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# Teachers' perceptions on introducing sensitive and controversial issues in the classroom

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Teaching sensitive and controversial issues (SCIs) has gained substantial attention in today's highly diverse societies. Even though it is regarded as a fundamental aspect of democratic education, many teachers refrain from undertaking this ambitious task as they feel inadequate to meet its challenges. This paper draws on focus group data on teachers' perceptions toward introducing SCIs in their classrooms. The purposively selected sample consisted of 11 teachers from three different educational levels in the Republic of Cyprus. The data revealed contextual and professional factors that affect teachers' decision to introduce the discussion of SCIs in the classroom. This research highlights the importance of including SCIs in the curriculum, providing efficient training and support, and equipping teachers with the necessary pedagogical strategies, knowledge, and skills to effectively navigate discussions around SCIs in the classroom. By promoting critical thinking, empathy, and respect through the inclusion of SCIs and supporting teachers in their implementation, schools can empower students to become informed and active participants in a democratic society.

## KEYWORDS

controversial issues, teachers' perceptions, critical thinking, classroom discussions, teacher education

## 1 Introduction

While polarization has existed throughout history, the current era is uniquely influenced by the rise of social media and the constant flow of online misinformation, disinformation, and fake news, which amplify divisive opinions and polarizing debates (Au et al., 2022). Given this context, schools are called to readdress their role by embracing their responsibility as educational institutions to cultivate students' critical thinking and empathy through dialogue and argumentation (Rapanta et al., 2021). In light of the rising incidents of hate crimes, terrorism, and extreme radicalization, schools need to play a pivotal role in addressing these critical issues (Sjøen and Mattsson, 2020). By actively engaging with this challenge, schools can create an environment that fosters empathy, respect, and critical thinking to promote freedom of speech, inclusion, tolerance, and human rights while preventing the use of hate speech by students (Wansink et al., 2023b). Within this context, addressing Sensitive and Controversial Issues (SCIs) is imperative to the development of democratic cultures and the moral and civic development of learners to become active democratic citizens who coexist peacefully (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2016).

In this research paper, we adapt the definition suggested by the Council of Europe, namely that SCIs are issues that provoke strong feelings and divide communities and society since different groups and individuals produce different meanings, interpretations, explanations,

and/or solutions. These issues can be political, social, or cultural in nature and can include topics such as racism, religion, sexuality, politics, and violence, abortion, gun control, immigration, climate change, and racial discrimination, among others, and are strongly politicized (Cotton, 2006; Kerr and Huddleston, 2015).

The teaching of SCIs is becoming an increasingly crucial topic in school settings, mainly in the context of teaching for active democratic citizenship (Noddings and Brooks, 2017; Zimmerman and Robertson, 2020; Sætra, 2021a). Consequently, the integration of SCIs in the curricula is imperative as it can foster respectful dialogue, and enhance empathy while offering the opportunity for students to gain a deeper understanding of diverse perspectives, develop their analytical and interpersonal skills, problem-solving and decision-making skills, thus becoming active and engaged citizens (Hess and McAvoy, 2014; Oxfam, 2018; Kubota, 2014).

Despite the importance of dealing with SCIs, several research studies have revealed teachers' uncertainty and difficulty when teaching SCIs (Wansink et al., 2023a) mainly due to insufficient training, possible strong emotional reactions from students, pressures from the school, parents, local community, and state, or feeling constrained by own values, beliefs, and identities (Pace, 2019; Cotton, 2006; Hess, 2009; Hand and Levinson, 2012; Zembylas and Kambani, 2012; Kello, 2016). Additionally, the demanding and overloaded curricula which reflect the various societal expectations placed on teachers, the fear of being accused of promoting specific political agendas, the lack of agreement on what constitutes controversial topics in the first place, and the insufficient knowledge are listed among the factors that contribute to teachers' hesitance in undertaking this task (Ho et al., 2017).

Most studies have explored SCIs as part of civic and social studies subjects and concentrate on secondary school teachers (e.g., Kello, 2016; Gindi and Erlich, 2018; Sætra, 2021a). Our research concentrates on exploring in-service teachers' perceptions from three educational levels—pre-primary, primary, and secondary. Furthermore, this study focuses on teachers' perceptions of introducing SCIs in the classroom and identifying the factors that affect their decision to introduce SCIs across different curricula subjects. The study, while small in scale, provides valuable insights leading to a larger, more comprehensive investigation. Moreover, this study enables the derivation of broader implications concerning teacher education by emphasizing the support needed to engage in such practices. Specifically, we seek to address the following research questions:

- 1 What are the perceptions of teachers (pre-primary, primary, and secondary educational levels) regarding the introduction of sensitive and controversial issues (SCIs) in the classroom?
- 2 What factors influence teachers' decision to incorporate SCIs across the curriculum?

## 2 Dealing with SCIs in the classroom

Teaching SCIs in the classroom is considered a challenging task for educators as it requires elaboration on complex and sensitive issues while creating an inclusive environment in which all students feel respected and valued (Woolley, 2020). While teachers find value in discussing SCIs in classrooms, they tend to withhold from doing so due to the anticipated consequences (Byford et al., 2009) and uncertainty in handling such discussions (Evagorou and Dillon, 2020).

The findings from the literature seem to be consistent as they highlight teachers' positive attitudes toward teaching such complex issues (Divéki, 2018), nevertheless, they reveal their concerns in doing so. Specifically, in a survey study with 67 high school social science teachers in the US, Byford et al. (2009) found that teachers were in favor of discussing SCIs because they felt that they helped in developing informed and enlightened citizens. However, they were concerned about "student-related disruption and conflict" (p.169). This general finding is also confirmed by Gindi and Erlich (2018), who studied the attitudes of more than 1,600 Israeli teachers toward holding class discussions on the controversial issue of Jewish-Arab relationship. The findings revealed a gap between teachers' positive attitudes toward conducting discussions on pluralism and their reluctance to do so due to their perceived inability to handle such discussions.

Similarly, Hungarian EFL teachers exhibit a predominantly positive attitude toward addressing controversial issues in class. They recognize the importance of discussing these topics and aligning with existing literature on the subject. Teachers are more inclined to introduce controversial issues if they believe their students would be interested, if they themselves are interested, if they feel prepared, and if they are confident in managing potential conflicts (Divéki, 2018).

