Young Europeans and their emerging ideas about political identities in an age of authoritarian dissent and fabricated news: What can we do to encourage their political understanding?'

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Abstract

This research project focuses on young European's political identities and the values that they express, and the implications this may have for political education. The qualitative study used 324 small discussion groups with groups of 11 to 19 year-old, across 29 European countries. The processes of deliberative discussions let the participants feel in control of the discussion and use their own terms and expressions. Discussions contrasted their views with those they felt were held by others, such as older people, those in other parts of their country, and those in other countries: contrasts and comparisons led to more refined and nuanced expressions. Analysis suggests that there have been significant changes in political structures in Europe, in the demography of the country (particularly increased diversity), and in the technology of the internet, that distinguish the views of this cohort of young people. The study also suggests that the research methodology might be the basis for supporting young people's learning and development in this area.

Key words

Political identities, political identities, Europe, young people, deliberative discussion, generational change

Introduction

This paper discusses a research project on young European's political identities and the values that they express, and the implications this may have for political education. The study was a qualitative study, conducted through small discussion groups with groups of 11 to 19 year-olds. Twenty-nine countries were involved, and 324 groups (2000 individuals) were involved, in over 100 different locations across these countries. The process of carrying out the deliberative discussions was designed to let the participants feel in control of the discussion, and to use their own terms and expressions. It showed that the process of discussion itself allowed ideas to be developed, refined, and more fully expressed. Discussions contrasted their views with those they felt were held by others, such as older people, those in other parts of their country, and those in other countries: contrasts and comparisons led to more refined and nuanced expressions. They also discussed the sources of information that they used in supporting and explaining their views, including the use of social media. Analysis suggests that there have been significant changes in political structures in Europe, in the demography of the country (particularly increased diversity), and in the technology of the internet, that distinguish this cohort of young people's views from those of older generations. The study also suggests that the research methodology itself might be a valuable way of supporting young people's learning and development in this area.

The methodological approach

This was a personal study, carried out after my retirement from full-time work as an educational researcher. It was designed to address my life-long interest in how young people 'learn about' politics and achieve political identities (Ross, 2015, 2019).

Identity formation is seen as a complex and multiple activity, in which identities are socially constructed. Identities achieve meaning though social interaction with others, and this suggests that they can best be examined and analysed through activities that seek to capture social interactions. Individuals have many identities, which are variously expressed in different contexts, and these identities are contingent and develop as the context changes. So constructing these identities is very different – and more complicated – than the simple transmission of 'facts'. Social facts have no 'real' existence, but are shared ideas that can only function effectively because each individual imagines that others will share the same meaning of the idea. Using instruments such as questionnaires, or interviews that present terms and categories to people, cannot reveal the complexity of what an individual understands by those terms and categories. Posing questions of this nature suggests – explicitly and implicitly – that these categories have a reality, and that there are responses (or at least types of responses) that can be given.

An additional complication, particularly in working with young people in school is that they often anticipate questions to be closed. Teachers, and many other adults, tend to use questions to test or assess young people's knowledge (Alexander 2008). The person being questioned therefore anticipates that a question will have a 'correct' answer, that they are supposed to supply as the 'right' response.

The categories of nationality, citizenship and ethnicity that are used in discussing political identities are not fixed and predetermined, but dynamically constructed. Decimo and Gribaldo refer to the 'strain of categorization and the proliferation of boundaries … Census records, vital records, passports, identification documents, church records and medical research data establish and grant materiality to the categorisations that inform our identities: beyond sex and age, they designate citizenship, nationality, lineage, religion, ancestry, health, language, ethnicity and race.' (Decimo and Gribaldo 2017:5)

Modern states require the classification of their populations: Anderson points to the need of states to distinguish between 'peoples, regions, religions, languages' in order to impose a 'totalizing classificatory grid' (1991:184). Instead of situationally-determined complex social linkages, the reification process of identity categories creates neat boundaries between mutually exclusive groups (Kertzer 2017).

I had developed over the years a wide network of colleagues in various European countries, through the Socrates/Jean Monnet Network I'd helped establish, and also through the Network for European Citizenship Education (BfPB) and the British Council. From these I recruited colleagues able to collaborate with me in towns and cities across the continent: in each location, I asked my colleague to identify a school in a middle-class area, and another in a more working-class area. In each school I usually recruited two groups of six students, one in the 12–15 age range, one 15–18. I asked for a range that included young residents of each country (not just citizens) and an appropriate representation of significant minority groups. Young people's and parents' permissions were obtained, and all data was anonymised.

I used what I have called deliberative discussions as my method, drawing in the concept of 'group conversations', which have been developed in German social science research over the past twenty years (Bohnsack 2000): The g*ruppendiskussionsverfahren* has been described as 'an open interview, intended to let respondents develop a topic in their own language, in their symbolic system and their relevant framework,' so that analysis 'can avoid projecting into single utterances meanings that are not appropriate … [we] learn more if this statement is put into a narrative context by the respondent … in his/her own language' (Bohnsack 2000:21, translated by Scheunpflug et al. 2016).[1]

In these discussions I explained that there would be no right or wrong answers, that any response would be accepted and valued, and that they might disagree – in which case, they should say so. The objective was to establish an empowering rapport, so that discussion was, to a substantial extent, directed and paced by group members.

My strategies to initiate discussions that produced this kind of dialogue were as follows:

- not to introduce leading terms, such as nation or state, but to use words such as 'country';
- to only use terms such as nation, state, Balkan, or Nordic when they had introduced them;
- questions to be transparently open (if someone said they were French, I might respond 'What makes you French?');
- to accept all responses as valid (nodding, saying how interesting the response was);
- to maintain direct eye contact with each speaker (showing I was following them);
- to often construct questions as responses to what they had said (so it appeared that the group was determining the agenda);
- to asking as few questions as possible (giving space for disagreement, supplementary comments);
- not directly asking an individual to respond (not everyone replied to each question: this was a discussion, not a sequential interview);
- to ask for elaborations, explanations and examples; and
- to loop the conversation back to earlier comments, when appropriate.

