

## Article

# The Educational Implications of Populism, Emotions and Digital Hate Speech: A Dialogue with Scholars from Canada, Chile, Spain, the UK, and the US

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Received: 1 July 2020; Accepted: 22 July 2020; Published: 27 July 2020



**Abstract:** The recent rise of authoritarian populism, fueled by the spread of digital hate speech and the preeminence of emotions in the political arena, has not aroused much interest among educational researchers. In response to this gap in the literature, the authors of the present article aim to provide an overview of the educational implications of the recent wave of authoritarian populism by interviewing a group of experts on democratic citizenship education from various countries and backgrounds. The dialogue resulting from their responses helps to move forward the educational debate on how schools can deal with the emotions and hate speech that motivate support for authoritarian populisms.

**Keywords:** populism; authoritarian populism; democratic citizenship education; emotions; digital hate speech

## 1. Introduction

The rise of authoritarian populism in the last few decades has led to increasing scholarly production related to this topic. However, populism has not aroused much interest among recent educational researchers, despite the long tradition of democratic citizenship education from the early 20th century. As a result, the educational system has rarely been analyzed as a factor related to the emergence of populism or as an opportunity to mitigate populism. We are not suggesting that national populism is mainly an educational problem. It is not. Contrary to what is usually believed, Trump's, Bolsonaro's, and LePen's voters are neither ignorant nor unable to understand the complexity of current politics [1], at least no more than their opponents [2,3]. This is not to say, however, that different aspects of populism such as the widespread use of digital hate speech or the increasing presence of emotions in political debate do not have a clear educational dimension. Yet, the scope of this dimension has not been sufficiently discussed. This fact led the authors to interview a group of experts from various countries (Canada, Chile, Spain, the UK, and the US) who had long professional records in education for democratic citizenship. These interviews aimed to collect their knowledge and opinions about the relationships between education and populism, emotions, and digital media. We directly asked experts about: (a) the educational roots and consequences of the rise of authoritarian populism, (b) the role of school in the preeminence of feelings over reason in political judgments, and (c) the educational challenges brought on by the new digital era that has contributed largely to the proliferation of this phenomenon.

After reviewing the most recent academic debates on the links between populism, education, emotion, and digital media, we present the dialogue resulting from the answers given by the participants.

We hope that this dialogue encourages researchers in the field of democratic education to explore the different educational implications posed by the recent rise of national populism.

## 2. Conceptual Framework

### 2.1. The Recent Rise of Authoritarian Populism

Recent unexpected results in numerous democratic elections around the world have triggered a proliferation of publications related to populism, especially in the field of political science. The concept of populism has been used to reference a broad range of phenomena, from certain political rhetoric styles to the challenge to the legitimacy of the establishment [4]. For some, populism occurs with the emergence of people as a political subject [5,6], while, for others, as Sant, Pais, McDonnell and Menendez Alvarez-Hevia [7] explained, it is the result of charismatic leadership, party machinery, and propaganda (see Mudde [8]).

In this article, we are concerned about the recent spread of what Norris and Inglehart [4] call *authoritarian populism* or what Eatwell and Goodwin [1] term *national populism*. These types of populism are characterized by the following features:

- A clear distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’. We, the ordinary citizens (the people, the silent majority, the forgotten France, etc.), and they, the distant and corrupt elites. Populist leaders usually promise to give a voice to those who feel that they have been neglected by corrupt elites. It is a movement, therefore, that is questioning hegemonic Western liberal politics.
- Prioritizing the culture and interests of the nation (e.g., America first). National feelings are exalted, and immigrants are viewed as cultural threats to the national identity. For this reason, metaphors such as ‘disease’, ‘syndrome’ or ‘virus’ are often used by national populist leaders to describe the foreign enemy [9]. As Eatwell and Goodwin [1] claim, “immigration and ethnic change present an imminent risk to cultural distinctiveness of the national group, to national values, identity and ways of life” (p. 66). The authoritarian value of *security* against *them* and the politics of *fear* play a key role in this regard [4]. The COVID-19 crisis has been an illustrative example of how populist leaders have used *fear* as a political weapon against migrants and other minorities to reinforce national identities [10].
- The diffusion of demagogic narratives that enhance emotional and visceral reactions instead of rational deliberations. Populist leaders frequently make use of personal experiences as arguments in political debate because they are easy to understand and difficult to argue against [11]. The increasing influence of social media in campaigns has also contributed to trivializing the political debate [12,13] and spreading hate speech [14].

