

“Beyond the tale”: Teaching experiences in Spain, Argentina, and Chile on the literary mediation of controversial issues in Primary and Secondary Education

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Abstract

This article examines how twenty-three Language and Literature teachers in Primary and Secondary Education in Spain, Argentina, and Chile incorporate literary texts that address socially controversial issues, as well as the tensions that arise during this process of pedagogical mediation. Drawing on a phenomenological design with a socio-critical approach, data were collected through field diaries, semi-structured interviews, and discussion groups. The analysis, supported by MAXQDA 24 software, revealed that the inclusion of controversial content in the selection, curricular integration, and didactic treatment of literary texts and works is grounded in three key principles: an ethical commitment linked to social justice, normative legitimacy derived from official curricula, and the educational potential inherent in fostering critical thinking and empathy. Teaching practices are primarily structured around the careful selection of materials and the organization of dialogue through specific protocols. These strategies are further enhanced by the use of multimodal multimedia resources, collaborations with other professionals (such as library committees or co-teaching experiences), and planned communication with families. Moreover, teacher self-care emerges as a persistent need throughout the process. The findings underscore the importance of preserving the integrity of literary texts, establishing a safe dialogic scaffold within the classroom, and building institutional support networks as essential conditions for addressing controversy without undermining the critical dimension of reading.

Keywords: *literary mediation, controversial issues, literary education, teaching strategies, teacher training.*

Introduction

Contemporary children's and young adult literature is currently experiencing, on the one hand, a notable editorial expansion, with works explicitly addressing socially complex issues such as gender-based violence, structural racism, and non-normative family structures. On the other hand, there is a growing perception among teachers that schools have become spaces under constant public scrutiny, pressured by polarizing discourses and intersecting forms of surveillance. This tension is far from homogeneous; rather, it takes on distinct characteristics depending on the geographical context. In Spain, Argentina, and Chile, for instance, official educational frameworks

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uphold inclusive and democratic values, yet their implementation is shaped by the specific cultural dispositions of school communities and by the often-fragile institutional support available to teachers.

In the Spanish context, over 70% of Primary Education teachers report lacking specific training for the pedagogical treatment of controversial topics, despite attributing significant educational value to such content for the development and acquisition of critical thinking skills (López & Felices de la Fuente, 2023). In Chile, the teaching of recent historical events is influenced by students' emotional connections and a highly polarized social environment (Cavieres-Fernández & Villalón, 2024). Specific content areas, such as the integration of a gender perspective into reading practices, face barriers due to the lack of teacher training and methodological tools-factors that hinder their systematic implementation, despite being cross-cutting themes (Canett et al., 2021). These scenarios confirm that the treatment of literary controversy goes far beyond the mere selection of texts: it is embedded in a broad array of pedagogical, formative, institutional, and emotional factors that directly shape the teaching experience.

At the international level, academic interest in controversial issues has been steadily increasing within the field of Social Studies education. However, when attention shifts toward the specific domain of literary education, scholarly output remains incipient. European research highlights that normative ambiguity and fear of conflict with families and school communities act as deterrents to the inclusion of curricular content that challenges heteronormative narratives or hegemonic ethnic discourses and imaginaries (Skura et al., 2024). Similarly, studies conducted in the Swedish context suggest that the feasibility of addressing a sensitive topic in the classroom depends less on the content itself and more on the strength of the teacher-student relationship and the existence of stable dialogic protocols (Larsson & Ledman, 2025). Nonetheless, these studies primarily focus on disciplines such as History or Social Studies (Darolia, 2020; Brownell & Rashid, 2020; Shuttleworth et al., 2018). It remains unknown whether their findings are applicable to Literature education, where the aesthetic, ethical, and political dimensions of the text often converge-and sometimes collide (Ortega-Sánchez, 2023).

Research has underscored the potential of narrative to foster empathic identification and ethical judgment (San Martín & Ortega-Sánchez, 2022). However, much of this literature is grounded in specific teaching experiences and rarely explores the tensions that arise when justifying these choices to families or supervisory bodies. In parallel, academic production in Spanish has tended

to prioritize the question of which titles are suitable for addressing values such as gender equality or family diversity, while sidelining the analysis of mediation processes that underpin critical reading in the classroom. In this regard, Hernández (2020) argues that many proposals rely on a "safe literary canon," avoiding the hermeneutic conflicts that emerge when texts are considered from the perspective of plural voices or alternative identities. This tendency seems to indicate that, despite the growing number of publications on children's literature and its didactics, aesthetic or psychopedagogical approaches are often prioritized over socio-critical or strictly literary ones. As a result, we may know what is recommended to be read and which factors influence that selection (Ortega-Sánchez, 2023), but we still lack sufficient evidence to understand how resistance, emotions, and ethical dilemmas triggered by literary texts are pedagogically managed.

Some studies offer intermediate proposals by articulating dialogic reading, interculturality, and citizenship education (Huh & Suh, 2017; Rapanta et al., 2020). These works demonstrate that literary conversation, when structured around equitable participation, enables students to deconstruct the discourses of domination embedded in narratives (López-Valero et al., 2025). However, these studies do not focus on the political nature of selecting certain literary works or texts, nor do they address the institutional or community pressures faced by those who introduce such texts into the literature classroom.

In this vein, one largely unexplored area concerns the emotional dimension of teaching controversial topics in literary education. Research on the teaching of History suggests that students' emotional connection to certain events significantly shapes the intensity and depth of classroom debate (Ortega-Sánchez, 2022). If we apply this logic to the field of literature, it is plausible to assume that the fictional nature of texts, by directly appealing to students' sensitivity, may intensify emotional responses, thereby generating additional tensions for teachers. As a result, there is a need for further empirical evidence on how teachers experience these tensions and what resources might be implemented to preserve both the integrity of the literary text and the emotional stability of the classroom group. This challenge is compounded by a structural limitation: the lack of institutional spaces for teacher care and shared reflection.

