

Dealing with polarization in schools: reflective and deliberative practices

Affrontare la polarizzazione a scuola: pratiche riflessive e deliberative¹

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Abstract

Polarization and various extremist movements are on the rise and young people's exposure to propaganda, disinformation, racism and hate speech has increased (Benjamin *et al.*, 2021). Not only the society tends to be more polarized, but there is mounting concern that social media sites contribute to it by creating *echo chambers* that insulate people from opposing views about current events (Bail *et al.*, 2018; Kubin and von Sikorski, 2021). Since teachers are at the forefront of these trends, they get to witness and address first-hand the effects and consequences that the various polarized ideologies may have on youth. Therefore, developing a global perspective that allows students to participate in an interconnected world, understand different viewpoints, learn to dialogue, value other cultures, and benefit from interculturality has become the objectives of world educational policy (Azqueta and Menino Arribas, 2020). The aim of this paper is to discuss the topic of polarization and then focus on two socio-pedagogical frameworks that are useful in this field: deliberative theory and reflexive practices.

Keywords: polarization, secondary school, radicalization prevention, reflective practices, deliberative theory.

Sommario

La polarizzazione e i vari movimenti estremisti sono in aumento e l'esposizione dei giovani alla propaganda, alla disinformazione, al razzismo e ai discorsi di odio è aumentata (Benjamin *et al.*, 2021). Non solo la società tende a essere più polarizzata, ma si teme sempre di più che il web e i social media vi contribuiscano creando *echo chambers* (Bail *et al.*, 2018; Kubin and von Sikorski, 2021). Poiché gli insegnanti sono in prima linea nel contrastare le derive negative dei processi di polarizzazione, potrebbero sviluppare pratiche educative capaci di minimizzare le conseguenze che le varie ideologie polarizzate possono avere sui giovani. Pertanto, lo sviluppo di una prospettiva globale che permetta agli studenti di partecipare a un mondo interconnesso, di comprendere diversi punti di vista, di imparare a dialogare, di valorizzare le altre culture e di beneficiare dell'interculturalità è diventato un obiettivo della politica educativa mondiale (Azqueta and Menino Arribas, 2020). Lo scopo di questo studio è discutere il tema della polarizzazione e concentrarsi su come gli insegnanti potrebbero innovare le proprie pratiche educative rilegendole alla luce di due framework socio-pedagogici: la teoria deliberativa e le pratiche riflessive.

Parole chiave: polarizzazione, scuola, prevenzione della radicalizzazione, pratiche riflessive, teoria deliberativa.

1. Polarization at school. Do not miss the opportunity to dialogue

Complex times, defined by rapid sociopolitical change, call for a coherently articulated critical pedagogy, that approaches issues concerning social difference, social justice and social transformation (Ledwith, 2001). As Benjamin and colleagues (2021) point out, polarization and various extremist movements are on the rise and young people's exposure to propaganda, disinformation, racism and hate speech has increased. Not only

the society tends to be more polarized, but there is mounting concern that social media sites contribute to it by creating *echo chambers* that insulate people from opposing views about current events (Bail *et al.*, 2018; Kubin and von Sikorski, 2021).

The legitimization of public opinion to develop clear-cut positions on controversial and complex issues can be read as a wake-up call on which schools could engage. Teachers could help in providing opportunities for students to learn how to understand different points of view, manage an argumentation in a dialectical setting, develop those skills that could prevent the risk of polarized thinking transiting to forms of radicalization and/or violent radicalization. School remains one of the few spaces in which students can learn to discuss very radical and extreme positions without being judged or stigmatized. This is not about building curricula dedicated to managing political, cultural, religious or other polarization. It is about helping teachers to manage the polarization of thought that can be generated in school settings in the face of at least two triggering events:

- teachers can introduce a particular issue in the historical context as a stimulus to discuss rights, stereotypes, bias, and other topics: in the face of this didactic choice, they must know how to manage groups within which highly polarized positions may be generated, at times not quite founded or at any rate difficult to reconcile;
- teachers grasp in the class the need to have to deal with a subject that students feel is close to their sensibility, experience, life context: frequently students take sides sometimes without having a thorough knowledge of the issue.

