SHORT HANDBOOK | CONCLUSIONS PAPER

COVID-19 Narratives that Polarise

Introduction

The goal of this paper is to help teachers and youth workers discuss polarising narratives related to COVID-19 in the class or on the street. The input used comes from the knowledge of practitioner experts present during a two-day meeting (24-25 September) organised by the Youth & Education Working Groupfrom the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) with the theme COVID-19 stories that polarise.

COVID-19 is a "wicked problem" ([1]), meaning that the problem has severe negative consequences for many groups and no straightforward "cure all" solution. It is a global disaster and has left many feeling a sense of uncertainty about their health, financial situation and future. Uncertainty caused by crisis can lead to heightened distrust of others with different cultural or political backgrounds; it also can make people more conformist and one's moral judgements can become harsher ([2]). Due the COVID-19 crisis, policymakers are confronted with conflicting priorities between societal groups and they have to make difficult political choices. Because of the wickedness of the problem and high societal impact, youngsters can disagree about possible solutions, which can make discussions controversial. The beliefs that youngsters have about COVID-19 are often influenced by sources on the internet, where both reliable information and misinformation are available. In a polarised environment where youngsters are under pressure, they can start to believe misinformation and mistrust can arise about what could be behind the virus. As a result, they might connect events that are not necessarily connected to reality, leading to conspiracy theories. It is important to note that not all criticism on government policy in relation to COVID-19 is conspiracy thinking. Conspiracy thinking refers to the belief that there are secret and hidden organisations that influence our lives without being aware of it ([3]). Believing in a conspiracy can be problematic as it can lead to polarisation, radicalisation and eventually undermine public health in relation COVID-19 ([4]).

In this paper we will discuss how teachers and youth workers can respond to polarising narratives and conspiracy theories around COVID-19. We consider schools as labs for democracy in which students can learn to disagree and learn to deal and act with different opinions harmoniously ([5]). During discussions, students can learn how to express disagreement with each other, within the boundaries of respect and moral decency towards each other. Teachers

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([1]) Rittel, H. W. J., & Webber, M. M. (1973). Dilemmas in a general theory of planning. *Policy Sciences, 4*, 155-169. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01405730
([2]) Van Bavel, J. J. V., Baicker, K., Boggio, P. S., Capraro, V., Chichocka, A., Cikara, M. … Willer, R. (2020). Using social and behavioural science to support COVID-19 pandemic response. *Nature Human Behaviour, 4*, 460-471. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-020-0884-z
([3]) van Prooijen, J.-W. (2018). *The psychology of conspiracy theories*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.
([4]) See also: ISD: COVID-19 disinformation briefing No.2. https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/covid-19-disinformation-briefing-no-2/
([5]) Nordbruch, G., & Sieckelinck, S. (2018). *Transforming schools into labs for democracy. A companion to preventing violent radicalisation through education*, Policy Paper. RAN Centre of Excellence.

and youth workers play an important role in this process. We will now discuss different types of reactions that teachers can give to students who express polarising narratives related to COVID-19.

Case study

During the RAN Youth and Education Working Group (Y&E) meeting held at 24-25 September, we used the reaction quadrant that has been developed as a training tool to discuss how one can respond to controversial remarks. The quadrant comprises two axes that, when combined, distinguish four quadrants ([6]). Each quadrant represents a possible reaction to controversial pupil statements. The vertical axis represents the subject matter of the teacher's reaction and runs from 'discussing no subject matter' (negative) to 'discussing subject matter' (positive). The horizontal axis represents the effects on the relationship of the teacher with the pupils and runs from 'weakening the relationship' (negative) to 'strengthening the relationship' (positive). We will use the input gained during the RAN Y&E meeting to illustrate how the quadrant works in relation to the described case.

