LIVING TOGETHER IN A POLARISED, DIGITAL WORLD

YOUTH VALUES, BELONGING AND NEW DIRECTIONS FOR EDUCATION

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Research Report

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Abstract

This report examines the conditions for “living together” in a polarised, digital world, focusing on youth values, belonging and the role of education. Drawing on European frameworks of democratic culture and global citizenship, it combines desk research with survey data and focus group insights from young people, educators and youth workers across European contexts.

The findings show that young people broadly endorse democratic values such as human rights, equality and tolerance, and prioritise relational and socio-emotional competences, including empathy, resilience and communication. However, these orientations coexist with low generalised trust, fragmented belonging and exposure to polarising digital environments shaped by algorithms, misinformation and emotionally charged content. Cognitive biases and moral intuition further reinforce divisions.

At the same time, young people express a strong need for meaningful relationships and safe spaces, while preferring experiential, relational and emotionally engaging forms of learning. International examples demonstrate that empathy and social–emotional learning can be effectively integrated into both curricula and school cultures.

The paper argues that the key challenge is not to introduce new values, but to redesign educational environments so that democratic competences can be practised and experienced. It concludes that fostering empathy, belonging and critical awareness requires educational approaches that combine safety with challenge and support young people in navigating diversity and uncertainty.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

In a time of rapid cultural, social and economic change, the ability to live together peacefully and constructively has become one of the central challenges for contemporary education. Polarisation, digital hyper-connectivity, misinformation and growing inequalities put pressure on social cohesion and democratic culture across Europe. Addressing these challenges requires more than knowledge and technical skills; it demands social and emotional competences that enable people to build inclusive communities grounded in respect, solidarity and civic responsibility.

At the European level, both the European Commission and UNESCO emphasise the urgent need to integrate global citizenship education and education for democratic culture into school curricula. Frameworks such as UNESCO's Global Citizenship Education and the Council of Europe's Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFCDC) identify values like human dignity, human rights, diversity, democracy, justice and the rule of law as fundamental for living together in diverse societies. However, empirical research on youth values, digital culture, belonging and learning suggests persistent gaps between the values that young people endorse in principle and the conditions under which they are able to enact them in everyday life.

This paper addresses three overarching questions:

1. Which cognitive, emotional and social dynamics support or undermine living together and tend to strengthen polarisation?
2. How do young people today build belonging and relationships, and what do they say they need in order to feel at home, safe and engaged?
3. What kinds of competences and educational methods are required to foster living together in digital, plural and uncertain societies?

To answer these questions, we combine desk research on youth values, democratic competences, cognition and bias, polarisation, belonging, social

and emotional learning (SEL), and learning trends among Generation Z and Generation Alpha, with primary data from surveys and focus groups with young people, educators and psychologists in several European contexts.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 presents the conceptual framework on living together, values and democratic culture. Section 3 discusses cognition, polarisation and belonging in the digital age. Section 4 summarises research on learning, motivation and competences, including international models of empathy education. Section 5 describes the mixed-methods design. Section 6 presents the main findings. Section 7 discusses these results in light of the literature, and Section 8 outlines implications for educational practice and policy. Section 9 concludes.

2. Conceptual Framework: Living Together, Values and Democratic Culture

The notion of "living together" used in this paper is rooted in European debates on democratic culture and global citizenship. The Council of Europe's RFCDC conceptualises democratic culture as a constellation of values, attitudes, skills, knowledge and critical understanding that enable individuals to live peacefully together as equals in diverse societies. Among the most salient values are:

- Valuing human dignity and human rights, recognising the equal worth of every person and the inalienable nature of fundamental rights and freedoms.
- Valuing cultural diversity, appreciating pluralism of cultures and worldviews as a source of enrichment rather than threat, within human rights boundaries.
- Valuing democracy, justice, fairness, equality and the rule of law, supporting democratic procedures, equal opportunities and equality before the law.

