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Prevention of Violent Extremism and Polarisation in Greek Schools: Teachers' Challenges and Needs in Helping Students Be Critical Thinkers and Not Critically Divided

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Prevention of Violent Extremism and Polarisation in Greek Schools: Teachers' Challenges and Needs in Helping Students Be Critical Thinkers and Not Critically Divided

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Abstract: The present article summarises the key findings of the research conducted in Greece for the exploration of the current state of the art related to addressing contentious topics in educational settings. The research was conducted in the framework of the HORIZON 2020 PARTICIPATION project, in an attempt to map existing needs, contentious topics, support systems, educational tools, and potential practices that support the management of controversial issues in the educational realm. Despite the efforts made by education professionals in developing and maintaining a safe and welcoming learning environment, several challenges emerge, ranging from the limited available time to address controversial issues, to lack of cooperation amongst concerned parties. It remains evident that a more holistic approach should be put in place, with the provision of further support, continuous training and relevant tools to teachers, the establishment of Standard Operational Procedures adapted to each school, the development of communication bridges for all parties involved, and the promotion of opinion and experience exchange.

Keywords: contentious topics, Greek educational system, P/CVE programmes

Introduction: contextual overview

The discussion on preventing and countering extremism and radicalisation has several factors involved, with two being more prominent: the factors that create risks of being or becoming radicalised versus the protective factors and processes (Lösel *et Al*, 2018). In the current article, those two categories are examined for the case of the Greek educational system to identify the main challenges and controversial issues faced by teachers in the classroom and school environment, along with the practices that have proved good or bad on the way the challenges mentioned above and controversial issues can be dealt with.

The Greek educational system has been characterised as having a “bureaucratic and centralised structure” (Geropoulos *et Al.*, 2022). In this context, several issues have been identified by academics in terms of:

- a. lack of long-term educational strategy (Saiti, 2012);
- b. lack of financial support (Saiti, 2012);
- c. inflexible and narrowly defined legal framework (Kougias & Efstathopoulos, 2020);
- d. cross-country uniformity – one coursebook per subject (Nikolakaki *et Al.*, 2012);
- e. being understaffed (Alexopoulos, 2019).

According to Kougias and Efstathopoulos (2020), the Greek educational centralised administrative system resembles a pyramid structure, where the Ministry of Education holds the highest position, responsible for developing educational policies. Moving down the hierarchy, administrative responsibilities decrease. School directors have limited authority and are considered mere executive tools. The middle level consists of regional sub-areas managed by Regional Education Directors and the lowest level includes Education Directors in the prefectures. At the school unit level, principals and vice principals are present. Decision-making power primarily lies at the top, with downward communication to lower levels, limiting their involvement. In this centralised and pyramid-based structure, the inclusion of P/CVE-related programmes becomes a vital matter to examine especially in terms of exploring the existing needs, contentious topics, support systems, educational tools, and potential practices that are identified within the education realm.

Referring to the main challenges and controversial issues of violent extremism (VE) in the country, they are diverse and complex. They include the presence of left-wing and anarchist violent extremism and terrorism, despite efforts to dismantle such groups like 17N. Additionally, right-wing violent extremism, including Neo-Nazi and fascist branches like the Golden

Dawn, pose a threat to social cohesion. Greece's role as a transit point for foreign fighters, particularly those posing as refugees, also raises security concerns while hooliganism and aggressive behaviours, especially among the youth, contribute to social unrest. In this regard, the influence of extremist ideologies on young people is a significant concern, as it makes them vulnerable to radicalisation and recruitment. The economic crisis has fuelled social exclusion, poverty, and a lack of support, acting as drivers of youth violent extremism. Racist perceptions and the influence of parental attitudes also play a role in polarisation and radicalisation (Lampas, 2018). Addressing these challenges necessitates a comprehensive approach that addresses socioeconomic issues, promotes social inclusion, counters extremist ideologies, and enhances community resilience.

In the context of the *PARTICIPATION* project, a four-step research path was developed and implemented, pertaining to: an initial literature review and the preparation of a first draft of an online survey; a 'Set-the-scene' workshop for the validation of the survey; the distribution of the online survey; and a 'Follow-up' workshop for the validation of the data gathered.