The reaction quadrant
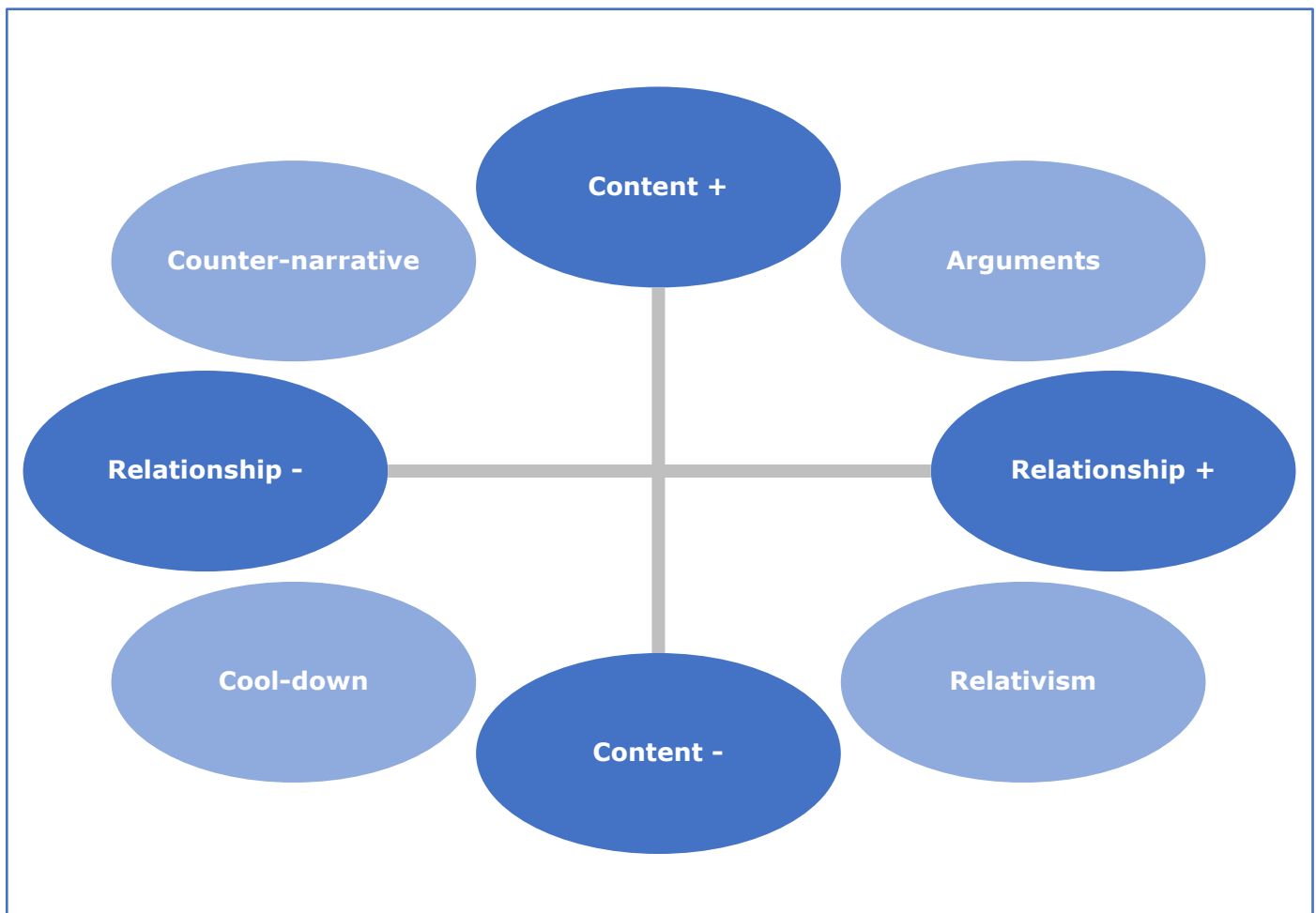
([6]) Wansink, B. G. J., Patist, J., Zuiker, I., Savenije, G. M., & Janssenswillen, P. (2019). Confronting conflicts: History teachers' reactions to spontaneous controversial remarks. *Teaching History, 175*, 68-75.
https://www.history.org.uk/publications/resource/9609/confronting-conflicts-history-teachers-reactions

Imagine you are a teacher in a secondary school and, during a lesson, Michael (fictious student name) says:

> "I do not trust the government and I believe they are trying to control us. I have seen many on the internet (for example celebrity/influencer X) who state that the government is not transparent about how deadly the virus is. Also, when looking at the numbers… the effectiveness of the state restrictions does not outweigh the burden for us as young people. I'm still young; I'm totally done with all these restricting rules and will no longer follow up on them. I'll go party with my friends."

This example served as one of the case studies at the RAN Y&E meeting, and we used the reaction quadrant to discuss the pros and cons of different types of reactions that teachers and youth workers can give. All the participants, working in 12 European countries, agreed that this case study was realistic for their situation.

Cool-down

During the meeting we first discussed the option that a teacher could remove Michael from the classroom. Another option is to avoid the conversation with Michael at that moment but leave him in the classroom. According to the quadrant, both options would be depicted as cool-down, because it would likely harm the relationship with Michael and the content would not be discussed. On the other hand a teacher or youth worker does not always have the knowledge to directly respond to a pupil. By avoiding the discussion the teacher has more time to think about their response and to search for trustful information, which can help to to deliberately design a lesson about the topic

Possible benefits:
- The teacher gains time to think and can prepare a lesson.
- The emotions of Michael and the teacher can be (too) intense and they have time to cool down.
- A clear norm is communicated to Michael.