Identity threat is another challenge that teachers seem to face when introducing such discussions in their classrooms. As Wansink et al. (2023b) explain, students can perceive that their sense of self and belonging, particularly related to their identity, is at risk of being negatively impacted or devalued in the context of discussions about controversial issues. Particularly, teachers can see their students exhibiting various defensive responses, such as distancing themselves from individuals with opposing perspectives that they perceive as identity-threatening (Goldberg, 2013; Zembylas and Kambani, 2012) and consequently become disengaged from controversial issue discussions to avoid critical self-reflection, in order to protect their self-image and identity. Cassar et al. (2023) study, reveals that teachers often perceive addressing controversial issues as a moral obligation to confront perceived injustices and to foster a classroom environment that supports justice and equity, considering them also as opportunities to develop students' critical thinking, empathy, and democratic competences. The decision to engage with unplanned controversial issues is also influenced by the emotional dynamics within the classroom and the broader context in which the school operates. Ultimately, teachers' actions are guided by their commitment to providing an education that aligns with democratic principles and prepares students to navigate complex societal issues.

Research studies highlighted teacher education as another challenge that could hinder the discussions of controversial issues in the classroom. Specifically, empirical evidence from school teachers' perspectives indicates that existing teacher education programs do not adequately equip educators to facilitate discussions on controversial topics within the classroom setting (Chikoko et al., 2011; Tannebaum, 2020). These results are similar to those reported by Oulton et al. (2004). Specifically, in their mixed-method research with primary and secondary teachers in the United Kingdom, the researchers unveiled teachers' unpreparedness to introduce controversial issues in the classroom due to a lack of appropriate resources, training, guidance, and time constraints as a result of the

overloaded curricula. Educators' level of confidence in incorporating such topics in their instructional practice seems to be interconnected with the degree to which they feel at ease within the context of their schools as well as the level of support they receive (Tannebaum, 2020).

Deciding which SCIs to teach and how to present them in a way that is age-appropriate and culturally sensitive is also crucial. Different topics may be more relevant and appropriate for different age groups, and educators need to take into account the diverse cultural backgrounds and experiences of their students (Woolley, 2020). Zembylas and Kambani (2012), who investigated the perspectives of elementary teachers in the Republic of Cyprus regarding the incorporation of controversial issues in the history curriculum, revealed that even though teachers acknowledged the educational value of discussing controversial topics with their students, they were reserved in performing such a task due to concerns related to student developmental readiness and the specific regional context. Despite teachers' willingness, the discussion of SCIs was perceived as challenging by the participants for various reasons, including emotional discomfort experienced by teachers, emotional resistance from students, limited access to professional development, inadequate teaching pedagogies, lack of appropriate instructional materials, and constraints imposed by national structures and norms.

SCIs are topics that provoke strong emotions and opinions due to the potential for controversy to extend beyond the classroom, affecting personal relationships and broader social dynamics (Misco and Patterson, 2007; Zembylas and Kambani, 2012; Pace, 2019). On one hand, educators want to encourage students to think critically and engage in productive discussions about complex issues; on the other hand, they need to ensure that all students feel comfortable expressing their views and that no one feels marginalized or disrespected. It is therefore essential for educators to create a classroom culture that values open-mindedness, respect, and empathy, even when discussing topics that students may have strong opinions about. In order for teachers to navigate through these challenges, researchers stress the importance of creating a safe and inclusive environment where students can engage in meaningful discussions, develop critical thinking skills and feel comfortable expressing their opinions while being respectful of others is vital (Hess and McAvoy, 2014; Pace, 2019; Nganga et al., 2020). Building on this argument, Sætra (2021a) in her qualitative research study in Norwegian high schools emphasizes that the creation of a jointly constructed learning environment is more productive and permits good classroom discussions of SCIs. In such an environment, as she argues, appropriate social relationships, norms for social contact, and skillful facilitation of discussion can take place. This also correlates with Goldstein (2021) who claims that establishing clear expectations concerning classroom behavior and discussion process is imperative for the development of meaningful discussions among students.

## 3 Materials and methods

### 3.1 The context

In the Cyprus Education System (CES), the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport, and Youth holds the authority for policy-making, administration, and enforcing educational laws. This

includes creating curricula, providing teaching materials, facilitating professional development, and overseeing teacher appointments, transfers, promotions, and secondments (Brauckmann and Schwarz, 2014). Based on the current national curriculum, education in Cyprus aims to establish a "democratic and humane school" (MEC–Ministry of Education and Culture, 2010, p. 6) where all children can be educated together, regardless of their race, ethnicity, or abilities, while enhancing their critical thinking, problem-solving, creative thinking, communication, and cooperation skills.

The jurisdictional and cultural context of Cyprus significantly influences the topics that can be discussed in classrooms. Cyprus is a deeply divided society due to the political conflict between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots, which has profound implications for the educational system. Issues considered controversial in Cyprus include the unresolved political problem, national identity, immigration, and religious differences. These topics vary in sensitivity depending on the educational level and the cultural backgrounds of the students.

According to Persianis (2010), the socio-political environment in Cyprus, influenced by historical and ongoing migration patterns, has shaped educational policies and practices. The impact of this context is multifaceted, as historical and political sensitivities play a crucial role and consequently affect the introduction of sensitive and SCIs in schools (Zembylas and Kambani, 2012). Teaching SCIs in the classroom can be challenging, particularly within a conflict-troubled context a highly centralized and conservative education system, where teachers are required to follow a prescribed curriculum and adhere to strict guidelines. As Misco (2012) explains, the context significantly impacts addressing controversial issues in the classroom as it can control, undermine, or support such a process. Additionally, externally imposed policy interventions directed by the government leave little room for teacher initiatives and limit their freedom to exercise agency, self-assess their practices, and implement new ideas (Karousiou et al., 2019; Karousiou et al., 2022). Therefore, this study aims to identify teachers' perceptions in dealing with SCIs and any efforts to break away from educational bureaucracy and conservatism to contribute meaningfully to the development of critical thinking, questioning, analytical and communication skills, and democratic values of their students.

### 3.2 Data collection

In order to study existing perceptions of teachers from three different education levels regarding the introduction of SCIs in the classroom, a qualitative study was implemented, involving the conduct of a focus group. While the study's scale is limited, it lays the groundwork for larger-scale research, providing essential insights and highlighting key areas for further investigation, ultimately contributing to the development of more effective educational practices and policies regarding the teaching of SCIs.