Empirical surveys at the European level, such as Flash Eurobarometer 505 on youth and democracy, and studies by the European Youth Forum, show that young people across Europe strongly endorse human rights, peace, democracy, freedom of speech, equality and sustainability. These findings suggest that, at the level of declared values, youth are broadly aligned with the normative core of democratic living together.

However, lived experiences often diverge from these ideals. Many young people report insecurity, discrimination, limited acceptance of diversity and low trust in institutions. Values-based education, both in formal and non-formal settings, tends to emphasise consensual values (kindness, respect, responsibility) while avoiding controversial issues and value conflicts. As a result, young people may endorse democratic values in principle while experiencing their environments as competitive, hierarchical and, at times, exclusionary.

In line with UNESCO's peace and global citizenship education, and with European work on education for democratic citizenship, this paper understands living together as:

the ability of individuals and groups to co-exist peacefully and cooperatively in diverse societies, recognising each other's equal dignity and rights, engaging with differences through dialogue and nonviolent conflict resolution, and participating in shared institutions and practices that embody justice, fairness and solidarity.

3. Cognition, Polarisation and Belonging in the Digital Age

3.1 Cognitive biases and moral intuition

Research in behavioural economics and cognitive psychology has demonstrated that human judgement is systematically shaped by heuristics and biases. Daniel Kahneman distinguishes between **System 1**, fast and intuitive,

and **System 2,** slow and analytical. Everyday decision-making relies heavily on System 1, which, while efficient, is prone to errors such as the availability heuristic, anchoring, confirmation bias, hindsight bias, overconfidence and loss aversion.

Jonathan Haidt's work in moral psychology complements this picture by emphasising **moral intuitionism**: moral judgements arise quickly and automatically, while reasoning is often recruited post-hoc to justify intuitive responses. He identifies a range of **cognitive distortions**—emotional reasoning, catastrophising, overgeneralisation, dichotomous thinking, mind reading, labelling, negative filtering, rumination and others—that can intensify moral and political conflict, especially when individuals interpret reality primarily through their feelings.

In polarised environments, confirmation bias and group processes such as **group polarisation**—the tendency for deliberation within like-minded groups to push opinions toward more extreme positions—reinforce ideological divides. Haidt conceptualises this through the metaphor of the "elephant and the rider": the elephant (intuition) drives most behaviour, while the rider (reason) mainly serves as a spokesperson and strategist for underlying motivations.

3.2 Digital architectures, misinformation and polarisation

Digital technologies amplify these cognitive dynamics. Research on social media algorithms shows that personalised feeds create **filter bubbles** and **echo chambers**, in which users are disproportionately exposed to content aligned with their existing preferences. This reinforces confirmation bias, reduces exposure to cross-cutting views and encourages **homophily** in social networks—people cluster with others who share similar identities, ideologies and lifestyles.

Misinformation and disinformation spread easily in such ecosystems. Political actors and extremist groups use manipulated content and fake news to discredit opponents and erode trust in democratic institutions, science and

journalism. While misinformation is not a new phenomenon, today's hyper-connected information environment produces unprecedented volumes of misleading content and accelerates its diffusion. These dynamics are particularly salient for young people, who often consume most of their news and political content via social media.

Recent empirical work shows that **shortfalls in digital media literacy** are a key reason why people believe false information. Real-world digital literacy interventions can significantly reduce the perceived accuracy of fake news and improve individuals' ability to distinguish false from factual content, regardless of political alignment. This suggests that educational interventions can mitigate, though not eliminate, vulnerability to misinformation.

Brandsma's polarisation framework conceptualises polarisation as **a mental construct** that divides people along identity lines. It is fuelled by identity-focused, emotionally charged statements about opposing groups and maintained by recurring roles:

- **pushers** who intensify divisions, joiners who echo their narratives, the
- **silent middle** under pressure to choose sides,
- **bridge builders** who try to foster understanding, and
- **scapegoats** who become targets of blame. Once polarisation is emotionally saturated, facts and logical arguments have limited power to reduce the divide.