Box 1 gives an illustration of extracts from the opening of such a discussion in the Danish town of Odense. My opening question was put to them all, to act as an ice-breaker: subsequent questions were answered by some, not necessarily all, as the discussion broadened

Box 1: Opening a discussion

Agnethe (18)	… I'm a Danish girl ...	
Lilli (17)	I'm a Danish girl - I go to school here ...	
Cæcilie (18)	… I feel –very Danish [laughs] – even though my grandfather immigrated from Scotland – so...	
Julius (17)	I find it very interesting that the first three people have stated that they're Danish, and not European, so ... we are nationalists	*[some amusement from others]*

		I delay picking up on the nationalist comment.
Evald (16)	I'm a little younger – I also feel Danish ... but my father.-and my grandfathers, my grandmother, they emigrated from Germany, so I also feel some connection with Germany – but I feel mostly Danish	*Evald's response broadens on Cæcilie's part Scottishness: he's ¾ German by origin ...*
Hussein (17)	my parents are originally from Palestine, but I'm born and raised in Denmark - I don't feel as quite as Danish as the others, I feel more a bit of both – I feel more European than Danish	*… and Hussein now explains his dual identities. I save the 'European' reference for much later in the discussion*
AR	Thank you – some very interesting answers. … You've all chosen to talk about how you are attached to a particular country or countries – Denmark, Germany, Scotland, Palestine – what does it means when you say you 'feel Danish' or you 'feel mostly Danish'?	*I pick on the commonalities, and ask an open question about their meaning*
Lilli	it's mostly about the culture of the country. When I say I feel Danish it's not like I feel that I *belong* in this country, I could easily move to another country, but it's more about the culture in this country ... how we feel about life in general	
Cæcilie	most of it has to do with the way I was raised – my mum feels more Scottish than me, so she sort of raised me to be proud to *be* Scottish ... like she [Lilli] said, our culture what we eat and what we do, and we celebrate with our flag	
Hussein	… people often mistakenly say that there is a clash of cultures, that the youngster doesn't know where to put himself. Is he German or Danish or Palestinian or something? But I see different cultures as being an advantage- you take the best of both cultures, of both identities and make your own – that's an advantage, from my point of view … I don't fancy the Danish culture as much, but I'm born and raised in Denmark, so a lot of what I do can be interpreted as being Danish – but I consider myself as being more Arabic than Danish – that's not because I'm not integrated into society, just I feel more Arabic.	*Hussein expands on his earlier comment*
Julius	I feel Danish too – and that makes it much easier, because you have a lot of people that you feel connected to in that way … when you're abroad you can find Danish people and then you feel at home. I'm aware that it's a social construction, and that until the eighteenth century you wouldn't have had nationalities in the sense that you have it now – and I try to look away from nationalities more or less, because I want to be able to travel and feel at home everywhere I go with different cultures. I agree with Hussein that you can learn a lot from different cultures – every time I go abroad my identity changes a bit, because I pick up from different cultures what I find interesting …	
Cæcilie	I think our nationality is a way of expressing ourselves when we're abroad, but also at home, using it to feel secure … you can tell people that I do this … because I feel Danish. I feel European	*Another 'European' reference. When I raise Europe, about 30 minutes later, I*

	as well, because we have some fair rules and stuff that unites us – even though we have very different cultures in the different countries of Europe.	*name check both Julius and Cæcilie as having mentioned this earlier*
AR	I haven't used the word 'nationality' or 'nation' – but you've both brought the word in – is that the same as feeling part of the country? Is feeling Danish the same as having Danish nationality?	*I now pick up on the earlier 'nationalism' comment – looping back to Julius and to Cæcilie*
Hussein	No it's not, because if you feel Danish you feel integrated into the culture … you so like this culture that you feel you are Danish. But *loving* the country, that's nationalism. And nationalism didn't really exist before the first world war – this concept is new, and it's being eradicated, because we are a global society and even more a European society … the world is being more globalised …	*Hussein – like Julius much earlier – draws on his historical knowledge, as well as his direct experience, to discuss the meanings he sees in these terms*
Julius	You can have Danish passport without feeling Danish, and you can also feel Danish without being able to get a Danish passport … it all comes down to what you feel, it's some kind of construction - it's very hard to put borders on it.	
Evald	I also think it's also very hard to define what is Danishness, or what it means to be a Dane – it's something we do ourselves – we create what we think is Danish in ourselves …	*… Danish identity is* performative

How discussions develop

These discussions often showed some forms of development and change as they progressed. Sometimes this was a consequence of changing the perspective of the conversation – changing the lens, as it were – that might result in some apparent contradiction with what had been said before. In other cases, as more people joined the conversation on a topic, a person's initial comments might become more refined and develop new threads and reasoning. A third form of development was to make a contrast with another country's political culture.

In many discussions about the value of being a member of the European Union, the initial responses were personal and instrumental: the direct benefits they had encountered. Freedom of travel across frontiers, the ability to study and potentially work in other member countries, the ease of working with a common currency. But as the conversation looped around the group, other aspects came to the fore, about European values, and after fifteen to thirty minutes, were acknowledged as more significant. In Lille (Box 2), Lawrence shows such a journey.

Box 2: From the instrumental to the abstract: Lille

Lawrence (16)	Yes, I feel European when I can travel and show no passport because of Schengen and other things – but I don't feel that I have the European nationality.	*After half an hour*
Lawrence	I think we share an economic policy more than a social one – to speak for myself, we don't feel European because of the social laws that have been passed, but it's a good thing for the economies, because of the economic zone ….	*2 minutes later*
Pascaline (15)	I think even though not all of us here are of the same origins, we can share an identity as Europeans – it's not really a culture, but – I think we share values that are so normal to us that we don't	*Several minutes later*

	really see it – but I think it's really different being a foreigner in Europe, rather than being a foreigner on the other side of the world.	
Lawrence	Sometime ago, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, tried to reintroduce the death sentence, and because of Europe he couldn't – he just abandoned the project. So I think that's a nice aspect of Europe, that he had to abandon it - but I don't think he abandoned it because he wanted remain with the social project of Europe - I think he did it because if he had reintroduced the death sentence he would have been sanctioned economically by Europe	*… and after a further eight minutes. Lawrence is here drawing on events in Hungary, a month ago - Orban had also spoken about this two days earlier*
Blaise (15)	I totally agree with Laurence – in the middle of the 2000s in Austria, when Jorg Haider, the far right leader was elected, some Europeans tried to install some sanctions and penalties when he took away some rights of homosexuals and unmarried couples- but the European Union was there to restrain him – it's like a dog leash.	*After a further 2 minutes, Blaise agrees with Lawrence, drain events 7 years earlier*

Introducing a contrasting country often provoked a change in previously given comments about their own country, or about Europe. Sometimes I would deliberately, after 40 minutes or so, ask whether they thought that another country, such as Russia, joining the European Union would be good, bad, or not matter. I tended to select a country that I thought might provoke a response, but to do so with a slight pause before naming the country, to make it appear a more casual random selection. In the following case (Box 3), a diverse group in Brussels were discussing the extent to which they felt European. Loes, like Lawrence, starts with some instrumental reasons for feeling European, but changes quite dramatically when Haroun contrasts Europe with Russia.

