



Navigating the Nexus: Educators' Perceptions of Populism's Impact on Secondary Education and the Imperative for Critical Pedagogy

Bob Barrett

Department of Education, American Public University, USA

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Abstract

The rise of contemporary populism presents complex challenges to democratic societies and their educational systems. This study moves beyond theoretical critiques to empirically investigate secondary school educators' perceptions of populism's impact on their work. It examines the perceived effects on curriculum, school climate, and student attitudes, and explores educators' sense of professional responsibility to foster critical thinking and media literacy as countermeasures. Employing a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design, data was collected from 355 secondary school educators in Germany, Poland, and Spain. Multiple regression analysis revealed that perceived exposure to populist discourse significantly predicted negative impacts on school climate and curriculum pressures. These perceived negative impacts, in turn, strongly predicted educators' sense of responsibility to implement critical pedagogy. However, the relationship between this felt responsibility and educators' self-efficacy was significantly moderated by perceived administrative support and access to professional development. The findings provide crucial empirical data on the challenges educators face and underscore the urgent need for targeted support systems to empower them as key actors in strengthening democratic resilience through critical education.

Keywords: Populism, secondary education, teachers' perceptions, school climate, critical pedagogy, media literacy, democratic resilience

1. Introduction

Populism, a political phenomenon characterized by the juxtaposition of a virtuous 'people' against corrupt elites and 'dangerous others,' has experienced a significant resurgence across the globe, reshaping political landscapes and public discourse

(Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). While its historical roots are deep, contemporary populism navigates and exploits the complexities of globalization, digital media, and societal anxieties, often challenging the foundational norms of liberal democracy, including the role of expert knowledge and established institutions (Brubaker, 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, provided a stark lens through which to examine these dynamics. The global health crisis created an environment of uncertainty and fear, which proved to be fertile ground for populist leaders who frequently questioned scientific consensus, downplayed threats, or framed public health measures as elitist impositions on popular freedom (Mounk, 2021). This period highlighted a critical tension inherent in much contemporary populist discourse: the conflict between appealing to popular sentiment and respecting evidence-based knowledge, particularly scientific expertise (Merkley, 2020).

Education stands at a critical nexus in this context. Schools are not merely passive sites for knowledge transmission but are fundamental institutions for shaping citizenship, fostering critical thinking, and socializing future generations into the norms and practices of democratic life (Biesta, 2020). Populist movements, however, often view formal education systems with suspicion, portraying them as bastions of liberal elite ideology, detached from the 'common sense' of the ordinary people. This suspicion can manifest in various ways, from direct political attempts to influence curriculum content—such as promoting nationalistic histories or challenging scientific theories like climate change—to a more subtle discrediting of teachers and academic experts. The overarching effect is the cultivation of an environment where emotional appeals and simplistic narratives gain traction over nuanced analysis and evidence-based reasoning.

Consequently, educators find themselves on the front lines of navigating the societal impacts of populism. They are tasked with upholding principles of academic integrity, fostering critical inquiry, and preparing students to engage constructively in diverse societies, often within a political climate that may devalue these very aims (Sant, 2019). This places them in a position of immense responsibility, requiring them to mediate between educational ideals and a frequently hostile socio-political reality. While theoretical analyses of populism's relationship with education are growing, there remains a significant gap in empirical research exploring how educators themselves perceive and experience these challenges in their daily practice. How do secondary school teachers perceive the influence of populist discourse seeping into their schools and classrooms? What specific impacts do they observe on curriculum, school climate, and student attitudes towards knowledge, authority, and diversity? Crucially, how do they conceptualize their professional responsibility in response to these perceived challenges, particularly regarding the cultivation of critical thinking and media literacy skills necessary for navigating a complex, often polarized information landscape (Mihailidis & Thevenin, 2013)?

This study aims to address this empirical gap. By employing a quantitative survey approach across three European Union member states—Germany, Poland, and

Spain—we investigate the perceptions of secondary school educators. The research seeks to quantify the extent to which they perceive populist narratives impacting their educational environment and to identify the factors that influence their sense of professional responsibility and self-efficacy in implementing critical pedagogical approaches as a potential countermeasure. By gathering data directly from educators, this research provides a grounded, practitioner-focused perspective on the challenges and opportunities for education in strengthening democratic resilience in an era marked by the pervasive influence of populism.