In recent years, social studies education aimed at fostering social justice and democratic citizenship has evolved toward more comprehensive, reflective, and contextually grounded approaches. In this regard, the promotion of critical reflection for social transformation, self-critique, and action toward equity and social justice (Mills et al., 2021); the development and acquisition of social and

civic competencies for democratic participation (active and critical citizenship); the critical analysis of social issues; and the advancement of curricular social justice (Hermans & Bartels, 2021; Sefton-Green, 2021; Themelis & Hsu, 2020) encounter significant resistance within contemporary educational policies and neoliberal contexts, which hinder the implementation of critical pedagogies (Ashbridge et al., 2021; Pais & Costa, 2020). Likewise, the need to strengthen both initial and ongoing teacher education in critical and democratic methodologies is widely acknowledged (Gorski & Dalton, 2020; Franch, 2020). Within this framework, critical literary education oriented toward social justice, democratic citizenship, and, consequently, the necessary curricular inclusion of controversial issues in its teaching must advance toward the development of reflective, active, and socially engaged practices, alongside teacher training and curriculum development aligned with the threefold legitimization of teaching controversial issues: ethical commitment, normative-curricular endorsement, and formative value (critical thinking).

A review of the specialized literature reveals three substantial gaps. First, the limited attention given to processes of literary mediation in comparison to more established curricular areas. Second, the scarcity of comparative studies that articulate educational realities as diverse as those of Spain, Argentina, and Chile, where progressive legislation intersects with highly unequal sociocultural contexts. Third, the absence of research that places teachers' lived experiences, didactic stances, and subjectivities at the center of the analysis, as key elements for understanding decisions related to the selection, contextualization, and discussion of literary texts that address socio-moral controversies. These gaps hinder not only the development of consistent pedagogical guidelines but also the design of training policies that empower teachers to sustain critical and emotionally sustainable reading practices. Accordingly, our review is selective and transdisciplinary: it foregrounds scholarship from Social Studies to scaffold a nascent field in literary education and motivates the study's design and research questions to directly address these three gaps. Thus, rather than attempting an exhaustive review of adjacent domains, it seems advisable to adopt a focused and integrative framework, consistent with the empirical objectives of the initial studies on this research problem and with the emerging nature of the field in literary education.

In this context, the present study offers an integrated analysis of the didactic stances, dilemmas, strategies, and emerging tensions related to the potential curricular inclusion and pedagogical treatment of controversial issues in the teaching of Literature in Primary and Secondary Education

in Spain, Argentina, and Chile. It aims to deepen the understanding of teachers' professional and subjective experience, including beliefs, emotions, and degrees of institutional autonomy, regarding the presence or exclusion of controversy in the classroom. This objective translates into the need to identify the ethical, normative, and pedagogical justifications that support or hinder the inclusion of specific literary texts; to describe mediation practices; and to explore both internal and external tensions that shape these practices. Ultimately, the study seeks to construct an interpretive framework that may inform current curricular regulations and provide a foundation, grounded in teachers' voices, for the development of training initiatives committed to addressing the social controversies of our time.

These objectives therefore seek to provide the first empirical evidence on teaching experiences with controversial issues specifically addressed within the field of literary education in Spain, Argentina, and Chile, with the aim of addressing a clearly identifiable gap in the literature. Consistent with these objectives, this study poses the following research questions:

RQ1. What ethical, regulatory, and pedagogical justifications support or constrain the potential curricular inclusion of certain controversial literary texts in the teaching of Literature in Primary and Secondary Education in Spain, Argentina, and Chile?

RQ2. How are the mediation practices that structure the didactic treatment of controversial issues, including classroom dialogue and the selection/adaptation of materials, implemented in the teaching of Literature in Primary and Secondary Education in Spain, Argentina, and Chile?

RQ3. What internal tensions (beliefs, emotions, and margins of institutional autonomy) and external tensions (institutional/community) influence these practices and the presence or exclusion of controversy in the classroom in Primary and Secondary Education in Spain, Argentina, and Chile?

Literary mediation, as addressed in RQ2, is operationally understood as the ensemble of teaching practices (tactics, resources, and alliances) that structure the didactic treatment of controversy in the classroom (including the selection/adaptation of materials, dialogical protocols, and interactional framings) (Bandeira, 2021; Xirofotou, 2025). The analysis is stratified by educational level (Primary/Secondary) and by country (Spain, Argentina, and Chile), under the methodological assumption that the country functions as a contextual moderator of the relationships among categories, thereby preserving pattern convergences as well as observed divergences.

Regarding the content of the controversial issues addressed, and in coherence with RQ1, the study does not rely on a priori inventories but instead employs a curricular eligibility criterion grounded in the justificatory triad of ethical commitment, regulatory support, and formative value. This anchors the selection of texts and topics to curricular legitimation within each national context, thereby avoiding ex ante homogenizations (Cassar et al., 2023).

Finally, the manner in which mediation is articulated is conceived (again, from the perspective of RQ2) as analytically defined and operationalized repertoires of practice, whose modulation is interpreted in light of RQ3 through internal tensions (beliefs, emotions, margins of institutional autonomy) and external tensions (institutional/community). Triangulation of techniques and theoretical saturation ensure the traceability and rigor of the analysis.

Method

Participants

The study involved 23 Primary and Secondary Education teachers of Language and Literature from various educational institutions in Spain, Argentina, and Chile. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, a strategy recommended in qualitative research when access to information-rich cases is required based on criteria relevant to the study's objectives (Palinkas et al., 2015; Patton, 2014). To maximize variation in sociodemographic characteristics and enable potential intersectional analyses (gender, age range, and professional background), a maximum variation sampling strategy was employed (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition, the study followed the recommendation to provide a detailed description of non-probabilistic samples in order to clearly define the scope and boundaries of the findings' transferability (Flick, 2018) (Appendix).

The participant selection process was carried out in two phases. First, the Teaching Innovation Group in Social Sciences, Language, and Literature Didactics in Initial Teacher Education for Early Childhood and Primary Education (DiCSOL) at the University of Burgos distributed a formal invitation to potential key informants-teachers with proven experience in Primary and/or Secondary Education and a reflective disposition. In the second phase, predefined inclusion criteria were applied, and new cases were incorporated until theoretical saturation was reached. The resulting sample composition made it possible to position teachers' voices at the intersection of

diverse identity and contextual axes, thus providing an appropriate framework for analyzing the narratives generated by participants.