The focus group was planned and conducted based on the protocols presented in Morgan and Krueger (1998) guidebook. Through this method and the discussions among the participants, new ideas and perspectives led to a richer understanding of the research questions. This qualitative method allowed for a range of perspectives to be explored and provided valuable insights into teachers' perceptions in tackling SCIs while facilitating the

TABLE 1 Demographic characteristics of the sample.

Teacher	Age	Sex	Years of teaching experience	Educational background
KT1	35	F	10	Master's in education
KT2	55	F	33	PhD in education
PT1	30	F	5	Master's in education
PT2	38	F	13	Master's in education
PT3	36	F	11	Master's in education
ST1	50	M	25	Master's in education
ST2	45	F	12	Master's in education
ST3	58	M	33	Master's in education
ST4	48	M	14	Master's in education
ST5	55	F	20	Master's in education
ST6	47	F	13	Master's in education

development of a deeper understanding of the challenges teachers experienced in dealing with such issues.

The interview schedule consisted of open-ended questions designed to elicit comprehensive and detailed responses from the participating teachers (Appendix). Initially, we included questions concerning participants' perspectives regarding the inclusion of controversial issues in their teaching practices. By examining their attitudes and beliefs in this context, we aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the teachers' personal viewpoints and professional approaches regarding the incorporation of SCIs in the classroom. Questions also explored the strategies they employed to foster constructive discussions and the various resources they utilize to engage their students effectively in such discussions. Another significant aspect addressed during the focus group interview was how teachers handle controversial topics in the classroom. Exploring the challenges teachers face, provided insights into the teachers' adaptability and responsiveness to diverse student reactions while shedding light on the complex landscape in which teachers navigate when teaching SCIs. Additionally, the focus group explored teachers' views on the age-appropriateness of different SCIs and how they adapted their teaching methods to suit the developmental stages of their students. Finally, participants were asked about the type of professional development and support they believed would be most beneficial in helping them navigate the complexities of teaching SCIs. The focus group discussion lasted approximately 2 h and 30 min, allowing for sufficient time for in-depth and meaningful exchanges between the participants, thereby ensuring a thorough exploration and capturing valuable insights for further analysis and research.

### 3.3 Participants

The focus group was conducted with 11 teachers from three different educational levels, aiming to collect a wide range of perceptions that could reflect the most common standpoints of teachers across the country. As the teachers were all volunteers and no inducements were offered, there is an increased possibility that the group was composed of a high proportion of teachers who have an interest in teaching SCIs. In total, two pre-primary, three primary,

and six secondary teachers with different demographic characteristics (Table 1) engaged in this discussion. It should be noted that teachers in Republic of Cyprus (RoC) are required to have at least a bachelor's degree, and many pursue further studies to obtain master's degrees or even doctoral degrees to advance their careers and improve their pedagogical skills. The respondents were informed that their anonymity and confidentiality would be maintained, as the data collected would be used solely for research purposes and codes, such as Kindergarten Teacher 1 (KT1), Primary School Teacher 1 (PT1), and Secondary School Teacher 2 (ST2), would be used instead of their names. Informed consent was sought, ensuring participants understood the purpose of the research, the procedures involved, their right to withdraw at any time without any consequences, and the measures in place to protect their privacy and confidentiality.

### 3.4 Data analysis

Having transcribed the audio-recorded interview, a thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. The analysis involved identifying themes and subthemes and interpreting the data in the context of the research questions. Following Braun and Clarke's (2021) approach to thematic analysis, we initially familiarized ourselves with the data by going through the transcripts or notes from the focus groups to identify patterns. Then, we assigned codes to the patterns found in the data. Similar codes were grouped to form themes that represented specific ideas. After scrutinizing the data repeatedly and checking that the emerging themes were coherent and relevant to the research questions, we developed a concise and descriptive definition for each theme to accurately reflect its content.

This led to the first draft of the analysis, which was then examined by two other researchers who had access to the full transcriptions. To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the research findings, we looked for counter-examples and alternative explanations. This approach involved searching for data that contradicted or challenged the main findings or initial interpretations (Morse, 2015; Guba and Lincoln, 1985). This procedure resulted in a set of detailed findings presented in the following section.



## 4 Results

### 4.1 What are the perceptions of teachers (pre-primary, primary, and secondary educational levels) regarding the introduction of sensitive and controversial issues (SCIs) in the classroom?

The participants' perceptions of teaching sensitive and controversial issues (SCIs) indicate a generally positive attitude and a collective sense of responsibility to address these topics in the classroom, particularly those that resonate with students, such as racism and bullying. Despite variations in developmental stages and the unique challenges encountered by teachers at different educational levels, there is a consistent recognition of the importance of engaging in discussions on controversial issues. Teachers understand that these discussions can enhance critical thinking, promote empathy, and prepare students for real-life challenges, highlighting the need for their integration into the curriculum. As participants explained:

Students will be confronted with these issues in their private lives. I am responsible for teaching my kids to deal with problems related to their own lives, make judgments about these problems, and be accountable (KT1).

I see my students as my children. I spend so much time with them. I think it's our duty to be able to get those messages across, whether it's about sexual abuse, sexual orientation, or whatever. [ST2]

Many kids are affected by issues related to sexual orientation therefore if we do not address them in schools nobody will. It is my responsibility to address these issues as my kids, because I consider them my kids, to do so. [ST6]

Participants also stressed the need for SCIs to be an integral part of the curriculum as they enable critical thinking and promote empathy. As ST3 explains:

Sensitive and controversial issues as a concept should be embedded in all subjects as it promotes critical thinking skills. There are multiple opportunities for incorporating controversial issues into the curriculum. For example, environmental issues in science and geography offer opportunities for a discussion on controversial decisions.

ST6 provided an example of how a SCI can be integrated in the curriculum:

In the biology lesson, we have the opportunity to discuss sensitive issues such as sexuality, sex education, etc. Students are able to participate in such discussions, and they are able to pose questions to enhance the discussion.

