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Navigating controversial issues: Greek-Cypriot primary students' emotional and epistemic responses to conflict

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study investigates the emotional and epistemic responses of 16 Greek-Cypriot primary school students to controversial issues related to the Cyprus conflict. Drawing on interviews conducted before and after an intervention designed to mitigate 'myside bias' through the teaching of argumentation skills, the study examines how students make sense of the 1974 Turkish invasion and their encounters with Turkish settlers and Turkish-Cypriots. Findings show that while the Turkish invasion evokes intense emotions, students generally express openness toward contact with Turkish settlers and Turkish-Cypriots. Also, while one group of students reinforced emotional distance by maintaining a singular Greek-Cypriot perspective, another displayed greater openness to multiple perspectives, albeit often with ambivalence. The study highlights the challenges and possibilities of teaching controversial issues in divided societies through a lens that pays attention to both emotional dimensions and argumentation skills. The paper discusses the implications for peace education in conflict-affected contexts.

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Introduction

A substantial body of research in peace education emphasizes the importance of addressing controversial issues in formal education, particularly in contexts where societies are divided by conflict, historical grievances, and identity-based tensions (Cassar, Oosterheert, and Meijer 2023; D. Hess 2005; Kello 2016; Kerr and Huddelstone 2015; Oulton, Dillon, and Grace 2004). Controversial issues, namely, issues that lack consensus and are contested in public and private discourse, are not only intellectually demanding but also emotionally and politically charged. Navigating such issues becomes especially challenging in conflict-affected societies, where the legacy of violence and trauma intersects with collective memory, shaping dominant narratives and emotional repertoires in powerful ways (McCully 2005, 2006).

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Despite these challenges, teaching controversial issues in the context of peace education can offer opportunities to foster students' capacity for democratic dialogue, critical thinking, empathy, and civic engagement (Bekerman and Zembylas 2012). In this context, peace education can cultivate learners' critical engagement with the root causes of conflict, their own positionalities, and the emotional and epistemic dimensions of historical understanding (Bajaj 2008; International Commission on the Futures of Education 2021). In line with these goals, international frameworks such as UNESCO's *Global Citizenship Education* (GCED) and the Council of Europe's *Teaching Controversial Issues* have emphasized the importance of teaching controversial issues as part of preparing learners for participation in democratic societies and fostering peaceful coexistence (Council of Europe 2015; UNESCO 2015).

Despite these normative commitments, much of the empirical research on teaching controversial issues in conflict-affected societies has focused primarily on teachers, particularly their fears, strategies, and emotional labor in addressing sensitive and contested topics (Kello 2016; Zembylas and Kambani 2012). While this research has generated valuable insights into how teachers navigate the pedagogical and political challenges of controversial issues, relatively little attention has been paid to how students themselves respond emotionally and epistemically to such teaching. This gap is significant, as it limits researchers' and educators' understanding of how students interpret, resist, or internalize dominant narratives and emotional discourses tied to conflict and peace. It also obscures the potential of peace education to transform not only how students think about conflict, but also how they feel about it — an essential dimension of fostering more empathetic, reflective, and critically engaged young citizens.

This paper addresses this gap by presenting a qualitative study of 16 Greek-Cypriot primary school students' responses to a classroom intervention designed to reduce *myside bias* in the context of the Cyprus conflict. Myside bias, that is, the tendency to favor information, arguments, and narratives that align with one's preexisting views while dismissing opposing perspectives (Iordanou, Kendeou, and Zembylas 2020), is especially relevant in conflict-affected societies where historical narratives are often polarized and emotionally charged. Cyprus remains an ethnically divided society, with unresolved tensions between Greek-Cypriots and Turkish-Cypriots dating back to the 1960s and culminating in the 1974 Turkish invasion.¹ The conflict continues to shape education curricula, commemorative practices, and national identity narratives in both the Greek-Cypriot and Turkish-Cypriot communities. Against this backdrop, we interviewed Greek-Cypriot students at two different stages: before and after an educational intervention focused on argumentation and critical discussion of the 1974 events. The intervention aimed to encourage students to engage with multiple perspectives and reflect on their own epistemic and emotional commitments.

By examining how children experience and navigate their biases, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how peace education may inform the ways teachers and students approach controversial issues. It also foregrounds the importance of supporting students in developing pathways to fostering more inclusive and empathetic ways of thinking. In this way, the paper enriches the theoretical and practical conversation about how peace education can cultivate emotional reflexivity, epistemic humility, and civic responsibility — core capacities for navigating conflict and building peaceful futures, both in Cyprus and beyond.

Previous literature and theoretical framework

Controversial issues

The definition of ‘controversial issues’ has sparked considerable interest and debate in the literature, reflecting the complexity and contextual nature of these topics. Scholars generally agree that controversial issues are those that involve competing perspectives and unresolved social, political, or ethical disagreements (W. Berg, Graeffe, and Holden 2003; Dearden 1981; McCully 2006; Stradling 1984). These issues are inherently contentious, often engaging deeply held beliefs and values, and are thus pedagogically challenging. Some definitions further argue that controversial issues involve viewpoints where both sides can be considered ‘right’ or, at the very least, are capable of being reasonably justified (Al Badri 2015). This characteristic not only emphasizes the moral complexity of such topics but also calls for pedagogical approaches that cultivate students’ capacities for empathy, critical thinking, and reasoned judgment. These challenges are further compounded in conflict-affected societies such as Cyprus, Northern Ireland, or Israel/Palestine, where controversial issues are not merely matters of debate but are often entangled with collective memory, historical trauma, and identity (McCully 2005, 2006; Zembylas and Kambani 2012). Not surprisingly, then, such issues are typically associated with high emotional stakes and can evoke strong emotional responses among students and educators alike.

A large body of scholarship highlights the potential benefits of incorporating controversial issues into the curriculum. These include enhancing students’ political interest (D. E. Hess 2002), promoting civic participation (Misco and Patterson 2007), improving classroom engagement (Chilcoat and Ligon 2000; Lin et al. 2016), developing critical thinking (Al Badri 2015; D. E. Hess 2004), and fostering tolerance for diverse viewpoints (Gist, Stevens, and Bavetta 1991). Moreover, engaging with controversial issues has been linked to goals of peace and global citizenship education, particularly in preparing students to participate in democratic societies and understand transnational challenges (Bekerman and Zembylas 2012; Sætra 2021). According to UNESCO (2015) and the Council of Europe (2015), teaching about such issues helps cultivate respect for diversity, empathy, and a commitment to human rights and sustainable peace.