Data collection techniques

The data corpus was constructed through the integrated application of three complementary and interdependent qualitative techniques (field diary, semi-structured interview, and focus group), designed to capture, respectively, teachers' individual experiences, interpretative depth, and shared meanings, while reinforcing the methodological triangulation of the study. The field diary, conceived as a self-reflective personal document, enabled the first-person recording of events, emotions, and stances related to the treatment of controversial literature, preserving narrative richness without sacrificing cross-case comparability. The semi-structured interviews were designed to deepen the stances identified in the diaries, balancing a common thematic guide with openness to emergent nuances inherent in complex educational contexts. Focus groups, in turn, provided an interactive record that facilitated the exploration of collective meanings and the contrast of individual reconstructions, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive social reading of the phenomenon. This coordinated combination of techniques aimed to achieve the convergence of evidence across different levels of interaction and to strengthen the credibility of the findings.

Empirical evidence of content validity for the questions used across the three techniques (field diary, 5 items; semi-structured interview, 6 items; focus group, 7 items) was obtained through the judgment of five experts in didactics, research methodology, and literary education. Each expert independently assessed the relevance, sufficiency, stage-appropriateness, coherence, and clarity of all questions, using a 1-to-4 scale adapted from Escobar-Pérez and Cuervo-Martínez (2008), where 1 denotes non-fulfilment of the criterion and 4 denotes excellent fulfilment. To estimate interrater agreement with more than three evaluators, Fleiss' Kappa was calculated, along with its asymptotic standard error (ASE), Z-test statistic, and two-tailed p-value (Fleiss et al., 2003). The qualitative interpretation of agreement strength followed the ranges proposed by Landis and Koch (1977). This validation procedure was applied to the full set of 18 questions constituting the instrumental scripts for each technique (Table1).

Table 1*Fleiss' Kappa Coefficient*

Dimension	<i>Mo</i>	K	ASE	Z	<i>p</i>
Pertinence	4	,86	0,012	71,67	< .001
Sufficiency	4	,88	0,011	80,00	< .001
Relevance	4	,91	0,010	91,00	< .001
Coherence	4	,94	0,008	117,50	< .001
Clarity	3	,82	0,014	58,57	< .001

Note. K = Kappa de Fleiss; ASE = asymptotic standard error; $Z \approx K/ASE$.

Interrater agreement was high across all dimensions ($K = .82-.94$), with modes ranging from 3 to 4, indicating adequate to excellent fulfilment of the criteria. These results support the content validity of the core questions used in the three qualitative techniques implemented in the study.

Reliability was strengthened through methodological triangulation (field diaries, interviews, and discussion groups) and through cross-checking between the primary researcher and an external researcher, an approach identified in educational research theory as essential for disciplining subjectivity. External validity was addressed by selecting teachers with diverse professional backgrounds and by explicitly contextualizing the classroom settings, in accordance with the logic of social relevance intrinsic to qualitative sampling.

Field diary

A field diary was used, understood as a personal document of a highly self-reflective nature, with the purpose of capturing events, emotions, and positions of the participating teachers in their own voice. Its selection was based on its introspective quality, which minimizes reactivity and allows for the ethical dimension of teaching decisions to be documented. To ensure contextual freedom in the generation of teachers' reflections and the recording of their experience, the instrument adopted a semi-structured format with three interlinked focal points: a description of the literary situation in which controversial content might emerge; a personal reflection on the emotions and beliefs involved; and the strategies used or planned to reinterpret the text with the group. This structure preserves narrative richness while facilitating cross-case comparison (Smith & Luke, 2021; Wilhoit & Kisselburgh, 2015) (Table 2).

Table 2*Questions included in the teachers' field diaries*

Reflective questions for structuring the teachers' field diaries	
1.	Have I felt challenged or questioned this week for addressing a controversial topic in literary texts (violence, racism, gender roles, family diversity, etc.)? Who raised the concern (students, families, colleagues...)?
2.	How, when, and why has this controversy affected my personal and professional identity as a Primary or Secondary Education teacher? (e.g., feelings of competence, confidence, satisfaction, stress...).
3.	Beyond the literary content itself, does this controversy intersect with other identity or structural factors (gender, culture, mother tongue, religion)? In what way?
4.	What strategies have I used to manage the controversy in my teaching practice? (e.g., selection and adaptation of texts, mediation activities, communication with families, coordination with the teaching staff, etc.).
5.	Following this experience, what training needs do I identify in order to address controversial literature in the classroom with greater confidence?

Semi-structured interview

To further explore the didactic stances regarding the curricular inclusion and pedagogical treatment of controversial issues in literary education, a semi-structured interview was conducted with each of the 23 participants, drawing on the trends and narrative patterns identified in the field diaries. This interview format was chosen to allow a flexible balance between comparability across a thematic guide and the inclusion of exploratory contributions with emerging nuances, a characteristic that methodological literature highlights as particularly suitable when aiming to uncover personal meanings and reasoning in complex educational contexts. The interview guide covered topics such as text selection policies, mediation strategies in response to stereotypes, and perceptions of institutional support, in line with the recommendation to focus questions on the informant's values, beliefs, and practices (Table 3).

Table 3*Semi-structured interview guide for each participant*

Guiding question for the semi-structured interview	
1.	Do you believe that the inclusion of controversial literary topics has influenced your teaching role? How? Please share an example.
2.	Have you perceived any negative impact on classroom dynamics or on your self-efficacy when addressing such topics? Why? Please provide an example.
3.	Beyond the literary content addressed, are there other identity or contextual factors (gender, culture, language, religion, socioeconomic status) that intensify the controversy? Which ones, and in what way?
4.	What institutional criteria or policies (school regulations, curricular guidelines, library projects) influence the selection or adaptation of controversial texts?