Teachers consider the developmental readiness of students, suggesting a gradual introduction of controversial topics. KT2 emphasized the importance of age-appropriate topics and often used

role-play to help young children understand and navigate sensitive issues:

We make sure that the topic is appropriate for our age group; for example, we choose a topic like sharing toys. We create a scenario; for instance, the children are playing and there is only one toy to share. I assigned roles to each child; one child to be the child who owns the toy, one child to be the child who wants to play with the toy, and one child to be the mediator. Then the role-play begins to allow children to act out the scenario. I encourage them to use critical thinking skills by considering different perspectives and evaluating the arguments presented by each character. After the role-play, I asked them how they felt about the scenario and if they changed their minds about the issue. Then I encourage them to reflect on the different perspectives presented and how they can apply this critical thinking skill in their everyday lives.

A secondary school teacher with 20 years of experience (ST5) expressed her reservations about opening discussions on controversial topics with her students. She feared that such topics might make everyone feel uncomfortable and highlighted the challenge of presenting multiple perspectives without causing significant emotional reactions or controversy. As indicated by the following narrative, the strong emphasis on Greek national identity in the Greek-Cypriot educational system influences the selection of topics. Teachers seem to avoid issues that challenge this identity or present alternative perspectives, fearing that it might undermine the national narrative.

I understand the importance of addressing SCIs in the classroom and I am positive. However, students hold different values or interests and strongly disagree with statements, actions, or beliefs. These topics can also be sensitive and touch on political or religious matters or elicit strong emotional reactions therefore, I am a bit reserved in addressing them in the classroom. For instance, addressing topics related to national identity and historical conflicts is extremely sensitive. It's often safer to steer clear of these subjects to avoid emotional distress or backlash from students and parents.

It should be noted that teacher participants are comfortable and feel more confident in facilitating discussions on issues that students can relate to, such as cultural differences, racism, and inequality. For example, they discuss racism in their schools due to the increased number of racist incidents. This is a topic that students can relate to, and when students feel ownership of a specific subject, they are more willing to engage in such discussions:

Bullying, violence, racism and equality are the SCIs that are being discussed in my classroom. We concentrate on these issues as are relevant to our students. (ST4)

If the students feel disengaged from the topic they show their reluctance toward it and act in an immature way. Only when students are affected by one situation (bullying, racism, inequality), they are willing to join in discussions of SCIs, therefore it makes it easier for us to address these issues. (ST5)

We have in our classroom students with a migrant background. These students were being bullied by the native students ... We managed to have discussions about this and the already existing ideologies and perceptions were contested. (ST1)

Teachers' use of interdisciplinary methods and multiple resources indicates their perception of SCIs as integral to comprehensive education, suggesting that these topics can be intertwined into various subjects to enhance students' learning experiences. Through dialogue and argumentation, students' participation in projects, and presentation of authentic incidents as well as engagement into problem-solving, participants encourage the discussion of SCIs in their schools. Moreover, the emphasis on establishing norms for respectful dialogue before discussing SCIs demonstrates teachers' awareness of the sensitive nature of these topics and reflects their perception of the need to create a safe and inclusive classroom environment. ST2 explained the process of introducing SCIs in the classroom by highlighting the importance of setting specific norms before the discussion:

Firstly, I remind them of certain ground rules for classroom discussion to create an environment which guarantees everyone has a voice to express their opinion and encourages respect. After the clarification of key terms such as gender equality, I ask them to explore this issue and also share their own experiences with gender inequality, and to ask questions. I follow an interdisciplinary approach with the introduction of SCIs in the classroom. For example, during Computer science students had the opportunity to search for information about gender equality in Cyprus. Often, students are presented with a real-life scenario to help them consider alternative perspectives by putting them in other people's shoes. The aim is to understand that different viewpoints on the same issue may exist and be equally valid.

By using real-life scenarios and collaborative projects, teachers engage students in discussions about SCIs, making the issues relatable and relevant while helping students develop essential communication skills and encouraging them to consider multiple perspectives. The data illustrates that teachers perceive SCIs as opportunities to develop students' critical thinking and empathy, preparing them for real-life challenges by engaging in discussions that require evaluating different viewpoints and challenging assumptions.

I often encourage them to participate in collaborative projects. The last one was on cultural differences with the use of technology, creating videos, making songs and role play, and presenting what they prepared in the classroom to initiate dialogue amongst them (ST1).

We do projects. Projects entail collaboration and require students to apply their knowledge and skills to solve real-world problems. This encourages them to engage in dialogue and present their arguments about the topic under investigation as they work together to find solutions. Pupils are encouraged to discuss and debate different perspectives and to evaluate the evidence and arguments presented by their peers (PT2)

The issue of dealing with multiple perspectives, which entails negotiating meaning, considering new ideas, and thinking about their own assumptions and biases, was also raised by the participants. By listening to different perspectives and opinions, students are able to consider new ideas and think about their own assumptions and biases. This helps to develop critical thinking skills as students learn to question their own assumptions and think critically about the material. As PT1 explained:

During a discussion that they had regarding sexual identities, students were able to address relevant questions, express themselves, and make claims and support these claims with evidence. Their peers also engaged in the conversation and they raised counterarguments. They dealt with different perspectives, they listened to each other and integrated their views with the others' point of view and it proved to be a very fruitful discussion.

Teachers' perceptions indicate that the integration of SCIs into classroom discussions by employing interdisciplinary methods and diverse practices is an important component of comprehensive education. Through these practices, students are encouraged to explore multiple perspectives, challenge assumptions, develop empathy, critical thinking and essential communication skills and critical thinking thus preparing them for real-world challenges enhancing also their ability to negotiate meaning and consider new ideas to be able to navigate complex societal issues thoughtfully and respectfully.

The perceptions of teachers at different educational levels reveal both a shared commitment to addressing SCIs in the classroom and some distinct differences in their approaches. Pre-primary teachers, like KT2, emphasize age-appropriate topics and often use role-play to help young children understand and navigate sensitive issues, focusing on foundational skills such as sharing and empathy. Primary teachers are more likely to integrate SCIs into various subjects using interdisciplinary methods to promote critical thinking and empathy, often addressing issues like bullying and racism that are directly relevant to their students' experiences. Secondary teachers, such as ST5, while generally positive about discussing SCIs, express more reservations due to the potential for strong emotional reactions and the complexity of the topics. They are more cautious about the students' maturity levels and the diverse values and beliefs that students bring to the classroom. Despite these differences, there is a consistent recognition across all levels of the importance of engaging in discussions on controversial issues. Teachers understand that these discussions can enhance critical thinking, promote empathy, and prepare students for real-life challenges, highlighting the need for their integration into the curriculum. By employing diverse practices and interdisciplinary methods, teachers aim to create inclusive learning environments that foster respectful dialogue and help students navigate complex societal issues thoughtfully and respectfully.