Research on how teachers handle controversial issues has been extensive over the years (e.g. see Al Badri 2015; Kelly 1986; Öztürk 2022; Tribukait 2021; Yacek 2018), whereas studies on how students navigate these issues have been scarce (for exceptions see Sætra 2021; Uygun and Arslan 2020). McCully (2006) highlights in particular the emotional burden demanded for the teaching and learning of controversial issues in divided societies, because such issues are often associated with collective identity and memory (Bar-Tal, Oren, and Nets-Zehngut 2014). This burden can obstruct effective learning, particularly when teachers perceive students as emotionally immature or incapable of engaging with such controversies (Bekerman and Zembylas 2012) or fear students’ emotional resistance (Asimeng-Boahene 2007; Jansen 2009; McCully 2005). Zembylas, Charalambous, and Charalambous (2014) also discuss how emotional norms and styles in classrooms dictate what is considered appropriate feeling in response to contentious

events, which in turn shapes the boundaries of dialogue. In conflict-affected societies, students' emotional responses frequently stem not from direct experiences but from familial stories or societal narratives (McCully 2006). Scholars argue that examining these emotions is crucial for addressing antagonisms in such contexts (De Rivera 2018), as 'the meaning of emotions cannot be separated from a relational world and a past' (Fierke 2012, 93).

Emotions

In the context of our study, we conceptualize 'emotions' not merely as personal reactions to external social structures and influences; rather, we understand emotions as deeply rooted in culture, ideology, and power dynamics (Ahmed 2004). Consequently, emotions can serve as potent forces capable of reinforcing or challenging social and political realities (Zembylas 2015). For instance, negative emotions (e.g. sadness, anger) triggered by traumatic events influence collective historical narratives and memories, potentially posing substantial barriers to efforts aimed at achieving peaceful coexistence (Harkin 2003). Thus, grasping contested narratives and controversial issues in conflict-affected societies requires an understanding of the emotional components woven into these discourses, which often involve distinctions between 'victims' and 'perpetrators', spanning for generations (Bekerman and McGlynn 2007; McGlynn 2007; Zembylas 2008, 2015).

In this context, individuals may experience emotions not only in response to personal events but also to collective or societal experiences (Bar-Tal, Halperin, and De Rivera 2007). Younger generations, for instance, might not have directly witnessed such experiences yet have internalized them through collective historical narratives (Bar-Tal 2001) and power dynamics related to conflict issues (Hutchison et al. 2024). The historical and political context thus plays a crucial role in shaping these emotions. Unlike the notion of emotions as purely individualized, collective or group-based emotions arise from shared experiences within a specific societal framework (Bar-Tal, Halperin, and De Rivera 2007). This theoretical perspective highlights the interplay between individual feelings and the broader socio-political environment, emphasizing how societal narratives and conflicts contribute to the emotional landscape of communities. Examining the entanglement between controversial issues and emotions, then, exposes the emotional complexities of challenging existing societal narratives (King 2009).

The role of emotions has partly been studied in relation to discussions of controversial issues in the classroom, focusing mostly on teachers' emotions (Barton and McCully 2007; Kitson and McCully 2005; McCully 2006, 2012; Zembylas 2017; Zembylas and Kambani 2012) and less on students' emotions (Sætra 2021). The few studies that have been conducted so far in relation to students have focused mainly on what kind of controversial topics students would like to be included in the curriculum (Öztürk 2022; Uygun and Arslan 2020). This gap is particularly pronounced in research on Cyprus. While important work has examined Greek-Cypriot students' identity constructions and emotional discourses (Christou 2007; Spyrou 2006), fewer studies have explored how students respond emotionally and epistemically to interventions aimed at addressing bias or transforming their engagement with controversial histories. Spyrou (2006) demonstrated how Greek-Cypriot children construct emotional and symbolic representations of the 'other,' often

drawing on cultural and familial narratives to describe Turks as threats. Christou (2007) documented how nationalistic pedagogies in Cyprus are often infused with 'sacred patriotism,' producing emotional attachments to state-sponsored historical narratives. More recently, Charalambous (2013, 2023) has shown how students both reproduce and contest dominant narratives in classrooms, occupying liminal emotional and ideological spaces. These studies highlight that students are not passive recipients of nationalist discourse but engage with it in nuanced and sometimes contradictory ways. Yet, less is known about how structured educational interventions can support students in critically navigating these emotionally charged terrains.

Myside bias and epistemic cognition

Our study seeks to address this gap by investigating the emotional and epistemic responses of Greek-Cypriot primary school students to a classroom intervention that focused on the 1974 Turkish invasion of Cyprus. The classroom intervention aimed to reduce students' myside bias through dialogic and argumentation-based activities. Myside bias refers to the tendency for individuals to privilege information and arguments that affirm their pre-existing beliefs while devaluing or ignoring opposing perspectives (Iordanou, Kendeou, and Zembylas 2020). This bias is particularly pronounced in contexts of intergroup conflict where competing historical narratives are linked to identity and trauma.

To make sense of students' epistemic responses, we draw on Kuhn et al.'s (2000) developmental model of epistemic cognition. This model conceptualizes epistemological understanding along a continuum that includes absolutist, multiplist, and evaluativist positions. Absolutist thinkers view knowledge as certain and transmitted from authority. Multiplist thinkers believe all viewpoints are equally valid, treating knowledge as subjective and uncertain. Evaluativist thinkers, by contrast, recognize that knowledge claims must be supported by evidence and reasoned argumentation. For example, when discussing the 1974 Turkish invasion, an absolutist response might simply echo an official narrative ('Türkiye invaded Cyprus illegally'), while a multiplist response might suggest that 'everyone has their own opinion, and we can't know the truth.' An evaluativist stance, however, would involve weighing multiple sources and considering how historical evidence supports or challenges competing claims. In the context of this study, evaluativist thinking is particularly important because it enables students to hold multiple perspectives in tension, assess competing historical narratives, and navigate emotionally charged content with greater nuance.