Although this recent wave of populisms has been frequently associated with the 2008 financial crisis, they in fact emerged much earlier. These populisms are the result of a systemic crisis of liberal democracy and capitalism [15] that has had deep social transformations. Eatwell and Goodwin [1] group these social transformations into four major societal changes. The first involves the *distrust* of politicians and institutions that the elitist nature of liberal democracies has promoted among a large number of citizens. The second refers to the fear of *destruction* of the national culture and identity due to hyper-ethnic change and immigration. The third is about the rising inequalities derived from the increasingly globalized neoliberal economies and the strong feelings of *deprivation* fueled by them. Finally, the fourth refers to the *dealignment* caused by “the weakening bonds between the traditional mainstream parties and the people” (p. 15). Some scholars consider that socioeconomic factors are not enough to explain the rise of national populisms [16,17] and recognize emotions, such as fear or anger, as key elements in understanding this new populist wave [18–20].

## 2.2. Populism and Education

National populisms pose challenges to current democracies that are not exclusive nor primarily educational. This is not to say that they do not have clear educational implications. Some of the previously mentioned features of authoritarian populisms have been empirically studied from an educational perspective. For instance, researchers such as Coenders and Scheepers [21], Jenssen and Engesbak [22], Meeusen, Vroome and Hooghe [23], Wagner and Zick [24] have thoroughly analyzed the effect of formal education on chauvinism, ethnic prejudice, and hostility toward immigrants. Others have also studied the educational effects on authoritarian values [25] and political opinions [26]. However, populism, as a phenomenon, has not generated much concern among educational researchers [15,27]. A brief look at databases such as ERIC, Scopus, or Web of Science is enough to realize that very little work has been done in the intersectional fields of populism and education.

The few publications related to this topic that have recently appeared mostly agree that a critical analysis of populism can provide teachers and students with opportunities to enrich democratic education [17]. These recent works have been primarily focused on three different, but closely intertwined concerns: the implications of populism for democratic education [15,27,28] and the role played by emotions [17,29] and digital media [30] in the rise of authoritarian populism. In relation to the first matter, Sant et al. [7] have reflected on the educational implications of populism understood in two different ways: (a) as an ideological narrative, drawing on Žižek's theoretical work; and (b) from the viewpoint of radical democracy, following Mouffe and Laclau's contributions. According to Sant et al. [7], for the first perspective, bringing populism into formal education means reproducing "the same ideological game that it claims to challenge" (p. 51), while for the second, it implies recognizing educational settings as political spaces. Departing from this last viewpoint, Mårdh and Tryggvason [27] consider that "a democratic education that stems from an associative and political understanding of democracy depends upon the notion of the people and cannot, subsequently, fully eliminate the elements of populism" (p. 10). For this reason, they suggest bringing the concept of populism into democratic education. Such an endeavor, however, implies the risk of opening education up to feelings and demands that are not geared toward a democratic life. The direction of the emotions becomes, therefore, one of the main challenges that democratic education faces. Along the same lines, Petrie, McGregor and Crowther [15] suggest that educators should use populism 'dialectically' as a resource for learning democracy and to draw upon the powerful learning motive of anger to engage students.

The affective dimension of right-wing populism and its implications for democratic education have been analyzed further by Zembylas [17]. For this scholar, democratic education can provide teachers and students with opportunities to critically reflect on the emotional modes through which right-wing populisms are articulated and the possible ways to respond to those emotions. Yet, as he recognizes, addressing issues of right-wing populism can be a serious challenge for educators in these times of intense political polarization, when even teachers and students highly value authoritarianism [31]. For McAvoy and Hess [32], it is precisely during times of extreme political polarization that teachers ought to create a political classroom that engages students in the practice of deliberation and collective decision making, through the teaching of controversial issues (p. 16). Similarly, Davies [33] insists that to work with extremism and radicalization it is necessary to address divisive issues and create what he calls an "interruptive (turbulent) democratic classroom", where teachers do not oppress offensive views, but also know how to deal with the emotions which arise from debates (p. 456). This scholar also suggests using social media to promote self-organizing horizontal networks that empower students.

The potentialities of media literacy education to halt the rise of authoritarian populisms have been explored in a volume edited by Ranieri [30] where issues of media content analysis and civic self-expression through media are analyzed (see, for instance, [34]). As Ranieri [30] states, political discourses and subjectivities are currently so profoundly influenced by digital media that media literacy education should be considered as an essential element of citizenship education. This book

also addresses the question of how teachers can be prepared to deal with the difficulties of contrasting discriminatory speeches and populist discourses and promote political participation among young people [35].

In summary, emotions and digital media are the topics that have received the most interest from educational scholars concerned with the phenomenon of populism. However, as we mentioned before, there remains limited literature attempting to explore the relationship between education and populism. As we will show in the next two sections, scholars from other fields have already paid reasonable attention to the role of both digital media and emotion in the promotion or prevention of authoritarian populisms.