In both examples, whatever the subjects of discussion and confrontation are, the teacher should know how to manage these moments while trying not to delegitimize positions. Where else in society but in school can students say and argue about polarized or radical positions without being judged or ousted from the outset from the discourse, first private in the classroom and potentially public later? If we wish not to transform polarization into an occasion for the imposition of a worldview, we must perhaps read it as an occasion for the validation of thought, as a critical incident to be managed, as a dialectical process from which, if properly supported, a new synthesis can be generated (Fabbri, 2007).

As Savage and colleagues (2021) underline, Europe's current social and political environment is marked by growing polarization. The conflicting trends are compounded by inflammatory socio-political dialogue influencing a sense of threat felt by different cultural groups. Young people are faced with increased economic, environmental and career uncertainties as well as the lure of extreme ideologies that seek to present a *quick fix* to the complexities of the modern world. Since teachers are at the forefront of these trends, they get to witness and address first-hand the effects and consequences that the various polarized ideologies may have on children and youth. Therefore, world educational policy aims to develop a global perspective that allows students to participate in an interconnected world, understand different viewpoints, learn to dialogue, value other cultures and benefit from interculturality has become objectives of world educational policy (Azqueta and Menino Arribas, 2020).

One of the most prominent roles ascribed to a discussion in the literature, for example, is creating the space and opportunity for the exploration and critique of ideologies (Stephens, Sieckelink and Boutellier, 2021). It is suggested that censoring or avoiding discussion around controversial issues means there is no opportunity to challenge or alter polarized views. Therefore, attention is given to the environment required for such dialogue, referring to the need for safety to explore and discuss issues without fear of condemnation.

The aim of this paper is to discuss the topic of polarization and then focus on two socio-pedagogical frameworks that are useful in this field: deliberative theory and

reflexive practices. They arise from a common matrix, the tradition of critical and emancipatory socio-psycho-educational studies and fit well with the mission of educational institutions as that of forming active citizens capable of participating in social dialectics in a spirit of inclusion and collaboration.

Reflexive practices and deliberative theory have similar goals (Ralston, 2010). They want to give power to the people to manage the democracy life into a process button-up by educational processes (reflective practices) and decision processes (deliberative practices) (Jackson, 2014).

2. Voices for drawing polarization phenomena

Polarization is not a simple concept to define and it can be interpreted through several lenses, and classified in different ways. Moreover, frequently authors who deal with polarization prevention bring along other constructs, like radicalization and violent extremism (Melacarne, 2021).

Polarisation refers to the «sharpening of divisions between groups that share certain social, cultural or religious traits» (Lub, 2013, p. 165), which in its extreme form can be related to societal conflict. Brandsma (2017) states that polarization can be seen as a thought construct, based on assumptions of *us* and *them* identities. In this process, the dominant and active narrative is about the perceived differences and simplistic narratives about the others. Moreover, polarization leads to the impediment of communications between disagreeing groups, the increase of disagreement about facts and interpretations of those facts, the proliferation of false information within each group, the distrust between opposing groups and it may also lead to the emergence of radical and extremist groups (Jung *et al.*, 2019).

In scientific literature, the construct of polarization can be defined as that mode of making meaning of events that generates, by being impervious to the contamination of different ideas, an opposing polarity of attitudes, ideas, stances, shared values. For one to be able to speak of polarization, it is, therefore, necessary to be at least a dyad, two people or two groups, two communities or two argumentation spaces that express diametrically opposed, seemingly irreconcilable readings and perspectives of analysis of phenomena. According to some studies of psycho-social matrix it is a cognitive automatism that uses dichotomous interpretive categories to make meaning of complex phenomena through simplifying logics of analysis (Sabic-El-Rayess and Marsick, 2021; Moghaddam, 2005; Hogg, 2000). In the public policy arena, there are many examples of complex challenges on which public opinion is polarized: immigration management, vaccination campaigns, the war in Ukraine, abortion, environmental challenges, and major public works.

