves represent pathways to radicalisation or polarisation.

Scholarship looking at the mainstreaming of extremist views in Central and Eastern Europe preponderantly focuses on the role of political actors, understood restrictively as political parties, public personas and intellectuals. (Pytlas, 2016). However, in this article, we approach the issue at grassroots level, and analyse the dynamics in formal education in relation to contentious or difficult debates that can occur inside the classroom. We identify “contentious issues” as themes and topics that tend to draw solid and opposing reactions from different partners involved in the conversation,

or debates about subjects that have a difficult historical or social capital, or that refer to issues that are perceived as highly subjective (CoE, 2015). These can vary from the political or social topics of the day to identity markers and debates to historical conditions which can arise during the educational process in school (Noddings, 2017). Contentious issues are ubiquitous in the public space and inevitably, some of these issues make their way into the school or into the classroom, either via incidents or opinions expressed during the educational process (Leicht, Heiss & Byun, 2018). Teachers and school staff are often the first to confront these issues through debates and are often the first in the position to address these issues in the classroom. In these dynamics, one can notice either extremism and radicalisation, or, on the contrary, a sensitivity towards differences, diversity or appreciation for multiple points of view, which are generally indicators of a less polarised or radical environment (Houston, 2019).

Methodologies of discussing and approaching contentious issues in the classroom have been generally highlighted to show promising breakthroughs in responding to extremism and polarisation among youth. Providing pedagogical opportunities for youth to discuss opposing truth claims and discuss the methodology and practices of handling controversial topics, such as “the 5 minutes rule” or “the choice radar” are resources used globally (Bonnell et al., 2010). The Prevent program in the United Kingdom, a comprehensive strategy for schools to be involved in the prevention of radicalisation and extremism includes a methodology of harvesting discussions of contentious issues in the classroom as a teaching tool (Jerome et al., 2019). National de-radicalization programs use such class discussions to untangle uncertainties and address unconscious bias, prejudice or misappropriations of terms or concepts among youth. Such programs are seen in conjunction with critical thinking, and argumentation (Kaepfel, 2021). In general, using contentious issues as trope for learning, unpacking information and using the opportunity to cultivate self-reflection, addresses existing barriers and concerns.

Previous work on the Romanian system has shown there is a deep divide between the information that reaches youth via information channels (media, social media, activities, etc.) and the type of feedback mechanisms they have in schools to process this information (Stoiciu, 2014). Young people reported a gap in the opportunities and quality of debates, discussions and reflections on topics and issues that they are exposed to and for which they would need a more nuanced understanding, preferably provided through a school setting (Ganea, 2013). Especially in relation to historical, political and social debates, that can give rise to concern or curiosity, there are few mechanisms for reflection provided by the Romanian school system. At the same time, youth reported a lack of a safe space where they can discuss and

ponder on issues of gender, discrimination, and hate. In general, frequent analyses point to the insufficient skills of teachers in handling complex topics in the classroom, and many topics or themes that do not get enough exposure and critical approaches. Other studies have shown that teachers perpetuate siloed, nationalist, and sometimes discriminatory views (Bădescu et al., 2019a). At the same time, teachers report that they feel underprepared to tackle and respond to stereotypes, nationalist narratives, any form of discrimination or racism. Although it was clear that, although many did encounter situations that were difficult to manage, or discussions or topics which required an appropriate context, most referred to these as isolated cases, not a complete methodological gap in approach.

Description of the sample

The sample of teachers included in the online survey amounted to twenty-four. The purpose of the survey was to chart the attitudes, experiences and needs of teachers when it comes to handling contentious issues in the classroom. Seven of them were aged between 30-39, nine between 40-49, six between 50-59, and one aged above 60. Out of twenty-three teachers who responded to the question regarding their gender, twenty were women, and three were men. Most of them (eleven out of twenty-three who responded to this question) said they have between 21-30 years of teaching experience, while the remaining teachers had between 5-10 (four teachers), between 11-20 (six teachers), and more than thirty years of teaching experience (two). None of them had less than five years of experience in teaching, and they primarily teach students in the 14-19 age group.

Most of the teachers in this sample also stated they have participated in various extracurricular activities: coordinators of educational programs inside or outside the school, some working in non-formal educational settings. The subjects that the teachers taught ranged from English, history, (majority), French, social sciences, Romanian language and literature, mathematics, and biology. Twelve of the teachers teach in general secondary schools, ten in high schools (lyceum) level, five at technical secondary, and one at an artistic secondary school.¹ The schools were located in different places around Romania: ten in a medium-sized city, seven in a village, and six in a town.