Possible negatives:
- The relationship with Michael is likely harmed as there is no possibility to express his ideas and emotions.
- The content is not discussed.

Counter-narrative

Another approach we discussed was that a teacher could start convincing Michael that he is wrong by immediately presenting a counter-narrative. This narrative should be based on rational criteria in order to undermine the arguments of Michael. Most participants of the RAN Y&E meeting agreed that this confrontational reaction ignores the perspective of Michael and will likely make the relationship worse, for there was strong doubt if Michael would even be open to listening to the teacher. Even more, from the statement of Michael, it remains unclear as to what extent he really believes in a COVID-19 conspiracy theory or if he is worried and critical about the government. Therefore, first, further exploration of Michaels' beliefs might be wise.

Possible benefits:
- The teacher or youth worker will fully control the conversation.
- The rest of the class is less influenced by Michael's ideas.

Possible negatives:
- The relationship with Michael might be harmed.
- The perspective of Michael is ignored.
- It is unlikely that Michael will be directly convinced by a counter-narrative.

Relativism

During the meeting, all participants were asked how they would start the conversation with Michael. Many of the proposed questions were open questions in which Michael was invited to express his emotions and worries. An example from a participant is: "That's interesting. Tell me more." Such questions were proposed to keep a positive relationship with Michael and for making contact. It was considered important that all pupils in the classroom could express their emotions, which can be done through writing down their position and arguments. In this manner, the teacher focuses on strengthening relationships by taking the pupils' beliefs seriously [7]. However, when a teacher gives no attention to providing evidence for the arguments, this approach can also reinforce the credibility of false claims and conspiracy thinking. Therefore, there was general agreement that additional steps are needed.
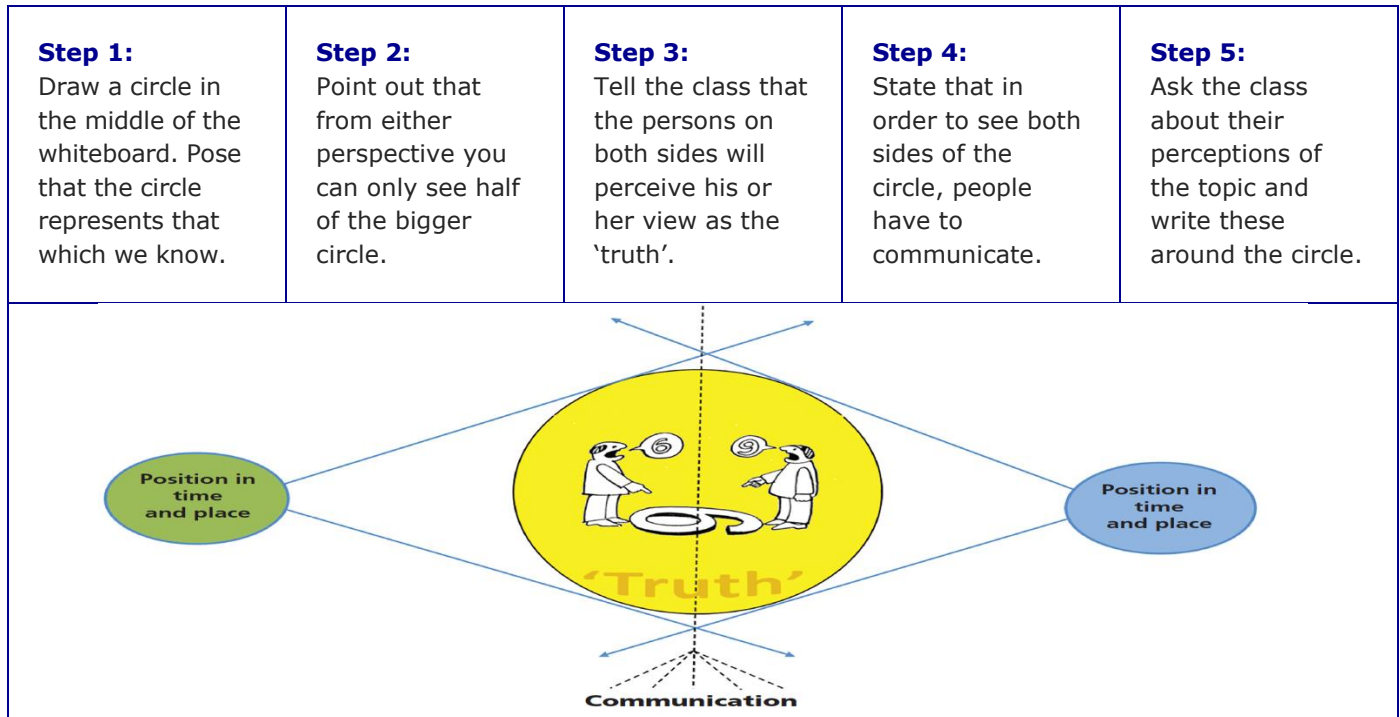
Possible benefits:
- Students can express their beliefs and emotions.
- The relationship with Michael and the class will not be harmed.
- The teacher can get a sense of what type of beliefs are present in the classroom.