### 2.3. Populism and Emotions

Due to the influence of the rational choice paradigm and the Enlightenment's legacy of the prevalence of reason over emotion, the emotional underpinnings of political behavior have been considerably understudied. Feelings and emotions have long been viewed as something that interferes with political decision making rather than being an integral part of information processing [36]. In the last few decades, however, the role of emotion has emerged as a central element to understanding political calculi. As it has been largely demonstrated, political views and actions are not precisely the product of meticulous processing of information and the balancing of advantages and disadvantages [2,37–42]. Deliberative and rational mental processes—including those involved in the configuration of political ideas and identities—are also voluntarily mobilized from automatic operations generated by impressions and emotions [43]. In other words, automatic impressions “are the main source of explicit beliefs and deliberate choices” [43] (p. 35). Moreover, Haidt's [44] research on moral reasoning found that automatic intuitions are often responsible for our final moral and political judgments. Indeed, individuals look for reasons that support their initial insights. The intense emotional adhesions of political opinions and judgments make them especially resistant to change and critical review [37,38,42]. As Westen [42] provocatively stated in his book *The Political Brain*, “in politics, when reason and emotion collide, emotion invariably wins” (p. 35).

Authoritarian populisms are also largely driven by emotions. Indeed, populist movements are usually described as an expression of certain negative sentiments and reactions [45]. Fear and anger are the emotions most frequently connected to the spread of authoritarian populisms [16,46,47]. These emotions play a key role in the rhetoric of national populist parties, especially when framing issues such as immigration, national culture, unemployment, and political distrust. Fear, for instance, has been widely used by authoritarian populist leaders in order to legitimize their policy proposals and offer simple answers to this fear by constructing clear enemies [4,47]. Anger, on the other hand, has been defined as an “indispensable political emotion” [48] (p. 133). Studies on the political effects of emotions have found that anger promotes mobilization during election campaigns more than other emotions such as anxiety and enthusiasm [49,50]. Moreover, anger stimulates support for populist forces among citizens with low political efficacy [46]. Anxiety, in contrast, is less mobilizing than anger [49] and not a determiner of populist support [45]. In fact, the political judgments people make when they are anxious tend to be more rational and deliberative, as they usually elevate the risk of action [51] and have emotional incentives to become better informed [52]. However, some suggest that anxiety decreases participation in costly participatory actions [49]. Other scholars have also pointed out that repressed shame resulting from not living up to the expectations of the increasingly globalized labor market often transforms into anger against those who oppose one's social identity and support authoritarian populist parties [16].

Yet, despite the increasing attention given by political scientists and psychologists to emotions in political behavior and the rise of populism, many citizenship education programs and studies are still based on the Cartesian tradition of *cogito, ergo sum* [53,54] and the notion of the ‘dispassionate citizen’ [55]. In other words, the idea of a citizen as a rational, permanently active, and non-contradictory political subject whose essential characteristics can be learned by students after a guided pedagogical

process. This idealized vision of citizenship education dismisses the importance of the automatic ways individuals think and act, as well as the resistance to critical review that individual and collective emotions and identities exert [53,56]. As a growing number of scholars warn, citizenship learning requires both cognitive and affective engagement (e.g., [17,57–59]). This affective engagement may require the arousal of emotions of anger and anxiety, confronting the tradition of what Hermans calls the ‘smiling fascism’ [60].

In conclusion, any citizenship education proposal needs to consider that emotions are an intrinsic part of human thinking and that rational decisions cannot be made without emotions [61,62]. For this reason, educational research should address the key question of how schools and citizenship education programs can deal with the feelings and emotions that motivate support for authoritarian populisms. As Petrie, McGregor, and Crowther [14] say, “a curriculum to engage with either representations of populism or populist representations will have to make space for exploring emotions as locations of, and resources for, political learning and struggle” (p. 493). Finally, but not less important, there is a need to analyze the role of school—as a powerful socialization tool—in the spread of emotions that foster undemocratic discourses [33].

#### 2.4. Populism and Digital Media

Although the relationship between the rise of populism and social media usage needs to be further explored, increasing evidence reveals that the process of mediatization of society has led political actors to adapt their discourses to the digital age; moreover, social media plays a key role in spreading political discourses, especially those created by right-wing populists [63]. Additionally, the increasing influence of social media in political campaigns has largely contributed to trivializing the political debate [12,13]. However, citizens are not only receivers of these discourses, but also producers. Digital natives also create new narratives on social media environments that reinforce extremism and nationalist discourses [11,64]. In fact, the Internet seems to be more beneficial for right-wing hate and extremist groups than for political moderates [65]. One of the reasons for this phenomenon could be the personalization of the newsfeed that social media networking sites offer. The ‘bubble’ that they create by steering people toward information that appeals to their ideology and preconceptions fuels political polarization [66,67]. Another reason for this may be attributed to the fact that some extremist opinions are not convenient in certain forums. As Mammone, Godin, and Jenkins [68] have studied, extremist discourses emerge in environments where people are not judged and can find other people with similar interests and concerns. These environments help develop feelings of solidarity, loyalty, and discipline, as people “can share their emotions and express their feelings without fear of stigmatization” (p. 8).