Box 3: Using the Russian lens: Brussels

Loes (17)	I also don't feel European – I guess that we have advantages in that it is easier to travel, and I like that … so it is easier, and everything is more open …	*After 45 minutes of discussion*
Loes	… I think that Europe has this common goal … to make Europe a better place, make sure that everyone has equal rights. I don't think that we are there yet.	*4 minutes later*
Haroun (17)	Russia has too different a point of view from Europe – Like about sexuality, for instance, or how Putin rules over his country.	*A further 5 minutes …*
Loes	I think Putin is not democratic at all!– the complete opposite! It's the complete opposite of what we want to do with the European Union – if we let him have more power in the European Union, then that's the end, all people who are not straight will be prosecuted, a lot of people who aren't in the right place, in his opinion, will just be moved - it would tear the European Union apart	

I never mentioned the United States, but it was striking that quite a number of young people raised that country as a contrast to the values of Europe, quite spontaneously and without any prompting: the following comments were all made before Donald Trump had become the Republican candidate for the presidency.

Akureyri, Iceland

Katrín (F 17) Capital punishment is a civic rights issue - people who do really bad things should be kept in prison for life, but they shouldn't be killed – I don't like that about America, and that's what I like about Europe, the death sentence isn't allowed

Hannover, Germany

Jule (F 13**)** Things which aren't allowed in Europe are allowed in the United States – there you don't have to be medically insured

Anker (F 15) Unemployment benefit – in the USA they don't have this security

Lëtzebuerg, Luxembourg

Rose (F, 17) it seems normal that everyone in America has a gun, and that they have the right to shoot

Frascati, Italy

Coralie (F 14) [In Europe] there's no capital punishment – in the US they are killed. In Europe, they are kept in prison for a lot of time. For me, they have the right to live, one of the most important rights

There were other occasions when arguments were made that were set within one set of parameters that changed as the contingent situation was modified. Here a group of young Croatians argued that Europe had no distinguishing cultural characteristics: but when they compared Europe to Turkey, they felt that there were, after all, some distinctions to be made.

Box 4: Changing the lens on European culture: Rijeka

Zorka (F 16)	I don't think you can say there are European characteristics. I don't agree with what that would imply, it might imply being more civilised or more cultured than some other countries or states, so that's not always the case	*After half an hour*
AR	So you wouldn't say that there's such a thing as a European culture?	
All	No/no	There had been earlier discussion of some parents apparent addiction to Turkish television soap operas
AR	Another country that's asking to join is Turkey. What would you feel about that?	
Agata (F 17)	I think they would be making a huge mistake, because they are a developed country – I think it help for us, but for them not.	
Danijela (F 15)	I think it's a bad thing for them, because they have their special culture, and I think – as she said – economically developed, and they don't need Europe to help them with that. I think it will just ruin their culture, their ways	
AR	So you think that Turkish culture is different from European culture?	
Danijela	Yes, definitely	
AR	Now, ten minutes ago you all said that there was no such thing as a European culture?	*some laughter, intake of breath*
Agata	Not as a European culture, but they are different from *Europe*, I would say – they're more with *Asia* and ..	
Danijela	They're special, they ...	

Tvrtko (M, 15)	... it's religion	
Danijela	It's a little bit of a mixture with everything – they have Asia, Europe and – I don't know, its about history – their history is different, is special, in one way ..	
AR	So there *is* a European culture?	
Zorka	OK, I didn't say their wasn't some kind of *link* between European countries – I mean, it could be religion – and I did say maybe, well, not civilised, we can't say that – but religion is a factor	
Agata	As we look at Turkey, with a European culture they don't fit in as …	
AR	When you say 'When we look at Turkish culture ..' – who does 'we' mean?	
Agata	*[laughing]* Europe!	*[general laughter]*
Zorka	We said before, when Rijeka entered our unified group, and then it's Croatia and Serbia – so when we talk about Europe and Turkey, we are part of Europe; but when we look at Croatia as just a European country, no, we are not part of Europe. So its group-in-group-in-group	*Zorka makes explicit that these judgements depend on the precise group comparisons that are being made*
Danijela	Maybe we are *not* part of the Europe group - but we are closely related	

There was some skill here in reconciling the apparent contradictions in their arguments.

How values become apparent

Another aspect of the discussions was the way in which issues were raised and argued around current issues and news: there was good evidence that the news media were being critically followed and internalised in their constructions of values. The following sequence of points about race, migration and refugees made in discussions are from western Europe, presented here chronologically alongside the global and European events of 2014 to early 2016.

September 2014: Scandinavia - the Islamic Republic (Da'esh) had been declared in Iraq in June.

I was carrying out discussions in Finland, and Teja (F 16) in Jyvaskyla spoke of stereotypes of religions: '

if you are talking [about] Christians, people say they are really kind, Muslims [*muslimi*] – the media has told us about them being very bad, they are terrorists. Especially older people. It's not like that, but the media is creating that image.'

In Helsinki, Fatima (F 16, born in Helsinki, of Somali parentage desribed everyday prejudice; 'People look at you and think 'Oh, she's from Somalia'. Vilhelm (M 18) was taken aback: 'People say that there is so much racism - I have been expecting to see this, so that I could fight back ... but I don't really see it.' At this point, Aune (F 16) pointed out that 'If you are white and Finnish no one will talk to you like that – if you are black you will see it much more'; and Fatima confirmed this: 'if you're dark skinned, people can see you're not a Finn - for me it's normal [an] everyday situation.' Vilhelm was visibly shocked by this: 'Fatima, what kind of people say these things?' Fatima wearily explained: 'Really – women, older women, also older men ... Not young people.'