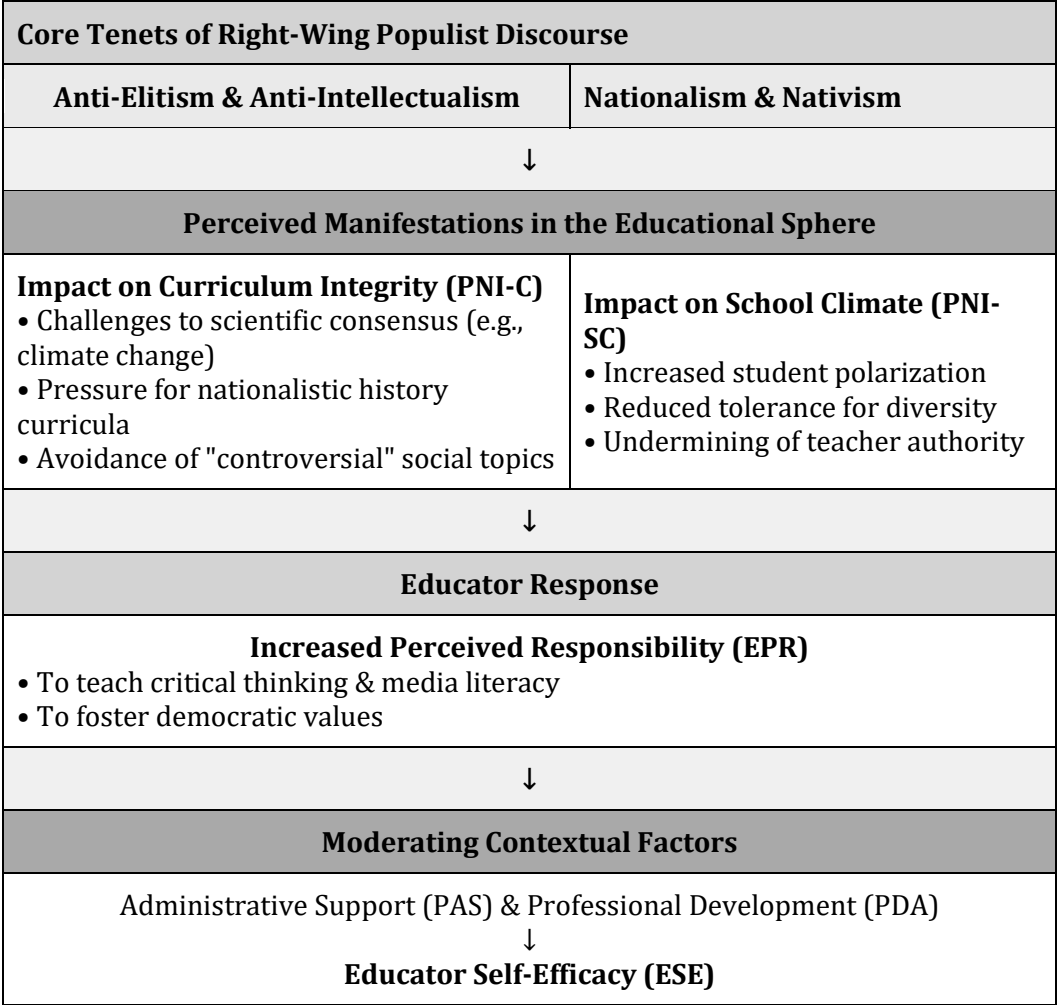
2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1. Defining Contemporary Populism in the European Context

To understand populism's impact on education, a precise conceptualization of the term is necessary. Populism is notoriously difficult to define, often described as a political style, a discourse, or an ideology (Brubaker, 2017). Following the influential work of Cas Mudde (2004), this study conceptualizes populism as a "thin-centered ideology" that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups: 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite.' This ideology posits that politics should be an expression of the **volonté générale** (general will) of the people. This framework is "thin" because it has limited ideological content on its own and must attach itself to "thicker" host ideologies, such as nationalism, socialism, or liberalism.