To facilitate the research, the identified challenges were grouped into three categories: educational, structural, and contextual. Educational challenges refer to those connected with the teacher's day-to-day duties and work; structural are concerned with weaknesses at institutional/authority level; and contextual regard the environmental changes in general. The categories interlap with each other greatly; nonetheless, a distinction is deemed necessary to identify the specific challenges more coherently. Concerning the educational aspect, the main identified difficulties were connected with the non-existence of programmes touching upon the prevention of extremism and radicalisation for teachers and students. In this regard, there is also a lack of continuous professional development programmes for teachers on related themes. Adding to this, the Greek curriculum does not promote critical thinking skills for the students, leaving little room for teachers to support this vital skill. The structural issues are associated primarily with the specific limits of the existing Greek legislation and policies supporting the prevention of extremism and radicalisation. Lastly, the contextual factors refer to the plethora of fake news, hate speech and propagandistic content available online, along with the increase in marginalisation and violent political radicalisation of young people in Greece. The implications of the pandemic have further aggravated both factors.

The challenges identified during the preliminary desk research functioned as a basis towards the first draft of the survey developed to explore the existing situation in the classroom, in terms of contentious topics and difficulties faced by education professionals. Similarly, the 'Set-the-Scene'

workshop, that took place in March 2022, acted as a starting point for discussing the aforementioned topics, and how they can be addressed. During the workshop, the twenty-six teachers involved became acquainted with the survey questions and expressed their suggestions, opinions, and clarifying questions. Some of the issues mentioned concerned the fact that the number of students in relation to the teacher is an essential factor for understanding the prevention and countering of radicalisation (a participant said, “is it the same for a teacher to have 80 students versus having 250?”). Additionally, the fact that teachers can also take on the role of a counsellor, was brought up, a situation that broadens their duties, leaving them less focused on their main obligations. After the workshop, the online survey was finetuned and administered to teachers. Finally, a ‘Follow-up’ workshop with the twenty-six teachers was conducted in May 2022, where they reflected upon the main challenges and the possible, identified solutions.

Considering the process that was followed for contacting and choosing the schools, a combination of utilising already existing contacts, previously involved in similar activities, with the publication of a call for new participants, took place. The schools’ main selection criteria were that participants were to be located in low socio-economic backgrounds and to include socially vulnerable groups. In any case, the selection process aimed to maintain and represent the diversity of the various groups in Greece. The process was entrusted to the facilitator (who took on logistical matters), who was also responsible for the specifics of conducting the two workshops. The facilitator’s role entailed the support, motivation, co-construction, and co-creation of the knowledge generation during the workshop process. The next part of the introduction describes the sample of the survey. After that, the rest of the report summarises the specific data that came from the survey and the ‘Follow-up’ workshop, and then synthesises the conclusion and relevant recommendations on the ways education professionals can be supported in addressing challenges and contentious topics in the classroom.

Description of the sample

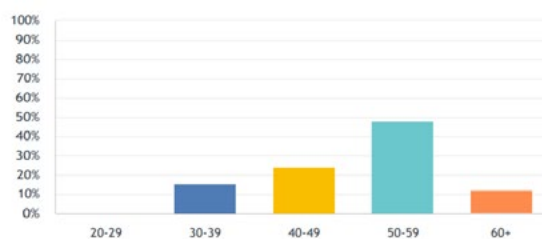
As presented in the following charts, the majority of the teachers who participated in the online survey *Contentious issues in the classroom: teachers’ challenges and responses* were female, while the most selected answer regarding their age range was 50-59 years old.

Figure 1. Gender breakdown of teachers in the Greek sample.



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Male	36%	9
Female	64%	16
Non-binary	0%	0
TOTAL		25

Figure 2. Age ranges of teachers in the Greek sample.



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
20-29	0%	0
30-39	16%	4
40-49	24%	6
50-59	48%	12
60+	12%	3
TOTAL		25

The respondents teach a variety of subjects, including economics (4), literature (3), mathematics (2), English (2), computer science (2), arts (1) and Principles of Economic Theory (1). One of the survey participants was a school psychologist, while two professionals noted that they teach more than one subject: e.g., one teacher stated that they teach economics and sociology, and another, computer science and mathematics. Teachers working in vocational schools, teach lessons related to specific professions (health, electrical engineering, agriculture, pre-school education and management, and economics).

During the past five years, the majority (70%) have taught students between 16-19 years old, one respondent has taught 12–15-year-old students, while six have taught both age groups. Six people selected the option *other* and explained that their students were 19 years old or older.