Possible negatives:
- The backing of the different perspectives is not evaluated.
- All perspectives might be seen as equally reliable.
- Other students might be influenced by ideas that are based on misinformation.

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[7] Activities to stimulate the resilience of youth can be found on: https://arktos.be/en/ondersteuning/bounce

Figure 1 describes an activity that can be used to gather the different perspectives in the class. This approach can facilitate mutual understanding. To avoid relativism it should be followed up by critical thinking and argumentation (8).

Step 1: Draw a circle in the middle of the whiteboard. Pose that the circle represents that which we know.	**Step 2:** Point out that from either perspective you can only see half of the bigger circle.	**Step 3:** Tell the class that the persons on both sides will perceive his or her view as the 'truth'.	**Step 4:** State that in order to see both sides of the circle, people have to communicate.	**Step 5:** Ask the class about their perceptions of the topic and write these around the circle.

Arguments

During the meeting, most of the time was spent on discussing how to stimulate Michael to critically evaluate his own beliefs and arguments. Therefore teachers need background on COVID-19 which could help them to engage with pupils and for them to know what is correct and what is incorrect. A starting sentence mentioned during the meeting was: "Let's see if we can find some fact-based information on COVID-19 and see whether we can agree with the statement or do we have a need to modify it." RAN practitioners stated that during discussions with the pupils, concepts such as fact and opinion, reliability and argumentation are of importance. This means that the different perspectives should not be treated as equal or even trustful, but that a teacher has to give meaning to them. By having a whole-class discussion on the arguments and credibility of sources, pupils might be encouraged to re-evaluate their position in response to their classmates' arguments that differ from their own. Tips for identifying strong arguments can be found in Figure 2. Other participants proposed to start with Michael's remark that the effectiveness of the state restrictions does not outweigh the burden for us as young people. These participants tried to understand the perspective of Michael and they thought he was deeply worried about the COVID-19 situation and the position of youngsters. This worry could be a starting point for further exploration about the consequences of COVID-19 state policy for different societal groups. Based on trustful information, they could discuss the difficult choices the government has to make in relation to COVID-19 and what this means for them as youngsters and their responsibilities.

During the meeting, several practitioners mentioned the enormous influence of online information about COVID-19 and that addressing the credibility of these sources should be part of a discussion (9). One practitioner stated that his goal was to make 'informed sceptics' so students really think about where their information comes from, question

(8) Patist, J., & Wansink, B. G. J. (2017). Lesgeven over gevoelige onderwerpen - Het aangaan van een moeilijk gesprek in de klas. *Kleio, 4*, 44-47.
(9) Lenos, S., & Krasenberg, J. (2017). *Dealing with fake news, conspiracy theories and propaganda in the classroom*, Ex Post Paper. Budapest, Hungary: RAN Centre of Excellence, 29-30 November.

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their sources, and do not trust all that they get in social and formal media. For example, a suggestion was to explore together with Michael the reliability of the information that the celebrity posted on the internet. In general, it was proposed that youth should be made aware of how social platforms work and how their algorithms might keep you in an alternative facts media environment. In figure 3 four media literacy questions can be found that can help to critically discuss arguments and the trustworthiness of media.

Possible benefits:
- The different arguments of the students are evaluated on reliability.
- Critical thinking is stimulated.

Possible negatives:
- Teachers and students start to convince each other during a discussion instead of listening to one another.
- The teacher lacks sufficient subject matter knowledge about the topic.

Figure 2. Tips for identifying a strong argument
- Addresses the rational argument instead of the person.
- Is based on scientific facts rather than assumptions.
- Doesn't give the impression that there are only two possibilities when there may be more.
- Doesn't present a caricature of a person or group.
- Doesn't rely on an extreme example to justify a position.