3.3 Belonging, social cohesion and democratic support

Parallel to these cognitive and digital dynamics, research has highlighted the centrality of **belonging** for individual and collective wellbeing. Slavich argues that the brain and immune system are attuned to detect social threat and motivate individuals to seek safety, connection and affiliation; belonging is thus a biological and psychological necessity.

Amit finds that immigrants' sense of belonging to the host country is strongly predicted by life satisfaction, language proficiency, religious motives and the degree of ethnic segregation. Halse theorises belonging at three levels:

1. social location (age, gender, class, nationality);
2. identification with particular groups, places and practices;
3. ethical and political values that shape recognition and valuation of belonging.

Fitzgerald shows that feeling "at home" in a place is associated with stronger **support for democracy** and higher trust in others.

Allen synthesized this work into an integrative framework of belonging with four components:

- **competencies for belonging** (skills to connect),
- **opportunities to belong** (enabling environments),
- **motivations to belong** (internal drive)
- **perceptions of belonging** (cognitive appraisals shaped by social feedback).

Belonging is described as **dynamic and compensatory**: strong investment in one domain (e.g., peer groups) may reduce belonging in others (e.g., civic or professional communities).

Haidt links belonging to **moral communities**: groups that provide security, shared values, rituals and norms. Such communities can foster solidarity and prosocial behaviour, but they can also sharpen boundaries and hostility toward out-groups, especially in polarised contexts.

4. Learning, Motivation, Empathy and Competences for Living Together

4.1 Learning environments and preferences of Generation Z and Alpha

Research on Generation Z and Generation Alpha indicates that:

- young people's trajectories are increasingly **non-linear** ("post-structural lives"), with multiple careers and blended learning;
- learning environments are **hybrid**, combining in-person and online modalities;
- while youth are fluent in digital tools, many experience **FOMO, sleep problems, stress and mental health issues** linked to constant connectivity;
- a significant proportion of Gen Z report that they **wish social media had never been created**.

Despite digital fluency, young people express a clear **preference for physical learning environments** with modern infrastructure and in-person relationships, which they experience as deeper than online ties. Survey and focus-group evidence from our study indicate that youth report learning most from:

- **practical, experiential activities** ("learning by doing"), real projects and meaningful tasks;
- **group work, discussion and shared activities**;
- **emotionally engaging experiences**, including storytelling, youth exchanges and challenging situations;
- **supportive explanations** by teachers and mentors, in a friendly and respectful manner.

They report learning least from **long, passive lectures** and de-contextualised memorisation.

4.2 Motivation to learn and decide

Our data and existing literature show that young people's motivation to learn and to make life decisions is driven by a combination of:

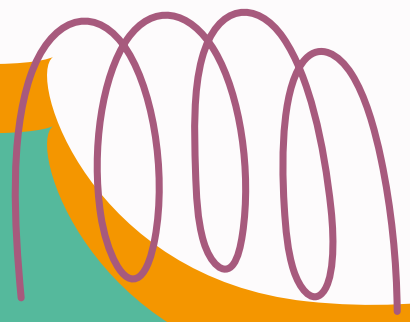
- **personal interest and passion** ("what I enjoy / what fulfils me");
- **future usefulness and impact** ("whether it will matter for my future");
- **intuition and feelings** ("how it feels").

Rational evaluation (pros and cons, research) plays a role, but emotional engagement and perceived meaning are primary. Advice from others (parents, teachers) and practical constraints (finances, time) are secondary, though still relevant. Decision-making responses from our survey confirm that youth rarely let others fully decide for them; instead, they combine internal alignment (values, interest) with pragmatic considerations about future opportunities. This pattern has direct implications for educational design: learning activities perceived as irrelevant or purely instrumental are unlikely to sustain engagement.

4.3 Competences for life and living together

When asked which competences are most important "for life", young people and educators converge on a set of transferable, **socio-emotional competences**:

- **Emotional intelligence**: self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, using emotions to stay motivated.
- **Resilience**: the capacity to cope with setbacks, persevere and recover, seen as a dynamic skill built through experience, not an innate trait.
- **Learning to learn**: the ability and motivation to continue learning throughout life.