Other relationships among young people with extremist ideologies, populism, and the Internet can also be established. As Ranieri [30] suggests, young people “as intense users of the Internet... are exposed to discriminatory content while their cognitive and affective development is still unstable” (p. 24). According to Krasteva and Lazaridis [11], there are several interrelated processes that strengthen the following elements: extremist community building, anonymity, and the dissidence of new generations. In relation to the first, joining an extremist group on the Internet is as easy as clicking a ‘join’ button on any social media group page, regardless of how far those people are from each other. Moreover, extremist political profiles are more active on average than moderate ones [11]. Furthermore, the anonymity permitted in most Internet forums is an advantage for spreading populist discourses, as it allows people to express those opinions that would otherwise be kept private. In fact, “electronically mediated and often anonymous communication eschews political and social control more than face-to-face propaganda and therefore leaves room for racist, sexist or homophobic political messages” [69] (p. 27). Finally, the Internet is a place where young people are able to express their lack of respect toward authorities and to the norms of political correctness and challenge them by overproducing hate speech.



Hate speech as an Internet phenomenon has become a major social issue, and it has been recently approached from an educational perspective (e.g., [70–76]). De Latour et al. [77] claim that hate speech is one of the most intolerant and xenophobic actions of today. According to these scholars, policy administrators that seek to eradicate hate speech, such as the Council of Europe, consider education a crucial starting point for achieving this goal. For Emcke [78], hate is collective and ideological. The social representations used to categorize, make judgments, and humiliate are not spontaneously elaborated, but are already established [79]. In this regard, Parekh [80] distinguishes four characteristics in hate speech that are strongly related to populism's main features: (a) it delimits an individual or group from a set of characteristics, (b) it stigmatizes by assigning to a group of people a set of characteristics regarded as undesirable, (c) it generalizes the stereotype in such a way that it is considered to be present in all the members of the group, and (d) the group is excluded from 'normal' social relationships and considered hostile and unacceptable.

In this scenario, many scholars consider building counter hate speech narratives to be a priority for social studies education and critical digital media literacy [81–83]. For Arroyo et al. [82], building counter-hate speech narratives is a process that begins with the identification of the conflict and its contextualization by determining which people are involved, assessing the arguments presented, and interpreting the emotions that the narrative evokes. They argue that human rights should be the basis on which these counter hate speech narratives are constructed. Other authors such as Sulzer [83] advocate for direct treatment of political power in digital environments due to its role in the proliferation of fake news and hate speech narratives. These scholars agree that a critical approach to digital media literacy is necessary to avoid an "overly technocratic and acritical framing" [84] (p. 13) that presents technologies as neutral devices [81].

### 3. Materials and Methods

The steady, worldwide spread of authoritarian populism poses relevant questions for educational research that need to be further discussed and analyzed. The authors of this article aim to provide a general overview of the educational implications of the recent rise of authoritarian populism by interviewing a group of scholars, experts in democratic citizenship education, from different countries and backgrounds. Specifically, the authors interviewed the following scholars: Antoni Santisteban (Autonomous University of Barcelona, Spain), E. Wayne Ross (University of British Columbia, Canada), Edda Sant (Manchester Metropolitan University, UK), Gustavo E. Fischman (Arizona State University, US), Jesús Romero (University of Cantabria, Spain), and Sixtina Pinochet (Católica del Norte University, Chile).

The selection of the participants was based on the following criteria. We chose scholars, both male and female, located in different countries. By doing this, our aim was not to focus on the particularities of each country nor to make any comparison, but to gain a broader view of the topic from multiple perspectives. We also selected scholars who had long professional records of education for democratic citizenship and, in particular, who have shown in their publications a concern regarding the rise of populisms (e.g., [7,85–88]) and the issues of emotions and digital media in democratic education (e.g., [53,89,90]).

In the literature review conducted, we identified three main topics from the scarce publications on populism and education: the implications of populism on democratic education and the role played by the emotions and digital media in the recent rise of authoritarian populism. These three broad topics steered not only the participants' selection criteria, but also the interview questions. In particular, the interviewees were asked about: (a) the educational roots and consequences of the rise of authoritarian populism, (b) the role of school in the preeminence of feelings over reason in political judgments, and (c) the educational challenges of the new digital era with the recent rise of authoritarian populism. The first question posed to the scholars intended to fill a gap in the literature, as the few researchers that have reflected on the relationship between populism and formal education have departed instead from a left-wing view of populism [7,15,27]. The second question aimed to

have the scholars reflect not only on the affective dimension of citizenship education, but also on the less-explored issue of the role of formal education, either active or passive [33], in the increasing omnipresence of emotions in the political arena. Finally, the third question sought for responses focused on the educational challenges, not only the potentialities [34], brought on by the new digital era that has largely contributed to the recent proliferation of authoritarian populisms.