5. In what ways do you feel supported, or unsupported, by school leadership, educational authorities, or colleagues when working with these texts?
 6. What strategies, resources, or curricular adaptations have you used to manage controversy and foster respectful dialogue?
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Discussion group

To triangulate the findings from the interviews and field diaries, two discussion groups were conducted with the 23 teachers (a number appropriate to the recommended range of 5–10 participants to foster a diversity of verbal interaction channels) (Krueger & Casey, 2014). The choice of this technique aimed to capture interactive data that would deepen understanding of shared meanings (Del Río-Roberts, 2011) and of the teaching strategies used to address literary controversy. Unlike focus groups, which applied research typically associates with program evaluation and the rapid collection of opinions, discussion groups are conceived as a tool for reproducing and analyzing socially embedded discourses. This orientation requires non-directive moderation that supports the spontaneous co-construction of meaning and records both verbal exchanges and gestures. From this methodological perspective, a structural guide was developed (Table 4), aligned with the reflective prompts from the field diary and the semi-structured interview guide.

Table 4

Focus group discussion guide

Discussion group guiding questions	
1.	Why does the group think that certain literary topics (violence, racism, family diversity, etc.) are considered controversial in Primary and Secondary Education? What normative, cultural, or community-based factors explain this?
2.	At what moments or during which classroom activities do the tensions associated with these texts emerge most strongly?
3.	What school policies or external pressures (social media, news outlets, regional legislation) influence the decision to include or exclude controversial books?
4.	How does controversy affect teachers' professional identity and well-being? Share examples of either burnout or, conversely, empowerment.
5.	What responses have you observed from students and families? Highlight experiences of support, resistance, or censorship.
6.	What resources, alliances, or collective strategies (library committees, communication protocols, in-house training) have proven most effective in managing controversy?
7.	Looking ahead, what structural or training-related changes do you consider essential for addressing controversial literature in a safe and inclusive manner?

Design and procedure

This study is based on a phenomenological, interpretive design that privileges lived experience over external measurement, an approach well-suited to the study of complex educational phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2018). From a socio-critical perspective, and in order to enable the triangulation of data sources, temporal moments, and levels of interaction, the corpus was constructed through the integration of three complementary and interdependent qualitative techniques: field diary, semi-structured interview, and discussion group. This methodological triangulation reinforces the study's credibility and validity. The combined use of this triad of data collection techniques has recently been endorsed in research addressing sensitive topics through the lens of intersectional studies and social justice (Hortigüela-Alcalá et al., 2025; Lindqvist & Forsberg, 2023).

Over the course of twelve school weeks, each teacher documented their experiences in their field diary after sessions involving literary reading, group discussion, and the didactic treatment of controversial content in literature education. To ensure the traceability required for methodological auditing and to control for researcher subjectivity, the diary entries focused on three interlinked components: situation description, critical self-reflection, and strategies for reinterpretation.

The semi-structured interviews, conducted via Microsoft Teams and lasting between 45 and 60 minutes, aimed to achieve interpretative depth (Nowak & Haynes, 2018) regarding the reflections teachers expressed in their diaries. Open-ended questions were used in a climate of trust (Husband, 2020). Audiovisual recording was justified by its capacity to preserve the richness of communication and to enable independent data review. To explore the social dimension of discourse surrounding literary controversy, the responses gathered in the individual interviews were complemented by two discussion groups, which were also conducted online and lasted 90 minutes each.

The qualitative analysis was conducted through open coding of emerging meaning units, followed by their axial reorganization around discursive patterns, integrating both individual and collective narratives. This procedure is grounded in the framework of Grounded Theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and was carried out under the principle of analytical induction, that is, the progressive generation and testing of hypotheses with each case. Categorical closure was determined by theoretical saturation, meaning that no additional data contributed new properties, dimensions, or relationships to the developing categories.

Given the structural heterogeneity of the national curricular frameworks, we treated the country as a contextual moderator/condition rather than as a control covariate, thereby allowing the national context to modulate the form and intensity of the relationships between analytical categories without imposing undue homogenization across cases (McMillan & Schumacher, 2005). Consequently, comparative statements are restricted to pattern convergences, while observed divergences/discrepancies are explicitly preserved and reported.

The study was conducted with the approval of the Ethics Committee of the University of Burgos. All participants signed the required informed consent form, and their voluntary participation, anonymity, and confidentiality were guaranteed in accordance with current international ethical standards for educational research (BERA, 2018).

Data analysis

The corpus drawn from the field diaries, interviews, and discussion groups underwent a two-cycle analytical process. In the first cycle, open and axial phenomenological coding was applied, identifying units of meaning that emerged without predefined categories (Hernández-Sampieri & Mendoza, 2018). The process followed the iterative logic of the analytical spiral described in qualitative research, in which description, classification, and connection recur cyclically until saturation is reached (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The generation of *in vivo* codes, their constant comparison, and their subsequent grouping into broader themes (inductive categorization) adhered to the open–axial–selective coding scheme proposed for the qualitative research pathway (Castellví et al., 2023).

In the second phase, triangulation across techniques, temporal points, and interaction levels was conducted to reinforce credibility, transferability, and dependability, the three most frequently cited criteria for qualitative rigor (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). This convergence allowed for a comparison between the micro-experiences captured in the field diaries, the retrospective reconstructions offered in the interviews, and the collective negotiation observed in the discussion groups, thus adding successive layers of meaning to the phenomenon under study. Additionally, the emerging categories were cross-checked against the interviewer's field notes, following the recommendation to maintain a 'parallel diary' for recording insights and working hypotheses.

The combined use of introspective records and dialogic conversations helped avoid the mechanical repetition of questions. Instead, a flexible thematic overlap was adopted (controversial content,

management strategies, and identity effects), opening up new analytical angles without losing the shared core focus, as recommended in the literature on source triangulation for ensuring qualitative data quality. Furthermore, intersubjective verification and external auditing were used to review coding decisions, ensure consistency, and document every analytical step, in line with auditing guidelines for rigorous qualitative studies.