## 4.2 What factors influence teachers' decision to incorporate SCIs across subjects?

Even though participants expressed their willingness to introduce SCIs in their classrooms, the perspectives of the teachers in the sample reveal a common thread of contextual and professional factors, such

as school administration, school culture, parental reactions, time and professional development.

Participants agreed that school leaders need to offer the necessary academic freedom and not restrict teachers from addressing these issues. By granting academic freedom, school leaders empower teachers to explore SCIs without constraints. As a result, teachers are able to establish inclusive learning environments where students can foster their ability for critical thinking, engage in respectful and meaningful dialogues, and acquire a more profound comprehension of divergent perspectives. As a PT3 explained:

When I decided to discuss issues around sexuality my head teacher asked me to be very careful to say only what is necessary to avoid having the students ask us further questions or start mocking the content of the discussion or having parents come over and complain. Listening to this, I felt restricted in terms of how to manage the discussion on this issue and made me more frustrated and stressed.

School leaders need to support this process by allowing distributed leadership, suggesting professional development opportunities, and offering guidance and support while protecting us from parents' reactions. (PT1)

My head teacher is supportive, she encourages me to raise such issues in the classroom. And in case I have some difficulties she encourages me to reach an expert and invite them to assist in such discussions. (ST5)

The biggest challenge is creating a school ethos in which students genuinely feel they can speak openly about their concerns without fear of vilification or ridicule. In order to create this ethos, the head teacher in collaboration with teachers needs to create a safe space where these discussions can take place (PT1).

The interrelated challenges of curricular overload and the constrained time available for teaching controversial issues pose significant obstacles, especially for primary and secondary school teachers. The past decade, curricula have undergone an expansion characterized by the inclusion of numerous subjects, standards, and assessments, which leaves limited space for the exploration of complexity and sensitivity, as teachers explained:

We find ourselves juggling an ever-expanding array of subjects, standards, and assessments, leaving little room for meaningful discussions on complex and sensitive topics. (ST2).

To truly empower our students, we must advocate for a balanced approach that allows us the time and space to tackle these controversial issues. It is our responsibility to build a generation that is equipped to navigate the complexities of the world with open minds and respect for diverse perspectives. (PT3)

Time ... we need to have more time to discuss SCIs. There is so much content to cover, standards to meet, etc. that leaves no space for addressing such important issues that promote critical thinking and respect. (PT2)

Parental reaction and its potential consequences for teachers in addressing controversial issues present a multifaceted and intricate dynamic within the educational milieu. Parents, as primary stakeholders invested in their children's educational experiences, frequently express apprehensions and viewpoints concerning the substance and delivery of instruction. On occasion, these reactions may manifest as a desire to shield their children from discussions of SCIs, thereby impeding the capacity of teachers to broach such topics within the classroom. As indicated below, parental reactions can significantly impact teachers' ability to address SCIs.

I tried to talk about sexual identities and I had parents threatening me to stop doing so. (PT2)

The lack of communication with the families is considered an important inhibiting factor to our decision to teach SCIs in the classroom. When there is no collaboration we hesitate to address these issues. Parents' participation is important as they can be an inhibiting factor in the teaching of SCIs in the classroom. (KT2)

Students usually reflect on their parents' perceptions, ideologies, etc. I have my reservations with respect to the extent to which they have the maturity to engage in discussions on SCIs without mocking. However, I believe that this depends on how we design and organize such discussions. By establishing the proper framework for such discussions where a respectful discussion can take place, students are able to express their own views and make arguments (ST3)

The lack of skills and knowledge in handling SCIs, due to insufficient professional development opportunities, leaves teachers feeling unprepared. Participants unanimously highlighted the scarcity of training seminars that specifically address sensitive topics such as sexual orientation, terrorism, or suicide. Instead, most available seminars focus on racism and cultural differences, often in a theoretical context without practical engagement. This deficiency in professional development opportunities results in teachers feeling ill-equipped to manage the complexities of SCIs in the classroom. As they argued:

We need support on how to address such sensitive issues. I am also afraid to initiate discussion on controversial issues like suicide and I do not know how to address this issue. I do not have the skills or the knowledge and there is no training available to sign for. (ST4)

We receive no support from the Ministry. Sometimes I feel that the Ministry has forgotten that pre-primary school teachers need support as well as most seminars are addressed to primary or secondary levels. Any efforts to introduce SCIs were made because we dedicated a lot of personal time and effort to be able to do so (KT2).

We really need official guidelines and support from the Ministry of Education. Without clear directives, we feel vulnerable and uncertain about how to approach sensitive and controversial issues. Having official protection would give us the confidence to handle these topics effectively (ST6).

Any kind of training we receive is based on our initiatives. We receive support through training organized by a university, through a master's degree course with a related module in. However, it is not our responsibility only. The Ministry should organize practical training and invite all the involved parties, teachers, parents, and students. (KT1)

All training sessions have the same form; most training sessions are theory-based. The practical part is missing. There was no interaction with colleagues or exchange of ideas and practices. It did not cover any of my needs. And most trainings have the same form (ST2).

Teachers also stressed the importance of participating in a well-developed training course on how to deal with these issues. Specifically, they suggested school-based training as a more suitable training type as it can be tailored to their needs. As they specified, school-based training takes place during school time and on a regular basis. Participants also mentioned the importance of inviting experts into schools to help teachers facilitate discussions on SCIs.

We do not receive any support. Training is important to be held during school hours. The overloaded curriculum and the limited time are the reasons why teachers refrain from attending training outside school, organized by the Cyprus Pedagogical Institute. An expert can come and illustrate good practices, and suggest methods on how to approach such issues, as sexuality, and racism. I do not believe we are specialized to talk to students about SCIs. One wrong word, one wrong expression immediately all the effort goes down the drain. (ST5).