The fieldwork with teachers concluded in a “Follow-up” workshop, that was carried out with a mixed approach, with some participants meeting the facilitator online, and with others writing to the facilitator, via email. The participants, eighteen for the “Set-the-Scene” workshop, and twenty-four for

¹ In this case, the total number of teachers in the results of this question (12 + 10 + 5 + 1) is higher than the total number of teachers participating in the survey; this is because many of them teach (or have taught) in multiple schools.

the “Follow-up” workshop, were teachers selected from a wider network of schools and teachers in the urban area and surrounding areas, that have previously been involved in several of the facilitator’s projects on democracy, prevention of extremism and polarisation. Some have participated in workshops, trainings and participatory research undertaken by the facilitator in the past. In this regard, a mixed approach has been used, by combining newer and older participants. A mixed outreach and engagement method to recruit and reach new teachers was used, specifically targeting teachers active in underrepresented communities, either with economic or ethnic conditions of exclusion and marginalisation.

Challenges and contentious topics in the classroom and the school environment

The first question in the survey sought to investigate the mindset that exists inside the classroom. Teachers were asked whether they had encountered a series of “challenges” inside the classroom, especially those detected during desk research, and quantified them with the options of “very often”, “often”, and “sometimes”. In case multiple challenges have received the same score, we have prioritised those that received a higher number of “very often” than “often” and “sometimes” or of “often” than “sometimes”. The table below reports the five most frequently experienced challenges by teachers, in the Romanian sample:

Table 1. Most experienced challenges in daily school reported by teachers, in the Romanian sample.

CHALLENGES	VERY OFTEN	OFTEN	SOMETIMES
Communicating constructively with the families of the students.	6	7	11
Managing situations where parents are not being supportive in addressing the problematic behaviour of their children in the classroom/the school environment.	/	9	14
Changing your role from ‘transferring knowledge’ to ‘moderating a conversation’ when it comes to speaking about topics that give rise to polarisation.	2	3	15
Questions related to polarising topics, asked by students, which were difficult to answer.	1	2	16
Managing polarising comments shared by pupils during class.	3	1	14

When asked about the challenges teachers encounter in the school environment, they focused primarily on the extended context of the classroom:

the most reported issue was a lack of communication with pupils' families and managing situations together with families (100% reported this, all twenty-four respondents). The teachers reported facing difficulties in parent-teacher collaboration in handling cases involving their children. Cases that have come up in class, discussed afterwards during the "Follow-up" workshop have been various. For instance, one teacher reported a case of harmful, antisocial, behaviour coming from a student (bullying), that was not resolved because the parent refused to collaborate with teachers, or to explain, and work towards, rectifying the behaviour. In general, the teachers reported a distinct lack of engagement from parents regarding the social context and progress of their children in school, but rather, parents were simply interested in good grades and achieving excellence in school results.

'Managing situations where parents are not being supportive in addressing the problematic behaviour of their children in the classroom/the school environment' is another challenge widely reported by the teachers (96%). Cases discussed during the workshop ranged from antisocial behaviour to discrimination.

A third category of challenges relates to the role of the teacher. *'Changing your role from 'transferring knowledge' to 'moderating a conversation' when it comes to speaking about topics that give rise to polarisation'* has been reported as a challenge by 83% of respondents. A main challenge is the rapport with families and involving families in addressing students' behaviour, but also cultivating a sense of responsibility among students to take the lead in addressing "contentious" topics. These tend to outrank challenges encountered in the class environment.

Since some of the responses were general and could be interpreted differently, we continued this conversation during the "Follow-up" workshop. When it comes to the difficulties in taking on the role of a *moderator* in the classroom, for instance, most respondents noted the challenge of making themselves heard in the classroom, especially concerning contentious issues (twenty out of twenty-four answers). However, none of the respondents reflected on potential bias and prejudices among teachers, which are often noticed by students. Another issue during the "Follow-up" workshop was the absence of a boundary between individual conviction and things that teachers convey to students. This was a major point of difference, as respondents see it as part of their duty to convey "values" and "morals", which made it difficult to separate between personal and professional obligations. Some participants (a minority) acknowledged that more training and preparation are needed in this area.

78% of the respondents (eighteen) reported challenges experienced by teachers when handling polarising comments. By "polarising", here, we refer to the gradual solidification and distance taking of a group identity *against*

another, and the growing emotional and conceptual distance between these two parties (Kimball et al., 2018). The concern here is the deepening of an identarian divide in relation too, or because of, another group. Such comments often appear in the classroom or frame much of the responses of students to debates. In the “Follow-up” workshop, respondents referred to the difficulties in transforming these debates into opportunities for learning and avoiding a conflictual situation in the classroom.