In the contemporary European context, the most prominent and impactful form has been right-wing nationalist populism, which combines the core populist antagonism with nativism (an ideology which holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group) and authoritarianism (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). This study focuses specifically on the perceived effects of this variant of populism, as its key tenets directly intersect with the functions of public education. We identify three core tenets of this populist discourse that pose direct challenges to education. First, **anti-elitism and anti-intellectualism** manifest as a deep-seated skepticism towards experts, intellectuals, and established institutions, including universities and schools (Merkley, 2020). Second, **nativism and nationalism** promote a vision of a homogenous national identity, often leading to pressure for curricula that emphasize a celebratory, uncritical national history while marginalizing minority perspectives and global interconnectedness. Third, the **appeal to 'common sense' and emotion over evidence** prioritizes simplistic narratives and affective responses over complex, evidence-based reasoning, directly undermining the educational goal of fostering critical thinking. These tenets form the conceptual basis for our investigation into educators' perceptions.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Populist Discourse Impacting Education



**Source: Conceptual model developed by the author.*

2.2. The Educational Frontline: Curriculum, Climate, and Criticality

The friction between populism and education is most palpable in the domains of curriculum and school climate. Populist movements often seek to reshape the curriculum into a tool for nationalist indoctrination, prioritizing a simplified and often mythologized version of national history while marginalizing critical perspectives and the histories of minority groups. This extends to the sciences, where populist skepticism of expertise can fuel challenges to established scientific consensus on topics such as climate change and evolution, creating pressure on science educators (Merkley, 2020). Beyond formal content, the divisive ‘us vs. them’ rhetoric central to populism can permeate the school environment, potentially increasing social

tensions, fostering intolerance towards minority groups, and undermining efforts to cultivate an inclusive and democratic school climate (Sant, 2019). This creates an environment where reasoned debate is replaced by affective polarization. Based on this literature, we first hypothesize that educators who perceive greater exposure to populist discourse influencing their professional context will also perceive greater negative impacts within their schools.

H1: Perceived exposure to populist discourse influencing education will be positively associated with perceived negative impacts on (a) curriculum integrity and (b) school climate.

2.3. The Educator's Role: Critical Pedagogy and Media Literacy as a Response

In response to these challenges, educational theorists argue that educators have a crucial role in fostering democratic resilience (Biesta, 2020). This role transcends mere knowledge transmission, requiring the active cultivation of students' abilities to critically analyze information, discern credible sources, understand diverse perspectives, and engage in reasoned deliberation. Two pedagogical approaches are central to this endeavor. First, Critical Pedagogy, rooted in the work of Paulo Freire, aims to empower students to question power structures, challenge dominant narratives, and become active agents of social change. In the face of populism, it encourages students to deconstruct simplistic 'us vs. them' narratives and analyze the underlying interests and power dynamics at play (Sant, 2019). Second, Media Literacy Education is essential in an era of digital misinformation. It equips students with the skills to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media, fostering a critical understanding of how messages are constructed, how bias operates, and how to verify sources (Hobbs, 2010). This is particularly vital for countering the manipulative techniques often employed in populist rhetoric (Bulger & Davison, 2018). Recent European research underscores the necessity of integrating media literacy across the curriculum to combat the pervasive threat of disinformation (Šramová & Pavelka, 2023). Educators, guided by their professional ethics to foster informed and engaged citizens, are uniquely positioned to implement these approaches. We therefore hypothesize that as educators perceive greater negative impacts from populism, their sense of professional duty to respond will intensify.

H2: Perceived negative impacts of populism on (a) curriculum integrity and (b) school climate will be positively associated with educators' perceived responsibility to implement critical pedagogy and media literacy.