In Bergen, in Norway, Ludvikke (M 18) recalled initial reactions to the 2011 muders of 77 people in Oslo and Utøya by Anders Breivik. 'we're pretty quick to put blame on non-Norwegian people – everyone was quick to say it was the Muslims who were responsible - no one actually thought it could be a Norwegian.' Later the same month, in København, Alvida (F 18) complained 'My parents keep making racist jokes - I don't think my mother realises that they are being racist … it's just the way that she was brought up.' This construct of ingrained social racism was echoed in the town of Galve, in Sweden, by Madiino (F 15, Somali parentage, Libyan born, naturalised Swedish 7 years earlier) commenting on the *Sverigedemokraterna (*Swedish Nationalist Party); '**I** don't think [they have good thoughts] - there are many Swedes, and there are many immigrants. Not all the Swedes are happy with it, and that's not good.'

January 2015: Austria, Switzerland and Italy – 16 killed in Paris, early January, in an attack on the *Charlie Hebdo* editorial offices and a synagogue. European and global leaders march in solidarity in Paris.

In Linz, Rosemarie (F 16) broadens the debate: 'I also think that freedom of speech is important, but what about freedom of religion - now this happened in France, everybody was 'Freedom of Speech – we have to fight for that' – but no one said yes, but there is also freedom of religion.'

In Innsbruck, Agatha (F 15) associated the response to the attack as a defence of human rights: 'some things, like human rights are very important in Europe – you see [after] *Charlie Hebdo,* everyone, especially in Europe comes together – [it's] a very important value for Europe'. This was echoed by Herta (F 13) in the tiny Swiss town of Holmbrechtikon, who refered to 'what happened – other European countries also helped France.'

In Padova (Italy), Albio (M 13) made the same point: 'when there were the terrorist attacks in France - we all felt European.' Other young Italians made very similar points in Frascati. Adorno (M 18) said 'the tragedy of *Charlie Hebdo* makes me feel European in a way - because it's an attack on Europe, not only France, the culture of Europe.' Sylviane (F 16) said the same, 'I really felt European after what happened ... because of the union that this thing created among Europeans.' But Julie (F 17) countered this: 'I feel *human* because of this, not European … the tragedy of the city [is] not a way to feel European. [It's] the tragedy of the whole city and the country and the world.'

April - May 2016: Belgium and France: April attack on Synagogue in København, 2 killed.

In the multicultural city of Brussels, young people discussed how their attitudes and values had been shaped by growing up in such an environment. Haroun (M 17, Belgian born of Moroccan parentage) suggested that people's values 'depend on how they grew up – if they grew up with people from other origins, if they live in a big multicultural city or not … these factors will define if you have racist views or not.' Ollie (M 18, Belgian) agreed: 'if you live in Brussels, rather than Flanders or Wallonia, you have an advantage, because you are in an international city, where a lot of nationalities are.' Nevertheless, they were very aware of the racist media environment around them: Maartje (F 18, Belgian/Moroccan parentage, Belgian born) pointed out that 'every time I look at TV, it doesn't matter what channel – "Al Quaida this, Al Quaida that, terrorists are attacking" – you can never see "Oh, it's an American that did this" – no, it's always a black guy – it's really the wrong image.'

There was a very different response from some young people in the small Flemish town of Torhout. Art (M 16) said 'The only proper solution to the problem of immigrants is to actually close the borders, all the European borders. Immigrants come to Belgium with a mindset that "Belgium has to change for me" – and it's not the way it goes. They ... don't like the culture, so they try to change Belgium.' I asked for an example of this, and Pim (M 16) volunteered 'They want to build *their* mosque on *our* grounds.' I asked how this might change his culture. He replied 'Because we have a normal Christian church, and they want to build their own mosque in the middle of the city.' I pointed out in response 'When Belgium had colonies, they built churches there – what is the difference?' Pim responded 'Belgium

occupied the colonies, so they had the right to do what they want – but now they come to our country, but we are still above them, I think – so we have a little bit more to say than them.'

In a discussion in Nantes, a very mixed group of six (Angola, Azerbaijan, France, Ivory Coast,, Morroco, South Africa, Tunisia and Turkey) discused their fears: Yesmine (F 16, French born, Morrocan/Tunisan parentage) raised the *Charlie Hebdo* attack – 'a very bad idea for Muslim people – people think that all Muslim people are like these terrorists, and that isn't so.' Aslan (F 16, Azerbaijan born and parentage, dual French citizenship) agreed: ' a lot of people believe lies that are said about Muslim people – it's not the truth.' 'We were a bit afraid, apprehensive – we took care,', said Yasmine.

In Lille, two young French (born and parentage) discussed their different upbringing. Pascaline (F 15) said that before coming to the high school, 'I used to live in the countryside … there was literally no person of colour in the whole school – it was "the evil that we don't talk about" – they never saw people from the Maghreb or eastern Europe working, being part of society'. Blaise (M 15) contrasted his experience: 'I was born and raised in the city, so when I was younger in my school it was the total opposite … There was a minority of people who were not from immigration backgrounds.'

September 2016: France, Spain and Portugal – in August 102 die in a bomb attack in Ankara; Syrian and other refugees die in a shipwrecks and sealed lorries in Europe; hundreds of thousand of refugees walk through the Balkans towards the north; Hungary closes her borders to them with a fence; Germany's Chancellor says the country will accept all refugees who come.

In the 42 discussions I had this month, every group spontaneously criticised the treatment of the migrants. In Paris, Albane (F 17) was typical: 'when some counties of Europe close their borders, yes, at this time, I don't feel European, because I don't think it's a good thing to close them.' Léo (M 14) pointed out that he 'grew up with all people – with Black people, with Chinese people – so I don't see any difference in the colour of skin – it's just the voice of some people – it's a bit strange sometimes - they are my friends – I don't want to hurt them, they don't want to hurt me. I'm a friend.'