Scholars received the questions in advance. The interviews were conducted online in May 2019 and each lasted about 45 minutes. Afterwards, the audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed in full and participants were asked for feedback on the transcripts. The authors conducted a conceptual content analysis of the qualitative data [91] to discern patterns and themes. The transcriptions were open coded using Atlas.ti. Themes were derived from patterned codes that arose out of merging statements with similar meanings. The themes resulting from examining the answers given by the participants are presented below.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. *The Non-Educational Roots of the Recent Rise of Populism*

The majority of the educators interviewed pointed out that the rise of authoritarian populism is not mainly an educational problem and, therefore, that it cannot be concluded that schools have a major and direct responsibility in the spread of this phenomenon. They attributed various social, political, and economic causes to the recent rise of populism. Some participants highlighted the role of economic liberalization policies and liberal elitist democracies in the spread of national populisms:

The incubator of the national-populist germ was what Snyder called the ‘politics of inevitability’. These ‘politics of inevitability’, hegemonic in the West since the 1980s, made sacred (by denying any viable alternative) deregulated capitalism, market fundamentalism and an idea of democracy as a mechanism to choose between competing elites (Jesús Romero).

As this Spanish academic explained, this ‘politics of inevitability’ created the propitiatory conditions (increasing economic inequalities, feelings of deprivation, etc.) to mobilize a Manichean rhetoric that exalts ‘the people’ defined in terms of the national identity versus the enemies that damage it (including politicians, technocrats, immigrants, refugees, ‘out of touch liberals’ who despise the Nation, privileged minorities, etc.)

Others stressed the degradation of democratic institutions as the most important factor in widespread populism. Professor E. Wayne Ross, for example, stated that:

We still have all the forms, we have elections, we have governments that are said to be representative of the people, we have courts, Congress, Parliament, but those forms are just that: they are just forms. Everything that matters about what should be happening in those institutional settings has been ... the meaning has been so corrupted that the content of democracy does not exist, even though the forms of democracy exist. And you can see that in a lot of different ways. The plutocracy is the democracy we have.

For this reason, he warned that “we can no longer rely on tropes of teaching students about liberal democracy or teaching students what it means to be an active citizen in a democratic society and think that’s enough”. He clearly differentiated between populism (a political movement that comes from the bottom) and what is usually called right-wing populism that he described as a twenty-first-century version of fascism. As he argued, if democracy is the platform and the enabler for right-wing populism today, the idea of democracy is “completely bankrupt”.

Edda Sant from the UK identified the crisis of representative democracy as the main cause of populism, describing it as an expression of the democratic deficit. Following Mouffe and Laclau, this academic considered that many issues that were previously depoliticized have been brought into the discussion by populist movements, which has made many citizens feel attracted to politics again.

#### 4.2. *Schooling as a Failed Opportunity to Halt Authoritarian Populisms*

While being cautious of attributing the recent rise of authoritarian populism to schooling, most of the scholars interviewed recognized the failure of formal education systems to strengthen democratic institutions and promote active citizenship.

For Antoni Santisteban, school is an institution that does not educate for civic participation and the resolution of social problems. According to him, schools have a great responsibility to teach democratic skills and, if they serve as spaces for democratic experience, can be a key tool for combating populist discourse. He recognized that schools are not the only space for political socialization, and probably not the most influential either, but they are crucial for learning political participation. For many students, schools are the only place where they can experience democratic deliberation and participation. As he said in his interview:

We need to make students the protagonists of their learning process. This learning has to be based on their life experiences in order to situate themselves in time and space. We need to help them to make decisions about the affairs that concern their communities. They need to understand that democracy is the responsibility of everyone, that it is more than a political system, it is a way of life. Teachers have the opportunity to choose whether to encourage passivity and indifference to non-democratic attitudes, or, on the contrary, to teach participation to deal with controversial issues. Teachers can always choose.

In the same line, Gustavo E. Fischman pointed out that even though schools are not a 'democratic paradise' and very often do not educate for citizen participation, they are much less authoritarian, violent, and discriminatory than any other social institution. After all, as he warned, it cannot be forgotten that things would be much worse without schools. This does not mean, however, that the achievements obtained by citizenship movements could be attributed to the school. As he clearly stated when talking about Brazil:

Bolsonaro's government has generated a pro-democratic reaction among young people in Brazil that is not the merit of schools, it is the merit of the people. The school institution is in debt with the people.