2.4. From Responsibility to Action: The Role of Self-Efficacy and Context

An educator's sense of responsibility, however, does not automatically translate into action. The ability and willingness to implement critical pedagogies are heavily influenced by other factors. Bandura's (1997) concept of self-efficacy—the belief in one's capability to execute specific actions—is highly relevant. An educator must feel confident in their ability to teach critical thinking and media literacy effectively,

particularly when navigating politically sensitive topics that may challenge dominant community views or invite external criticism (Journell, 2017). This confidence is not developed in a vacuum. Contextual factors within the school environment play a decisive role. The presence or absence of administrative support can either empower or constrain an educator's pedagogical choices. School leaders who publicly defend academic freedom and support teachers addressing controversial issues create an enabling environment (Loonstra, 2021). Conversely, a lack of support can lead to self-censorship and pedagogical reticence. Furthermore, access to relevant, high-quality professional development is crucial for equipping teachers with the necessary skills, resources, and pedagogical strategies to teach these complex topics effectively (Bulger & Davison, 2018). Therefore, we hypothesize that self-efficacy is a key outcome of perceived responsibility, but that this relationship is moderated by the institutional context.

H3: Educators' perceived responsibility will be positively associated with their self-efficacy in teaching critical thinking and media literacy.

H4: Contextual factors, namely (a) perceived administrative support and (b) access to professional development, will positively moderate the relationship between perceived responsibility and self-efficacy.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study utilized a quantitative, non-experimental, cross-sectional survey design. This approach was chosen as it is well-suited for capturing a snapshot of educators' perceptions, attitudes, and reported experiences across a large and geographically diverse sample at a single point in time. The design allows for the examination of associations between variables and the testing of the hypothesized predictive relationships outlined in our theoretical framework. Data was collected via an anonymous online questionnaire distributed between March and May 2024, ensuring participant confidentiality and encouraging candid responses.

3.2. Sample and Sampling Strategy

Participants were secondary school educators (teaching grades typically corresponding to ages 12-18) currently employed in public or state-funded schools in three EU member states: Germany, Poland, and Spain. These countries were purposively selected to represent different regions of Europe with varying recent experiences of populist influence. Germany represents a stable Western European democracy grappling with a resurgent far-right; Poland represents a Central European nation that has experienced significant populist governance and democratic backsliding; and Spain represents a Southern European country with more recent populist movements on both the left and right, alongside strong regional political dynamics.

A multi-pronged recruitment strategy combining purposive and snowball sampling was employed. Initial contact was made with major national teacher unions and professional associations in each country. These organizations were asked to distribute the survey link via their member newsletters, email lists, and closed social media forums. This purposive step aimed to reach a broad and relevant professional audience. Subsequently, a snowball sampling technique was employed, where a closing message in the survey invited respondents to share the survey link with colleagues in their professional networks. This approach helped to expand the reach of the survey beyond the formal membership of the initial partner organizations. Participation was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants at the beginning of the survey. An a priori power analysis using G*Power indicated that a sample size of approximately 300 would be sufficient to detect medium effect sizes in a multiple regression model with several predictors, ensuring adequate statistical power. An initial pool of 410 responses was received. After screening for completeness (minimum 90% completion) and validity (removing responses with invariant patterns or unusually rapid completion times), the final analytic sample comprised N=355 educators. The demographic and professional characteristics of the sample are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Respondent Demographics (N=355)

Variable	Category / Statistic	Value
Country	Germany	115 (32.4%)
	Poland	125 (35.2%)
	Spain	115 (32.4%)
Gender	Female	218 (61.4%)
	Male	134 (37.7%)
	Other/Prefer not to say	3 (0.9%)
Age (Years)	Mean (SD)	42.1 (9.8)
	Range	24 - 65+
Years of Teaching Experience	Mean (SD)	15.6 (8.5)
	0-5 years	65 (18.3%)
	6-15 years	148 (41.7%)
	16-25 years	92 (25.9%)
	26+ years	50 (14.1%)
Primary Subject Area	Humanities/Social Sciences	135 (38.0%)
	STEM (Science, Tech, Eng, Math)	102 (28.7%)
	Languages	68 (19.2%)
	Arts/Physical Education/Other	50 (14.1%)
School Location	Urban/Suburban	258 (72.7%)
	Rural	97 (27.3%)

Variable	Category / Statistic	Value
Political Orientation	Mean (SD) (1=Left, 7=Right)	3.75 (1.55)