- **Relationship-building**: forming and maintaining firm, trusting relationships.
- **Open communication**: expressing ideas clearly and honestly, listening actively, resolving misunderstandings.
- **Quality decision-making and responsibility**.
- **Leadership as support**: guiding and supporting others, rather than dominating them.
- **Critical thinking and digital literacy**: especially regarding algorithms, misinformation and echo chambers.

Survey data from our study show that **building firm relationships, working with emotions and empathy, persistence and resilience, quality decision--making, leading and supporting others, and open communication** receive the highest ratings as "very important". Team collaboration, creativity, ability to learn and flexibility are also valued, while organisational skills and critical thinking are seen as somewhat less central, though still important.

4.4 Empathy and social–emotional learning: international models

A growing body of international practice demonstrates that **empathy can be systematically taught** through diverse, evidence-based approaches embedded in both curricula and school culture.

In **Denmark**, empathy has been treated for decades as a core competency. Since 1993, all public schools have implemented a weekly Klassens tid ("class time") for students aged 6–16, during which learners discuss personal or group issues, practise active listening, mutual understanding and collaborative problem-solving in a cosy (hyggelig) atmosphere. Programmes such as Step by Step (preschool emotional literacy) and CAT-Kit (Cognitive Affective Training Kit) provide structured tools—emotion "thermometers", picture cards, body outlines and social-relationship maps—to help children identify, name and work with emotions and relationships. Approximately 60% of school ta-

sks are collaborative, trophies for top performers are absent, and emphasis is placed on intrinsic motivation and learning from each other rather than rivalry.

Several other countries and models confirm the effectiveness of empathy--oriented interventions:

1. **France's national empathy curriculum.**
   France has recently introduced empathy lessons in all primary schools, starting from an initial pilot in 1,200 schools. A 62-page teacher guide and online training support lessons in which children learn to recognise emotions (joy, fear, anger, sadness) and practise empathetic responses in everyday scenarios (e.g., comforting a peer whose toy has broken). Early evaluations suggest improvements in classroom climate and pro-social behaviour.

2. **Theatre-based empathy in medical education (France).**
   At the University of Montpellier–Nîmes, medical students attend theatre workshops where they role-play delivering difficult news (such as a cancer diagnosis). By focusing on nonverbal cues, tone and presence, the programme has been shown to slow the decline in empathy typically observed during medical training.

3. **The UK "Empathy Programme" (Empathy Studios).**
   A Cambridge-backed study tested a 10-week film-based intervention in six countries. Students aged 5–18 watched carefully selected films and engaged in guided discussions. Empathy scores increased from 5.6 to 7.0, while prosocial behaviour scores rose from 6.5 to 7.9. Teachers reported better classroom management and increased curiosity about other cultures.

4. **Cooperative learning in U.S. middle schools.**
   A randomised trial in U.S. middle schools demonstrated that cooperative learning—structured group tasks emphasising collaboration over competition—significantly increased both affective and cognitive empathy

and reduced bullying. Peer relatedness was found to mediate these effects.

5. **Roots of Empathy (Canada and beyond).**
   The Roots of Empathy programme brings infants and parents into classrooms for guided observational sessions. Under a trained facilitator's guidance, children observe the baby's development, discuss emotions and reflect on their own feelings and relationships. Originating in Toronto in 1996, the programme has been implemented in 11 countries and is supported by a robust evidence base showing reductions in aggression and increases in prosocial behaviour.

6. **Evidence-based interventions and serious games.**
   The **FRIENDS** programme, implemented internationally, combines resilience, anxiety prevention and socio-emotional learning, increasing empathy and reducing internalising symptoms.

- Empathy-training interventions in Romania and elsewhere have reduced bullying—especially verbal and relational bullying—and improved perspective-taking, particularly when teachers are consistently involved.
- In Italy, structured conversational "emotion programmes" in early childhood settings have enhanced emotion understanding, theory of mind and cognitive empathy.
- VR-based serious games designed to simulate dyslexia experiences increased empathy towards students with dyslexia by approximately 20%, demonstrating the potential of immersive technologies to support perspective-taking.