Eleven out of twenty-five teachers who answered the relevant question, have been teaching for 21-30 years, eight have been working in education for 11-20 years, four teachers had less than five years and two teachers had more than thirty years' experience. Apart from their teaching role, nine respondents stated that they had also assumed other roles during the past five years. These pertained to the role of mentor, principal and assistant principal, psychologist in a private office, Educational Work Coordinator and Education Counsellor.

The majority (80%) teach in a vocational secondary school; 40% teach in a general secondary, and 8% in a technical secondary school. One respondent selected the option 'other' and explained that they teach in an evening vocational secondary school. According to most of the participants, their school is located in a big city. Teachers could provide multiple answers to this question: for this reason, the sum of percentages is higher than 100%, as well as the sum of schools, which is higher than the number of participants who replied.

Figure 3. Location of schools where the teachers in the Greek sample teach.



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
A big city	72%	18
A town	44%	11
A village	12%	3
Total Respondents: 25		

Challenges and contentious topics in the classroom and the school environment

When it came to asking teachers about the challenges and contentious topics, the questionnaire of the online survey provided a list of topics and issues that had been gathered during the desk research and asked teachers

to highlight if they have faced them or not. If they answered *yes*, they were then asked to estimate the extent to which they had dealt with these challenges and contentious topics (*very often*, *often*, or *sometimes*). Then, teachers were asked to share any other challenge or contentious topic that had arisen in their classrooms during the last five years.

Teachers who responded to the online survey mentioned facing several difficulties related to polarising and controversial issues. The challenge they meet more often than not, pertains to the change of their role from a ‘teacher’ to a ‘moderator’ of a conversation on topics that give rise to polarisation. The five most common challenges identified are presented in this table:

Table 1. Most frequently experienced challenges in teachers’ work life, in the Greek sample.

CHALLENGES	VERY OFTEN	OFTEN	SOMETIMES
Changing your role from ‘transferring knowledge’ to ‘moderating a conversation’ when it comes to speaking about topics that give rise to polarisation.	3	9	12
Managing polarising comments shared by pupils during class.	1	5	18
Questions related to polarising topics, asked by students, which were difficult to answer.	0	7	15
Communicating constructively with the families of the students.	3	9	9
Handling conflicts and disputes between students, that related to contentious issues within society.	3	6	11

During the ‘Follow-up’ workshop, participants elaborated on the everyday challenges they face, as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the measures taken to eliminate the spread of the virus. Students have difficulty attending face-to-face lessons and re-integrating into the school environment, which leads to the expression of extreme behaviours, and the increase of discussions on polarising and controversial issues. This applies to all schools the participants teach in. They provided the example of three to four students who manifested relevant behaviours; in this case, the school staff tried to be in constant communication with the parents. Nonetheless, the parents were not always very cooperative and, thus, it fell to the discretion of the teachers and the school psychologist to support these students.

Apart from the aforementioned challenges, the survey respondents also listed the following difficulties, pertaining to extreme manifestations of extremist behaviours and the implementation of practices for the prevention of radicalisation, as less frequent in their work environment.

Table 2. Additional experienced challenges in teachers' work life, in the Greek sample.

CHALLENGES	VERY OFTEN	OFTEN	SOMETIMES
Managing situations where parents are not being supportive in addressing the problematic behaviour of their children in the classroom/the school environment.	/	7	13
Detecting clear signs and indicators of radicalisation processes in your students.	/	3	9
Understanding how to implement the practices of the legislation regarding the prevention of radicalisation at school (if any exist).	/	2	8
Dealing with students who bring or express extremist symbols in the classroom/the school environment (e.g. performing Nazi salute, wearing symbols such as a swastika on clothing, drawing such symbols, etc.).	/	1	5

They were also asked to rate in which frequency they have experienced students expressing their opinion and manifesting behaviours related to a plethora of contentious topics in the class, or the school environment in general. The 10 most frequently expressed topics identified are presented in the table below.

Table 3. Most frequently experienced contentious topics in teachers' worklife, in the Greek sample.