3.3. Instrumentation and Measures

The survey instrument was developed in English and then translated into German, Polish, and Spanish by professional translators, followed by back-translation to ensure conceptual equivalence. The questionnaire was pilot-tested with a group of 15 educators (five from each country) for clarity, relevance, and length, leading to minor wording adjustments. All perceptual items used a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree/Not at all, 7 = Strongly Agree/To a very great extent). The following multi-item scales were constructed:

Perceived Exposure to Populist Discourse (PEPD): This 5-item scale, developed for this study, measured educators' perception of encountering populist themes influencing their professional context. The items were derived from the key tenets of populism identified in the literature (Mudde, 2004; Brubaker, 2017), such as anti-elitism and nationalism. Sample items included: "I frequently encounter political discourse critical of 'educational elites' or 'academic experts'," and "There is noticeable pressure to emphasize national identity over global perspectives in the curriculum." The scale demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .84$).

Perceived Negative Impact - Curriculum (PNI-C): This 4-item scale measured perceived negative effects on curriculum content and academic standards. Sample items included: "I feel pressure to avoid controversial topics relevant to social studies/science," and "There are challenges to teaching established scientific consensus (e.g., climate change, evolution) in my school/district." (Cronbach's $\alpha = .81$).

Perceived Negative Impact - School Climate (PNI-SC): This 4-item scale measured perceived negative effects on the school's social environment. Sample items included: "I observe increased polarization among students based on political or social views," and "There is less tolerance for diverse perspectives among students compared to previous years." (Cronbach's $\alpha = .86$).

Educators' Perceived Responsibility (EPR): This 6-item scale measured the sense of professional duty to teach critical thinking and media literacy. Sample items included: "It is my professional responsibility to help students critically evaluate political claims," and "Fostering critical thinking is essential for protecting democratic values." (Cronbach's $\alpha = .90$).

Educators' Self-Efficacy (ESE): This 6-item scale, adapted from existing teacher self-efficacy instruments and grounded in Bandura's (1997) theory, measured confidence in teaching critical thinking and media literacy. Sample items included: "I am confident in my ability to facilitate classroom discussions on controversial topics

respectfully," and "I feel well-equipped to teach students how to analyze media sources for credibility." (Cronbach's $\alpha = .89$).

Contextual Factors: Two scales measured perceived institutional support. Perceived Administrative Support (PAS) was a 3-item scale (e.g., "My school administration supports teachers who address controversial social/political issues in class"; $\alpha = .79$). Professional Development Access (PDA) was a 3-item scale (e.g., "I have had access to relevant training on teaching media literacy/critical thinking"; $\alpha = .82$).

Control Variables: Demographic and professional variables were collected to account for potential confounding factors, including Country, Gender, Age, Years of Teaching Experience, Primary Subject Area, School Location (Urban/Rural), and self-reported Political Orientation on a 7-point scale.

3.4. Data Analysis Strategy

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 29. The process began with data cleaning and descriptive analysis. Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to examine the bivariate relationships between all key variables. To test the study's hypotheses, a series of hierarchical multiple regression analyses were performed. This method allows for the assessment of the unique contribution of predictors by entering them into the model in sequential blocks. For all regression models, the control variables were entered in the first block to statistically control for their influence. For H1, PEPD was entered in the second block to predict PNI-C and PNI-SC. For H2, PNI-C and PNI-SC were entered in a subsequent block to predict EPR. For H3 and H4, EPR, PAS, and PDA were entered to predict ESE. To test for moderation (H4), interaction terms (e.g., $EPR \times PAS$) were created by centering the predictor variables to reduce multicollinearity and then entering these terms in a final block. The significance of the R^2 change at each step was examined to determine the explanatory power of the added variables.