7. **Embedded empathy cultures (EL Education model, U.S.).**
   Research on schools following the EL Education model suggests that empathy is most powerful when it is treated as a **lived value** rather than an isolated subject. Empathy is cultivated through role-modelling by teachers, restorative practices, journaling, advisory time, community norms and service-learning, making it part of daily routines and relationships.

Taken together, these models illustrate several **key principles** for empathy education:

- dedicated time for emotional sharing and dialogue (e.g., Klassens tid, French empathy lessons);
- integration across the curriculum (literature, history, civics, health);
- use of media and narratives (films, stories, VR) as empathy triggers;
- cooperative learning and peer teaching;
- connection to real-life experiences (e.g., infants in Roots of Empathy, real case studies);
- sustained teacher involvement and role-modelling;
- targeted, time-limited interventions that can still produce measurable change;
- embedding empathy into school culture, routines and norms, not only into standalone workshops.

These findings support the view that empathy is both a **teachable skill** and a **context-dependent practice**: it thrives when environments consistently reinforce perspective-taking, emotional literacy and mutual care.

5. Methods

5.1 Overall design

The research adopts a mixed-methods design that combines **desk research** with the collection and analysis of **primary quantitative and qualitative data**. The aim is to link macro-level evidence on youth values, democratic competences, cognition and polarisation with micro-level insights from young people and professionals working with youth.

The study has three components:

1. Analysis of existing data and literature (books, policy frameworks, empirical studies, podcasts).

2. Online surveys targeting youth workers and young people.
3. Online focus group interviews with educators and psychologists.

5.2 Desk research

The desk research was conducted between 2023 and 2025 and focused on academic publications, European policy documents and empirical reports relevant to youth values, democratic culture, digital media, misinformation, belonging and learning. Key sources included:

- books and monographs (e.g., Goleman, 1995; Kahneman, 2011; Haidt, 2012; Damásio, 2018, 2021; Carr, 2010; McCrindle & Fell, 2020; McMillan & Fell, 2021);
- policy frameworks and reports (Council of Europe, 2012, 2018a; European Commission, 2023; OECD, 2020, 2022; UNESCO, 1998, 2015; CASEL, 2020; INAPP, 2020; European Youth Forum, 2016, 2024, 2025);
- empirical studies and reviews (Adamas et al, 2023; Amit, 2014; Biocca, 2000; Halse, 2018; Fitzgerald et al., 2023; Allen et al., 2021; Feio & Oliveira, 2024; Madsen et al., 2024; Rathje et al, 2024; Saulnier & Krettenauer, 2022);
- projects and internal reports (ALiCe, 2024; ANEV & YouthWatch, 2022, 2025; Project Feel Good, 2023; ScioResearch, 2023; Self-Directed Learning Competencies for NEETs, 2023);
- podcasts and online resources (Fell, 2023; Alexandra, 2023; Brandsma, Inside Polarisation).

5.3 Online surveys

Three online surveys were used:

1. Values and competences survey

- Time and place: 2023–2024, across several European countries.
- Respondents: 51 (41 youth workers, 10 young people).
- Focus: perceptions of key youth values, barriers to cooperation, acceptance of diversity, essential skills and factors supporting belonging.

2. "Feeling at home" survey (English)

- Time and place: 2025, among volunteers from different European countries participating in the European Solidarity Corps.
- Respondents: 39 young adults (approx. 20–26 years).
- Focus: sense of belonging, acceptance, social trust, and learning preferences.

3. "Feeling at home" survey (Polish)

- Time and place: 2025, in Poland.
- Respondents: 92 high-school students (approx. 16–17 years) in technical education.
- Focus: sources of belonging (family, friends, online groups, institutions), perceived acceptance, and social trust.

In addition, a smaller questionnaire (N = 32, November 2025) explored:

- self-perceived values and perceived values of peers;
- prioritised competences;
- preferred learning activities;
- conditions for trust in new groups;
- decision-making factors;
- media consumption patterns (TV series, films, books).