From this process, two major analytical categories emerged: (1) *Curricular legitimization of literary controversy* (ethical, normative, and pedagogical arguments used by teachers to justify the inclusion of controversial texts) and (2) *Didactic mediation practices* (tactics, resources, and alliances employed to manage debate and reinterpret texts in the classroom). These categories, respectively, articulate the curricular justification for controversial topics and the teaching strategies for literary mediation. Grounded in the convergence of evidence from all three data collection techniques, they form the interpretive core of the study's findings.

All data collected through each of the applied techniques were analyzed using the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA 24. To identify textual excerpts according to the data collection technique and the corresponding participant, a system of identification codes was employed. These included the participant's name, the initials of their sociodemographic attributes, and the technique used (e.g., MAR_PE_F_SP_FD → Marta · Primary Education · Female · Spain · Field Diary).

Results and discussion

Curricular legitimization of literary controversy

The intentional curricular inclusion of controversial literary texts tends to be supported by a threefold justification based on ethical commitment, normative endorsement, and educational value. Regarding the techniques, the field diary and interviews account for over 70% of the references, indicating that individual reflection (outside the group setting) encourages a more detailed articulation of the reasons underlying the selection of controversial texts in Literature teaching. Although the discussion groups yielded a lower relative frequency, they contributed collective nuances that helped consolidate a shared ethical and normative perspective (Table 5). Nevertheless, the distribution of coded segments across subcategories is statistically homogeneous across the four techniques. The χ^2 contrast is not statistically significant ($p = .396$), indicating that there is no evidence that the use of a particular technique (FD, INT, DG1, DG2) differentially

favors coding in the subcategories of legitimization (Ethical commitment, Normative endorsement, and Educational value).

Table 5

Frequency of coded segments in the category ‘Curricular legitimization of literary controversy’

Subcategory of legitimization	FD	INT	DG1	DG2	Total	% of category
Ethical commitment	80 (40,8 %)	65 (33,2 %)	29 (14,8 %)	22 (11,2 %)	196	39,9 %
Normative endorsement	60 (34,9 %)	59 (34,3 %)	29 (16,9 %)	24 (14,0 %)	172	35,0 %
Educational value	44 (35,8 %)	37 (30,1 %)	17 (13,8 %)	25 (20,3 %)	123	25,1 %
Total by technique	184	161	75	71	491	100 %

Note. FD = field diary (23 entries); INT = semi-structured interview (23 entries); DG1/DG2 = discussion groups 1 and 2 (8 and 15 participants, respectively). Percentages in parentheses are calculated based on the total for each subcategory; the final column represents percentages relative to the total for the overall category.

First, teachers appeal to social justice as a moral duty: *If I hide the implicit manifestations of racism in stories, I perpetuate real racism; my ethical obligation is to bring it to light and discuss it* (MAR_PE_F_SP_FD); *Literature helps them see other realities and understand others’ pain; if I don’t do it, I’m failing as a teacher* (ANA_PE_F_AR_FD). However, this emphasis on the ‘moral duty’ contrasts with the documented self-censorship observed when controversy threatens to challenge the canon, even in classical works such as *Othello* (Beatty, 2021). According to the findings, the majority of curricular legitimization rests on ethical commitment, followed by the perceived existence of normative support. Indeed, teachers frequently refer to current legislation: *The LOMLOE (Spanish education law) requires us to work on democratic values; if the curriculum supports it, there should be no debate* (VARIOUS-DG1); *When a family complains, I give a clear answer: the inspector supports the selection because it aligns with the stage criteria* (DIE_LOWERSEC_M_SP_INT). However, recent studies with pre-service teachers suggest a stronger reliance on perceived personal safety (self-confidence) than on formal regulatory guidelines (Kindlinger & Hahn-Laudenberg, 2023). In this study, although the moral justification for the curricular inclusion of controversial literary topics emerges as the cornerstone of teachers’ discourse, the appeal to legal and curricular frameworks holds practically equal weight.

Finally, teachers highlight the educational and competency-based benefits of addressing controversial topics in literature education: *“Reading Chimamanda helps my students argue,*

empathize, and think critically; that's what school is for" (SER_BACH_M_SP_FD); *"Family diversity in literary texts allows us to work on social and civic competence"* (VARIOUS-DG2). Although arguments emphasizing educational utility are mentioned less frequently, the formative value of literary controversy still accounts for one in four coded segments. In this respect, research on specific stereotypes in canonical texts notes that the formative dimension becomes central when reading is explicitly oriented toward critical literacy (Cormier, 2020). Along similar lines, Canett et al. (2021) argue that the formative value is enhanced when gender-sensitive critical literacy is embedded as a cross-cutting axis, articulated through shared guidelines and sustained dialogue between teachers and students. This dynamic fosters a fluid exchange of guidance, experiences, and resources that strengthens the educational process.

Didactic mediation practices

The participating teachers describe a broad repertoire of strategies, resources, and coordination actions aimed at balancing the sensitivity of controversial content with the educational goals of literature teaching. Mediation is organized around two core areas of action: the selection/adaptation of materials and dialogue protocols. These two practices account for nearly half of all coded segments; anticipating risks, without avoiding conflict, through careful reading design, and regulating classroom interaction emerge as the primary strategies for managing controversy.

This trend is followed by inter-teacher and cross-level coordination and the integration of multimedia resources. A significant volume of references confirms that co-teaching and multimodality serve as key supports for reinterpreting sensitive texts. Practices such as communication with families and intra-teacher reflection and self-care, although mentioned less frequently, highlight the need to maintain the external legitimacy of these pedagogical choices and to protect teachers' well-being. Once again, the field diaries and interviews provide the majority of the evidence, while the discussion groups complement the collaborative and strategic dimension of these practices (Table 6).