In the debate around the processes of polarization in public discourse, there is substantial agreement that people are more open to identifying with an already elaborated, clear, simplified and available social category. The socialization processes that take place within mono-ideological groups fuel an effect referred to by some as an *echo chamber* effect (Geeraerts, 2012). This describes how a polarized opinion within a group with a low diversity of opinions further reinforces the polarized opinions by pushing them to become more extreme, gaining more and more authority and truthfulness. Some studies point out how polarized thinking mechanisms can reinforce feelings of alienation and powerlessness toward the society or communities in which we live, often generating distrust toward institutions (Lamberty and Leiser, 2019).

Political scientists have studied polarization for decades and in this field, it is broadly conceptualized as the distance between parties on dimensions that matter for political cooperation, including the extent to which groups dislike each other and the extent to

which they disagree with each other (Nugent, 2020). One differentiation made in these studies is related to affective polarization, which refers to negative views and distrust versus outgroup members, and ideological polarization, the extent to which political views are widely dispersed (Axelrod *et al.*, 2021). The study of affective polarization suggests that polarization is reflected in mutual *dislike* between opposing ideological groups that have a negative effect on social interaction outside the political realm. As Harel and colleagues (2020) point out, research indicates that affective polarization can escalate to a more severe form of animosity, including manifestations of hostile and aggressive attitudes, emotions, and behaviors typically associated with intractable intergroup conflicts. It can also pose a significant challenge to leadership trying to mobilize society's support for a peace process. When it becomes extreme, polarization can undermine democracy by making compromise impossible (Axelrod *et al.*, 2021).

According to researchers like Gaultney and colleagues (2022), since falsehoods spread quickly through social media, there is an increasing concern that misinformation combined with a politically polarized society may be a threat to democracy. In their study, the authors analyze how students interact with social media, consume the news and determine in which of them to believe. This study collected 206 undergraduate students' perspectives at a regional university in the USA analyzing how they interact with social media, news determining which news articles to believe.

Furthermore, polarization may challenge democratic societies when groups are so hostile and biased against opponents that political compromise becomes impossible (Renström *et al.*, 2022).

Political science provides an understanding of polarization at both meso-and macrolevels and it has increasingly incorporated findings from social psychology in order to understand the micro-foundational cognitive processes through which individuals form and update politically relevant preferences (Jung *et al.*, 2019; Nugent, 2020).

In Social Psychology, group polarization is defined as «the tendency for group discussion to produce a group decision or consensual group position that is more extreme than the mean of individual group members' prediscussion attitudes and opinions in the direction already favored by the group» (Isenberg, 1986, cit in Jung *et al.*, 2019, p. 302). Jung and colleagues (2019) bring some examples of underlying mechanisms of polarization that have been documented in different subfields of social psychology: it can occur because group members conform to a polarized ingroup norm, as in social identity theory, while the attitude change and social influence literature focus on how people tend to selectively search for confirming information.

Always in the domain of Psychology, in an interesting study published by Koudenburg and Kashima (2022) the authors examine whether perceived polarization about a societal issue promotes or inhibits public deliberation. They define polarization as a state in which opinions in society are divided, and partisan groups form around the divided opinions.

Critical in our definition is a distinction between perceived opinion differentiation (i.e., the extent to which opinions in society are perceived to be divided) and perceived structural differentiation (i.e., the extent to which society is seen to fission into subgroups rather than fusion into an integrated group), and we propose that although opinion differentiation may invite discussion of societal issues, the belief that these opinions are entrenched in subgroups in society and that there is a risk of societal fission may be detrimental for communication and deliberation (Koudenburg and Kashima, 2022, p. 1068).

The authors conclude that these perceptions that certain issues divide society into subgroups may work as a self-fulfilling prophecy by triggering communication behaviors that could catalyze actual societal polarization.

Jung and colleagues (2019), in their multidisciplinary approach, point out other two fields in which polarization is studied and defined: social epistemology and complex systems science. In the first, polarization has been addressed through the problem of peer disagreement. There has been a debate over whether and how much belief-revision is rational once peer disagreement is recognized, and peers have had a full chance to share the support for their respective views. In the second, polarization is considered a system property that emerges from multiple complex interactions among agents over a period of time and polarized groups emerge in a large society, when people are influenced by similar others. These researches show how the term polarization has been read and described by different scientific traditions. Despite this, we will try to put together similar perspectives for understanding and defining the boundaries within which we could move research on this topic. We need to clarify that polarization processes are different from radicalization, they could emerge in the same experience, but theoretically they are different.