CONTENTIOUS TOPICS	VERY OFTEN	OFTEN	SOMETIMES
Discussions about the government's measures to counter the Covid-19 pandemic.	7	11	6
Juvenile delinquency.	3	9	10
Grievances relating to social conflicts and inequalities in society.	1	10	11
Disinformation related issues (e.g., fake news and conspiracy theories).	3	10	7
Racism.	3	4	13
Intolerance towards the existing cultural, social, or religious differences in society.	0	7	13
Gender.	1	11	7
Intolerance against gender and sexual diversity (e.g., anti-LGBTQ).	1	8	10
Xenophobia, including polarising narratives on the phenomenon of migration.	1	8	10
Hatred against institutions and authorities.	0	6	13

When asked to elaborate on the challenges presented above, the 'Follow-up' workshop participants explained that the school in which they work, is engaged in different projects, may it be EU-funded programmes or school initiatives. When implemented, such projects have a positive impact on the students, and on the general response to the challenges raised, taking into consideration the location of the school and the demographics of the children that come from a lower social stratum. Teachers highlighted that although some students show a lack of interest in attending lessons, there are pupils with excellent educational performance.

With regards to the correlation between subjects taught and teachers' experiences in terms of contentious topics and challenges, the opinions differed. Some teachers mentioned that controversial topics are discussed in the context of all subjects; the only difference they have observed lies in the intensity and frequency of such discussions. One participant clarified that laboratories do not provide the space for the discussion of such issues, in comparison to more theoretical or human-focused subjects, like history, philosophy or political sciences, which are much more related to these matters. Nonetheless, teachers explained that even in the context of more theoretical lessons, they find it hard to approach these issues, considering the pressure they face to finish the school's prescribed curriculum.

They explained that the main contentious topic discussed, pertained to the government measures to counter the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the participants commented that teachers could not be involved in such discussions or assess existing decision-making processes, as this could lead to conversations that should not take place in the school environment. They tried to handle the situation, and sometimes avoid the topic completely. They also tried to avoid related conversation points, as a method to prevent the manifestation or expression of extreme views.

Furthermore, students sometimes appear to be unwilling to engage in dialogue; one of the participants mentioned that they have heard many students stating: "this is my opinion, and I am not going to change it". They went on to comment that the behaviour of the students differs depending on their age; older students appear to have more tranquil behaviour, while being fully integrated into the school environment.

The online survey, which was completed by the teachers during the second phase of the research, allowed them to elaborate on additional challenges or contentious topics that they have experienced and were not listed in the available options. Although the vast majority (90%) stated that they had nothing to add, one of the respondents mentioned "the behavioural problems manifested by the students, which we often discover derive from their family and the familial environment. E.g., drug and alcohol abuse, and physical violence. Although there are only a few relevant incidents, they are very

important. Moreover, the 4-5 incidents manifested [in the school, *Author's note*], involved migrants”.

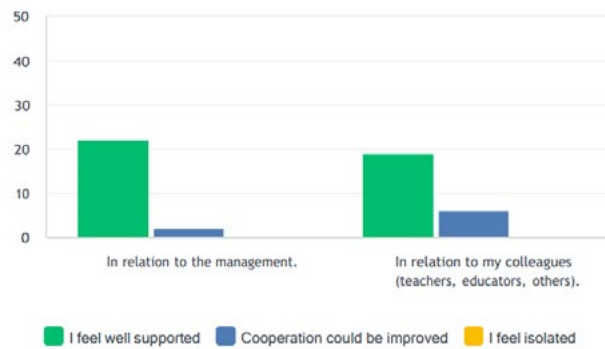
When asked, during the ‘Follow-up’ workshop, participants emphasised that the main polarised topic that gave rise to heated discussions was the pandemic and the measures established by the government.

Support received from other colleagues and the school management

The online survey also aimed to investigate the teachers’ feeling of support received by their colleagues and the school management when dealing with contentious topics and issues in the classroom and in the school environment.

As presented in the following chart, none of the twenty-five teachers who responded to this question felt isolated, in terms of the support given to address contentious topics and issues in the classroom and the school environment, neither by their colleagues nor by the school management. The majority (22) stated that they felt well supported by the management, and nineteen felt the same in relation to their colleagues. Two stated that cooperation with the school management could be improved, and six noted the same about their colleagues.

Figure 4. Perception of support received by teachers from colleagues and from the school management, in the Greek sample.