Previous research by Iordanou, Kendeou, and Zembylas (2020) demonstrated that Greek-Cypriot students with evaluativist epistemic beliefs were more likely to engage with both Greek-Cypriot and Turkish-Cypriot perspectives in writing tasks about the 1974 war. In contrast, those with absolutist or multiplist beliefs tended to either reproduce monologic narratives or treat all accounts as equally unverifiable. These findings suggest that epistemic cognition plays a protective role against myside bias. However, that study did not consider the emotional dimensions of epistemic change. Our study builds on this work by explicitly examining how emotions and epistemic beliefs are entangled in shaping students' responses to controversial historical issues.

The classroom intervention used in this study was designed with these theoretical insights in mind. It integrated strategies from argument-based learning to promote evaluativist reasoning while also creating space for students to reflect on their emotional responses to the Cyprus conflict. Emotions were not treated as ancillary or disruptive but as integral to how students process historical narratives. This theoretical framing guided both the design of the intervention and the analysis of student responses. Additionally, our intervention design was informed by transformative learning theory, which emphasizes the importance of disorienting dilemmas and critical reflection in enabling learners to question previously held assumptions and consider new perspectives (Kumashiro 2015; Taylor 2007). Controversial historical issues often serve as disorienting dilemmas that destabilize students' inherited narratives and emotional understandings. Through the structured engagement with multiple perspectives and evidence-based reasoning, the intervention provided opportunities for students to re-evaluate both the content and emotional dimensions of their historical knowledge.

Although our study focuses on Cyprus, the issues it addresses resonate across other conflict-affected societies where education is entangled with contested histories and collective identities. For example, scholars like Paulson (2015) have explored how post-conflict education reform engages with historical memory, often encountering similar tensions between official narratives, emotional legacies, and the pedagogical imperative to foster critical thinking. Bringing such comparative perspectives into dialogue with our work highlights the broader significance of examining how students – not only teachers – emotionally and cognitively engage with controversial issues. Ultimately, understanding how young people navigate myside bias and emotionally fraught histories is crucial for advancing peace education as a transformative practice that supports both critical consciousness and empathetic citizenship.

The socio-political and educational context of the study

Cyprus has been ethnically divided since the early 1960s. After the armed struggle of the Greek-Cypriots against the British colonial rule (established in 1878) that started in 1955 and lasted for four years, Cyprus turned into an independent, bi-communal state between Greek-Cypriots and Turkish-Cypriots in 1960. The independence was followed by tensions between the Greek-Cypriots who longed for 'enosis', union with 'motherland' Greece, and Turkish-Cypriots, who opted for 'taksim', ethnic partition. The conflict in Cyprus, known as the 'Cyprus Issue', reached its zenith between 1963 and 1974, a period marked by intercommunal strife. In 1974, a failed military coup orchestrated by the Greek junta, aimed at unifying Cyprus with Greece, triggered a Turkish invasion, which resulted in the island's de facto partition into two ethnically homogeneous regions. The division led to the forced displacement of approximately 200,000 Greek Cypriots to the south and 45,000 Turkish Cypriots to the north, dramatically altering the demographic landscape of the island.

Following the 1974 invasion, Türkiye initiated a process of settling the occupied territories in the north part of Cyprus, a practice that has continued over the years and significantly altered the region's demographic composition. This settlement activity has been a source of considerable controversy and is deemed illegal under international law, including United Nations Security Council resolutions. These resolutions classify the

settlement of non-indigenous populations in occupied territories as a violation of the Geneva Conventions. The presence of Turkish settlers complicates efforts toward the reunification of Cyprus and remains a central point of contention in the protracted Cyprus Issue. In 1983, the unilateral declaration of the 'Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus' (TRNC) further exacerbated tensions. This declaration is considered invalid by the United Nations and is recognized only by Türkiye. For almost three decades following the Turkish invasion, the Greek-Cypriot and Turkish-Cypriot communities had minimal to no direct contact. However, in 2003, the Turkish-Cypriot authorities eased restrictions, allowing limited access to the occupied territories. Despite numerous diplomatic efforts and peace initiatives over the decades, Cyprus remains ethnically divided.

Research worldwide indicates that education in divided societies like Cyprus often serves as a vehicle to legitimize the positions of conflicting sides (Bekerman and Zembylas 2012; Gallagher 2004; Zembylas 2015). School textbooks and curricula frequently align with the dominant ethno-political narratives of their respective communities, reinforcing binaries between 'us' and 'them' (Bryant 2004; Kizilyürek 2001; Papadakis 2008; Spyrou 2006; Zembylas 2008). In the Greek-Cypriot educational system, a prominent educational objective in the aftermath of 1974 was that of 'I know, I don't forget and I struggle' so that younger generations do not forget the occupied territories in the north and keep struggling to liberate them. The Educational Reform Committee (2004) criticized the nationalist ideology that had been prominent till then, and the years that followed were characterized by debates between social groups, political parties and teacher organizations on whether Greek-Cypriot education should continue to promote nationalism in light of the ongoing Turkish occupation of territories in the north.

Finally, it is crucial to emphasize that Greek-Cypriot teachers continue to carry significant emotional weight, including anger, resentment, fear, and a profound sense of injustice, stemming from the trauma and suffering experienced during and after the 1974 events (Zembylas 2008, 2015; Zembylas, Charalambous, and Charalambous 2016). These emotions create a challenging environment for addressing controversial issues in the classroom, particularly those related to the events of 1974. As a result, there are several controversial topics surrounding this period that Greek-Cypriot teachers may find difficult to engage with or may choose to avoid entirely (Zembylas and Kambani 2012). Among these contentious issues are questions regarding the future of Turkish settlers in Cyprus: should they remain or return to Türkiye after a potential reunification of the island? Additionally, there are ongoing controversies surrounding the different interpretations of historical events, particularly the characterization of the Turkish military operation in 1974. Greek-Cypriots commonly refer to this operation as an 'invasion,' while Turkish-Cypriots and Turks describe it as a 'peace operation.' Such discrepancies in historical narratives not only fuel tension but also present significant obstacles for educators who must navigate these emotionally charged discussions while fostering an environment of critical thinking and mutual understanding.

Methodology

This section introduces the research methodology and methods used in the study. It discusses the research design, participants, intervention, and data collection and analysis process. The research reported here is part of a larger study focusing on developing

a learning environment for supporting students' argumentation skills and reducing myside bias. While the broader project used both quantitative and qualitative tools – including questionnaires, observations, and teacher interviews – this paper presents only the qualitative component focused on students' emotions and epistemic understandings in relation to the Cyprus conflict.