With regard to the contentious topics covered by the survey, Romanian teachers responded as follows:

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

CONTENTIOUS TOPICS	VERY OFTEN	OFTEN	SOMETIMES
Discussions about the government’s measures to counter the Covid-19 pandemic.	6	4	14
Disinformation related issues (e.g., fake news and conspiracy theories).	4	4	16
Bullying and cyber-bullying.	3	6	14
Grievances relating to social conflicts and inequalities in society.	/	5	16
Issues relating to clothes at school.	2	3	15
Stereotypes and prejudices coming from violent movies and games.	/	4	16
Juvenile delinquency.	/	3	17
‘Us-vs-Them’ thinking and rhetoric.	/	2	18
Complex historical national debates (e.g. Holocaust, authoritarianism, totalitarianism, etc.).	/	3	14
Intolerance towards the existing cultural, social, or religious differences in society.	1	3	12
Polarised discussions about individual freedoms (e.g., abortion, euthanasia).	1	3	12

During the “Follow-up” workshop, some examples discussed regarding these issues, were about hate speech online (targeting physical appearances, economic and social status, and gender). Offline, in-person bullying was also often identified as an issue, especially in relation to gender and economic status. In this regard, respondents underlined that projects and campaigns against “bullying” have been by far the most successful in targeting hate speech and discrimination. However, respondents also argued that the lack of involvement of families is a barrier to the success of such initiatives. Less

reflection was given to the fact that most of these interventions tend to restrict themselves to individual approaches, where a “do not harm” approach translates into shying away from taking on more complex causes or contexts (Hall, 2017). Matters of discrimination or hate speech are still tackled as individual attitudes and concerns, related to personal views, continue to be individualised and separated from the social context in which they occur. For instance, there is no substantial reflection on the fact that “bullying” attitudes stem from stereotypes, prejudice, racism or discrimination, which are seldom tackled by these programs. Few of these topics make their way into the classroom, with contextualisation, explanations or a framework for combatting such attitudes.

100% of respondents also noted that the COVID-19 pandemic was a polarising topic, presumably in relation the measures taken by governments to curb the spread of the disease, such as restrictions which affected the school environment. It is an interesting point because the anti-COVID-19 prevention measures have provided a fertile nexus of conspiracy theories, extremism and radicalisation in Europe (Saad-Filho, 2020). In teachers’ responses, the pandemic seems to appear as a problematic topic in itself, rather than a topic of debate with polarising topics.

The issues of disinformation, fake news and conspiracy theories received an equal number of responses in the survey (100%). In fact, some of the cases that were reported during the “Follow-up” workshop, had to do with, primarily, the dissatisfaction at the presence of fake news. In this case, it seems that teachers have mechanisms in place to discuss critical thinking skills, with regard to transparency and reliability. The teachers also admitted that they are less versed in managing, and answering to, the often-heated debates that can be triggered by fake news, among young people.

Interestingly, slightly lower in the ranking, were topics relating to grievances, social conflicts, and inequalities (twenty-one respondents). Some of the examples that emerged during the “Follow-up” workshop, were to do with cases of poverty and marginalisation, where teachers are asked to resolve heated debates by offering context, or potential tools for critically understanding the narratives and perspectives used in mainstream or social media.

Clothing and social representation was also one of the topics singled out by participants, with twenty mentions representing 83% of respondents. During the workshop, additional comments suggested these debates are tied in with youth identity markers, but they often spill into conversations about economic and class status, which can be challenging to manage. Young people seem to have created and follow new rules of interaction within social networks and these generate new conditions and social ways of “belonging”, some of them through clothes and external appearances (Literat

& Kligler-Vilenchik, 2019). In this sense, the issue of clothing and outward appearances is not only a question of lifestyle but also of political and social choices or opportunities. There is an exclusion in these communities that affects the social integration of youth. Negotiating this social dimension of social appearances poses problems to teachers, because it can open difficult discussions about personal choice and freedom of decision.

Other reported (although lower ranked) contentious topics faced by teachers in Romania were the following: a culture of violent movies and video games, and the issues that come out of these, were mentioned by teachers (87%) twenty times. Attitudes towards others, often violent and filled with hate, were cited as examples of the repercussions of this video-gaming culture. Gaming and online cultures are increasingly treated as an accelerator of hate, but during the workshop further insights were provided into how these symbols and patterns make their way into debates about values and politics, and further contribute to conflictual encounters. Interestingly, twenty answers also refer to juvenile delinquency (83%). During the “Follow-up” workshop we clarified this applies to situations where teachers or class discussions, discuss drug use, minor theft and antisocial behaviour that can also polarise conversations. Debates discussing reasons for, and conditions that lead up to, the use of drugs, or antisocial behaviour quickly become a strong debate that concerns values and social conditions. Also, the social and economic conditions triggering these attitudes were debated topics, although they did not occupy nearly as much as the above-listed priorities.

‘Us-vs-Them’ thinking and rhetoric was also singled out by twenty respondents. During the workshop, it was clear that such cases had to do with language use and specific stereotypes denominators of class, for instance. This may be accentuated by gender stereotypes as well as social expression – experimentation with values and personal views, activism towards sensitive causes, clothing, and friend groups. It is important to emphasise that the “us-versus-them” attitude is also something connected to language and use of certain concepts and social denominators, and this has not emerged as a priority among teachers in the follow-up conversation.