School-based training would have been the most ideal type of training to participate in. It involves collaboration with other teachers and the sharing of ideas and best practices. We focus on real-life incidents that concern our school. Also, it is more efficient as it does not require travel or other expenses. Theory needs to be connected with practice. (ST4)

A secondary teacher also addressed the importance of reflective practices and receiving constructive feedback to critically analyze their instructional approaches, identify areas for improvement, and make necessary adjustments. As she explained:

We need to be shown strategies and practices on how to handle SCIs in schools, implement them in their classroom, and then return to the training and reflect on what we have achieved along with the difficulties we encounter in doing so. We consider receiving feedback an integral part of successful training. We need to have the opportunity to implement what we have learned from experts and then reflect on it and receive feedback in order to improve. (PT3)

The concerns expressed by teachers from different educational stages emphasize the need for comprehensive and practical training programs encompassing opportunities for interaction, exchange of ideas, and engagement in problem-solving activities related to these sensitive topics to equip them with the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively address these critical issues.

Across all educational stages, research participants emphasized the need for academic freedom and support from school leaders to effectively address SCIs. They consistently highlighted the importance of creating inclusive learning environments that foster critical thinking and respectful dialogue. Additionally, teachers at all levels expressed concerns about parental reactions, noting that opposition from parents can lead to hesitation and stress when discussing sensitive topics. Time constraints and curricular overload were also common challenges, with teachers from kindergarten to secondary school struggling to find adequate time to address SCIs amidst an expanding curriculum. Furthermore, the lack of sufficient professional development opportunities was a shared concern, with teachers across all stages feeling unprepared to handle SCIs due to the scarcity of practical training programs. These similarities underscore the need for systemic support and comprehensive training to empower teachers at all educational levels to engage students in meaningful discussions on sensitive and controversial issues.

## 5 Discussion

This study reveals teachers' positive attitudes toward discussing SCIs, recognizing their importance in fostering critical thinking and empathy among students. However, in alignment with other research studies, their ability to effectively address these issues is influenced by various contextual and professional factors. The centralized and conservative education system, rigid timetables, insufficient training, and an overloaded curriculum, combined with school culture and ethos, school leadership, and parental reactions, create unique challenges and affect teachers' decisions to introduce these issues in their classrooms. These factors hinder opportunities for deviating from prescribed guidelines and developing activities that promote critical thinking, interpersonal and analytical skills, and empathy.

Relevant studies show differing opinions among teachers regarding discussing controversial issues with students. Some view such discussions as a means to foster critical thinking (Cassar et al., 2023), while others may avoid them due to students' reactions (Kubota, 2014). The lack of maturity among younger students, mentioned also by research participants, can make it challenging to address SCIs in the classroom, and the probability of losing classroom control or having students steer the conversation toward undesirable paths are other factors documented as well to influence their decision to deal with SCIs in the classroom (Beck, 2013; Pace, 2019).

The teachers in this study also raised the issue of age suitability regarding the content of the SCI and ways to address it. Specifically, preschool teachers dealt with age-appropriate content and simpler scenarios, such as using role-play to teach sharing toys, which helps young children develop empathy and critical thinking from an early age. In contrast, high school teachers faced more complex challenges, such as the potential for strong emotional reactions and discomfort among students when discussing highly controversial topics, highlighting the need for different approaches and considerations based on the developmental stage of the students. Age suitability is a frequently raised concern, not only among professionals in the children's workforce but also among teachers and parents, as noted by Mason and Woolley (2019).

Teachers' perceptions not only reveal a positive attitude toward introducing SCIs in the classroom but also reflect their pedagogical



expertise and sense of duty to discuss complex issues with their students, whom they see as their children. This relates to the construct of teachers' professional identity, which gives them a sense of purpose that significantly influences their teaching decisions (Beijaard et al., 2000; Berger and Lê Van, 2019). The overall positive attitude toward teaching SCIs is consistent among teachers, signifying a shared sense of responsibility across different educational levels. They consider it important to address these issues, as controversy can stimulate critical thinking, foster empathy, and offer valuable educational opportunities where values and ideas can be explored in a safe space (Oxfam, 2018; Gindi and Erlich, 2018).

Teachers employing diverse methods to engage students in meaningful discussions on SCIs reveals that teachers perceive the integration of sensitive and controversial issues (SCIs) into classroom discussions as essential to comprehensive education. Kitson and McCully (2005) highlighted history teachers' diverse approaches to teaching SCIs in Northern Ireland, classifying them on a continuum from avoiders to risk-takers, with containers in the middle. Avoiders deliberately avoided discussing controversial topics, while risk-takers fostered empathy and encouraged diverse interpretations of history through immersive teaching methods. Containers taught potentially controversial historical events but limited students' focus to historical sources without actively encouraging engagement with diverse perspectives. In this study, teachers lean toward the risk-takers' position, facilitating students' participation in activities that enhance critical thinking, empathy, and analytical reasoning within an enriching classroom environment.

The results of this study show that discussion, whether in groups or pairs is central when addressing SCIs providing an opportunity for all children to express their opinions, increasing awareness of different viewpoints, and promoting democracy by ensuring no one person has the "correct" answer. Dealing with multiple perspectives involves reflecting on, evaluating, and comparing them to identify convergence and divergence between arguments. In culturally diverse societies, it is essential for students to understand various perspectives from their own culture and diverse cultural groups within the same society (Yoder and Jaffee, 2019). By critically evaluating others' arguments, students learn to assess the quality of arguments and identify strengths and weaknesses in different perspectives. Through dialogue and argumentation, students can engage in constructive discussions regarding controversial issues, resulting in a more comprehensive and collaborative learning environment (Gillies, 2016). This technique promotes the examination of controversial topics in a productive manner while providing students with the means to express their views respectfully and convincingly. However, to have productive discussions, teachers must deeply understand the topic and be skilled in listening to and questioning children's responses at key moments, which can help move the debate forward (Hand and Levinson, 2012).