There were 85 students (49.4% male) from three public elementary schools participating in the intervention, but interviews were conducted with 16 of them. This paper employs a phenomenological-interpretive framework (Denzin 1997; Schwandt 1998; Van Manen 1990) to examine the biases and emotions of these 16 Greek-Cypriot primary students, who were selected randomly from the participating schools. The random sampling ensured a heterogeneous group in terms of gender and academic performance, as reported by teachers.

The data collection took place in the spring of 2024 and involved 30 semi-structured interviews with these 16 primary school students 11–12 years-old (male = 7, female = 9). Sixteen interviews were conducted before and 14 were taken after our intervention program (two students were absent during the post-intervention interviews). The pre- and post-interviews used the same set of open-ended questions, which allowed us to examine potential changes in students' emotions and epistemic understandings. However, we are aware that this repetition may have introduced a rehearsed quality to some responses in the second round, potentially altering the interactional dynamics. While the same questions were used, the second set of interviews also naturally included students' spontaneous references to the intervention, offering insight into their reflections on the experience. All the interviews were conducted in Greek and later translated into English.

The decision to work with a relatively small number of participants was based on the study's aim to capture students' biases and emotions in-depth – elements that lie at the core of a phenomenological-interpretive framework. A smaller sample size allows for a more focused exploration of individual experiences, offering rich and detailed insights into how students engage with and respond to controversial issues within their educational context. This approach also ensures a deeper understanding of the emotional processes involved, providing a nuanced view of students' perspectives that might be overlooked in larger-scale studies. By prioritizing depth over breadth, this methodology enables a more meaningful examination of how students' emotions and biases shape their understanding of controversial issues in conflict-affected societies.

The central questions guiding this study are as follows: 1) How do Greek-Cypriot primary school students respond emotionally to and perceive the Turkish invasion of 1974? (2) What emotions do Greek-Cypriot primary school students report when considering potential encounters with Turkish settlers and Turkish Cypriots? (3) How do Greek-Cypriot primary school students conceptualize historical knowledge about the Cyprus conflict, and what epistemic beliefs shape their understanding of multiple perspectives on history? (4) Are there any changes in how Greek-Cypriot students respond emotionally to the Turkish invasion of 1974, how they conceptualize historical knowledge about the Cyprus conflict, and what epistemic beliefs they exhibit about history after their engagement in an argument-based intervention?

The intervention program entailed participation in an established argument curriculum (see Iordanou and Rapanta 2021) which aimed to support students to develop their

argumentation skills and potentially reduce their myside bias. The intervention, which was based on dialogic and reflective activities, took place in ten 40-minute sessions. For the first two sessions, students discussed the topic of undocumented immigrants in the US: 'What do you think should happen to the children of undocumented immigrants who were brought to the US as children and are now living there? Do you think they should leave or stay in the US?'. The idea was to start with a 'neutral' (distant) topic for them that bore some similarity to the local controversial issue. The premise was that working with a neutral topic about a distant country, one that did not evoke strong feelings among the students, would help them develop a broader epistemological understanding and reasoning on controversial issues. We chose a topic that was somewhat similar to the issue of immigration to facilitate transfer from the neutral topic to the local, controversial, one. For the rest of the eight sessions, students discussed the topic of whether Turkish settlers should stay in the same house they have been provided to live in after the Turkish invasion of 1974, move to other houses, or leave Cyprus altogether.

Dialogic argumentation was conducted in real-time through an instant messaging software integrated into a Moodle-based learning platform, which was developed as part of the broader research project this study is part of. The intervention was synchronous, allowing students to engage in live, back-and-forth exchanges throughout the activity. During the sessions, students were provided with factual information from reliable sources regarding the topic, such as statistics on undocumented immigrants and the number of Turkish settlers. This information was presented in a question-and-answer format, enabling students to discuss and respond to it immediately. For half of the sessions, students were asked to support their own opinions, while in the other half, they were tasked with adopting the perspective of the opposing side and arguing in favor of that position.

The interviews were conducted on the basis of a list of pre-defined open-ended questions, allowing both focused and open components (B. L. Berg 2004). Examples of these questions are the following:

- I will take you in the past to an event that happened when you were unborn. Do you know what happened in Cyprus in 1974?
- How do you feel about these events that happened 50 years ago?
- How would you feel if you had to talk about divided Cyprus in front of a child who lives in the occupied territories of Cyprus?

The interviews encouraged participants to delve into the interpretation of their views and express their feelings. They were conducted in participants' schools and lasted around 20–25 minutes. Given the emotionally sensitive nature of the topics discussed, particular care was taken to ensure students' emotional well-being. All interviews were conducted by trained researchers familiar with pedagogical approaches on controversial issues, and students were reminded of their right to stop or skip any question. All ethical permissions (e.g. written authorization from parents) were granted according to the guidelines of the Cyprus National Bioethics Committee and the Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth. The recorded interviews were transcribed and later translated from Greek to English.

Content analysis facilitated the identification of key categories emerging from the data (Schreier 2012), focusing on the frequency with which specific categories of meaning

were used (Given 2008). The process followed several steps: selecting material; creating a coding frame composed of main categories and subcategories; dividing the material into coding units; testing the coding frame through double-coding and discussing any discrepancies; assessing the consistency and validity of the coding frame and revising it as necessary; coding all material using the revised frame; and, finally, interpreting and presenting the findings (Neuendorf 2017). Inter-rater reliability was assessed using Cohen's kappa ($\kappa = 0.87$) on 25% of randomly selected cases, with coders initially blinded to each other's ratings. For all disagreements, each coder explained their rationale, and the coding supported by the strongest justification was adopted. When disagreements persisted, the third author was consulted and consensus was reached through discussion among all three authors. This systematic procedure led us to focus on three central themes: (1) Greek-Cypriot students' emotional responses and views on the 1974 Turkish invasion and the occupied territories; (2) Greek-Cypriot students' emotions about potential encounters with Turkish settlers and Turkish Cypriots; (3) Greek-Cypriot students' epistemic thinking about history. For the third theme, we applied Kuhn et al.'s (2000) theoretical framework of epistemic profiles as a complementary deductive coding scheme, categorizing students' understanding of history as absolutist, multiplist, or evaluativist. These three themes are discussed below in detail.