Table 6*Frequency of coded segments in the category 'Didactic mediation practices'*

Mediation practice	FD	INT	DG1	DG2	Total	% of category
Selection / Adaptation of materials	89 (44,9 %)	67 (33,8 %)	23 (11,6 %)	19 (9,6 %)	198	25,1 %
Dialogue protocols	71 (42,8 %)	55 (33,1 %)	24 (14,5 %)	16 (9,6 %)	166	21,0 %
Multimedia resources	52 (46,8 %)	32 (28,8 %)	15 (13,5 %)	12 (10,8 %)	111	14,0 %
Professional Alliances	57 (40,1 %)	52 (36,6 %)	18 (12,7 %)	15 (10,6 %)	142	18,0 %
Communication with Families	32 (31,1 %)	43 (41,7 %)	14 (13,6 %)	14 (13,6 %)	103	13,0 %
Intra-Teacher Reflection / Self-Care	21 (30,0 %)	27 (38,6 %)	3 (4,3 %)	19 (27,1 %)	70	8,9 %
Total by Technique	322	276	97	95	790	100 %

Note. FD = field diary; INT = semi-structured interview; DG1/DG2 = discussion groups 1 and 2. Percentages in parentheses are calculated based on the total for each mediation practice; the final column represents percentages relative to the total for the overall category.

According to these results, certain mediation practices were coded with varying frequency depending on the technique used ($\chi^2_{(15)} = 29.87$, $p = .01$, $CC = .19$), indicating a dependency between the data collection technique and the type of practice coded, with a small-to-moderate effect size (Table 7).

Table 7*Standardized residuals (z)*

Técnica	Práctica de mediación	z-residual	Interpretation
DG2	Intra-teacher reflection / self-care	+3,65	Overrepresented technique (more coded units than expected).
DG1	Intra-teacher reflection / self-care	-1,91	Tendency toward underrepresentation (below the ± 1.96 significance threshold).
FD	Communication with families	-1,54	Moderately lower than expected.
INT	Communication with families	+1,17	Moderately higher than expected.

Note. $z \geq 1.96$ = significant contribution to the overall χ^2 ($\approx 5\%$ in the tail of the $N [0, 1]$) and identification of the location of the preference or difference.

The residual contrast reveals a real deviation between observed and expected frequencies under the assumption of independence between technique and mediation practice. The most extreme value ($z = +3.65$) corresponds to the combination DG2 – *Intra-Teacher reflection / self-care*, indicating that the second discussion group elicited a notably higher presence of this practice. In contrast, *Communication with families* appears slightly underrepresented in the field diaries ($z = -1.54$) and somewhat overrepresented in the interviews ($z = +1.17$).

Overall, the selection and adaptation of materials emerges as one of the most frequently employed strategies. In Primary Education, references to “pilot readings” are common: *I read the text aloud and highlight passages that might be hurtful; then I think about how to soften the language without losing meaning or content* (MARTA_PE_F_SP_FD). Indeed, analyses of family diversity in children’s literature confirm that providing families with written anticipation of the reading increases both acceptance and participation in shared reading activities (Soler-Quílez et al., 2022). In Secondary Education, adaptation often involves adding informational paratexts: *I include footnotes with historical context so that, for example, racism doesn’t appear as an isolated anachronism* (RODRIGO_LOWERSEC_M_CL_INT). In this regard, recent evidence warns of the loss of critical potential when literary texts are excessively “softened,” rather than addressing controversial passages explicitly and in context (Larsson et al., 2025; Lindström, 2024). Therefore, preserving controversial passages and guiding the dialogue through clear protocols proves more effective in fostering critical thinking than resorting to sanitized versions or avoiding ideological confrontation. Along these lines, maintaining textual integrity and structuring conversations with clear rules promotes more equitable participation and stimulates complex forms of reasoning (Al-Adeimi & Baumann, 2024).

Another widespread strategy is to anticipate debate through dialogue protocols. A high school teacher explains: *Before we start reading, I distribute a classroom agreement: listen without interrupting, argue without attacking, and respect diversity* (SER_UPPERSEC_M_SP_FD). In Primary Education, more visual approaches are used instead: *We write an emotion traffic light on the board; if a story makes them uncomfortable, children raise a red card and we pause to breathe* (PAULA_PE_F_CH_INT).

The triangulation of multimedia resources emerges as an effective strategy for reinterpreting controversial content in literary texts: author podcasts, illustrations, short films, or newspaper articles. In Discussion Group 1, several teachers agree that *a two-minute video* helps students

understand complex contexts without overwhelming them (VARIOUS-DG1). This multimodal support contributes to decentering the teacher's voice and legitimizing external perspectives. Research supports this multimodal approach. Indeed, Oberman (2023) demonstrates that picture books acquire greater critical depth when accompanied by audiovisual and sound resources, such as author podcasts, short films, or annotated illustrations, since each medium expands the interpretive horizon without imposing a single reading. Similarly, Shahnaz et al. (2020) highlight how the visual representation of gender in children's literature requires discursive counterweights to challenge implicit biases; the inclusion of short videos or press articles allows for the contextualization and nuance of these images without overwhelming students. Thus, the triangulation mentioned by teachers in DG1 as a means to clarify certain contexts is proposed as an effective strategy to redistribute interpretive authority and validate external voices, ultimately enriching students' critical understanding of the literary text.

Regarding professional alliances, both vertical and horizontal coordination is frequently reported. A primary teacher and a secondary teacher from two schools within the same autonomous community describe the following: *We designed a joint itinerary: the short story is studied in fifth grade of Primary Education and the graphic novel in the second year of Lower Secondary Education* (CAR_PE_F_SP_FD / JAV_LOWERSEC_M_SP_INT). The library committee, mentioned in seven field diaries, also serves as a protective mechanism: *When there is an objection to a book, the committee issues a formal statement justifying its literary and curricular value* (CARMEN_PE_F_SP_FD). To sustain these practices, coordinated collaboration among professionals and educational and social stakeholders, such as the establishment of library committees, vertical pathways across educational stages, and early communication with families, helps reduce external pressures and legitimize curricular proposals. Evidence from Chile further shows that in polarized contexts, such coordinated actions open spaces for deliberation that mitigate emotional tension and reinforce student agency (Cavieres-Fernández & Villalón, 2024). Communication with families is structured in two key moments. First, proactive communication: *Before we begin the unit, I send a letter explaining why we'll be addressing family diversity; I include learning objectives and planned activities* (NUR_PE_F_SP_INT). Second, post-activity feedback: *After the debate, we share a Padlet where students post anonymous reflections; families read it and understand the process* (VARIOUS-DG2). In this regard, Pace and Stoddard (2024)

have shown that collaborative management of diverse perspectives on artistic controversies fosters civic deliberation.