In this regard, E. Wayne Ross also recognized, somehow disillusioned, that schools only reflect what society is and that they are not a leading force of change: "I want to believe that schools offer the best place to organize because they are one of the last places where people of different backgrounds can come together". Furthermore, Jesús Romero highlighted that the attack on comprehensive school reforms accentuated the tendency to educate children with their 'equals' separated from the 'different'. Such a tendency, he added, is not only an expression of the growing inequality but also promotes increasingly separated and distant lives. The ignorance of the 'other' favors the advance of prejudice, the feeling of threat, and the consequent defensive reactions of an essentialized 'we' that does not recognize the 'others' in their otherness. Citing Simón [92], he stated that:

Appeals to insecurity and the loss of symbolic and effective status are more common in relatively homogeneous communities since it is easier to blame a foreign community with which there is little or no contact. On the contrary, more heterogeneous areas seem to vote comparatively less for extremist parties.

#### 4.3. *Obstacles to Critical Thinking at Schools*

For all the scholars interviewed, critical thinking is crucial in confronting the anti-democratic narratives that right-wing populist leaders and movements spread. However, they mentioned three closely intertwined curricular matters that noticeably hinder the development of critical thinking at school. The first refers to the lack of attention to controversial issues in the classroom. The second



involves the tendency of social studies education to disconnect past events from present affairs. The third is related to the traditional nationalizing role of school curricula.

For Jesús Romero, education should enable children to ask progressively more complex questions about how to live in society and how to collectively face its fractures and problems using the tools of critical and self-critical reason. He thinks that schools should help students challenge the demagogic and emotional narratives of national populism, and the ‘politics of inevitability’ origin. However, as he warned, the widespread ‘curricular escapism’ (the expression is from Derricott) that refuses the treatment of controversial public affairs in the classroom denies students space to critically dismantle narratives and build counter-narratives “from more rigorous knowledge and more wisely informed desires”.

Sixtina Pinochet also emphasized the importance of including socially sensitive topics in schools. This scholar expressed her concerns about the strength of the idea of neutrality in education and how this assumption has largely hindered addressing relevant social issues in classrooms and promoting understanding between opposing groups. As she stated in her interview, “by avoiding these issues, we are creating spaces for authoritarian views to spread”. Edda Sant and Antoni Santisteban used similar arguments to advocate for including controversial issues and relevant social problems into the school curriculum. As Edda Sant explained in her interview, schools have not included these topics “because we were afraid that some voices [laden with values that we did not like] would come out in the classroom”. Silencing these voices, however, has only reinforced them.

For E. Wayne Ross, the idea of including controversial issues in the classroom is intrinsically related to his understanding of the nature of critical knowledge:

We will never get to objectivity in teaching the curriculum unless everything can be discussed. If something is excluded from discussion, we only have a knowledge that is approved, that comes from authority, dogma, or tradition and that it is not subjected to critical analysis. This is the equivalent of prejudice. Using the logic that John Dewey laid out in terms of a pragmatic, a philosophically pragmatic approach to understanding the world, you have to be able to test out all the hypotheses and if there are things we can’t talk about, we can’t test them and, therefore, they can’t ever rise to the level of being truths in a pragmatic sense.

For this professor, the development of critical thinking at school is also limited by the tendency to present social phenomena, such as the recent growth of authoritarianism, as if they “rise out of nothing”. According to him, social studies educators should help students think historically and dialectically about the connections between the past, the present, and the future and he criticized that social phenomena are usually “treated as if they don’t have a past, they just somehow appeared, so that Hitler was the person who becomes responsible for the whole problem”. For him, historical, revolutionary events should be rescued by social studies educators to serve as an example of how the socio-economic structures can be collectively transformed. This idea of the relevance of historical awareness is also expressed by the Chilean scholar Sixtina Pinochet. She claimed that her generation values democracy more than younger generations because younger generations lack a deep understanding of what happened during Pinochet’s dictatorship, as this issue is treated very superficially in Chilean schools.

In addition, both Jesús Romero and E. Wayne Ross alluded to the traditional nationalizing role of schooling as a clear impediment to the development of critical thinking skills. As highlighted by Jesús Romero, the strong survival of territorial identity markers in school curricula helps maintain the vision of ‘our country or region first’ that is responsible, to some extent, for the visceral rejections to the ‘others’ and to any criticism that questions national identities. E. Wayne Ross related the promotion of nationalism through schooling as a means of social control and reproduction of the socio-economic order. According to him, schools provide idealized narratives about the rise of nations and the functioning of democracies that limit one’s self-thinking and self-determination. As he claimed:

In the US, the school system was primarily focused on Americanizing people and accepting the dominant social, economic framework. And I think the schooling was aimed at convincing

young children that there is no other alternative to the capitalist worldview. I am not saying that everybody that teaches in schools is doing something evil necessarily, but I do think that socialization is the main option... Chomsky writes about manufacturing consent and what controls a democratic society, and he actually writes a book on the necessary illusions. And my colleague and friend Gibson has a phrase that I think is really good. He talks about schools as illusion factories. I think we create these illusions when we think about these particular kinds of narratives about the rise of the nation, the role of religion, or the individuals in society or about democracy.