5.4 Focus group interviews

Two online focus group interviews were conducted:

- **Focus group 1 – Educators and youth workers**

  ✓ Date: 9 September 2025.

  ✓ Participants: 7 (2 men, 5 women), aged 35–55; 6 from Poland, 1 from Ukraine.

- ✓ Roles: school teachers, an intercultural mediator, a university lecturer, a youth centre worker.

- **Focus group 2 – Psychologists**

  - ✓ Date: 10 September 2025.

  - ✓ Participants: 4 (1 man, 3 women), aged 33–50; all from Poland.

  - ✓ Roles: psychologists working as trainers, youth workers and therapists.

Both focus groups addressed the following questions:

1. Which cognitive biases do not support living together and instead strengthen polarisation?
2. How do young people build and experience the need for belonging?
3. What causes and contributes to polarisation among youth?
4. What do young people need to establish and sustain meaningful relationships?

Discussions were recorded, summarised and analysed thematically.

6. Findings

6.1 Youth values and trust

Across the values and competences survey (N = 51), respondents identified **safety and stability** (74.5%) and **freedom and human rights** (58.8%) as the most important values for today's youth. **Respect and tolerance** and **fairness and justice** were also frequently named. These perceptions align with European-level surveys indicating that young people prioritise human rights, peace, democracy, equality and sustainability.

However, surveys on belonging revealed **very low generalised trust**. Among Polish high-school students (N = 92), 83% disagreed with the statement that most people can be trusted, and 75% believed that others are not fair and may take advantage of them. While youth rely heavily on close relationships with **friends (82%)** and **family (78%)** for their sense of belonging, only 25% reported strong identification with online communities. Acceptance within groups was felt most strongly when respondents could **be themselves without fear of judgement (77%)**, when their opinions were **listened to (66%)**, and when they felt **supported (48%)**.

6.2 Belonging and relationships

Quantitative and qualitative data converge on the centrality of relationships and safe spaces. Young people describe belonging as rooted primarily in:

- close ties with friends and family;
- environments where they can express themselves authentically;
- groups where they are listened to and emotionally supported.

In focus groups, educators and youth workers observed a perceived **fragility of relationships:** it is easy for young people to leave a group and find new contacts online, which may reduce incentives to work through conflicts and develop long-term commitment. Many adolescents are described as "starved for contact", seeking safe, non-judgemental spaces (youth centres, informal meeting places) where they can simply be present.

Participants emphasised the importance of:

- shared goals and activities (projects, hobbies, scouting, sports, activism) as contexts where relationships grow organically;

- older peers and mentors as key figures for guidance, especially when family or school support is limited;
- time and gradual trust-building: young people need time, informal interaction and small-group settings before they feel ready to share personal experiences.

6.3 Cognitive biases, labelling and polarisation

Focus group participants reported that young people frequently adopt psychological or diagnostic **labels** (e.g., "ADHD kid", "borderline"), which quickly become identity markers. These labels can provide relief and understanding for some, but they also risk:

- reinforcing self-stigma and fixed identities;
- shaping others' expectations before genuine interpersonal contact occurs;
- dividing groups into categories of "normal" and "problematic".

Practitioners described youth judgements as often **sharp and black-and-white**, consistent with Haidt's account of dichotomous thinking and moral intuitionism. Group identities are formed rapidly; for example, class groupings (A, B, C) produced strong antagonisms within a few weeks. Social media further amplifies polarisation by:

- lowering the threshold for expressing extreme or emotionally charged views;
- creating conditions in which any topic can become polarised;
- providing visibility and status for radical or provocative positions.

Participants noted that young people sometimes support **charismatic political figures** whose positions contradict their declared values; style and emotional resonance can override ideological coherence. They also pointed to a lack of **common physical spaces** where diverse groups of youth can

meet informally, which reduces opportunities for cross-group contact and understanding.