In the tiny town of S Clément de la Rivière, near Montpellier (population 4,500), Amandine (F 15) spoke of how many French feared Muslims: 'some people fear them – there is a lack of tolerance, Islamophobia – they're scared of the way Muslims live, and scared about their principles. I don't – they are people like us, they think like us.' Rosalie (F 14) talked of the different responses across Europe: 'we don't all think the same – for instance, the Hungarian government authorised the army to shoot on the migrants, they rejected the refugees – in France we try to welcome the refugees.' Lola (F 15) was indignant: 'things in Hungary are not the same, and the *unity* is destroyed – Hungary is not respecting the *principles* – Europe says we should help refugees. Some countries have taken the opposite view.'

There were similar responses in Spain. In Segovia, Benita (F 13) said it was important that 'countries like Spain are taking a lot of people – they are in a war, they only want to escape. If I was from Syria, I'd only want to be alive, because there is war – people have children and a family and they don't want to lose them. Pablo (M 13) was 'so proud of being European because of the response …. the refugees who are arriving in Croatia and Hungary – if it wasn't for the European Community they would send all the refugees back - but in Brussels said that they should be shared by all the countries.'

Im Madrid, Yana (F 16, was Spanish born of Syrian parents). 'I go in the train or metro and feel people stare at me because I'm Muslim. When they hear the word Islam they feel scared, they feel terror. Other countries are really welcoming to religions. Here, religion is something they keep – limited.' But she was active in the crisis: 'I'm in an association of Spanish teenagers who are helping Syrian families cross Spain. We wait for them at the station, give them directions on how they can get to Germany or wherever they want to go.' In the same group, Berta (F 16) was supportive: 'Europe did wrong when we closed the frontiers … we should try to help them, they are in a difficult situation.'

In Sevilla, Sancho drew parallels with the end of the Spanish Civil War, nearly eighty years earlier: 'a lot of people had to go, to any country in Europe – because they were in the war, if you stayed in Spain you would die – countries like France opened their doors [and] helped – and now, they don't.' And in

Cordova, Santi (M 13) said ' I watched on TV this morning the Mayor of Calais [tell] the refugees to go to other cities, because he didn't want the refugees in his city - I think that's bad.' This was just one example of a young person actively responding to the daily news.

In Faro (Portugal) Amélia (F 14) also observed that one of the reasons she felt European was because of the (generally) positive response to the refugees. 'I feel that I really live in Europe when the refugees come … because the European Union gave money to the countries to help these people who don't have anything.' Abraão (M 16) said 'The ones who are building walls, like Hungary, don't share our mentality, they are so prejudiced – I think that they are not truly European.'

January 2016: Denmark, Germany – in December, a terrorist attack on the Bataclan in Paris killed 137; New Year's Eve, Köln: reports circulate claiming some refugee men are assaulting women: the scale and nature of this are disputed.

In Kolding, in Denmark, Mirjeta(F 18, Danish born of Albanian parents) was in a position very similar to Yana in Madrid. 'My parents told me that when they came here they were given so much, they were welcomed – and I don't think that is happening right now. I think that they push people away from Denmark. … We were down at the station, waiting for them [refugees transiting to Sweden] with food and so on, then you see another whole different view of the refugees. I just wanted to give the refugees some peace, and show that the mind of Denmark is still open for people – we are good people still, and we want to help people.'

Finally, in Germany, some young people in Forst (a town close to the Polish border), several young people described their experiences with the recently-arrived refugees. Erdmute (F 17) told of how her mother had volunteered to work with them: 'she told me that for her it was a wonderful feeling to see those children smile. I believe it – I was really impressed by my mother's motivation.' Roland (M 17) explained how his sister's boyfriend was a refugee; 'he's a really nice guy, I talk with him in English, sometimes German – he learns fast – so he and his friends are very nice, but some of my friends don't like refugees.'

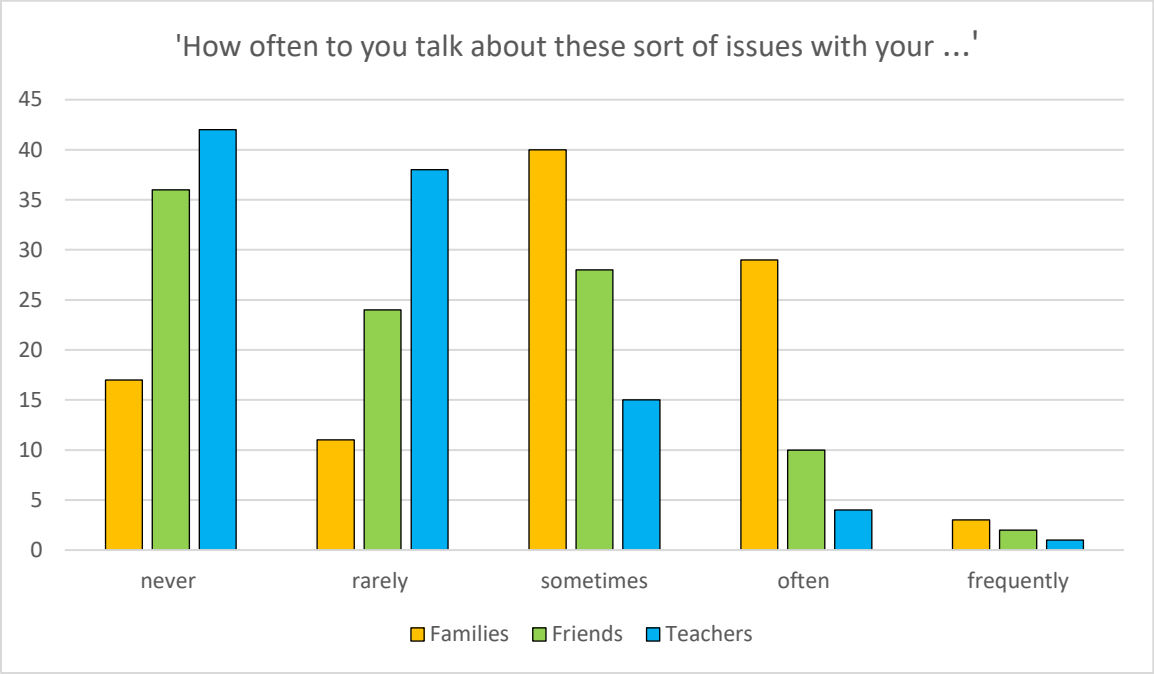
Not all were so welcoming. In Hannover, Petros (M 16, German born, Greek parentage) was cautious about the Köln incident: 'We need more controls on the borders – because many things happened in Germany, and if there was some better control at the borders there wouldn't be this problem.'