The emphasis on establishing norms for respectful dialogue underscores teachers' awareness of the sensitive nature of SCIs and their commitment to creating a safe and inclusive classroom environment. As mentioned in the literature, setting norms for respectful dialogue is crucial for promoting productive discussions among students, particularly around SCIs. This practice encourages participation without evoking negative emotions that might dissuade students from engaging in discussions (Goldstein, 2021; Valerio, 2001; Pace, 2019). It is a vital step toward whole-group discussions on SCIs in a safe classroom space, allowing students to gain perspectives and

knowledge in areas such as developing a democratic viewpoint, understanding conflicting views, and discovering solutions to problems (Hand and Levinson, 2012). By engaging in critical discussions concerning real-life scenarios, students can expand their viewpoints, eliminate misconceptions, and develop empathy and tolerance (Sasson et al., 2018; Issa and Khataibeh, 2021). Moreover, the use of project-based learning is considered by the focus group participants, as a method which enables students to confront real-world incidents that can be controversial and necessitate critical thinking and analysis. This approach offers students a chance to engage in conversations that facilitate dialogue and argumentation while developing necessary communication and critical thinking abilities (Ningsih et al., 2020).

Teachers' perceptions and attitudes influence their teaching practices, which are further shaped by contextual and professional factors. In terms of context, the distinct socio-cultural and political framework of Cyprus significantly impacts the topics that can be discussed in classrooms and the appropriate ages for these discussions. The strong emphasis on Greek national identity in the Greek-Cypriot educational system, the unresolved conflict between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots, creates a highly charged environment for discussing historical and national identity topics. This context shapes teachers' decisions to introduce such topics that challenge this identity or present alternative perspectives, leading to their avoidance. Additionally, the lack of official support and clear guidelines from the Ministry of Education further complicates teachers' efforts to address SCIs confidently (Perikleous, 2010; Zembylas and Kambani, 2012).

School culture and ethos play a vital role in creating a supportive environment for teachers and students alike. A supportive school culture includes the involvement of school leaders, who set the tone and expectations for addressing controversial issues. School leaders must prioritize open communication, collaboration, and transparency with teachers, parents, and students (Hollingworth et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2020). By working collaboratively, school leaders and teachers can establish clear guidelines and expectations for discussing sensitive topics and promoting critical thinking skills.

The current study found that teachers' decision to introduce SCIs in their classrooms is influenced by factors, such as increased workload and strict timetables. Similarly, Chikoko et al. (2011) argue that the crowded curriculum and focus on league tables and standards emphasize knowledge-based instruction over cultivating critical thinking abilities. The bureaucratic structure of school systems contributes to these working conditions, resulting in reduced autonomy, commitment, satisfaction, and increased stress and depression (Day, 2020; Skinner et al., 2021). The lack of time for planning, preparation, and implementing new practices is linked to this correlation (Liu and Ramsey, 2008; Karousiou et al., 2019).

Parental reaction was found to impact the learning environment and the depth of classroom discussions. Specifically, participants expressed concerns about potential negative reactions from parents, aligning with other studies emphasizing the fear of parental reprisal (Payne and Smith, 2014; Mcpherson et al., 2023). If teachers perceive significant resistance from parents, they might feel constrained in fostering meaningful discussions on complex topics, limiting students' exposure to diverse perspectives and critical thinking opportunities. The findings of the current study are consistent with those of Tannebaum's empirical study (2020) on novice educators' perceptions

of using controversial public issues in the classroom which revealed that parental reaction plays a crucial role in influencing teachers' willingness to address controversial issues.

Teachers in this research expressed that a lack of efficient training and support affects their ability to effectively address difficult issues in the classroom. This finding is in agreement with [Chikoko et al. \(2011\)](#) findings which showed that most in-service training programs tend to be overly technical, prioritizing knowledge acquisition over developing critical understanding skills. Teachers with proper training play a vital role in shaping informed, responsible, and engaged individuals capable of grappling with societal complexities. Therefore, they need to develop the capacity to handle discussions of difficult issues, manage their prejudices and biases, and handle spontaneous questions constructively ([Hess and McAvoy, 2014](#); [Bragg and Buckingham, 2013](#)).

Teachers suggested that school-based training and collaborative professional communities can significantly enhance their ability to incorporate sensitive and controversial issues (SCIs) into classroom discussions. These communities facilitate collaborative problem-solving, generate new ideas, and demonstrate innovative teaching methods within a supportive environment. By addressing both emotional and instructional challenges, such communities can alleviate feelings of overwhelm and frustration among teachers ([Karousiou et al., 2021](#)). This study signifies the importance of a collaborative learning environment as through their participation in these environments, teachers can gain valuable insights, perspectives, and strategies from their peers, broadening their knowledge base and refining their teaching practices ([Admiraal et al., 2021](#)).

## 6 Conclusion

This study has contributed to existing scholarship, particularly on research regarding teaching controversial issues in the classroom, by identifying the challenges teacher's face, strategies employed, and needs, highlighting the significant influence of contextual and professional factors on teachers' willingness to introduce the discussion of SCIs in the classroom.

The findings emphasize the great responsibility and commitment of educators, positioning them as a force arising from the reality on the ground. Teachers need to consider the developmental readiness of students, as younger children may not have the cognitive or emotional maturity to engage with complex and emotionally charged issues. Therefore, scholars suggest a gradual introduction of controversial topics, starting with simpler issues in lower grades and progressing to more complex discussions in higher grades ([Shiakou and Belsky, 2009](#)). Addressing controversial issues in the classroom requires careful planning to create an inclusive and intellectually stimulating environment that fosters critical thinking, empathy, and respectful dialogue among students. Establishing clear guidelines for respectful and constructive discussion, encouraging students to support their arguments with evidence and engage in active listening, creating a safe space where diverse perspectives are welcomed and respected, fostering open communication with parents and the community, and incorporating SCIs into different subjects and grade levels are certain pedagogical practices employed to navigate the aforementioned challenges ([Goldstein, 2021](#); [Oxfam, 2018](#)).

While this study provides insights into the perceptions of a small sample of teachers regarding SCIs, across different levels, the findings

can inform educational policy and practice by highlighting the need for supportive school environments, comprehensive training programs, and effective parental involvement. To facilitate such discussion in the classroom, various models of critical thinking pedagogies, such as the "philosophy for children" (P4C) approach could be employed. These models emphasize dialogue, inquiry, and reflection, which are crucial for developing students' critical thinking skills and relevant for discussions on SCIs, as they equip students with the ability to critically evaluate information, construct well-reasoned arguments, and engage in respectful dialogue. The P4C approach, in particular, has been shown to positively impact higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) and create safe environments for discussion, promoting democratic dialogue in the classroom ([Ab Wahab et al., 2022](#)). The theoretical foundations and practical applications of P4C emphasize the role of dialogue, inquiry, and reflection in developing critical thinking skills ([Välitalo et al., 2016](#)). These elements are crucial for engaging students in meaningful discussions on SCIs, as they promote a deeper understanding of the issues and encourage students to consider multiple perspectives. Research has demonstrated that P4C activities significantly improve children's cognitive and social-emotional development, which are essential for engaging in discussions on controversial issues ([Unal and Gunes, 2024](#)). By encouraging students to think critically and empathetically, P4C prepares them to handle diverse perspectives and conflicting viewpoints often encountered in SCIs. Fostering an atmosphere of open inquiry and reflective thinking, P4C helps students navigate complex and sensitive issues, making it an effective tool for discussing SCIs.