6.4 Learning preferences and high-impact activities

Across surveys, young people consistently reported that they learn best from:

- **practical, real-world experiences and projects**, such as volunteering, organising events, sports training, creative tasks and long-term projects;
- **interaction and dialogue**, including group work, discussions and sharing opinions with peers;
- **emotionally engaging experiences**, such as youth exchanges or moments that "hit to the bone";
- **inspiring teachers and mentors** who explain clearly, show enthusiasm and adopt a friendly, supportive stance.

Self-directed learning (e.g., via YouTube, podcasts, blogs, AI tools) was valued, especially outside formal schooling, but did not replace the importance of human relationships and structured support. Repetition and structured practice were recognised as useful for certain subjects (e.g., languages, mathematics) but were rarely described as inspiring.

6.5 Prioritised competences

In the competence surveys (N = 51 and N = 32), respondents rated almost all listed competences as at least "rather important", but several clearly stood out as **top priorities**:

- **building firm relationships** (highest number of "very important" responses);
- **ability to work with emotions and empathy**;
- **ability to persist and overcome obstacles** (resilience);

- **ability to make quality decisions**;
- **ability to lead and support others**;
- **open communication**.

Team collaboration, creativity, ability to learn effectively and flexibility were rated as important but slightly less central. Organisational skills and critical thinking, while still valued, received more mixed responses and were perceived as less emotionally salient compared to relationship-centred competences.

When asked which characteristics best described themselves vs. their peers, young respondents tended to see themselves as:

- **friendly, loyal, ambitious, reflective and independent**,
- with relatively low importance given to popularity, image or simplistic answers.

By contrast, they perceived their peers as more:

- **image-driven, competitive, success- and popularity-oriented**,
- with less emphasis on loyalty, depth, self-awareness or critical thinking.

This gap suggests a perception of **misalignment** between one's own values (connection, loyalty, personal growth) and the broader peer culture (appearance, success, popularity).

7. Discussion

The findings paint a complex but coherent picture of young people's conditions for living together in a polarised, digital world. At a **values level**, youth in Europe largely endorse the normative core of democratic culture: human rights, equality, tolerance, peace and sustainability. At a **relational level**, they strongly value friendship, loyalty and meaningful relationships, and prioritise competences related to emotional intelligence, resilience and supportive leadership.

However, this value orientation coexists with:

- very **low generalised trust,**
- **fragmented and fragile belonging**,
- and **intense digital pressures** that facilitate polarisation and misinformation.

Cognitive biases (confirmation bias, emotional reasoning, dichotomous thinking) and moral intuitionism help explain why polarisation is so persistent: once group identities and emotions are activated, reasoning often serves to defend existing positions rather than to seek truth. Digital architectures amplify these tendencies by feeding users content aligned with their preferences and rewarding high-arousal, morally loaded messages. Young people, whose social lives increasingly unfold online, are particularly exposed to these influences.

At the same time, the evidence on belonging suggests that youth are not indifferent or cynical; rather, they are **cautious**. They invest deeply in small circles of friends and family while remaining sceptical of wider society. They seek safe spaces where they can be themselves and fear judgement, exclusion and exploitation. This combination of deep micro-level belonging and low macro-level trust is fertile ground for both solidarity and polarisation: it can generate strong in-group loyalty and mutual support, but also suspicion toward out-groups and institutions.

Educationally, young people's strong preference for **experiential, relational and emotionally engaging learning** contrasts with the continued dominance of **passive, content-heavy instruction** in many systems. While policies increasingly reference SEL, global citizenship and democratic competences, implementation often remains partial and constrained by testing pressures and overloaded curricula.

International models show that it is possible to integrate **empathy and SEL** into both curricula and school cultures in systematic ways. Denmark's Klas-

sens tid, CAT-Kit and cooperative practices, France's national empathy curriculum, the Roots of Empathy programme, the FRIENDS programme, and film-, theatre- and VR-based interventions provide concrete examples of how empathy, perspective-taking and prosocial behaviour can be cultivated with measurable results. Crucially, these models combine **structured programmes** with **cultural practices**—teacher role-modelling, restorative approaches, advisory time and community norms.