Many groups discussed why Germany had adopted such an open reception to the refugees. There were four groups of response. Some referred to Germany's past: Baldur (M16) in Hannover explained that 'Germany is haunted by its past, and tries to get away from that by being nice to everyone, saying yes to everyone.' More common was to recall Germany's experience in the 1945-9 period, when there was massive internal migration of displaced people (Germany received perhaps some 10 million refugees): thus Constanze (F 18), also in Hannover, spoke of how 'My grandparents on my dad's side [who] were Germans, and they had to flee in the second world war … there is more of an understanding here – than with people who haven't experienced anything like that.' A small number referred to Germany's need for migrants to counter population decline. But the dominant explanation was a values-driven humanitarian response, such as in Dortmund, where Karl (M 18) said 'the western, very wealthy countries, have a responsibility for other countries who live in a much worse condition. In a globalised world, the countries that are wealthy have constructed their wealth on the back of the others.' Also in Dortmund, Abadi (M 18, Iranian born, Iranian parents, dual nationality) said 'I don't think our generation has to feel guilty about the past. I think in Europe it's a part of our communal values and that all western countries have to help each other to manage the refugees, the situation that we have to handle.' It's significant how a former migrant such as Abadi identifies himself with his generation and contemporary Germany and 'our communal values'.

What sources of information are used?

As I drew these discussions to a conclusion, I asked (if there was time) with whom they talked about 'these kinds of things. Was it friends, families, or teachers in school? Figure 1 shows the relative emphasis placed on each of these three: family discussions are clearly more popular; friends less so. Teachers are largely not seen as those with whom one could talk about politics. There were some exceptions: 'Not every teacher is talkative – shall we say it like that – but there are some, like our history teacher, who's very up-to-date on what's happening, a great partner in conversation', said Maartje (F 16) in Brussels.

Figure 1: The frequency of political discussions with various categories



More typical was the comment by Annegret (F 15, Berlin): if we want to talk about something, we really have to push the teacher - like Köln [2015 New Year's Eve incident] - we wouldn't have talked about it if we hadn't pushed. They have their curriculum which they stick to, they don't like going off track' (Ross, 2020).

Other sources that were frequently discussed were traditional newspaper and television media. There was a sense of critical analysis in many remarks, as seen in the following examples.

Hannover, Germany

> Oscar (M 19) It's about the rates and the viewing figures – they try to exaggerate so they get very good rates – and they make money.
>
> Christiane (F 14) Media like *Zeit* say that immigrants are not bad, they are fair; but some are not fair – like *Biltzeitung*. The local newspaper wrote that sometimes immigrants are bad.

Forst, Germany

> Albin (M 18) The media in Germany are not really high-quality, because private channels like RTL or Pro-7 give their own opinions. The public channels, between the news broadcasts, are serious.
>
> Katrin (F 17) The media never [give] a positive example of asylum seekers who are working voluntarily here - that's a bad influence on people who [only] get their information from the internet, or Facebook .

Madrid, Spain

Augustin (M15) It's obvious that *Atresmedia* is a more right-wing channel

Segovia, Spain

Adan (M 16) If you contrast some of them, you can find which, and the one that is better, we take it

Ivan (M 16) Television can be biased, because the companies funding the channels can be biased, not objective.

Brussels, Belgium

Loes (F 15) The media are telling us that if there's a murder "He's Moroccan" or "He has origins in Africa" – the media is racist, that other people are dangerous when they're not Belgian, when they have a different skin colour.

Roubaix, France

Bérénice (F 17) People that get their news from the TV, the news – one is not born racist, one becomes racist … I know, I'm not naïve about news.

Various social media were also frequently mentioned. This sometimes mentioned with a sense of critical reservation: for example, Nina (F 13, Koper, Slovenia) said 'we can communicate with our telephones, computers, but this is not face to face – and face to face is the best way to talk with people,' and Aat (M 16, Amsterdam) said 'I only use it to directly communicate, not anything else.'

There was a sense that there needed to ne a multiplicity of information. Patrick (M 16, Lille, France) observed 'So we have *our* point of view – it would be better having *their* point of view - and our point of view in their country' and Virginie (F 16, also Lille) said 'I realise that on the internet we mostly talk to strangers that are actually from Europe … maybe there's a reason for this.' In a discussion that spent some time on social media use in Rijeka, Agata (F 17) felt that they were less personally so connected, 'because we have our cell phones, its how we are hanging out,' and Zorka (F 16) appeared to agree: 'I have made a lot of friends over the internet, people I would never come across if it wasn't for Facebook … [but] social media means that people are more and more asocial today.' Vida (F 16) had become so dissillusioned that she had deleted her Facebook page a few months earlier;: 'It's a good thing for me, I really like it. Before, I was spending the whole day on it with my friends. One of my friends from primary school told me "Hey, you don't have a Facebook! I forgot that you exist!".'

But there was a predominant sense that they were empowered through social media. Margriet (F 16, Torhout, Belgium) said 'Our generation is totally different – we are in contact with the whole world. It's not only our small town … we hear a different story from the other side of the world, and have a more objective way of thinking,' and Magda (F 15, Innsbruck, Austria) explained 'I play on-line games with people from all overt the world - then I recognise that people from Europe are in some ways like each other … in those moments I really feel European.' Agatha (F 15, also Innsbruck) said 'I have friends in Denmark, Serbia, from all over Europe. I chat with them, I don't see many differences. I really feel more European than just Austrian.' Internet use gave a sense of a different, and expanded, identity, as Živile (F 16, Kaunus, Lithuania) explained: 'quite often you don't know yourself, what's inside of you. By communicating with others you find out something new about yourself – it's difficult to describe. Identity can be different - when you are talking with your friends you are one person, when you are talking on the internet you are another person. It's like you're one person, but having a lot of small parts.' Internet sources could complement, even surpass, traditional media: In Segovia, Narcisa (F 16) said 'I find it very useful to see people who write from their own experience – for example, if there is a conflict in Syria, people who write who are living there, who write about their lives – it's not definite, OK, but they are not the people who write for newspapers – they are normal people.'
Some were clearly aware that there could be very different, conflicting news stories. Adelina (F 16, Madrid, Spain) said 'It's not that there's some kind of objective news - you have to search in different parts, the news, TV, the press, Twitter, what people say – you have to compare,' and Bernardino (M 12, Sevilla, Spain) said that 'I think twice – there aren't correct answers – it's opinions.' Conversely, Dirkje

(M 17, Torhout, Belgium) admitted 'I am super-naïve, I believe everything – so when I see somebody died I instantly believe it and I'm telling everyone …and it's not true, and I'm feeling stupid!'