3.5. Ethical Considerations and Researcher Positionality

The study received ethical approval from the author's institutional review board. All participants were provided with a detailed information sheet explaining the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, and the measures taken to ensure anonymity and data confidentiality. No personally identifiable information was collected. The author, as a researcher in the field of democratic and critical education, acknowledges an inherent interest in the study's topic. This positionality brings an insider's perspective to the research questions but also a potential for bias. To mitigate this, a quantitative survey design with anonymized data collection was deliberately chosen to minimize the direct influence of researcher interpretation on the data itself. The analysis relies on statistical relationships rather than qualitative interpretation, ensuring a degree of objectivity in the reporting of results.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Table 2 presents the means, standard deviations, and Pearson correlation matrix for the primary study variables. On average, educators reported moderate levels of perceived exposure to populist discourse influencing education ($M=4.15$, $SD=1.28$). They perceived slightly higher negative impacts on school climate ($M=3.88$, $SD=1.35$) than on curriculum ($M=3.45$, $SD=1.41$). A key finding from the descriptive data is the high level of educators' perceived responsibility (EPR) to teach critical thinking and media literacy ($M=5.75$, $SD=1.05$), which was coupled with a moderately high level of self-efficacy (ESE) in this area ($M=5.10$, $SD=1.12$). The correlation matrix provides initial support for the study's hypotheses. Perceived exposure (PEPD) was significantly and positively correlated with perceived negative impacts on curriculum (PNI-C, $r=.48$, $p<.001$) and school climate (PNI-SC, $r=.53$, $p<.001$). In turn, both PNI-C ($r=.41$, $p<.001$) and PNI-SC ($r=.46$, $p<.001$) were strongly and positively correlated with educators' perceived responsibility (EPR). Furthermore, EPR showed a very strong positive correlation with self-efficacy (ESE, $r=.62$, $p<.001$). Finally, the contextual factors of administrative support (PAS) and professional development (PDA) were both significantly and positively correlated with self-efficacy.

Table 2: Means, Standard Deviations, and Pearson Correlation Matrix (N=355)

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. PEPD	4.15	1.28	(.84)						
2. PNI-C	3.45	1.41	.48**	(.81)					
3. PNI-SC	3.88	1.35	.53**	.59**	(.86)				
4. EPR	5.75	1.05	.21**	.41**	.46**	(.90)			
5. ESE	5.10	1.12	.15**	.28**	.33**	.62**	(.89)		
6. PAS	4.65	1.40	.09	.12*	.15**	.25**	.35**	(.79)	
7. PDA	4.20	1.55	.11*	.18**	.20**	.31**	.40**	.42**	(.82)

*Note: Cronbach's α reliabilities in parentheses on the diagonal. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$ (2-tailed).*

4.2. Hypothesis Testing: Hierarchical Regression Analysis

A series of hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted to test the hypothesized relationships. The results are summarized in Table 3. In support of H1, after controlling for demographic and contextual variables, perceived exposure to populist discourse (PEPD) was a strong, significant positive predictor of both perceived negative impacts on curriculum (PNI-C, $\beta = .46$, $p < .001$) and perceived negative impacts on school climate (PNI-SC, $\beta = .51$, $p < .001$). This indicates that educators who report more frequent encounters with populist themes in their professional environment also report more significant negative consequences within their schools.

To test H2, educators' perceived responsibility (EPR) was regressed on the perceived impact variables, controlling for demographics and initial exposure. The results showed that both PNI-C ($\beta = .28, p < .001$) and PNI-SC ($\beta = .34, p < .001$) were significant positive predictors of EPR. Together, these variables accounted for a substantial portion of the variance in perceived responsibility ($\Delta R^2 = .22$). This supports H2, demonstrating that educators who perceive greater harm to their curriculum and school climate feel a stronger professional obligation to respond pedagogically.

Finally, the model predicting educators' self-efficacy (ESE) provided support for H3 and H4. As hypothesized in H3, perceived responsibility (EPR) was a very strong positive predictor of self-efficacy ($\beta = .58, p < .001$). Beyond this, both perceived administrative support (PAS, $\beta = .18, p < .001$) and professional development access (PDA, $\beta = .22, p < .001$) were also significant positive main effect predictors of ESE. Most importantly, the moderation analysis supported H4. The interaction term between EPR and PAS was significant ($\beta = .11, p < .05$), as was the interaction between EPR and PDA ($\beta = .14, p < .01$). These significant interactions indicate that the positive relationship between feeling responsible and feeling efficacious is stronger for educators who perceive higher levels of administrative support and have greater access to relevant professional development.