Seventeen respondents noted the issues of national debate and difficult histories (authoritarianism) can manifest inside the classroom. In the Romanian case, this can lead to conversations about the Holocaust. During the “Follow-up” workshop, the group reflected on casual but frequent rhetoric denying the gravity of the Holocaust or the targeting of Roma and Jewish groups. It is a striking situation because teaching the history of authoritarianism in the country and the persecution of the Jewish and the Roma communities have been under constant public debate. At the same time, efforts to introduce special disciplines or specific classes on these topics in school

also triggered opposition from more nationalist-prone actors who do not find the topic relevant for youth today (Misco 2008).

Sixteen teachers reported issues related to intolerance towards the existing cultural, social or religious differences in society. Those who did report such episodes primarily reflected on the Orthodox and conservative groups that are now essential actors in the public space and want to define attitudes about gender or sexuality. The issue of religious education in schools remains a point of contention, with an extensive public debate in Romania about its need and parameters.

Issues about individual freedom, such as abortion or euthanasia, have been reported by sixteen respondents. Reproductive health is a contentious topic in the country, and precisely when it comes to the discussion of these topics in education. Reproductive health is a highly public topic where the political right and the political left clash in relation to the school curricula and education, this affects many of the youth and impacts the debate on the topic in Romania. The follow-up discussion allowed teachers to discuss and add more contentious topics that had not been listed. One teacher referred to the debate about reproductive health education in schools in Romania, and that it has been a divisive issue between schools, national education authorities and parents. In this regard, a recent survey has shown that 77% of parents favour introducing reproductive health education into schools, but education officials often oppose their wishes (Levi & Neagu, 2022).

One other contentious topic listed has been drug use, which one teacher mentioned. When asked to describe the situation, the respondent referred primarily to a lack of willingness to engage in a constructive discussion about the social and economic conditions leading to or triggered by drug use.

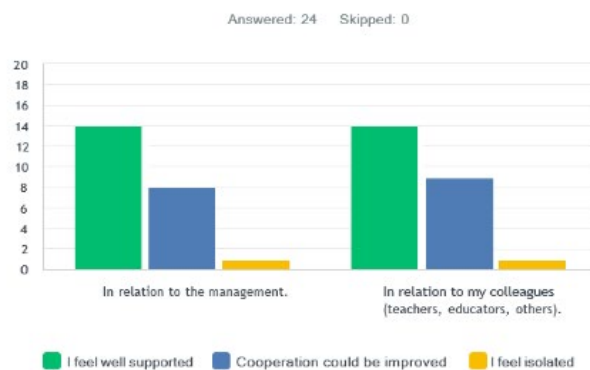
The feedback received during the “Follow-up” workshop, regarding the variations of challenges and contentious topics depending on differences (other groups, different schools, different subjects), indicated to some variations. The majority of teachers (fifteen) reported some differences between different age groups, with the younger students (primary students) being more receptive to discussions and mediation and less inclined to take an immobile stance or position. However, the majority conceded that there is also a difference in how families relate to children and childhood, particularly between the cities/small town and the rural environment. There are more expectations for independent and pragmatic education for children born in a rural environment.

Some respondents also reflected on the differences between schools, with teachers working in the city environment reporting more polarising discussions than those working in the rural or small-town environment. Also, science teachers, such as mathematics, usually do not encounter debates about contentious issues or are not asked to mediate and intervene.

Support received from other colleagues and the school management

The findings of this section of the survey show a gap between needs and services provided by school administrations, and a clear division in terms of preferences, although almost 50% of the respondents reported that they feel well supported in relation to management (fourteen out of twenty-three respondents) and in relation to their peers (fourteen out of twenty-four respondents). 38% (nine respondents) report that collaboration could be improved in relation to colleagues, teachers, educators, while 35% (8 respondents) argue the partnership could be improved with regard to the management. Only one respondent reported feeling isolated in relation to the management, and one respondent felt isolated from peers (teachers, educators).

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



	I FEEL WELL SUPPORTED	COOPERATION COULD BE IMPROVED	I FEEL ISOLATED	TOTAL
In relation to the management.	61% 14	35% 8	4% 1	23
In relation to my colleagues (teachers, educators, others).	58% 14	38% 9	4% 1	24

Regarding additional comments, respondents argued that one of the main issues is that effective intervention requires actions that surpass the responsibilities of teachers (alone) and consequently any action within (only) the school is not durable.

Three respondents have reported no genuine discussion between teachers and the management on such topics, and consequently, the effectiveness of interventions is limited. School authorities do not feel responsible in such situations and therefore are not interested in starting a program. One respondent argued that because these cases are not that frequent, the school does not have an integrated plan to tackle them, but there are substantial conversations about preventing bullying at school.