Polarization and radicalization

Radicalization and violent extremism are two concepts that frequently appear in literature together with polarization, both in theoretical studies and preventative ones. It is important to underline though that there is no cause-effect relation among them. The literature on radicalization is wide and has grown rapidly in the last decades, even if there is no universal agreement on the meaning of the term; the following one is quite accepted by many authors:

an individual or collective (group) process whereby, usually in a situation of political polarization, normal practices of dialogue, compromise and tolerance between political actors and groups with diverging interests are abandoned by one or both sides in a conflict dyad in favour of a growing commitment to engage in confrontational tactics of conflict-waging. These can include either (i) the use of (nonviolent) pressure and coercion, (ii) various forms of political violence other than terrorism or (iii) acts of violent extremism in the form of terrorism and war crimes. The process is, on the side of rebel factions, generally accompanied by an ideological socialization away from mainstream or status quo-oriented positions towards more radical or extremist positions involving a dichotomous world view and the acceptance of an alternative focal point of political mobilization outside the dominant political order as the existing system is no longer recognized as appropriate or legitimate (Schmid, 2013, p. 27).

Gaspar and colleagues (2020) state that extremism describes a condition and not a process, like radicalization. Furthermore, they argue that in the academic discourse, extremism is understood to constitute the rejection of the democratic constitutional state and fundamental values, while radicalization, irrespective of political systems, can be conceived as the willingness of actors to increasingly challenge the existing political order. Schmid (2013) tries to distinguish these terms by focusing on pluralism – in historical terms, if we think about political dictatorships of the XX Century, the author explains that extremists can be characterized as political actors who tend to disregard the rule of law and reject pluralism in society. The author affirms that extremists want to

make society conformist by suppressing all opposition and subjugating minorities and that this would distinguish them from mere radicals who accept diversity and believe in the power of reason rather than dogma.

3. Two ways for developing teachers' practices

Rather than specific educational practices, we describe below two theories that can help teachers position themselves within the work they have already been doing at school. Positioning oneself means choosing what role to play before and during the teaching activity, what to do if critical situations arise, what words to use or not to use to intervene. The deliberative approaches – first studied in the social and political sciences – and the reflective approaches – developed instead more in the educational field – offer keys that could be used to rewrite some teacher practices already in use. Polarization in school is not necessarily a structural phenomenon, and the task of teachers could be to prevent those drifts that can lead polarization to turn into radicalization and sometimes micro-radicalization (Caramellino, Melacarne and Ducol, 2022).

The literature has shown how pluralistic societies tend at certain historical moments to develop forms of polarization of public discourse, sometimes with dangerous effects (Burden *et al.*, 2007). If this were a confirmed trend, how can we incorporate into teachers' current practices the need to use the phenomena of polarization as a spark for an education in confrontation and dialogue rather than the use of imposition or strong measures?

Deliberative approaches

The deliberative approach is based on the idea that mutual communication that involves weighing and reflecting on preferences, values, and interests regarding matters of common concern. Defining it this way minimizes the positive valence that attaches to the word *deliberation* itself, so that we can then speak of *good* and *bad* deliberation without *bad deliberation* being a contradiction in terms. We define deliberative democracy as any practice of democracy that gives deliberation a central place (Bächtiger *et al.*, 2018, p. 2).

As highlighted in scholarly debate (Bächtiger *et al.*, 2018) deliberative approaches initially developed around policy challenges have more recently been used to support public participation on issues involving civic coexistence, multiculturalism, cultural minorities, and others. Some studies have tried to translate the lessons of deliberative theory to innovate teaching practices in schools, since deliberative political discussions increase understanding and positive regard toward others by facilitating citizens' socio-cognitive functioning in terms of perspective taking, complex thinking, and political interest. For example, Miklikowska and colleagues (2022) examined the role of teacher-initiated political discussions in the classroom for the development of attitudes toward immigrants from early to mid-adolescence (13 to 15 years) using a three-wave panel of Swedish youth. The authors argue that the classroom constitutes an ideal site for the implementation of deliberative discussions, as it provides an exceptional combination of deliberative characteristics during a formative life phase for the development of intergroup attitudes. They conclude that discussions initiated by teachers in the classroom reduce the development of anti-immigrant attitudes in adolescence and that these effects persist after students move to new schools. Irvine (2018) affirms that teachers who are culturally responsive do not avoid civil discussion of controversial topics because of unfounded fears of polarization and potential conflict. On the contrary, they use