Table 3: Summary of Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analyses

Criterion Variable	Predictor Block	Predictor	β	R ² Change	Model F
PNI-C	Block 1 (Controls)	(Demographics)		.07*	3.55*
	Block 2	PEPD	.46***	.20***	28.1***
PNI-SC	Block 1 (Controls)	(Demographics)		.08*	4.11*
	Block 2	PEPD	.51***	.25***	35.8***
EPR	Block 1 (Controls)	(Demographics)		.10**	5.20**
	Block 2	PEPD	.06	.00	11.5***
	Block 3	PNI-C	.28***		
		PNI-SC	.34***	.22***	21.3***
ESE	Block 1 (Controls)	(Demographics)		.12**	6.35**
	Block 2	EPR	.58***	.36***	55.1***
	Block 3 (Main Effects)	PAS	.18***		
		PDA	.22***	.09***	48.7***

Criterion Variable	Predictor Block	Predictor	β	R ² Change	Model F
	Block 4 (Interactions)	EPR x PAS	.11*		
		EPR x PDA	.14**	.03**	41.2***
<i>Note: β = Standardized Beta Coefficient from the final model block for that predictor. Controls included Country, Gender, Age, Yrs Experience, Subject, Location, Pol. Orient. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.</i>					

5. Discussion

5.1. Interpretation of Findings

This study sought to empirically investigate secondary educators' perceptions of populism's influence on their professional environment and their perceived role in responding through critical pedagogy. The findings paint a clear and compelling picture: educators across Germany, Poland, and Spain perceive populist discourse as a tangible force with negative consequences within their schools. This perception, in turn, galvanizes a strong sense of professional obligation to counter these effects by fostering critical thinking and media literacy. However, their confidence in executing this vital democratic function is significantly shaped by the level of institutional support they receive.

The strong, positive association between perceived exposure to populist discourse and perceived negative impacts on both curriculum and school climate (H1 supported) provides robust empirical validation for existing theoretical concerns. Educators are not viewing populism as an abstract political phenomenon detached from their daily work. Rather, they report experiencing its effects directly, whether through pressures on what they teach—particularly concerning science or diverse social perspectives—or through observing increased polarization and reduced tolerance among their students. This suggests that the broader political culture of a society permeates the schoolhouse walls, making the school a microcosm of wider societal tensions. The curriculum becomes a battleground for national identity, and the classroom becomes a space where societal divisions are reflected and sometimes amplified.

Crucially, the perception of these negative impacts significantly predicts educators' sense of professional responsibility to act (H2 supported). This finding is perhaps the most hopeful aspect of the study. It suggests a powerful intrinsic motivation among educators to uphold democratic and educational values. Faced with what they perceive as threats to academic integrity and social cohesion, teachers feel a stronger duty to equip students with the critical tools needed to navigate a complex world. This aligns with theories of critical pedagogy that position educators as transformative intellectuals who have an ethical responsibility to foster social justice and democratic

citizenship. They see the teaching of critical thinking not merely as a pedagogical choice, but as a necessary democratic imperative in an era of misinformation and polarization (Šramová & Pavelka, 2023).

However, the pathway from responsibility to confident action is not straightforward. While responsibility strongly predicted self-efficacy (H3 supported), the moderation analyses (H4 supported) revealed the critical importance of the school context. The positive link between feeling responsible and feeling efficacious was significantly stronger for educators who perceived high levels of administrative support and had access to relevant professional development. This highlights a potentially debilitating "efficacy gap." Many educators may feel a profound duty to address these complex issues but lack the confidence or institutional backing to do so effectively. Teaching critical thinking about politically charged topics is inherently risky; it can invite criticism from parents, community members, or political actors (Journell, 2017). Without the explicit and tangible support of school leaders and the practical skills honed through professional development, an educator's sense of responsibility may curdle into anxiety and inaction, leaving them feeling isolated and unable to fulfill what they see as their core professional duty.