During the “Follow-up” workshop, there was a consensus that the managerial system is often inflexible and causes many of the identified shortcomings. There was a shared mutual disappointment with the fact that schools cannot bring more collaborative approaches to the teaching process, and rather opt for approaches such as co-teaching, rather than participatory approaches that could enhance the opportunities for discussion and self-reflection. Most of the reasons for this limitation reside in the rather conservative syllabus and teaching approaches promoted nationally, as well as the volume of information that needs to be conveyed to students per subject. In general, the focus on knowledge, rather than abilities, still supported by national educational mechanisms, is one of the challenges identified by teachers when trying to implement such approaches.

What emerges out of the survey is a consensus that collaboration is lacking among colleagues, and that most of them are not interested in taking these approaches, and that there is a sense of competition and isolation among peers. Only one respondent reported that more collaborative practices are noticeable in their schools, and that new approaches are interesting in this teaching environment.

It is crucial to underscore that the position of the teacher and schools in relation to current social and political conditions are essential points of uncertainty for teachers. Their observations show that they do not feel supported by the school ecosystem in responding to polarisation issues. Not only does the school ecosystem not accommodate this topic, from their inclusion in methodological approaches to the school approach, the system continues to be regarded as separate from the socio-political environment. The correlation between methodologies in schools and the debates, as well as systems of teaching and response that can be adapted to respond to such concerns are missing.

This positioning has two implications. First, the teaching process is somewhat isolated, with little correlation between disciplines, cross-disciplinary or inter-disciplinary work. When queried about the potential of growing programs of co-teaching or subject-based teaching (which often crosses disciplines or even age groups), teachers pointed out that such programs will negatively affect the quality and content that they could transmit to students in the classroom. This would negatively affect their performances in standardized tests. They also fear negative feedback from parents in regards to the type of content discussed in the class-room and its suitability. In general, teachers have widely reported difficulties in conveying the need for alternative teaching and education methods to pupils’ parents. There is, however, a systemic misalignment in this context because parents are generally dissatisfied with the level of educational tools present in the Romanian school system.

Secondly, schools continue to be regarded as isolated from communities in which they operate, be those neighbourhoods or cities. The social and political context of the environs are not a concern formulated by teachers, who are more inclined to dispel and ignore differences rather than transforming them in teaching opportunities. In fact, there is a strong opposition from teachers to breaching some topics which have garnered public and political attention and are also relevant to students. Gender politics, gender identity, even feminist thought, are increasingly uncomfortable for teachers to discuss, and are topics which are consistently disregarded in schools precisely because they tend to trigger intense opposition.

However, the reluctance in engaging in debates about gender mirror the type of rise of illiberal and the radical right in educational policies and also mirror broader dynamics in Europe. Recent contributions to educational policies in France show that educational policies – and their neglect – represent programmatic directions of parties and groups in this category (Berg et al., 2023). As the authors argue, “with the content of educational policies, though they also emphasise what we refer to as the redistributive dimension and to a lesser extent the governing dimension.” (Berg et. al., 2023: 233). The critical dimension where policies and content of education become important is authority and discipline, which reflect on the choices of subjects or curricula. These do not stop at policies; discourses and narratives can seep into the classroom. Often, these translate into partisan references in the classroom which perpetuate certain topics and viewpoints (Andreotti, 2012). It is in this line of argumentation that many of the attacks on educational systems in Central and Eastern Europe stem from. The attacks on specific programs and specialisms, such as social sciences, gender studies fit an agenda where identity and gender roles need to be unilateral and in general simple to include and appropriate in certain narratives (Ergas et. al., 2022; Peto, 2022).

Educational tools

The survey was interested in understanding if, in their view, there were an adequate number of educational tools available in their country to help school staff address challenges and contentious topics in the classroom. In this regard, the number of positive (ten) and negative (eleven) replies has been almost the same, with the remaining teachers (three) stating that they do not know. When asked if the existing tools were adequate for this purpose, the number of “I do not know” answers increased (six), while a slight majority responded positively (ten), and the remaining teachers (eight) negatively. Finally, a third question asked the teachers if they themselves, and their school staff were sufficiently trained to use these tools. In this regard, the majority of teachers (fifteen out of twenty-four) responded negatively, six replied “I do not know” and only three replied positively. When it comes