discussions of controversial issues to help their students understand various points of view while developing their analytical skills, critical thinking, facility with language, and verbal and written discourse. The author concludes that culturally responsive pedagogy is an effective strategy for instilling democratic principles and decreasing growing polarization in schools.

Ultimately, for these teachers, the goal is to be able to include parts of public debate and deliberation on an issue in the school curriculum, not simply to discuss it. Debate, in fact, can be healthy and stimulating, especially when facilitated by experienced teachers. But debates can go wrong, may not be conclusive and leave room for misunderstanding among students. With this in mind, we should turn the classroom into a place where we can collectively explore how to live together, instead of figuring out all of our points of view. It is a stance that does not necessarily encourage rational dialectics (Mezirow, 1991) by pushing students to support their own views, explain them and make their case in discussion. Deliberation is a different kind of arguing and debating. Deliberation is about trying to reach a common understanding rather than winning. It is about using argumentation to find consensus since discussion itself, as some social psychology studies on group polarization show, often causes groups to shift to extremes when individuals hear new arguments. Discussion seems likely to lend support to positions that people already hold, leading them on average to hold those positions even more strongly (Sunstein, 2002). This is why Fishkin (2009) reminds us that in deliberative approaches, as in other educational settings, it is important that the small groups can count on trained moderators who try to ensure that everyone talks and no one dominates the discussions.

Gutmann and Thompson (1996) argue that promoting analytical and critical discussion is not enough to generate a deliberative process. It may even generate a backward step if teachers orient their work with the purpose of discussing controversial issues only to help students clarify their values and articulate their views more effectively. To appreciate the value of deliberation, students must learn to understand different points of view but be helped to welcome them as elements that must come together in a common position (Hess and McAvoy, 2015). According to these two researchers, «the closer that classroom exercises can come to the decision-making or advising conditions of binding deliberations, the greater potential such lessons have for engendering deliberative virtues» (Gutmann and Thompson, 1996, p. 999). The deliberative approach in school should favor the use of exercises in which students themselves have to agree on a controversial issue that affects them collectively, such as legislation affects citizens. Community issues could be chosen, bringing the challenges of public arena discussion back into the classroom. Or it might be preferable to work on subjects in which students have a real interest, such as rules governing school conduct.

Critical-reflexive approaches

Mezirow (1991) speaks of «discourse communities» (p. 185) to identify those communities that interact using the grammar of the critical-reflective dialectic to make decisions about contradictory, uncertain, ambiguous, or even polarized issues. Rational dialectics within groups involves interactions based on understanding and verifying the validity of what is communicated (Striano, 2001). Above all, it involves the development and exercise of relationships and interactions in which different positions are developed with the main goal of understanding from what assumptions the argumentation moves. Inside the discourse communities there is an explicit goal of validating their sources, understood as assumptions and presuppositions. The underlying idea is to try to transform the complex system of meanings and practices that students develop informally in and

out of school and that generate forms of pre-reflective, pre-critical, critical, reflective thinking. This goal fits well with that of stemming the potential drifts of polarization phenomena. The attention a teacher can have to the development of students critical-reflective thinking is likely to enable them to participate with greater awareness even in polarized discourse settings. Being aware that one's point of view is partial and that its validity must be grounded is an important prerequisite that we can hope to be learned at school. Mezirow (1991) describes some of these pre-critical and/or critical learning patterns. He describes pre-critical learners as those who fear that the certainties they have reached may be challenged; therefore, they see new ideas as threats rather than opportunities. They view theories and practices other than their own as alien and misleading. They tend to think in concrete rather than abstract terms, not to place their assumptions on the broader social, political and historical context. In contrast, critical students know how to empathize with the perspective of another person or group. They know how to manage a discursive dialogue that involves a conscious exploration of the relationship between their own problematic situation and similar problems relating to other places and other times.