	I FEEL WELL SUPPORTED	COOPERATION COULD BE IMPROVED	I FEEL ISOLATED
In relation to the management.	92% 22	8% 2	0% 0
In relation to my colleagues (teachers, educators, others).	76% 19	24% 6	0% 0

One survey respondent mentioned that discrimination, lack of punishment and indifference in terms of essential solutions to the problems arisen, are manifested by the school management due to the heavy workload, while there is a lack of cooperation with actors who have expertise in certain

topics. Another respondent commented that “it would be useful for a more concrete policy on handling violence and discrimination to be established in each school”.

Regarding improving cooperation with their colleagues, two survey respondents mentioned that some professionals avoid getting involved in relevant situations or prefer to remain distant from incidents occurring in the school context. Another participant elaborated that, apart from the above-mentioned issues, there is a lack of essential communication and dedication of quality time when addressing existing problems, there is a lot of competition amongst professionals, and pressure to complete the established curriculum, while teachers are also burdened by the national socio-economic context and work fatigue. Finally, one participant recommended the implementation of experiential workshops for team building.

Participants of the ‘Follow-up’ workshop clarified that such behaviours are not often manifested in their school, while education professionals strive to resolve any issues that emerge, individually and collectively, for example, through their work in the Teachers’ Association. They highlighted the difficulties they faced due to the current circumstances and the need to ‘re-integrate’ into the school environment, after a long period of remote (online) lessons. They mentioned that more psychologists should be allocated to each school, along with supportive personnel (e.g., janitors and guards) that could assist with their administrative tasks. They concluded that more support should be provided by the State and the respective Ministry. Participants explained that they have managed to combat existing challenges through the formation of a framework of cooperation, while they make efforts to dedicate quality time to all students; this is understood by the students’ parents, who have, on a number of occasions, expressed their trust towards the school and the individual teachers.

Educational tools

Most of the survey respondents (56%) indicated that the number of available educational tools for school staff to address challenges and contentious topics in the classroom and the school environment, is inadequate; 24% stated the opposite, while 20% were unaware. Similarly, 48% found that existing tools are not adequate for their students, 32% believed that they suffice, and 20% did not know. Some of the participants of the ‘Follow-up’ workshop confirmed the latter statement, and explained that they are unaware of any existing, relevant tools. One participant mentioned that school psychologists support teachers in addressing controversial issues in the school environment. However, it was pointed out that it falls to teachers’ discretion to attend the relevant trainings and to cooperate with each other, in order to overcome existing barriers.

The majority of the survey respondents (72%) mentioned that teachers are not sufficiently trained to use these tools, while only 12% believed that education professionals are adequately trained; 16% selected the option “I don’t know”. When asked specifically about the staff working in their school, the majority (76%) stated that they are not sufficiently trained, 20% were unaware, and only 4% seemed to be confident that education professionals in their school environment are adequately equipped to exploit the available tools.

The surveyed participants were also asked what kind of support, training and/or tools they feel they need to strengthen their capacity to deal with challenges and polarising, contentious issues in the classroom and the school environment. They recommended case management trainings and empowerment seminars, with the use of real-life examples, and information regarding the best way to approach children that are exhibiting such behaviours. They further suggested the establishment of online counselling services addressed to teachers, the implementation of youth exchange programmes between schools with different cultural backgrounds, the cooperation with other actors and schools, and the exploitation of online apps. One respondent proposed the implementation of school seminars, in the context of which students would have an active role, presenting and discussing certain topics in the form of a debate, in order to extract conclusions that will help them.

Teachers who participated in the ‘Follow-up’ workshop, mentioned that if they had assisting personnel and support on other issues (e.g., administrative), they might have had more time to dedicate to their educational role and their students, while noting that this type of support creates a more positive climate in general. Class management trainings should also be organised, while ‘Youth Counselling Centres’ should be established.

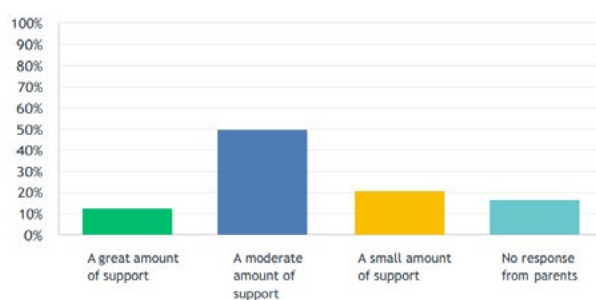
The relationship with the parents

Survey respondents were asked to select up to three options that best described their relationship with the students’ parents. Of a total of twenty-five respondents, nine stated that they have sporadic contact with them, and the same amount responded that they only speak with parents when there is an issue regarding a pupil’s behaviour. Eight noted that they only talk with the students’ family during the annual teachers-parents’ meetings, while six stated to have frequent contact, but still face difficulties in reaching out to some of them. Some stated that they try to involve both pupils and parents in extracurricular activities at school, have frequent contact with parents, or that parents initiate communication (each of these options was selected by four respondents). Finally, two stated that they have no frequent

contact with them, and the same number of participants reported having no contact with them at all.