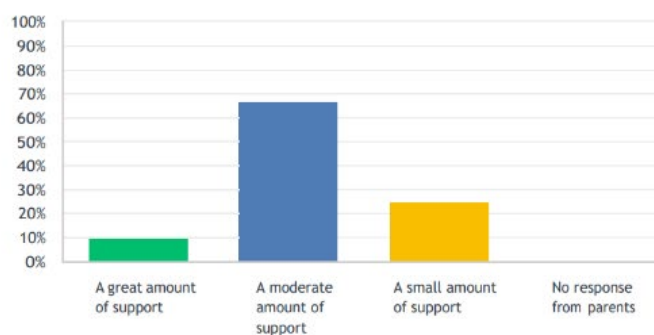
to the support and tools they feel are needed, discussed during both the online survey and during the “Follow-up” workshop, most teachers (18 in the online survey) reported on the need for training, whether that is on the use of online tools, new participatory methods of teaching, pedagogical tools for critical thinking skills, and consultations with specialists in education methods. Others reported that what is needed is training on social construction and improved participation in teaching processes. One respondent in the online survey specifically emphasised a need for more psychologist-counseling collaboration with teachers to respond to these issues. All twenty-four respondents argued that specific training on new, interactive, and participatory teaching methods are needed, and more emphasis on conflict mediation skills, through training, would address the existing gap. One respondent also mentioned the need for juridical training for teachers. During the “Follow-up workshop”, it became evident that only a small minority (one) think that these topics are covered. Also, during the workshop, we returned to the question about tools used in the school setting during the workshop. Most of the teachers noted online resources (videos, documentaries, news, photographs, etc.) that they use in the teaching process. When asked whether they refer to guiding materials (for instance the UNESCO guide for teachers) on teaching contentious issues in schools, most of them admitted they did not know about it (CoE, 2014).

The relationship with the parents

The findings in question 5a of the online survey, interested in understanding the relationship between the parents of their students, points to a rather satisfactory relationship with the parents among those responding to the survey. Twelve stated that they have frequent contact with them (50%), nine reported that they have frequent contact, but sometimes they have difficulties in reaching them (39%), ten (42%) argued that they try to involve them as much as possible in extracurricular activities. Nine respondents (38%) said they only interact with parents when there is a problem in the child’s behaviour.

In relation to the support teachers received from parents, two respondents out of twenty-four said they have a great amount of support, sixteen teachers reported they receive a moderate amount of support, and six respondents said they receive no support from parents. When questioned on whether this varies from parents to parents, 96% of the respondents answered that it does.

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



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
A great amount of support	8%	2
A moderate amount of support	67%	16
A small amount of support	25%	6
No response from parents	0%	0
TOTAL		24

In regard to the main challenges encountered when dealing with the parents of their students, three teachers referred to a “cultural barrier”, nine stated the issue of a lack of time, which they coupled with indifference and lack of preoccupation towards their child’s general development. Seven reported a lack of interest in the role that school has in the child’s general development and were more interested in focusing on results and grades. Two stated there is a “mentality” barrier and a difference in how they interpret the school’s role in the child’s development. Two reported there were no problems, and another two said there is no trust in the school system. In the “Follow-up” workshop, a number of teachers flagged the relationship with the parents, in that they are not closely involved in the school activities and prefer to look at the educational environment as a space for the acquisition of knowledge. These respondents flagged the fact that parents’ involvement could facilitate the interventions to address some of these issues conducive to extremism.

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

The second half of the online survey sought to investigate the various reactions and practices that teachers deploy in the classroom and in the school setting to address challenges and contentious topics.

When asked whether they felt adequately trained to address polarisation-related issues in the classroom and in the school environment, Romanian teachers answered preponderantly that they do not feel supported and pointed out that the lack of proper training is the main impediment in working through issues of polarisation in the classroom. However, when asked about good and bad practices, the respondents did point to a number of approaches that they themselves employ. Twenty-three teachers, for example, noted the empowerment of the triangular relationship between students-teachers-parents as a good practice. The same number said that discussions about values and human rights, and providing lessons about “tolerance and antidiscrimination”, and the teaching of critical thinking skills, were good practices. Twenty-two referred to developing a sense of empathy with, and among students, and the same number opted for building a trust-based relationship with students. The same number of respondents indicated that increasing knowledge about active citizenship and raising awareness about the consequences of violence were good practices. Twenty-one indicated critical thinking and media literacy methods in combatting conflict and polarisation notions as good practices. Twenty argued that keeping the school management well informed about the situations in the class is another good practice. Twenty teachers were in favour of inviting experts into the classroom (CSO, NGOs, etc.). Sixteen teachers indicated Peer-to-peer approaches as a good practice, and sixteen teachers thought that singling out those who are wrong and right in a debate was a good practice. Finally, fourteen pointed to the need to report cases of radicalisation to management.

Among bad practices singled out, sixteen teachers evaluated the practice of ignoring the challenges so that things would not escalate, as bad. While eight declared that finding out who is wrong and who is right in a situation, is another bad practice, thus disagreeing with the other fourteen teachers who had evaluated this practice as good. What follows is a full breakdown of the practices deemed as good or bad by teachers:

Table 31. Good and bad practices, in the Romanian sample.