Findings

Greek-Cypriot students' emotional responses and views on the 1974 Turkish invasion and the occupied territories

This section explores Greek-Cypriot students' emotional responses and views on the 1974 Turkish invasion and the occupied territories. Drawing on Ahmed's (2004) theorization of emotions as relational and performative, we interpret these emotional articulations as discursive practices that align students with national imaginaries and moral orders. We also remain attentive to how emotion circulates through and is shaped by intergenerational memory and collective narratives of loss, injustice, and displacement.

Pre- and post-intervention emotional discourses on the 1974 Turkish invasion

Figure 1 shows students' emotional responses to the 1974 Turkish invasion before and after the intervention.

In the pre-intervention interviews, sadness emerged as the most frequent emotional expression, referenced nine times by seven students. Importantly, all students referred to the 1974 events as a 'Turkish invasion,' a label that itself performs the dominant framing of these events. Sadness in this context is not just a spontaneous emotional reaction; rather, it reflects an emotional alignment with the national discourse of victimhood and territorial loss. As S16 expressed:

I am very sad because I also wanted to go to our other half of Cyprus, to see it, yes, and I feel very sad.

Here, the phrase 'our other half' reaffirms a sense of rightful ownership over the entire island, and sadness functions as an emotion that performs belonging and dispossession simultaneously. In a related account, S14 stated:

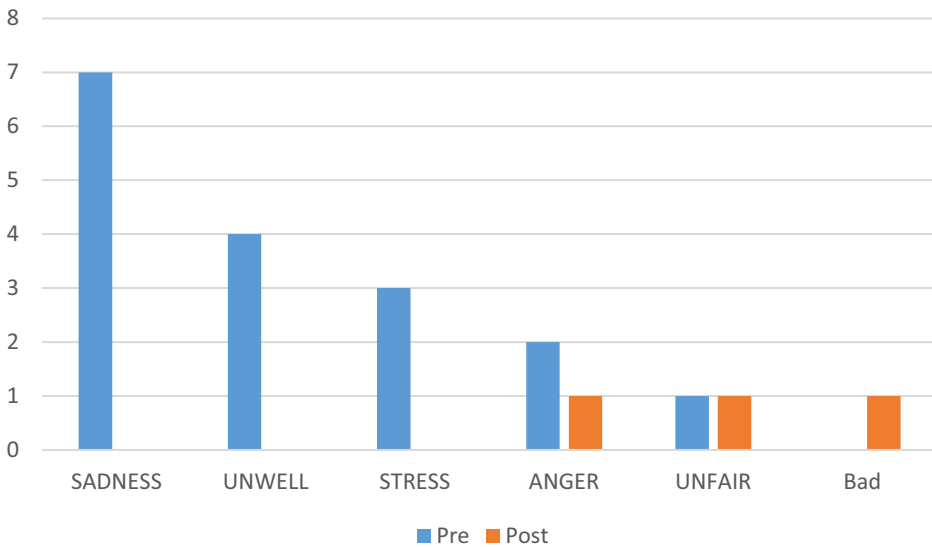


Figure 1. Students' emotional responses to the 1974 Turkish invasion at pre and post intervention.

I am sorry that they [Turks] took Cyprus and I imagine if there is a war here I would not be calm and collected like my grandmother, I don't want us to think about it.

The feeling of sadness here is tied to a generational memory, demonstrating how emotions are transmitted and reactivated through family stories and imagined futures. The student's alignment with her grandmother's experience positions her as a bearer of collective trauma, while her fear of a future war indicates an anticipatory emotion shaped by unresolved histories.

Another emotion articulated by students was stress or anxiety, noted five times by three students. These expressions function not merely as psychological descriptors but as emotional orientations toward the perceived threat of repeated violence. S3 explained:

'I feel anxiety, because it [Turkish invasion] might happen again.'

This is a clear example of how past events are not temporally contained but re-enter the present through emotional projections. The fear of recurrence indicates that the trauma of 1974 is not historical but emotionally ongoing.

Less frequent but still significant was the expression of anger, which was mentioned by two students. These articulations typically co-occurred with sadness and were often linked to perceptions of injustice and exclusion. For instance, S2 described:

I feel anger and sadness at the same time. The anger is because they [Turks] came and took half of Cyprus from us and now, we have to show IDs in the same place and without an ID we can't go to our own country. I also feel sadness because I feel sorry for those who lost their homes.

This statement weaves emotion into the fabric of territorial politics: anger is directed not only at the initial act of displacement but also at the continued material effects (e.g. ID

requirements) that structure daily life. The reference to ID cards exemplifies how infrastructures of separation become charged with emotional meaning, reinforcing feelings of injustice and exclusion.

One student used the term 'unfair' to describe the geopolitical dynamics of the invasion, further embedding emotion into a discourse of international morality:

It is unfair, normally they [Turks] should have been stopped by England, which was the guarantor power. England was a bigger country than Türkiye, but they let them do what they wanted, that was injustice. (S1)

The emotional charge here is directed outward, toward a perceived failure of international actors. The appeal to fairness and betrayal by guarantor powers positions the speaker within a moral universe in which Cyprus is the victim of broader geopolitical neglect.

A few students ($n = 4$) also mentioned feeling 'unwell', a somatic emotion that may reflect internalized anxiety or psychosomatic responses. These instances should not be read diagnostically but rather as indications of how emotions related to conflict are embodied and expressed. For example, S7 mentioned:

Psychologically, I don't feel well when I am thinking about the Turkish invasion ... it might happen again.

Following the intervention, there was a marked reduction in the intensity and frequency of negative emotional expressions. Sadness, stress, and unwellness were no longer referenced explicitly, while anger was mentioned by just one student. Interestingly, a less intense emotion, namely 'bad', emerged as the most frequent one. While still negative, the term 'bad' suggests a cognitive distancing from the high emotional intensity of earlier responses. As S11 remarked:

It is bad because it is unfair ... I mean to come and take one's land just to give it to your people for a better life. It was unfair because we did not have such a big army. We were a small country versus a bigger country.

Here, the emotional tone is less visceral and more reflective. While the student still invokes injustice, the language is more measured and abstract. This shift may reflect a movement from embodied emotion toward ethical reasoning, a pattern consistent with the goals of the argumentation-based intervention.

Pre- and post-intervention emotional discourses on the occupied territories

Students' emotional responses to the occupied northern part of Cyprus (referred to consistently by students as 'the occupied territories') further illustrate how emotions function within dominant national narratives. This is shown in [Figure 2](#) below.