As presented in the graph below, half of the sample stated that parents give them a moderate amount of support in dealing with polarising statements made by their children in the classroom and in the school environment. Twenty-four out of the twenty-five respondents agreed that the amount of support provided varies from parent to parent.

Figure 5. Teachers' perception of the support received from parents, in the Greek sample.



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
A great amount of support	13% 3
A moderate amount of support	50% 12
A small amount of support	21% 5
No response from parents	17% 4
TOTAL	24

The surveyed participants elaborated on the challenges they have experienced when dealing with their students' parents. The difficulties identified included: time constraints, due to the parents' workload; language and cultural barriers; inability to reach parents; tendencies of some parents to justify their children's behaviour; and disdain of some teachers or the methods they use.

Participants from the 'Follow-up' workshop referred to the conflicts between parents and teachers in terms of the students' performance assessment; all parents want their children to receive excellent grades and some of them tend to complain to the education professionals and/or ask them to improve their children's grading. Sometimes, parents appear to be indifferent to dedicating time to their children's problems. Teachers mentioned that they make efforts to create bridges of communication with the parents; nonetheless, some provided the example of parents who did not come to the school to have discussions with the teachers upon the latter's request.

Reactions and practices to address challenges and contentious topics in the classroom and the school environment

Survey participants confirmed that they do not feel well-trained to address polarisation-related issues in the classroom and the school environment in general. Apart from administrative support and tools, education professionals need more trainings on class management and ways to approach children that express extreme behaviours. More initiatives could be implemented in order to foster relationships and build a more inclusive and welcoming environment. Online counselling services addressed to teachers would also strengthen their capacity to deal with challenges and polarising contentious issues in the classroom/the school environment.

In the online survey, teachers were provided with a list of practices and methods with regard to dealing with challenges and controversial issues and asked to flag if they deemed them beneficial or ineffective. As depicted in the table below, all survey participants agreed that “building a trust-based relationship with students”, “empowering the triangular relationship between students, teachers, and parents”, discussing democratic values and human rights, raising awareness regarding the consequences of violence, and teaching critical thinking skills, constitute good practices when dealing with challenges and contentious topics in the classrooms and in the school setting.

The teachers that participated in the ‘Follow-up’ workshop confirmed these statements, as they suggested for more trainings to be held, with the active involvement of students and the exploitation of real-life cases, in order to raise awareness and create a common ground for communication. The majority of the survey participants also highlighted that inviting experts into the classroom, increasing students’ knowledge about active citizenship, using alternative means of education and facilitating a space where all students can express their opinions, are amongst the good practices that could be implemented; these suggestions were also in line with the ideas expressed by the workshop participants that were presented in the previous chapters of the present article.

On the other hand, the majority of survey respondents believed that *ignoring the challenges and issues faced by young people to avoid making matters worse* and *mocking students who share fake sources to incite them to react against disinformation* are bad practices, in terms of responding to polarisation in the education realm. The teachers that took part in the ‘Follow-up’ workshop expressed that education should follow a learner-centred approach and emphasised that they strive to support each individual student, responding to their needs. The indifference shown towards challenges and events that occur in the school was criticised.

Table 4. Good and bad practices in the Greek sample.