ITEMS	GOOD PRACTICE	BAD PRACTICE
Facilitate a space for discussion where every student can talk and be heard, no matter their position.	21	1
Building a trust-based relationship with students.	22	1
Trying to find out who is right and who is wrong when students share their thoughts.	14	8
Peer-to-peer approaches.	16	0
Addressing taboo-related issues.	14	4
Looking for early signs of radicalisation processes.	10	1
Ignoring the challenges and issues facing young people to avoid making matters worse.	4	16
Reporting signs of pupils' radicalisation processes to the school principal.	14	1
Trying to develop a sense of empathy with and among students.	22	1
Strengthen resilience against violent narratives by teaching students critical thinking tools and methods for media literacy.	21	0
Empowering the triangular relationship between students, teachers, and parents.	23	0
Keeping the school management well informed.	20	0
Establishing networks between teachers across Europe.	18	1
Invite experts in the classroom (e.g.: psychologists, CSOs, NGOs, young ambassadors).	20	3
Debating online news that is based on unclear sources or none at all.	12	9
Discussions about democratic values and human rights.	23	0
Provide lessons on the importance of tolerance and anti-discrimination.	23	0
Mock the students who share certain fake sources to incite them to react against disinformation.	3	19
Raise awareness regarding consequences of violence.	22	1
Ask for support from the police.	13	3
Ongoing training for teachers in the prevention of radicalisation.	19	1
Cooperation between schools and representatives of minority groups to push back against "Us vs Them" narratives.	19	2
Teach critical thinking to students.	23	0
Ongoing training for teachers and students to spot fake news and harmful conspiracy theories.	19	1
Increase students' knowledge about active citizenship and the relationship between rights and responsibilities.	22	1
Increase students' knowledge of democratic practices and processes.	21	2
Rely on alternative means of education such as arts, crafts, one-to-one development.	16	2
Watch for and take action in cases of students with mental health issues, coming from domestic violence, abuse, addiction contexts by referring them to professionals, confidentially.	20	0
Engage with parents, and request their support in cases of concern, where students are isolating themselves.	23	0

During the “Follow-up” workshop, there were some additional comments about the role of the teacher as a facilitator to discuss contentious topics in the classroom. This was a debated topic. Although most admitted to the value and the need for such an approach, they find it challenging to put it into practice and hard to strike a balance with the formal requirements of the school system and curricula. More training and preparation are needed in this regard, according to them.

Main suggestions and obstacles in dealing with challenges and contentious topics

Finally, the online survey asked teachers to share their main suggestions and perceived obstacles to overcoming the challenges and contentious topics that arise in their classrooms. Suggestions discussed in the “Follow-up” workshop had to do with the closer collaboration and involvement of parents in the school environment and better involvement of the management of the school in mediating the situation. Also, one notable observation was the necessity to receive more training and capacity building for teachers.

The main obstacles for teachers to deal with contentious issues are a fear of giving the wrong advice, a lack of collaboration between the family and the school system, a lack of awareness about the effects of polarisation in society at large, the lack of correct information and accountability, a traditionalist and formal approach, lack of methodology in dealing with such topics, prejudices and not being open enough to such practices, a lack of training of teachers and an understanding of the need to discuss such topics. The school environment reflects divergent and conflicting attitudes in society. It is necessary to approach problems from several perspectives, only by involving the parties and specialists, who can provide solutions and alternatives. The influence of the external environment of the school is greater than the family context was the general consensus of teachers.

As discussed in the previous sections, teachers approach the issue of ‘contentiousness’ as something that they are confronted with in reality. As such, most of the obstacles are related to “solving” these concerns, in such a way that it reaches a level of balance with regard to the knowledge-sharing capacity of the school. There is little reflection in how these can be harnessed to bridge more difficult perspectives and topics (Hess, 2004; Macfarlane, 2015). In the “Follow-up” workshops about challenges and suggestions, many expressed the opinion that expertise, or ways of approaching these issues, are better provided for elsewhere (either in the family, because they often stem from behavioural challenges, or in society at large, as these concerns do not originate from the school environment).

In this context, a reflection on the topics that represent contentious issues is in order. Most teachers referred to issues of youth identity, general debates

in the public space (eg. pandemic) and less on issues of perceptions of the other, othering or contextual and systemic biases which circulate in the public space. Indeed, the systemic conditions of equality and exclusion, for instance poverty, discrimination or racism do not fall in the categories most investigated or approached. This is a pattern also noticed in the type of policies and programs encouraged in illiberal political systems, where the focus on certain elements of identity politics, primarily promising traditional values, such as the “family” are paramount. In this sense, there educational practices by teachers, the reluctance to engage in pedagogical opportunities that tackle unconscious or conscious bias, discrimination and exclusion should also be looked at in the social-cultural context, where normative “values”, even those which can be construed as more “liberal” see their mobilization into authoritarian and illiberal inflections.

Conclusions

The challenges reported by teachers, either by choice or personal commentary identified in the survey are different than the issues of violence (verbal, physical, etc.) towards certain groups, and issues of xenophobic attitudes, especially against Jews (antisemitism) and Roma communities, the Hungarian minority, refugees and asylum seekers, and the LBGTQI+ community. Here, the issues of disinformation and COVID-19 seemed to be more preponderant.