Finally, teachers rely on shared spaces for reflection as a form of self-care and methodological adjustment. This practice aligns with Lowery's (2024) proposal that school leadership should promote professional workshops and dialogue forums to support staff in decision-making when faced with contentious situations. Conceived as emotional and professional support mechanisms, these spaces aim to preserve teacher autonomy in the face of pressures arising from media crises or public controversies. However, their real impact has yet to be empirically verified. In this vein, six participants recorded biweekly meetings in which they shared progress and challenges: *We sit down with coffee, review problematic excerpts, and come up with new guiding questions* (ESTEBAN_LOWERSEC_M_CL_FD). This exchange reduces uncertainty and reinforces pedagogical coherence.

Conclusion

The findings indicate that ethical-social conviction, normative-curricular support, and competency development serve as valid arguments in response to community resistance. Indeed, the results show that teachers legitimize the inclusion of controversial literary texts as part of an ethical commitment to social justice. This tension explains why normative support acquires a weight equivalent to that of moral reasoning. The third pillar (educational value) is strengthened when critical literacy is addressed through a gender and diversity perspective, as this allows entrenched stereotypes in canonical texts to be critically examined. In this regard, Primary and Secondary teachers sustain potentially contentious practices without abandoning the transformative purpose of reading, in line with the principles of a justice-oriented and globally conscious literary pedagogy.

Moreover, the didactic mediation practices described cluster around material selection/adaptation and dialogue regulation, reflecting a delicate balance between engaging with literary texts and their associated controversial content, while preserving both the integrity of the text and the conditions for safe dialogue. Didactic mediation thus emerges as a form of pedagogical engineering, a process that combines foresight, flexibility, and collective support to reinterpret controversial topics. The results also suggest that heterogeneous discussion groups are particularly effective in fostering

teacher self-care, while individual interviews better support the exploration of school–family dynamics when addressing controversial content in Literature education.

The evidence points to four key educational implications. First, maintaining the integrity of the literary work while supplementing it with contextual paratexts allows for the development of complex interpretive practices without compromising students' emotional well-being. Second, dialogue protocols, whether formulated as classroom agreements or deliberative models, provide a safe scaffolding for debate, contrast, and discussion without distorting the literary work. Third, the creation of professional networks and transparent communication with families serve to protect teacher autonomy and legitimize controversy as a formative opportunity. Fourth, systematic reflective spaces, such as field diaries, operate as effective frameworks for transforming uncertainty into methodological coherence and preserving teacher well-being, as instructional practices move toward critical literacy in the teaching of Literature.

Limitations and future lines of research

This study succeeded in accessing particularly revealing and meaningful narratives. However, the methodological choice of purposive sampling introduces limitations regarding the transferability of the findings to other contexts. In qualitative research, the potential for generalization is not based on statistical criteria, but rather on the similarity between contexts and the richness of the description provided about the research setting. This caution is further amplified when considering international comparability: national curricular frameworks (such as LOMLOE in Spain, the NAP in Argentina, and the Curricular Bases in Chile) present structural differences that directly influence literary mediation practices. Such curricular diversity may act as a confounding variable, reducing the external validity of the findings and making it difficult to offer a homogeneous interpretation of the experiences collected. In future studies, to prevent curricular heterogeneity from acting as a confounding factor, each coded segment should be annotated in both the category system and the analytical logbook with its corresponding country/school system and curricular reference. Furthermore, it would be advisable to construct cross-case matrices (country × theme × curricular reference) in order to trace how national curricular frameworks shape teachers' discourse and to serve as an intermediate step prior to cross-case integration (axial/selective coding). This procedure should ensure that comparative statements remain strictly limited to

pattern convergence. In this way, consistent with the analytical generalization characteristic of qualitative research, external validity would be bounded by international curricular differences. Moreover, the active involvement of the researcher, inherent to ethnographically-oriented studies such as this one, although necessary to access teaching experience from a close and situated perspective, introduces a risk of reactivity. Prolonged interactions may lead to conditioned responses or even the unconscious adoption of the researcher's interpretive frameworks. This influence, rather than being eliminated, should be recognized and made explicit as part of the interpretive process. Added to this is the reliance on self-reporting techniques, such as field diaries. While these tools foreground the teacher's voice, they also expose the analysis to social desirability bias and distortions related to memory, particularly when the questions concern sensitive or normatively charged issues.

On the other hand, although the methodological design incorporated three data collection techniques, the exclusion of students' and families' voices limits the analytical perspective. This lack of actor triangulation weakens the understanding of the phenomenon and the depth of qualitative interpretation. Similarly, the cross-sectional nature of the study prevents the observation of medium- or long-term effects of the described practices, a limitation widely acknowledged in educational literature, which emphasizes the need for longitudinal follow-ups to capture sustained changes. Additionally, the interplay of pedagogical, emotional, and institutional factors, with their inherent divergence and need for integration, imposes interpretive demands that are difficult to isolate.

To strengthen methodological robustness and enhance the applicability of the findings, future research should take these limitations into account. Expanding the sample and stratifying it by region and school type would improve the transferability of results, especially if accompanied by thick descriptions of the contexts. Including the perspectives of students and families, through individual interviews, discussion groups, or classroom observations, would enrich triangulation and reduce potential interpretive bias. Furthermore, implementing longitudinal designs would facilitate the identification of delayed effects of mediation practices, particularly useful in complex educational processes such as those addressed in this study.

Equally relevant would be the incorporation of explanatory mixed-methods approaches. Integrating qualitative evidence with quantitative measurements, such as teachers' attitudes or levels of self-efficacy, would allow for hypothesis testing using advanced statistical analyses.

Likewise, the implementation of research-based formative interventions grounded in collaborative action research would align with the transformative orientation that characterizes much of contemporary qualitative inquiry. These interventions, focused on cycles of improvement and teacher reflection, would enable not only the analysis but also the internal enhancement of pedagogical practices.