Figure 3. Four media literacy questions
1) Who is behind the information and what are the providers' motives?
2) What is the evidence for the content?
3) What does the title say and what does the whole article say?
4) What do other sources say? ([10])

Is a discussion always constructive?

Classroom discussion can have drawbacks. Because controversial topics are strongly related with identity, students might want to defend their positions and are less likely to participate reflectively (i.e. openly listen to different perspectives and reflect on their own). Moreover, focusing on the extremes can be counterproductive as it might seem that there are only extreme positions possible. Therefore, a teacher has to think carefully how to discuss the topic.

During the meeting, practitioners proposed that depersonalising and distancing strategies are effective teaching methods ([11]). An example of such a strategy is to teach about conspiracies that are situated in the past, such as

([10]) An interesting website in relation to media literacy is: https://cor.stanford.edu
([11]) Kerr, D., & Huddleston, T. (Eds) (2015). *Teaching controversial issues. Professional development pack for the effective teaching of controversial issues developed with the participation of Cyprus, Ireland, Montenegro, Spain and the United Kingdom and the support of Albania, Austria, France and Sweden*. Strasbourg, France: Council of Europe. https://edoc.coe.int/en/human-rights-democratic-citizenship-and-interculturalism/7738-teaching-controversial-issues.html

Black Death conspiracy theories. The Black Death is far away in time and that pandemic has no direct influence on the students' current lives. Therefore, the students will be less emotionally involved (i.e. depersonalised) with the conspiracy and more open for discussion, critical thinking and different perspectives. Students could, for example, learn that during a pandemic a specific group is often blamed for spreading the disease. During the Black Death it was the Jews, and at this moment the Chinese are often blamed.

Most practitioners said during the meeting that, in their environments, conspiracy thinking comes to the fore, but that they seldom see young hard-line conspiracy thinkers. In these cases, it is worth to discuss the mechanisms behind conspiracies, as it might prevent these youngsters from becoming hard-line believers. In order not to reinforce conspiracy thinking, it is important that teachers focus on the facts they want to communicate about COVID-19 and not on the myth they want to debunk ([12]). Still, teachers should always take into account the backfire effect of teaching about conspiracies, as they also might increase the interest of their students in these topics. Therefore, another suggestion is to discuss underlying triggers of why students believe in conspiracies related to COVID-19, for example fear or uncertainty. By not focusing on what divides society but on shared worries, students can experience positive connections and realise that the other's ideas or position is not a threat and that there can be a common ground.

Primary and secondary education

During the meeting, we also discussed to what extent differences exist between primary and secondary education in relation to teaching about COVID-19. Primary school children, llack of knowledge and cognitive abilities make them less able to handle fear caused by COVID-19, which may cause loss of perceived safety. We therefore propose that primary school children need more guidance during a discussion. Secondary school children are vulnerable because they are developing their own identity; as a consequence, they can be more open to extreme beliefs or overestimate their own abilities and critical thinking skills. Youth professionals should not directly (over)worry when youngsters develop different ideas, for it is a part of growing up. It is the task of youth professionals to guide them in the process of becoming democratic citizens.

Conclusion

Children similar to Michael, live due to COVID-19 in an uncertain situation needing stability, a safe space, hope and a perspective for their future. In these situations, youth professionals can help to fulfil those needs. It is important to note that teachers and youth workers alone cannot solve deep societal problems such as polarisation, but they can help youngsters to explore the problem and make them aware of their own responsibilities. In all cases, the teacher should be trusted by the students; therefore, a good student–teacher relationship is of great importance. In addition, youngsters themselves also want to make the world a better place; therefore, teachers and youth workers can emphasise what pupils themselves can do against the pandemic and against polarisation in society. Concrete examples are: don't polarise, respect each other, learn from each other's points of view, make sure you are well informed and don't spread one-sided information, stand up against one-sided reporting, etc.

There is no simple advice on how to react to COVID-19 narratives that polarise. It will depend on the teacher, youngsters (such as Michael) and the contextual situation. In most cases, teachers and youth workers have to deal with conflicting priorities and need to make multiple choices in a short amount of time in a high-pressure environment. The proposed suggestions can help to reflect on the various advantages and disadvantages of different types of reactions. Reflection will also enable teachers and youth workers to take a proactive approach in discussing controversial issues and reduces the risk of being overthrown by youngsters' responses about COVID-19. Finally, we recommend that teachers should be trained in how to deal with controversial topics in the class.

([12]) Advice for how to deal with conspiracies can be found on: https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/health/coronavirus-response/fighting-disinformation/identifying-conspiracy-theories_en