They also sometimes interrogated internet sources. In Forst, Germany, Katrin (F 17) said she had 'checked an internet story of a young child that was abused, and the media said it was by a refugee - and when they came to the child and the mother, they said we'd never talked about that, and we never said it was a refugee - so the media made it up.' [2]

There is further recent evidence that young people are wary of the possibility of 'fake news' on social media: a recent survey in the UK of 13 to 20 year-olds found that only 5% said that they trusted social media as a source if news (Adams, 2021).

A possible new generation

One further finding of this research is that we may be witnessing here the development of a new generational cohort. Many young people drew distinctions between themselves and older people in terms of the social and political values that they held. There was a strong sense amongst many of these young people that they were more cosmopolitan, more open to diversity, more challenging of social inequalities than their parents had been. This was by no means universal – there were also examples of racism and intolerances, but these were relatively few in number.

Napoleon is reported to have said 'To understand the man you have to know what was happening in the world when he was twenty' (often quoted, never sourced!). The notion of the cohort – meaning those born within a particular period of time or a particular year – is a useful analytic tool with which to examine the different experiences and societal constructs of different cohorts. Lutz et al. summarise the differences between a cohort effect and a period effect:

> A period effect is something affecting all ages and cohorts simultaneously, such as wars, epidemics or specific political events, while cohort effects only affect groups of people born in the same year and typically relates to factors that are associated with childhood experiences or socialization. (Lutz et al. 2006:3)

In Fulbrook's 2011 study of German identities, *Dissonant Lives*, she argues that there are not only significant differences in the ways that identities are constructed between generations, but that these are the consequence of political fractures and dissonance in national society. The age at which people experience key historical moments, such as the transitions within German society in 1933, 1945 and 1989, can be a critical explanatory factor behind an individual or group's 'availability for mobilisation' for political expression.

This cohort effect seems to be present in these European young people's narratives in three respects: of political change, of demographic change, and of technological changes. Their experiences of what is happening in their teenage years is different, in all these respects, from the corresponding period in the lives of their parents and grandparents. Their parents were largely at school in the period between 1973 and 1993 and their grandparents in the period between 1947 and 1967 (Ross, 2019, 139).

The political fractures in Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s were profound. These young people have grown up in a post Cold War environment, with an enlarged European Union and NATO, a largely common currency, and the Schengen agreement on mobilities. These are very different social and political conditions from their parents and grandparents. Their constructions of identities are different: period and cohort effects interact. In these states, the cohort of parents can recall the end of the Cold War and reconstruct identities in the post-communist state; and cohort of grandparents could recall the communist state and sometimes World War II.

The demographic changes have been equally profound. My sample had 23% of the young people who were either born in a different country, or who has at least one parent or grandparent from a different country.[3]

The third effect, of technological change, has been the development of the internet, the world-wide web, and the associated communication technologies of the social media.[4] These young people constitute the first generation to have such access, and – as they described above - they recognise the significance of this: they made a greater use of, and had a greater interest in social media technology than older people; they were more able and willing to use it; they were consequently in greater contact with others in different countries; and had a different global perspective.

These narratives show a perception of a generational difference, across a wide variety of countries of Europe. This was a perception, it should be noted, of the young people themselves, and not one necessarily held by other generations. There appeared to be a sense that some of the supranational aspects of the European Union were making national identities a less important element in young people's construction of their identities, from the functional and utilitarian freedom of movement for study and work to the development of human rights enforceable through a supranational court. There was a desire for rights to be extended in the areas of gender identities and sexuality; a recognition that rights in Europe were better supported and more embedded in the values of *their* continent than in either Russia or (sometimes) the United States of America. Some of these key formative experiences of these young people were different, some were shared, but all of them contributed to the sense of a generational cohort that perceives itself as different, particularly in loosely identifying with the *country*, as opposed to strongly identifying with the *nation*. Identification was with a broader range of spatial entities: the province or region, Europe, the world.

Some proposals for action

There is a fairly widespread belief that young people are uninterested in politics, and that this is a growing trend.[5] These claims are largely predicated on particular forms and patterns of political participation, and it can be argued that such 'traditional' political activity as voting is not the only possible way of participation, and indeed is rooted in an outdated conception of what constitutes a civic culture. Hahn suggests that many studies of political socialisation construct young people as passive recipients of political messages from the social environment (Hahn 1998:20): political culture and educational ethos interact to limit the ability of citizenship education educational programmes to contribute to constructing political identity. Much commentary on 'the democratic deficit' is rooted in a concept of civic culture in which most citizens were expected to quietly endorse the political system, occasional making selections between parties with broadly similar policies. The classic exposition of this was made by Almond and Verba (1965): a passive culture, in which most citizens accept existing political systems and structures, and a few are more actively involved in political roles.

There have been many recent initiatives across Europe to involve young people and their voices in political and democratic processes: the recent European Commission-funded *Study on child participation in EU political and Democratic life* (Janta *et al*, 2021) describes a wide range of opportunities and programmes in the EU and its member states to support young people's participation in decision-making processes. But this is essentially supporting the education and participation of an minority of young people, and is directed essentially at ensuring the future participation of such an elite in political roles, as described by Almond and Verba.

The thrust of this study has been that nearly all, or at least a substantial majority, of young people have an interest in political issues, and are able to form and express views on current issues. If this is so, we clearly need to ensure that they are supported, through educational systems, to develop their skills of analysis, argument and exposition. The findings of research in this article suggest that the methodological approach used to gather this data may in itself offer elements of a pedagogical approach to delivering such a programme.

Such an approach can be considered at three levels: that of the classroom and the school; at national level; and at the level of the European Union itself.

At the level of the school, we should expect all schools and their governing institutions to recognise that teachers have a civic duty to encourage young people to discuss and debate those political issues of the day that *young people* see as important and relevant.