It is important here to point out that gender-related debates, for instance gender-based discrimination, or discrimination against sexual minorities, did not come up as one of the contentious issues that teachers are confronted with. Another topic which diverges between the two, and was not flagged in the survey, was the issue of polarisation against gender and normative roles, for instance, more recently surrounding feminism and gender advocates.

Missing from the survey results, were concerns regarding teachers’ encounters with the spread of illiberal discourse and the rise of authoritarianism, meaning that no responder flagged tendencies to affirm such attitudes among students. Also not present among the chosen options in the online survey, were attitudes associated with Euroscepticism, and the spread of far-right messages.

It is also important to point out that some of the concerns and gaps already noticed by teachers (lack of space for debate, lack of preparation in handling and leading conversations as a mediator, the rigid environment in dealing with the students) meet the concerns of youth flagged by literature. Some of the good practices used and emphasised by teachers reflect the needs of students. However, other issues, specifically the school responding or providing a safe space to explore and understand fake news, online conspiracy

theories or even political debates, which are requested by youth, continue to be absent in the responses and interests of teachers. There is, similarly, the gap in covering the “gender’ and identities debate, where youth feel are not supported by the school system. Similarly, social and economic issues, that often stem from poverty or isolation of youth, are not a priority for teachers and the school environment.

For an effective action against most of these manifestations, more extensive activities pertaining to underlying causes are necessary. Fostering programs fighting against bullying and promoting anti-racism education would address, for instance, bullying regarding ethnic minorities, and would enable an understanding of how racism seeps into daily interactions.

The risk of vulnerable young people coming from “poor families and/or dysfunctional families” becoming marginalised was considered to be a major push factor towards radicalisation. In contrast, in the survey, the social and economic conditions were not among those listed as “contentious” topics, so it could be considered that this issue is not a constant preoccupation for youth.

A lack of proper educational tools in the national curricula that address contentious subjects was confirmed in the survey. Specifically, teachers refer to a lack of tools to alleviate low self-esteem, influence of TV, the Internet, mass-media, violent movies and online games, stereotypes and prejudice. The gaming culture, and in general, the media environment, have been reported as points in contentious debates at school by teachers.

In terms of good practices, some of the good practices outlined are shared by the majority. They agreed that the creation of opportunities for dialogue where students are free to manifest their concerns and build critical skills that can also help them manage their own or others’ prejudice is essential.

Conversely, school evaluations did not make it on the list of good practices suggested by teachers.² In fact, it seems that evaluation are cumbersome.

Non-formal approaches were highly valued by teachers as well, and the survey reflects this as a good practice: introducing new speakers, and collaborations with NGOs are some of the items which can fall under these categories. One of the concerns listed during the research was the enhancement of dialogue between stakeholders, teachers and parents.

Bad practices reported by teachers refer to the ‘inefficiency amongst key implementing actors and lack of proper institutional coordination’³, and this seems to be a concern for teachers, as illustrated in the survey. Bad practices listed in the online survey primarily refer to the lack of dialogue, and it mir-

² *Ibid.*

³ In this regard, see the section of this deliverable entitled ‘Countries contextual reports: an overview of projects implemented in schools’: Romania.

rors some of the concerns that sensitive issues are sometimes inaccessible to the audience, because of the difficulty in communicating.

There are a number of recommendations for policymakers and school managements that teachers believe would benefit the Romanian context regarding challenges, obstacles, good and bad practices, as well as their perceived needs and requirements, that would increase their capacity to solve these issues.

- For policy makers:

1. Define a methodology for approaching and discussing “contentious” issues in the pedagogical practice, in educational/state policy.
2. Facilitate access to training, access to resources and lifelong learning approaches for teachers, in a structured and regular system.
3. Provide teachers with training to help them better navigate the position of facilitators of conversations, rather than knowledge holders.
4. Set up mechanisms to increase the collaboration between teachers, parents, and students.
5. Introduce mixed and new approaches into the teaching system, by encouraging co-teaching and phenomenon-based learning.

- For school managements:

1. Build new avenues for teachers within the school to collaborate on: informal activities and teaching activities.
2. Build better relationships of trust between teachers and school management by: including participatory consultations.
3. Add more activities for students in the school system, although non-formal in scope: collaboration activities, project-based learning, trips, etc.
4. Encourage a whole-of-school approach, where schools identify and promote certain elements (e.g., values, way of teaching, etc.), and encourage the participation of parents and the extended community in these activities.
5. Take the school “out” of the classroom: encourage activities where students are encouraged to work in the community, to look for solutions or encourage activities, and placing issues of schoolwork in real-life contexts.
6. Encourage problem-solving activities, even allowing students to create start-ups, campaigns, and volunteer projects, in the communities surrounding the school.

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