#### *4.4. The Emotional Challenge for Critical Citizenship Education*

Most of the scholars interviewed agreed that schools should develop children's critical thinking skills to help them challenge the demagogic, toxic, and anti-democratic narratives that mobilize, in Jesús Romero's words, "passionate and visceral reactions instead of rational deliberation". However, very few raised concerns about the affective dimension of citizenship education.

Edda Sant argued that emotions are the basis of reasoning and that fighting emotions and values such as fear of the 'other' or racism cannot come from reason, because it can generate even greater resistance. Instead, she proposed making students feel and understand that democratic values such as equality are of vital importance in their daily lives. Therefore, the role of school in this regard is not to impose certain rationality over certain values, but "to combat certain values that are not very democratic with values that have a more important democratic dimension" (Edda Sant).

Edda Sant also advocated for letting students express their opinions freely while discussing controversial issues. She insisted on the importance of not suppressing certain voices for being politically incorrect because, as she explained, they come from people who are suffering and who have a strong sense of oppression. Instead, it would be better to provide them with an alternative vision of the causes of their suffering. In line with her critique of representative democracy, she claimed that schools should offer students different possibilities and models of democracy that go beyond "voting every four years". According to her, this would make that students feel more engaged in politics.

Gustavo E. Fischman also expressed concerns about the preeminence of the Cartesian rationalist premise in schools when warning about the difficulties of balancing skepticism and critical thinking with emotions such as anxiety. For this scholar, the act of doubt generates an emotional instability that teachers should take into account when fostering critical thinking. As he said in his interview:

We must raise doubts about the claims that appear without too many foundations beyond 'it was said by the authority, the pope, the president or the enemy'. But, at the same time, we must work with the emotion and anxiety that those doubts create... Eliminating doubts is a very appropriate way to survive because, otherwise, anxiety levels would generate a lot of emotional instability that may affect our health. For this reason, we must generate doubts, but also generate possibilities to answer those doubts in an appropriate way (not with the populist responses of 'the bad ones are out there') and try to understand how these structures are generated.

#### *4.5. The Educational Implications of the Digital Era*

The scholars interviewed had different views on the role of new technologies in the recent rise of populism and, accordingly, different opinions about the educational implications of the digital era. Some of them highlighted the virtues that new technologies have had for democracy, although they also mentioned some disadvantages. For instance, Sixtina Pinochet stated that the Internet has greatly contributed to democracy by providing easy and widespread access to a huge amount of information, even though she also recognized that it has also created the illusion that everything on the Internet is true: "it seems that nowadays the idea that prevails is that everything that appears in social networks is real when most of the time is not". Antoni Santisteban argued that, at least to

some extent, this behavior is due to educational reasons. He considers that an education that transmits information without questioning teaches citizens to do the same in their everyday lives. According to him, digital media is the broadest source of information, but it is also a place where most of the content is “rubbish, advertisements, and spectacle”. Therefore, he considered it necessary to teach children how to select, contrast, and analyze relevant information and identify who is represented and who is missing in the text. Gustavo E. Fischman also agreed that it is crucial to teach critical thinking skills to help students question information. Yet, he insisted that teachers should generate questions “but also generate possibilities to answer those questions in an appropriate way”. He also added that teaching critical thinking is not easy considering current educational systems and the underfunding of education in many countries.

Edda Sant stressed that digital tools provide the opportunity to speak out to people who have traditionally been silenced while being aware that these devices have also given voice to authoritarian ideologies. Accordingly, she claimed that education in the digital era should help students critically analyze hate-speech discourses and empower them:

I don't think we can stop discourses we don't like in social networks. We could obviously analyze them, and we can help students to talk about and discuss these topics and use them as a source, but we can't stop them. What we can do is help [make sure] everyone has a voice in that media.

In the case of E. Wayne Ross, instead of pointing out the benefits of digital technologies, he insisted that “these tools are neutral”; therefore, they do not have “to be *per se* a negative thing”. However, while acknowledging that technology is not the source of the problem, he recognized that it has contributed to the rapid rise of extreme right-wing ideologies and manifestations of racism and xenophobia. This does not mean that he advocates for a more restrictive use of technology in schools. For him, the digital era is challenging the authority of teachers and the content of teaching up to a point that “the way we think about the delivery of education might be coming to an end”.