This will mean that all young people, at least from the age of 11 (preferably earlier., from eight) will be able to participate in deliberative discussions, ideally on a daily basis, in as small a group as is possible. Group sizes should be no more than ten. The agenda for this needs to be set by the young people themselves, with the teacher's role being to listen, to respond with open-ended questions, and to moderate the process: it should not be to instruct, and any information that is asked for should be presented in a neutral manner. The function of the moderation is to allow a sceptical, challenging, questioning and safe environment, that allows a diversity of views, but does not seek to come to an agreed conclusion. The teacher should model inclusivity and an acceptance of diversity of views, encouraging (but not requiring) participation, and suggesting diverse sources of information.

Such a role for the teacher is challenging, and needs support from the school in two broad respects:

1. In-service support and materials that support them in the task of discussion moderation (understanding their role; asking open ended questions; avoiding teaching/presenting facts);
2. The handling of controversial issues, which requires them not to be avoided, but managed in a way that the teacher does not impose or endorse views, but is able to express their own views in a way that does not require young people to accept them. In-service support may be needed to ensure that discussions do not accept views that denigrate or stereotype others in terms of gender, race or ethnicity, disability or sexuality, and are conducted in a way that respects others (whether they are members of the group or not).

State and governmental educational agencies need to facilitate curriculum change to require deliberative discussions of contemporary social and political issues. Such facilitation needs to be an explicit expectation that schools will carry this out. In support of this, governments should develop support materials and training for school staff; encourage critical discussion of local and international matters; and explicitly recognise and counter the tendency for teachers and schools to drift towards the safe and 'uncontroversial', and to instead focus on the study of structures and processes. These aspects are of particular importance in diverse communities, which will inevitably have contested narratives of past and current events.

There should also be a further level of action, at the level of the European Union and Commission. They need to particularly address four areas:

1. Firstly, to encourage and support member states to promote deliberative discussion in schools; secondly, to develop material for young people on European values, focussing on current discussions of rights and values, rather than celebrations of values already established;
2. Thirdly, to champion the unique position of the European Union in actively continuing to develop the rights and values of European citizenship; and
3. Fourthly, to support research and development in this area.

School education, in many parts of Europe, seems to have focused in recent years on an attempt to fill young people with encyclopedic knowledge, largely about the past. It has, by and large, avoided the development of the skills of analysis and synthesis about fundamental conceptual understanding. This is a generalization – there are exceptions. What is needed, I suggest, is a realisation that education is not an instrument of the state, or of the family, for the reproduction of past knowledge. It should instead be the vehicle that provides young people with the analytic and communicative skills to develop and articulate *their* future. This is what they need, and what they deserve.

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Biography

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Endnotes

1 Group discussions are a less structured and more open than traditional focus group techniques. Scheunpflug et al. (2016) write of it as a method 'in which respondents can set the structures and contents of the conversation by themselves,' thus exploring 'knowledge stocks that are not located on the surface of conscious and clear explicable attitudes and values, but which are beneath the surface' (2016:10). My method was to provide narrative-generating open-ended questions that would initiate discussion between group members. I begin by exploring immanent issues – the topics, accounts and language that the group members use in their narratives – and only later move to ask more direct questions – my own agenda of themes, thus giving them the opportunity to develop structures that seem relevant to them. I sought to capture what Wood (2014) calls the '"everyday" data' that is sometimes seen 'as rambling, off-task or divergent …with frequent interjections, incomplete sentences, questions and queries or a sense of ambiguity or uncertainty' (2014:16).

2 Website Netzplanet reported in January 2016 'Schweden: 12-Jähriger brutal verprügelt von Araber wegen blauen Augen. Der 12-Jährige Junge in der schwedischen Stadt Helsingborg wurde von arabischen Einwanderern derart zugerichtet, weil er blau Augen hat." [Sweden: 12-year-old brutally beaten by Arabs because of blue eyes. The 12-year-old boy in the Swedish city of Helsingborg was so mauled by Arab immigrants because he has blue eyes], with a pixilated photograph – which had been used eight years earlier in a UK paper about a four year old girl attacked by a dog at her home in Cardiff

3 This corresponds to Agafiţei and Ivan's (2016) estimate that by 2014, just over a fifth of all EU households included at least one person of migrant origin. This change has occurred largely from the early 1990s, when there was a significantly diversified and larger pattern of migration both into Europe and within it (Van Mol and de Valk 2016), and since 2008 the number of non-EU migrants of both first generation (birth) and second generation (origin) has again risen sharply, from 6.6 million in 2008 to 9.4 million in 2014 (Eurostat 2015a, b).

4 These young people have had access to social and interactive media that did not exist for earlier generations. The first browsers for the world wide web became available in 1990. In January 1992 – when the oldest people in this survey were born – there were just over 700 thousand internet hosts, world wide. When the youngest were born, in 2004, there were 285 million. Over the period of my data collection, the number of households with internet access in the EU-28 countries rose from 70 per cent to 85 per cent, but of households with dependent children, 94 per cent had access by 2014. By 2014, 90 per cent of all 16 to 20 year olds were reporting at least daily use of the internet. (Eurostat 2018a, b).

5 For political apathy of the young, see, for example, (Foa and Mounk 2016), though there are some counter-claims (such as Ekström 2016; Ross and Dooly 2010;). It is claimed that the percentage of young people's voting in national elections is in decline (López Pintow and Gratschew 2004), and this had continued in elections for the European Parliament (European Parliament 2014). Young people's participation in European Parliament elections is often lower than the national election vote (Avbelj 2005). The predominant narrative of apathetic young people essentially holds that the narrow and regulatory model of political activity *is* politics, and that lack of participation in this traditional electoral model is indicative of lack of knowledge and interest in the political. Henn et al. (2002) call this 'conventional political science' (170), and argue that including wider forms of political participation in studies of young people's participation would show much greater evidence of activity among young people, and higher levels of youth political participation (Henn et al. 2002). Edwards (2007) observes that there is an initial assumption in much of these studies 'that most young people are apathetic, civically unaware, disassociated and excluded.' (2007:543). We must seek a more nuanced understanding of *which* young people are alienated, and from what aspects of politics:

Rainsford's (2017) study of UK young people suggests that some may be less alienated, and that others are alienated from political actors, rather than the political system.