In the pre-intervention phase, students commonly used the term 'bad' ($n = 7$ references from 6 students), along with sadness, anger, unfairness, loss, and pity. These emotional articulations often drew on personal or familial histories. As S6 stated:

What happened to my family – it wasn't fair, and people need to know that.

The term 'need to know' highlights how emotion here functions as a demand for recognition. S10 similarly noted:

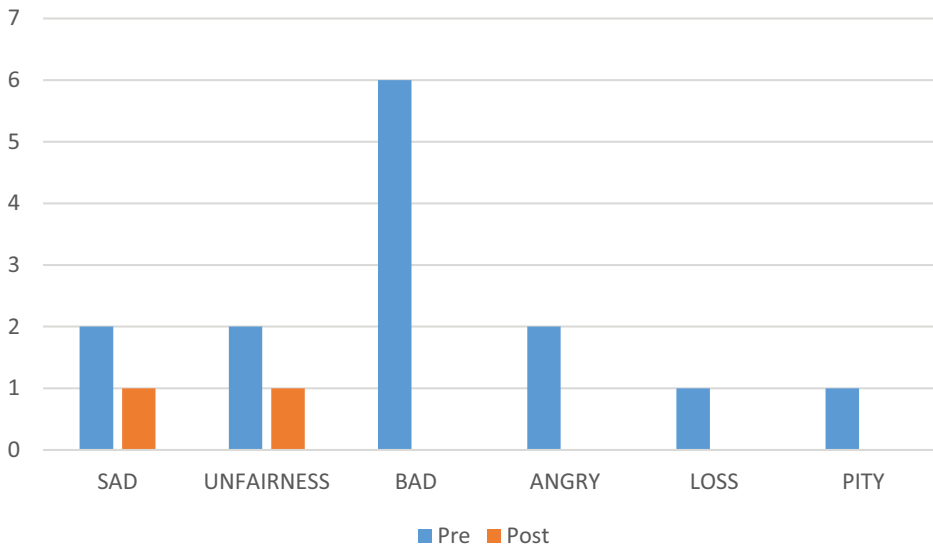


Figure 2. Students' emotional responses to the issue of occupied territories at pre and post intervention.

It feels unbelievably unfair. The fact that people who have lived there, were suddenly forced to leave.

These narratives portray emotion as historically sedimented and relational, embedded in intergenerational memory. One student's expression of loss was particularly evocative:

It's sad to know that we can't go there. It's like something that belongs to you but you're not allowed to touch it. (S13)

Here, loss is not only territorial but also ontological. The student's sense of belonging is severed, not only by physical barriers but also by emotional ones.

In the post-intervention phase, these emotional expressions shifted significantly. References to 'bad,' 'pity,' and 'loss' disappeared entirely, while sadness and unfairness were each mentioned once. This reduction suggests a partial reworking of emotional discourse. The change is not necessarily a sign of emotional disengagement but may indicate a reframing of the conflict through the lens of argumentation and dialogic reasoning. Students' post-intervention responses suggest an emergent capacity to hold conflicting emotions and moral perspectives without collapsing into fixed narratives.

Furthermore, these findings do not suggest that students abandoned their national identifications or emotional attachments. Rather, they began to articulate them through more nuanced terms. This suggests a shift from embodied, inherited emotion toward a more dialogic and deliberative engagement with memory, history, and identity. These patterns indicate that while the intervention did not erase strong emotional attachments, it created space for reframing those attachments in ways that are more dialogically and ethically oriented.

Greek-Cypriot students' emotions about potential encounters with Turkish settlers and Turkish Cypriots

This section examines how Greek-Cypriot students navigated the emotional and ethical terrain of imagining contact with Turkish settlers and Turkish Cypriots before and after the educational intervention. Students' responses reveal not only feelings about 'the Other' but also how emotional orientations are shaped by national narratives, family histories, and the discursive boundaries of belonging.

Pre-intervention emotional orientations toward the other

Before the intervention, a clear majority of students (10 out of 16) expressed a positive disposition toward the idea of meeting Turkish Cypriots or Turkish settlers. These expressions of curiosity or openness are not merely signs of 'tolerance' in liberal terms, but rather index a tentative willingness to cross entrenched emotional boundaries. For example, S6 responded positively, grounding her openness in familial precedent:

INTERVIEWER: Would you like to get to know these people better?

S6: Yes, my grandmother already knows.

INTERVIEWER: What does your grandmother know?

S6: Turkish Cypriots and Turkish settlers.

INTERVIEWER: The grandmother goes there, so she knows them or did she know them before?

S6: Yes, she goes there and knows them.

Here, relational trust and emotional openness are extended through intergenerational experience. The grandmother's actions work as emotional testimony, providing the student with a script of familiarity rather than fear. Another student (S10) articulated curiosity as a reason to engage:

S10: I want to see their thoughts, if they like it [there] or not . . . About the invasion, how they feel.

Such a desire to 'see their thoughts' signifies more than cognitive interest. It marks an emotional movement toward the Other, challenging the dehumanizing abstraction often associated with 'the enemy.' This desire for dialogic encounter functions emotionally to undo hardened binaries.

A particularly compelling response came from S11, who offered a nascent moral distinction between ordinary people and political decision-makers:

S11: It is not the fault of these people, it is the fault of the one [the prime minister of Türkiye in 1974, Bülent Ecevit] who decided to do it [the invasion] . . . The people came to live here; it was not their fault.

This repositioning of blame suggests an emergent ethical consciousness, wherein emotional blame is redirected from collectivities ('Turks') to decision-making agents.

When asked whether they envisioned living together with Turkish Cypriots and Turkish settlers in a united Cyprus, nearly half the students responded affirmatively (7 out of 16).

These responses tended to employ universalizing language – ‘we are all the same,’ ‘we are all humans’ – suggesting an emotional alignment with ideals of shared humanity, even as structural inequalities remain unaddressed.

S12: Because there are no reasons to make wars and such things, since we are all the same, we are all humans.

This kind of statement, while echoing liberal humanist values, also points to the idea that students must suspend inherited narratives of enmity to embrace this vision of sameness.

Other students invoked spatial longing and symbolic belonging to the ‘occupied’ parts of the island:

S2: Because I want to go and see the occupied territories that I did not go to and it is forbidden to go . . . I want them to find a solution so that we can all be united so that we do not show IDs but just go there.