Jesús Romero was probably the most skeptical in this debate. According to him, the digital era poses four serious challenges to democracy that critical social studies education must face. The first relates to the illusion of digital activism, which refers to the idea that the Internet and social media offer people tools for mobilization while providing an illusory sense of efficacy that discourages people from collaborating offline [67]. Secondly, these technologies have largely contributed to the degradation of political language and debate. Thirdly, our tendency to ignore what does not adapt to our prior beliefs (confirmation bias) has been accentuated by bubble filters (the algorithms that outline our footprint through social networks), which reinforces prejudices and political polarization. Finally, he argued that propaganda and collective manipulation are stronger than ever before because social media networking sites collect and store a huge amount of information (big data) that enterprises use to more precisely manipulate citizens' feelings and emotions. As he asserted, social media has become the new battleground for political parties (perhaps especially for populist leaders); therefore, social media is an important space of political socialization. This space “has its own logic and functioning mechanisms, game rules and a different set of possibilities, limits and biases”. For him, citizenship education should help students deconstruct the logic of this socializing instance that is shaping their perceptions and notions of political reality.

## 5. Discussion

The recent rise of populism has become a major social issue with profound implications in many fields, including education. However, these implications have not been sufficiently discussed in educational literature. For this reason, the authors of the present article interviewed a group of experts on democratic citizenship education from various countries (Canada, Chile, Spain, the UK, and the US) to provide a general overview of the educational consequences of the steady, worldwide spread of authoritarian populism.

According to these scholars, educational policies and practices may not be direct contributors to the ascent of extremist political movements. Instead, they are indirect contributors because they miss a unique opportunity to strengthen democratic institutions. For the most part, current societies have the appearance of democracies, but are actually driven by economic interests and neoliberal values that have been primarily responsible for the rise of national populisms, as other scholars have shown [93–95]. They claimed that if the aim is to make democracies truly democratic, where citizens have the right to vote and the right to actively participate in public decision making, it is necessary to rethink institutions, political and economic priorities, and educational systems at all levels.

In line with other authors (e.g., [96,97]), these scholars criticized that the school curriculum has traditionally provided idealized narratives about the rise of nations and the functioning of democracies that have helped feed the idea of ‘our country first’ and the acceptance of the socio-economic order. For the academics interviewed, by refusing to teach current public affairs, schools deny students the possibility of critically analyzing social problems and collectively discussing potential solutions. For this reason, they strongly advocated for teaching controversial issues in the classroom, especially in these times of political polarization. In line with other scholars in the field (e.g., [98,99]), they argued that it is only possible to critically dismantle hate-speech discourses and build counter-narratives by including these topics in schools. However, disarticulating opinions that collide with values such as tolerance, equity, or social justice is not an easy endeavor. Visceral resistance and reactions constitute a huge challenge. However, the emotional aspect of citizenship education was overlooked by most of the academics interviewed. While they offer clear routes to developing critical thinking (such as teaching controversial issues, thinking dialectically of the connections between the past and the present, and impugning the nationalizing role of school curricula), guidelines were much more blurred when dealing with the affective dimension of democratic education. Some of them highlighted the issue of not suppressing certain voices, as other scholars have warned [33,59]. Others stressed the importance of taking into account students’ anxiety toward criticism by offering them opportunities to address their doubts. However, the question of how schools can deal with the feelings of fear and anger that motivate support for authoritarian populisms is still rather uncertain. The issue of the role of schooling in the increasing omnipresence of emotions in the political arena remains unknown too.

In relation to the educational challenge posed by digital media, the academics interviewed think that the Internet and social media have increased the urgency of developing critical thinking skills, which remain infrequent even among undergraduate students [100]. By teaching critical thinking skills in this context, students need to analyze pieces of digital information and be able to deconstruct the logic of this media to understand how our beliefs are shaped by different enterprises and political campaigns, as other scholars advocate as well (e.g., [83]). For others, it also means empowering individuals and collectives to participate in democracy and transform social structures. From their responses, new questions have arisen: How do we deal with the emotional manipulation caused by social media networking sites? How can we make children and young people more aware of the bubble filters that reinforce political polarization and what alternatives can we offer them? How can teachers promote students’ digital activism without discouraging political participation offline?

The need to respond to these educational issues becomes more urgent now that the COVID-19 crisis has favored the spread of xenophobic conspiracy speculations and discriminatory narratives and strengthened exclusionary nationalistic feelings.

The interviews with these scholars have shown that authoritarian populisms pose several challenges to democratic citizenship education and school systems that are far from being solved. Formal education still has a deep impact, either by action or by omission, on the construction of political judgements and subjectivities. However, in the last few decades, digital media has clearly gained territory in the political socialization of the youth, especially in the field of emotions. For schools to regain this territory, they can no longer ignore controversial issues, voices and feelings. That is, they can no longer pretend to be politically neutral.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, M.E. and J.C.; methodology, M.E. and J.C.; software, M.E. and J.C.; formal analysis, M.E. and J.C.; investigation, M.E. and J.C.; data curation, M.E. and J.C.; writing—original draft preparation, M.E. and J.C.; writing—review and editing, M.E. and J.C. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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