To ensure that SCIs are effectively integrated into the curriculum, it is important to embed controversial topics within existing subjects such as history, social studies, and science ([Oulton et al., 2004](#)). Developing guidelines for introducing SCIs in an age-appropriate manner is also essential. This includes starting with simpler issues in lower grades and progressing to more complex discussions in higher grades ([Shiakou and Belsky, 2009](#)). Encouraging the use of interdisciplinary methods to address SCIs can further enhance students' learning experiences. This can involve integrating topics across subjects and using project-based learning to engage students in meaningful discussions ([Ningsih et al., 2020](#)). By incorporating discussions on sensitive and controversial issues into the curriculum, schools can provide a platform for students to develop a deeper understanding of diverse perspectives, enhance their analytical skills, and cultivate respectful dialogue, especially in today's society, which is marked by divisive views and mass polarization. Furthermore, engaging with these issues empowers students to become active participants in shaping a more inclusive society ([European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2016](#); [Sætra, 2021b](#); [Hess and McAvoy, 2014](#); [Oxfam, 2018](#); [Kubota, 2014](#)).

Effective communication with parents is crucial to address their concerns and highlight the importance of SCIs in developing critical thinking and empathy among students. Parents as primary stakeholders invested in their children's educational experiences, frequently express apprehensions and viewpoints concerning the substance and delivery of instruction. On occasion, these reactions may manifest as a desire to shield their children from discussions of SCIs, thereby impeding the capacity of teachers to broach such topics within the classroom. Nevertheless, parents who actively engage in their children's education can provide valuable support, such as reinforcing the importance of critical thinking and empathy,

which are essential for discussing SCIs. Establishing open lines of communication can help mitigate parental concerns and foster a supportive environment for discussing SCIs. Involving parents in the educational process can enhance their understanding of the value of SCIs and how these discussions can benefit their children's overall development. By engaging parents in workshops or informational sessions, schools can build a partnership that supports the integration of SCIs into the curriculum. This collaborative approach can help create a more inclusive and respectful learning environment, where students feel empowered to explore diverse perspectives and develop critical thinking skills (Hermann-Wilmarth and Ryan, 2019).

Supportive school leadership is also vital in creating an environment that encourages teachers to address SCIs. School leaders should provide guidance, protect teachers from parental reactions, and foster a culture of openness and respect (Hollingworth et al., 2017). Promoting distributed leadership by involving teachers in decision-making processes related to SCIs can empower teachers and create a sense of ownership and responsibility (Smith et al., 2020).

The study revealed that advocacy for teaching SCIs in the classroom has grown internationally, yet there is limited scholarship on teachers' training to support them in handling SCIs. Therefore, SCIs are rarely addressed beyond a compulsory curriculum and are often avoided. By redefining their role as facilitators of constructive conversations on sensitive and controversial subjects, teachers can equip students with the skills and knowledge needed to navigate the complexities of our world and become responsible, engaged global citizens.

Creating a supportive environment where students feel safe to express their views and engage in respectful dialogue is essential. This requires teachers to be well-prepared and confident in handling such discussions, highlighting the need for professional development programs that focus on building these skills (Hess and McAvoy, 2014; Pace, 2019; Nganga et al., 2020). Teachers need adequate training to navigate potentially challenging situations effectively, to be equipped with strategies to manage disagreements, prevent conflicts, facilitate discussions that encourage students to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize information, and promote constructive dialogue, ensuring that the classroom remains a supportive learning environment for all students. To achieve this, training should be an ongoing reflective learning process that engages teachers and provides them with the necessary support, knowledge, time and resources to assimilate and develop teaching strategies for implementing new practices and address challenges. It is therefore essential to offer supportive and constructive feedback as well as dedicated time for reflection on authentic instances such as lesson plans, demonstrations, and lesson recordings. Feedback and reflection are fundamental components of adult learning theory and effective professional development initiatives (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

Scaffolding training is recommended as an effective method for teachers to engage students constructively and meaningfully in discussions. This approach involves breaking down complex tasks into smaller, manageable steps while offering support and guidance throughout the process. In designing professional development, trainers could utilize faded scaffolding, which involves providing learners with supportive task structures and materials in the initial stages of learning (Karousiou et al., 2022). As individuals become familiar with the tasks, the level of support gradually decreases until

they can successfully apply the target knowledge independently (Tofel-Grehl et al., 2018). Initially, teachers can work with fully developed materials that support their practices in terms of introducing SCIs in the classroom, gradually assuming greater independence in implementing such practices. By adopting a reflective stance, participants engage in self-exploration, critically examine their teaching practices, evaluate the effectiveness of their classroom performance, bridge the gap between theory and practice, pose thoughtful questions about the teaching-learning process, analyze the cause-effect relationships between teaching and learning, and seek optimal solutions to classroom challenges with the aim of improving their pedagogical practices (Cirocki and Farrell, 2017).

Although it was a small-scale study, it did yield some interesting findings by providing valuable insights into the perception, practices, strategies, and challenges associated with teaching sensitive and controversial issues in the classroom. By informing future studies, this research can contribute to the development of more comprehensive training programs and support systems for educators, ultimately enhancing their ability to facilitate meaningful discussions on sensitive topics and prepare students for active participation in a diverse and complex society.

## Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

## Ethics statement

A complete bioethical review for this research was waived through a fast-track process by the Cyprus National Bioethics Committee (CNBC) as the study involved participants who were all over 18 years of age. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

## Author contributions

CK: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. MV: Formal analysis, Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Conceptualization. ME: Supervision, Writing – review & editing, Project administration.

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## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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## Supplementary material

The Supplementary material for this article can be found online at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/feduc.2025.1481173/full#supplementary-material>

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