The exercise of a reflexively critical or rational dialectic (Dirkx, 1998) aids groups to develop new thoughts, in the willingness to check validity through reasoning. In other words, they practice using logic and weighing supporting evidence and arguments, rather than referring only to authority, tradition, and implicit rules. Validity checking is a form of consensus that is achieved through a dialectic that puts one in a position to validate relationships, predictions, explanations, as well as implicit claims to validity by which orders, demands, excuses and decisions are justified. Teachers could be supported in developing practices in which students can justify and value their own positions, even polarized ones, through the use of strategies that rely on data research. Mezirow (1991) agrees with what has been argued when he suggests that ultimately, learners need to be assisted if we want to make them effectively participate in the discursive domain. Discourse is necessary to validate what one knows and/or how to reach a better judgment about that knowledge. In this sense, learning is a social process, and discourse becomes central to constructing meanings. A curriculum (Clandinin and Connelly, 1997) based on critical-reflexive principles should help communities of learners to:

- decontextualize;
- become more aware of history, contexts (norms, codes, reaction patterns, perceptual filters) and the consequences of their actions;
- become more reflective and more critical in evaluating the content and process of problem-solving and how to participate in this process;
- *set aside* preconceived ideas and examine factual data and argumentative theses without bias;
- make more effective inferences, more appropriate generalizations, and more logical and coherent argumentations;
- be more open to the perspectives of others;
- rely less on psychological defense mechanisms and be more willing to accept the authority of provisional consensual validation of expressed ideas.

Conclusions

We discussed how polarization between groups can intensify tensions and amplify the various psychological and social factors that also make people vulnerable to radicalization (Wilner and Dubouloz, 2015). Our proposal is that we can begin to include in teacher training programs topics concerning the prevention of polarization processes.

In a public arena that seems to stimulate polarization, how can we make our schools capable of handling groups of students who are driven to think in binary, opposing, irreconcilable patterns? In literature, two perspectives appear particularly interesting, because they arise from a common matrix: the tradition of critical and emancipatory socio-psycho-educational studies. They both fit well with the mission of educational institutions as that of forming active citizens capable of participating in social dialectics in a spirit of inclusion and collaboration.

The deliberative perspective invites us to help teachers adopt teaching strategies or set up specific paths of deliberative education aimed at generating consensus among divergent positions. Polarization is interpreted as a structural element of the school setting, and its management as a focus on not basing consensus on the majority, but on building a synthesis based on the recognition of the opposing position. The main goal appears to be to generate a discursive field where students can first bring their own demands without being judged or marginalized.

The critical-reflexive perspective is based on the construct of validation. The student must be helped to search for the evidence, data and knowledge that ground and support his or her claims. Bias can be interpreted in this case as a disorienting event from which to take a cue to develop reflection based on such premises. The teacher's goal is not to seek consensus, at least immediately, but to help the poles of the discussion validate their own views, to find through critique of sources and assumptions, the position that best seems to be sound, data- or evidence-based, than the others. Whereas in consensual validation the student is urged to seek consensus and mediation with an interlocutor in order to understand what he or she intends to communicate, in critical-reflexive validation the student is urged to find foundations to his or her own positions. We can speak of reflective rationality as a willingness to question the rules by which we think our argument is valid.

Both paths share an educational goal. Deliberative and critical-reflexive dialectics presuppose the search for shared criteria to develop communication aimed at mutual understanding of an event, making a decision, or more generally defining a common meaning. Polarization processes could be interpreted as increasingly structural elements of public discourse but also of learning processes at school. Supporting teachers in managing classroom settings with deliberative or reflective approaches could be a first step in managing polarization not only as a problem but as a positive element from which to take cues to bring discussion of divisive social challenges back into classrooms. It involves helping students not to view diversity of perspectives as a threat and learning to relate to another person or group to share the rules of discourse rather than to control or manipulate it.

Notes

¹ This paper is the result of continuous exchanges between the authors. Only for reasons of scientific responsibility, we specify that Claudio Melacarne is the author of paragraphs 3 and 4 and Marina Slavutzky is the author of paragraphs 1 and 2.

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