5.2. Theoretical Implications

This study makes several contributions to the theoretical literature. First, by quantifying educators' perceptions, it moves beyond normative arguments and theoretical assertions to provide empirical evidence of populism's perceived influence within schools. It demonstrates a tangible mechanism through which macro-level political discourses can impact micro-level educational processes, affecting curriculum, climate, and pedagogy. Second, the study integrates concepts from political science (populism), educational theory (critical pedagogy), and social psychology (self-efficacy) into a coherent, testable model. This interdisciplinary approach enriches our understanding of the complex interplay between political context and educational practice. The findings underscore the role of educators not just as implementers of policy but as active agents who interpret and respond to socio-political challenges within their professional sphere. The strong link between perceived threat and perceived responsibility resonates with theories of professional identity and ethical commitment, suggesting that challenging contexts can activate and reinforce core professional values. Finally, the significant role of self-efficacy and contextual moderators reinforces the applicability of social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1997) to understanding teacher agency, especially under conditions of political and social pressure.

5.3. Practical Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings yield significant and actionable implications for educational stakeholders. For educational policymakers and school administrators, the primary takeaway is the need to recognize that populist discourse is not external noise but is perceived by educators as an active force shaping the school environment.

Acknowledging these challenges is the first step toward developing supportive strategies. This involves creating policies that explicitly protect academic freedom and defend educators who engage students in critical inquiry on controversial topics. School leaders, in particular, must act as "institutional buffers," shielding their staff from undue political pressure and fostering a school culture where intellectual courage is valued and supported.

For providers of teacher education and professional development, the results highlight an urgent need. Educators require ongoing, high-quality training that moves beyond the theory of critical thinking and media literacy to the practicalities of implementation. This training should focus on pedagogical strategies for managing sensitive classroom discussions, addressing misinformation confidently, and designing curricula that foster critical consciousness. As our data shows, such professional development is not a luxury; it is a direct and significant predictor of teacher self-efficacy. Investing in these programs is an investment in the resilience of the education system itself.

Finally, the study implies a need for greater solidarity and networking among educators. Teacher unions and professional associations can play a key role in creating platforms for educators to share experiences, strategies, and resources for navigating these challenges. By fostering a sense of shared purpose and collective efficacy, such networks can help mitigate the feelings of isolation that educators may experience when confronting these issues alone. Listening to the voices of teachers, who possess invaluable on-the-ground insights, is essential for informing more effective policy and support mechanisms from the bottom up.

6. Conclusion

6.1. Principal Contribution

This study provides much-needed empirical evidence on the educational frontline in an age of resurgent populism. Its principal contribution is the quantitative demonstration of a clear pathway: educators perceive populist discourse as negatively impacting their schools, this perception significantly strengthens their sense of professional responsibility to foster critical thinking and media literacy, and the translation of this responsibility into confident action is heavily dependent on institutional support. The research reveals a critical bottleneck, where the laudable commitment of educators is either enabled or constrained by the administrative and professional context in which they work. This highlights that while educators may represent a crucial line of defense in cultivating critical and resilient democratic citizens, they cannot be expected to do so effectively without robust institutional backing. The findings issue a clear call to educational systems to move beyond rhetoric and actively empower their teachers to fulfill this vital democratic role.

6.2. Limitations and Future Research

This study, like all research, has limitations. Its cross-sectional nature prevents causal claims; the relationships identified are correlational, although the hypothesized directions are theoretically grounded. The reliance on self-report measures may be subject to social desirability bias, though the assurance of anonymity was intended to mitigate this. While the sample was drawn from three distinct European countries, it is not a representative sample of all European educators, and thus the findings' generalizability should be approached with caution. The measures of populism's influence were perceptual, and future research could benefit from incorporating objective measures, such as analyses of curriculum policy changes or documented incidents of political pressure.

Future research should build upon these findings in several directions. Longitudinal designs are needed to track changes in educators' perceptions and practices over time, potentially linking them to specific political events or policy shifts. Mixed-methods approaches, combining large-scale surveys with in-depth qualitative interviews or ethnographic case studies, could provide richer, more nuanced insights into the specific challenges educators face and the creative strategies they employ to overcome them. Comparative studies across more diverse national contexts, including outside of Europe, would be invaluable for understanding how different political systems and populist manifestations interact with educational institutions. Finally, and most urgently, research is needed to examine the other side of the equation: the actual impact of these critical pedagogical interventions on students' susceptibility to populist narratives and their development of democratic competencies.

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