PRACTICE	GOOD PRACTICE	BAD PRACTICE
Facilitate a space for discussion where every student can talk and be heard, no matter their position.	22	2
Building a trust-based relationship with students.	24	0
Trying to find out who is right and who is wrong when students share their thoughts.	9	11
Peer-to-peer approaches.	22	1
Addressing taboo-related issues.	17	1
Looking for early signs of radicalisation processes.	14	1
Ignoring the challenges and issues facing young people to avoid making matters worse.	0	23
Reporting signs of pupils' radicalisation processes to the school principal.	18	2
Trying to develop a sense of empathy with and among students.	23	0
Strengthen resilience against violent narratives by teaching students critical thinking tools and methods for media literacy.	19	1
Empowering the triangular relationship between students, teachers, and parents.	24	0
Keeping the school management well informed.	21	0
Establishing networks between teachers across Europe.	19	0
Invite experts in the classroom (e.g.: psychologists, CSOs, NGOs, young ambassadors).	23	0
Debating online news that is based on unclear sources or none at all.	7	15
Discussions about democratic values and human rights.	24	0
Provide lessons on the importance of tolerance and anti-discrimination.	21	0
Mock the students who share certain fake sources to incite them to react against disinformation.	1	22
Raise awareness regarding consequences of violence.	24	0
Ask for support from the police.	6	9
Ongoing training for teachers in the prevention of radicalisation.	17	0
Cooperation between schools and representatives of minority groups to push back against "Us vs Them" narratives.	15	2
Teach critical thinking to students.	23	0
Ongoing training for teachers and students to spot fake news and harmful conspiracy theories.	17	1
Increase students' knowledge about active citizenship and the relationship between rights and responsibilities.	23	0
Increase students' knowledge of democratic practices and processes.	21	0
Rely on alternative means of education such as arts, crafts, one-to-one development.	23	0
Watch for and take action in cases of students with mental health issues, coming from domestic violence, abuse, addiction contexts by referring them to professionals, confidentially.	22	1
Engage with parents, and request their support in cases of concern, where students are isolating themselves.	22	0

Admittedly, *trying to find out who is right and who is wrong when students share their thoughts* received almost an equal number of positive (38%) and negative (46%) responses. The participants of the 'Follow-up' workshop explained that this practice was unclear to them, in terms of its aims and objectives. They stressed that when children share their thoughts, teachers should not evaluate and grade 'right and wrong ideas'; instead, they should try to extract conclusions and useful meanings from the discussions. In any case, the aim of such a procedure should not be the evaluation of ideas.

In the context of the online survey, teachers were asked to share additional practices which they deemed ineffective and constructive. No further 'bad practices' were identified or shared by the teachers. However, three teachers listed the cooperation between teachers, parents, and experts (e.g., psychologists), the integration of lessons related to social and political sciences, and psychological support targeting violent behaviours, Internet addiction, and social alienation, as other good practices that were not included in the available list. The workshop participants agreed with these suggestions; they elaborated that psychological support in the school context should provide a sense of stability, with the same people being appointed to the respective school, and the scheduling of sessions being more concrete. Additionally, subjects related to social and political sciences can provide stimuli for discussions; in the context of these lessons, students have the opportunity to work together and cooperate on group assignments, strengthening their critical thinking and teamwork skills.

Main suggestions and obstacles to deal with challenges and contentious topics

In the online survey, respondents were asked to provide their main suggestions on how to deal with challenges and contentious topics in the classroom and the school environment. Their answers included the establishment of 'friendly groups for cooperation' between students and teachers, information provided by experts, continuous training, collaboration with parents and organisations with relevant expertise, development of a relationship of trust with the students, use of alternative educational media and organisation of experiential workshops with the involvement of experts. They further recommended the integration of lessons related to social and political sciences in the curriculum, and the development of networks of cooperation.

When asked about the aforementioned practices and specifically the 'friendly groups for cooperation', the 'Follow-up' workshop participants explained that this is a practice that has been implemented in their school, highlighting the teachers' interest in their students. Despite the occasional lack of cooperation expressed by the parents, relevant groups exist, and they involve cooperation between students and parents, with a main focus on

students who experience difficulties. They elaborated that such groups could not be further expanded to involve more actors. They also provided the example of workgroups established in the context of programmes that focus on specific thematises, such as environmental projects, that have been proven effective in the increase of collaboration between the different parties.

With regards to the main obstacles preventing the successful countering of challenges and contentious topics in the classrooms and the school environment, survey respondents emphasised the lack of meaningful discussions and the lack of relevant subjects, programmes and educational tools. Simultaneously, the adoption, perpetuation and expression of stereotypical viewpoints, the indifference of some educators, as well as work fatigue negatively affect the way controversial issues are addressed in educational settings. Educators are additionally burdened by the limited available time they have, to organise discussions and talk about relevant matters, due to pressure to finish the prescribed curriculum, their heavy workload and the supplementary tasks they are assigned. Finally, they have to face the unpredictability of such incidents and the students' lack of trust towards them. During the 'Follow-up' workshop, teachers confirmed the aforementioned obstacles and highlighted that one of the main challenges, which could hinder their effective response towards the phenomena under discussion, pertains to the constant pressure to finish the school's curriculum within the school calendar, and the additional tasks for which they have assumed responsibility.