Our findings thus support a shift in perspective: the challenge is not to **invent new values**, but to **redesign educational environments and methods** so that existing democratic values and relational competences can be learned, practised and lived.

8. Implications for Educational Practice and Policy

Building on the literature and empirical results, several implications emerge for educational practice and policy.

First, social and emotional learning (SEL) and empathy should be integrated into the **core of curricula**, not treated as optional or peripheral. Experiences from Denmark, France, Canada and other contexts demonstrate that structured, evidence-based SEL can improve classroom climate, reduce bullying and support mental health. European initiatives such as PROMEHS, Hand in Hand, SEEVAL, BOOST and UPRIGHT, as well as frameworks like LifeComp and the RFCDC, provide conceptual and practical tools for implementation.

Second, education systems should recognise and connect **learning across formal, non-formal and informal contexts**. Youth work, arts and culture, volunteering and digital participation all provide rich opportunities for practi-

sing empathy, cooperation and active citizenship. Coherent strategies are needed to avoid fragmentation and to validate competences acquired outside formal schooling.

Third, learning should shift from **passive, content-heavy models to participatory, experiential and dialogical methods**. This includes:

- regular class times dedicated to reflection and dialogue (inspired by Klassens tid or French empathy lessons);
- experiential projects and service-learning that connect knowledge to real-world challenges;
- cooperative learning structures that foster peer support and shared responsibility;
- use of stories, films, VR and games to stimulate empathy and perspective-taking;
- structured opportunities to explore value conflicts and misinformation in a guided way.

Fourth, schools and youth organisations should be designed as **safe but challenging spaces**. Psychological safety—non-judgement, clear but fair rules, opportunities to be heard—is a precondition for deep learning and sharing. At the same time, learning to live together requires exposure to **discomfort, risk-taking and disagreement**. Educators should be trained to hold spaces where young people can disagree respectfully, confront other opinions, fail and try again, without fear of humiliation or exclusion.

Fifth, explicit work on **cognitive biases and digital/media literacy** should become part of education for living together. Learners need to understand how confirmation bias, emotional reasoning, group polarisation and algorithmic curation influence their perceptions and relationships. Media literacy programmes should be combined with values and SEL, so that critical thinking

does not become a purely adversarial or cynical stance but remains connected to empathy and respect.

Sixth, educators must be supported as **relational and ethical professionals**. Initial and in-service teacher education should include SEL, trauma-informed practices, nonviolent communication and facilitation of dialogue. AI and digital tools should be used strategically to free time for one-to-one and small-group interaction, rather than to replace human presence. Teacher wellbeing and collegial cultures that model empathy, cooperation and reflection are essential conditions for sustainable change.

Finally, **policy frameworks** at European and national levels should provide **sustained funding, guidance and evaluation** for SEL, empathy and democratic competence initiatives. Outcomes related to living together—belonging, prosocial behaviour, democratic engagement, reduction of bullying and exclusion—should be recognised and valued alongside academic achievement.

9. Conclusion

The evidence presented in this paper suggests that young people in Europe are not "lost" or fundamentally alienated from democratic values. On the contrary, many strongly endorse human rights, equality, relationships and personal growth. They are emotionally aware, self-reflective and motivated by meaning and future impact. At the same time, they live in environments marked by low generalised trust, fragmented belonging, polarising digital dynamics and educational systems still heavily oriented towards cognitive outcomes.

To strengthen the ability to live together in such a context, it is not enough to teach about values; education must **embody** those values in its structures, relationships and methods. This means integrating socio-emotional and democratic competences into the heart of curricula, recognising and con-

necting learning across all contexts, adopting participatory and experiential methods, working explicitly on cognitive biases and digital literacy, and empowering educators as relational professionals.

Empathy, belonging and critical awareness are neither purely innate traits nor purely cognitive skills. They are **learned, practised and negotiated** in concrete environments. By designing educational spaces where young people can experience safety and challenge, connection and difference, support and responsibility, we can move closer to an education that not only talks about living together, but actually helps make it possible.

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