The student voices frustration with movement restrictions (IDs) and articulates a vision of unity tied to the desire to feel ‘at home’ in one’s own land. The emotional force here is structured not just by exclusion but by longing, indicating how space and memory coalesce in the emotional architecture of belonging.

Another revealing layer in the pre-intervention data was the emotional discomfort expressed by students when asked how they would feel discussing Cyprus with children ‘from the other side.’ Ten out of sixteen students expressed unease or apprehension. These feelings are significant; they signal awareness of the discursive volatility of national narratives in intergroup settings.

S2: I would feel a little uncomfortable . . . Because it’s like I’m accusing them. Because I will say that the Turks took the country from us and the kids are from Türkiye and it is as if I am accusing them.

Here, the student demonstrates emotional self-regulation, recognizing how speaking may wound. The student implicitly acknowledges the power of narrative to reproduce emotional divides and the ethical risk of re-traumatizing others.

Post-intervention emotional shifts

Following the intervention, many students continued to express a desire to meet or befriend Turkish Cypriots and Turkish settlers, particularly in the context of an imagined international camp. This continuity indicates that openness toward the Other did not regress, and in some cases, became more reflective.

S3: I would be a friend of her because she has nothing different from us, she’s a human.

INTERVIEWER: And if he/she was a Turkish settler?

S3: The same, I would be with her because she’s a human.

This response mirrors earlier humanist appeals but also illustrates emotional consistency and clarity. However, other students, like S11, placed conditions on friendship:

S11: If he talked badly about us, I wouldn’t want to be his friend . . . But, if he was a good guy who doesn’t talk badly about Cyprus, then it would be ok.

Such statements show the persistence of conditional inclusion. While openness exists, it is shaped by perceived respect for one's group, indicating that emotional willingness to engage is still filtered through national pride and sensitivity to critique.

Interestingly, emotional recalibration was evident in some students who revised their initial stance but couldn't fully articulate the reason:

S1: I would be a friend of her. I don't know. That changed. I remember having said that I wouldn't.

This uncertainty is crucial. It may indicate emotional ambiguity, a transitional space where previously held emotional investments are being re-evaluated. These moments of emotional 'I don't know' are pedagogically significant. They represent a departure from certainty and signal an openness to transformation, even when that transformation has not yet stabilized.

Other students became more explicit in their emotional evaluations of past positions. S7, for example, began to recognize the distinction between collective identity and individual responsibility:

S7: When I hear the word "Turkish," I cannot stop thinking of negative things. However, it was not these individuals who were responsible for those actions.

This statement reveals a sophisticated ethical awareness, even as emotional residue ('cannot stop thinking of negative things') remains strong. Here, the student is grappling with the 'stickiness' of emotion (Ahmed 2004) – how certain terms ('Turkish') remain saturated with negative associations even as one seeks to detach them.

The question regarding Turkish settlers' right to remain in Greek-Cypriot refugee properties in the case of reunification of Cyprus revealed further complexity. Before the intervention, as shown in Figure 3, most students (9 out of 16) supported settlers' right to stay, while five believed they should leave.

This reflects a relatively high degree of ethical differentiation, particularly around birth and innocence:

S10: No, it's not their fault because they were born in Cyprus.

This view reappeared in the international camp scenario as well.

S13: Just because he's in the occupied territories, this doesn't mean he's different and I shouldn't hang out with him, he's still human.

These statements emphasize birthplace and humanity as criteria for inclusion, disrupting ethno-nationalist logics that equate land with exclusive ethnic entitlement.

In the post-intervention phase, the most significant shift was the emergence of a new category: undecided. While the number of students who insisted settlers should leave remained relatively stable (5 to 6), several students moved from a clear position to one of uncertainty. This suggests the intervention prompted epistemic and emotional hesitation:

S14: At the beginning I said they should leave . . . but now I don't know if they should stay or if they should leave.

S12: I am confused as both sides have their rights . . . It's complicated.

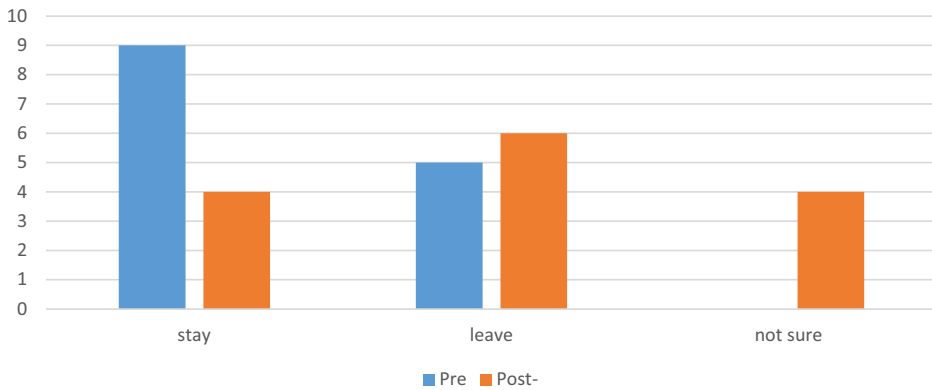


Figure 3. Students' perspectives on Turkish settlers' post-reunification residency rights in Cyprus at pre and post intervention.

This shift from certainty to confusion should not be interpreted as failure. Rather, it may reflect a productive emotional impasse – a moment when prior attachments are disrupted and new possibilities for judgment begin to take form.

These findings suggest that while students retained many emotional and moral investments aligned with dominant nationalist discourses, the intervention enabled a reframing of these positions. Students developed discursive resources to express emotional complexity, differentiate between collective and individual responsibility, and recognize the ethical risks of speech. Most notably, the emergence of hesitation, confusion, and conditional openness illustrates the kind of emotional learning that goes beyond content knowledge. These are not signs of neutrality or detachment, but of young people beginning to inhabit difficult histories with more ethical awareness and discursive flexibility.

Greek-Cypriot students' epistemic thinking about history

The final section of our findings explores how Greek-Cypriot students conceptualized historical knowledge and truth, before and after participating in the argument-based intervention.

Pre-intervention: the primacy of absolutism and singular truths

Figure 4 summarizes the distribution of students' epistemic profiles at pre- and post-intervention stages, showing a notable shift in the prevalence of multiplist and evaluatorist views following the program.