Conclusions

The present paper summarised the main findings of the survey and 'Follow-up' workshop -which validated the data gathered- that were implemented in the framework of the *PARTICIPATION* project, on the management and prevention of contentious topics in Greek educational settings. The above-mentioned survey was developed upon the review of the existing literature and the evaluation of an initial draft during the 'Set-the-scene' workshop. Our research findings show that two of the main challenges faced by teachers when it comes to addressing polarising and controversial issues are moderating conversations on topics that give rise to polarisation, and handling polarised views related to the governmental measures introduced to counter the COVID-19 virus. This issue was highlighted during the 'Follow-up' workshop, in the context of which teachers explained that the re-integration to face-to-face lessons was found difficult for both them and their students. Professionals also found it hard to address and respond to extreme views related to these topics when they were expressed in the school classroom. Those issues align to a degree with the preliminary desk research; nonetheless, there are also specific differences. From the categories that were identi-

fied during the literature review, the educational and the contextual categories were supported. However, within these categories, different factors were stressed. An example that highlights this, is the fact that teacher, parents, and student contacts were not stressed or discussed as much during the desk research but were significant within the online survey and the 'Follow-up' workshop. Lastly, the structural aspect identified in the literature was not equally stressed by teachers in the online survey and the 'Follow-up' workshop; nevertheless, it was mentioned during the 'Set-the-Scene' workshop that took place before the online survey.

Although most of the online survey respondents and 'Follow-up' workshop participants stated that they feel well supported by their colleagues and their school's management, cooperation could further improve, in terms of opinion and experience sharing, not only between teachers and the school management, but also with other competent and experienced actors. As suggested by the majority of teachers that participated in the research, existing tools do not suffice, and teachers are not properly trained to use them. These findings are in line with the desk research that was conducted prior to the implementation of the research activities, which underlined the absence of materials, training courses and tools focusing on the prevention and tackling of polarisation and radicalisation. More material should be provided in order for professionals to follow a more holistic approach, feel more confident to address the phenomenon, and handle students with extreme views and behaviours. At the same time, teachers should be supported by assisting personnel and experts, such as psychologists, in order to be able to dedicate more time to their educational responsibilities and tasks.

Half of the online survey respondents agreed that parents provide them with a moderate amount of support; nonetheless, it is clear that the communication between parents and teachers should be more stable. This was noted by the workshop participants, who provided examples of incidents when they could not reach parents and could not resolve eminent issues involving their children. In fact, participants mentioned that sometimes it falls on teachers' discretion and abilities to support students that exhibit polarised views and extreme behaviours. The importance of parents-teachers collaboration was also depicted in the desk research, since cooperation between the school and students' families was deemed a good practice.

It should be underlined that the pressure to finish the school curriculum limits teachers' capacity to address such issues, while they have to find ways to support students' re-integration into the school community and face-to-face teaching after a long period of online lessons. Moreover, teachers have assumed responsibilities for further administrative tasks, which hinder their focus on their educational role, and can lead to detachment and work fatigue.

Taking into consideration the results of the desk research, the online survey, and the workshops conducted, the following recommendations are proposed to support education professionals in addressing challenges and contentious topics in the classroom and the school environment:

1. Trainings and seminars should be implemented in order to raise teachers' awareness of the issues at hand and provide them with tools and practices on how to address them, and better approach students who exhibit such behaviours. Such events should include experiential activities and provide real-life examples and concrete steps teachers can follow.
2. Standard procedures should be established in each school on how to address relevant incidents, so the school community can have a holistic approach to the prevention and tackling of extreme behaviours related to contentious topics and polarised views.
3. Students and parents should be further engaged in relevant initiatives, through workgroups, events (including debates) and appropriate activities.
4. More educational tools should be developed, while existing tools should be widely disseminated to all relevant actors. An online library could be created, gathering all suitable material that has been developed by competent organisations.
5. Networks of cooperation should be established, working as a bridge of collaboration between schools and organisations with expertise. Trainings addressed to teachers, students and parents should be implemented by these organisations in and outside the school premises.

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