A comparative analysis of curricular frameworks, accompanied by interviews with educational policymakers, would help isolate the normative influence on teachers' attitudes and practices. Likewise, the emotional dimension and teacher well-being, identified as relevant elements in the present corpus, could be further explored through the combined use of psychometric scales within sequential mixed-methods designs. Finally, a more detailed analysis of teachers' didactic positioning from an intersectional perspective would allow for the construction of more nuanced maps of their attitudes and mediation practices.

Addressing the limitations identified and advancing along these future lines would not only strengthen the validity and depth of the methodological approach developed, but also contribute to the design of more robust and effective curricular and training proposals to face, through literary education, the challenges posed by controversial issues in the Literature classroom.

Ethical approval statement

The project *"Beyond the tale": Teaching experiences in Spain, Argentina, and Chile on the literary mediation of controversial issues in Primary and Secondary Education* was reviewed and approved by the Bioethics Committee of the University of Burgos. The research was conducted in accordance with the October 2024 revision of the World Medical Association's Declaration of Helsinki, the EU General Data Protection Regulation (Regulation [EU] 2016/679), and the Spanish Organic Law 3/2018 on the Protection of Personal Data and Guarantee of Digital Rights. It ensured full respect for the dignity, privacy, and integrity of participants, as well as the technical and legal security of their data. All databases were pseudonymized prior to analysis and securely stored on restricted institutional servers.

Informed consent statement

Each potential participant received a digital informed consent form prepared by the research team. The document outlined the objectives of the study, the planned methodology, the estimated

duration, the minimal risks involved, the confidentiality safeguards, and the right to withdraw at any time without consequences. Consent was granted in writing by ticking the box ‘I agree to participate’; the system automatically recorded the time and a pseudonymized identifier as documentary evidence. Consent encompassed voluntary participation, the scientific use of data for strictly academic purposes, the retention of the pseudonymized database for five years, and the potential publication of aggregated results or anonymized microdata in open-access repositories. The form explicitly stated that participants’ identities could not be inferred, that participation posed no risks beyond those inherent to an opinion survey, and that no financial incentives were offered. All participants were adult professionals, and the study did not involve vulnerable populations; therefore, no consent from legal representatives or special authorization procedures was required.

Data availability statement

The datasets generated and/or analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to privacy and confidentiality agreements with the participants. However, they may be made available by the corresponding author upon reasonable request, provided that the purpose is justified and appropriate measures are taken to safeguard the privacy and anonymity of the individuals involved.

Conflicts of interest

Conflicts of interest: none. The authors have not reported any potential conflicts of interest in relation to this article.

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Appendix

Sociodemographic characteristics of the participants

Name*	Gender**	Age**	Years of experience**	Region***	Other characteristics ****
Marta	Female	28	4	Castilla y León (Spain)	Language Arts teacher in the second year of Primary Education
Diego	Male	35	10	Castilla y León (Spain)	Spanish Language and Literature teacher in first and second years of Lower Secondary Education
Ana	Female	41	15	Mendoza (Argentina)	Language and Literature teacher in the third grade of Primary Education
Luis	Male	52	28	Córdoba (Argentina)	School principal and Literature teacher in the fifth year of Secondary Education
Paula	Female	30	7	Santiago de Chile (Chile)	Spanish Language and Communication teacher in the third year of Basic Education
Carmen	Female	33	9	Cantabria (Spain)	Spanish Language teacher in the fifth year of Primary Education
Javier	Male	45	20	Andalusia (Spain)	Spanish Language and Literature teacher in the fourth year of Lower Secondary Education
Nuria	Female	29	5	Madrid Region (Spain)	Homeroom teacher for Spanish Language in the sixth year of bilingual Primary Education
Sergio	Male	38	14	Galicia (Spain)	Spanish Language and Literature teacher in the first year of Baccalaureate and fourth year of Lower Secondary Education
Claudia	Female	27	3	Neuquén (Argentina)	Language and Literature teacher in the second grade of Primary Education
Fernando	Male	50	25	Santa Fe (Argentina)	Language and Literature teacher in the fifth year of Secondary Education
Valeria	Female	36	12	Salta (Argentina)	English Language and Literature teacher in the third year of Technical Secondary Education
Matías	Male	31	7	Buenos Aires (Argentina)	Homeroom teacher for Spanish Language in the sixth grade of Primary Education
Camila	Female	42	18	Biobío (Chile)	Spanish Language and Communication teacher in the first year of Upper Secondary Education
Rodrigo	Male	28	4	Valparaíso (Chile)	Spanish Language and Communication teacher in the sixth year of Basic Education
Daniela	Female	34	11	Metropolitan Region (Chile)	Area coordinator and Spanish Language and Communication teacher in 2nd year of Upper Secondary

Esteban	Male	47	24	Araucanía (Chile)	Head teacher and Spanish Language and Communication teacher in the eighth year of Basic Education
Isabel	Female	40	16	Castilla-La Mancha (Spain)	Spanish Language and Literature teacher in the third year of Lower Secondary Education
Gonzalo	Male	26	2	La Rioja (Spain)	Spanish Language teacher in the first year of rural Primary Education
Julieta	Female	53	30	Tucumán (Argentina)	School principal and Language and Literature teacher in the fourth grade of Primary Education
Nicolás	Male	37	13	Los Lagos (Chile)	Spanish Language and Communication teacher in the fourth year of academic Upper Secondary Education
Laura	Female	31	8	Navarra (Spain)	Spanish Language and Literature teacher in second year of bilingual Lower Secondary Education
Pedro	Male	44	19	Antofagasta (Chile)	Spanish Language and Communication teacher in the second year of Upper Secondary Education

* Fictitious names have been used to ensure participant anonymity.

** Diversity in gender (12 women, 11 men), age (26-53 years), and teaching experience (2-30 years).

*** Balanced contextual variation across countries and regions of the educational institutions (Spain, Argentina, and Chile).

**** Brief description of each participant's professional role, excluding any sensitive personal data.