In the pre-intervention interviews, 8 out of 13 students expressed an absolutist view of historical knowledge. These students saw history as a domain of fixed facts and singular truths, usually aligned with the dominant Greek-Cypriot national narrative. This epistemic stance was frequently expressed with moral certainty and binary logic: one side is right, the other wrong. As one student (S4) explained:

INTERVIEWER: Is there a chance that only one of the points of view is correct or is there a chance that both of them are to some extent correct?

S4: Only one.

INTERVIEWER: So there is no chance that both sides are right. On your view, who is the right one?

S4: The Greeks, because it is not possible for the Turks to come and make an invasion. If they came in a peaceful way, as they claim, they would not keep the territories [till today] ...

This quote demonstrates how epistemic absolutism is not merely about epistemological assumptions but also closely intertwined with emotional-national attachments. The student's justification rests not only on reasoning about the nature of history, but also on a moral rejection of Turkish claims, reinforced by the language of invasion and occupation. For these students, historical knowledge was not just a matter of factual recall but of loyalty – truth and national identity were deeply entangled. In this sense, epistemic beliefs functioned as identity-affirming narratives, where deviation from the dominant story was emotionally and morally fraught.

Only three students in the pre-intervention phase articulated a multiplist understanding of history, that is, the idea that different perspectives may each hold partial truths. Additionally, two students expressed epistemic uncertainty, using phrases such as 'I don't know' or 'it's hard to say.' One such multiplist perspective came from a student who reflected on the perspectival nature of historical narration:

Everyone says the things from their side and what they say, they think is correct. There is no definite answer. (...) Because they both speak from their side. You can't tell the facts from your side as they happened and be sure, because you will support the one who told them from your side.

This response reveals a critical awareness of positionality in historical knowledge. The student does not claim that all perspectives are equally valid, but that each is shaped by

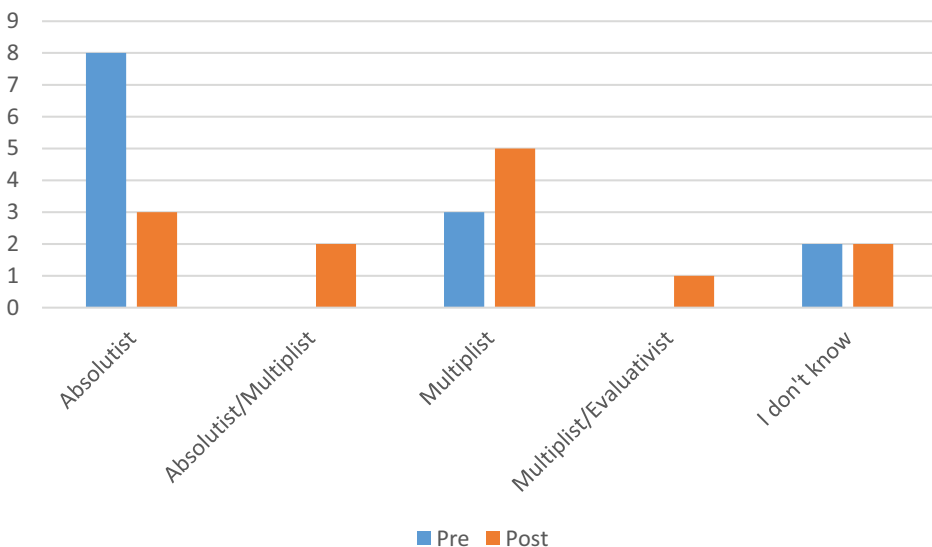


Figure 4. Students' epistemic thinking at pre and post intervention.

a particular viewpoint. This is a significant epistemic insight in a conflict-ridden context, where history is deeply politicized.

Post-intervention: from certainty to multiplicity and ethical inquiry

By the post-intervention stage, there was a significant transformation in students' epistemic orientations. Of the 13 students interviewed again, 8 now demonstrated multiplist or hybrid epistemic positions, compared to just 2 at the outset. Several of these shifts involved students who had initially expressed absolutist views. For example, S12, who began with a binary view, now expressed a nuanced understanding of historical multiplicity:

INTERVIEWER: 'So, both viewpoints could be correct, do you believe that?'

S12: They're not completely correct.

INTERVIEWER: So, which one is more correct?

S12: I don't think either is correct.

INTERVIEWER: So, you believe we are both wrong?

S12: A little wrong, 50% us and 50% them.

INTERVIEWER: If we want to learn what really happened in '74, how can we find out 50 years later?

S12: It's a bit strange, but there's a lot. We could make museums that show us phases of the war, soldiers' uniforms, or maybe our grandmother could tell us . . . and it continues.

This excerpt is rich in both epistemic and emotional insight. The student moves from a stance of certainty to one that embraces ambiguity and complexity. The use of percentages ('50% us and 50% them') may seem simplistic, but it signals an important departure from binary logic and an openness to shared responsibility or partial truths.

Equally important is the student's attention to sources of historical knowledge – not just textbooks, but museums, artifacts, and oral history. This reflects a developing evaluativist epistemology, where the credibility and relevance of sources are assessed. The reference to grandmothers, uniforms, and storytelling suggests an emotional dimension of history – knowledge is not merely abstract but embedded in memory, embodiment, and community.

While some students exhibited clear shifts, others remained in tension between competing epistemic frameworks. One student moved from absolutist to a mixed absolutist/multiplist position, while another multiplist student introduced a degree of uncertainty at post-intervention, possibly reflecting cognitive disequilibrium. These intermediate stances are significant. They demonstrate that epistemic change is non-linear and often entails productive uncertainty. Such 'in-between' positions may be temporary holding spaces – moments of epistemic discomfort in which students begin to question prior certainties but have not yet resolved how to reconfigure their understanding. In these cases, the intervention seems to have disrupted epistemic closure but not fully replaced it with a new framework – an outcome that is both developmentally expected and pedagogically valuable.

The qualitative data also suggest that students' engagement with argumentation pedagogy played a role in supporting epistemic shifts. As one student reflected:

Now I understand that war is not at all a fair way to achieve something, while you can do other things, let's say make arguments. War is an unfair way to conquer someone.

This statement reveals not just a moral critique of war but also an emerging belief in argument as a civic and epistemic practice. The student links disagreement and conflict to deliberation rather than violence, suggesting a growing appreciation for dialogic resolution in historical and political matters.

The findings show that a relatively brief intervention can initiate meaningful changes in how students think about history, truth, and perspective in a post-conflict society. These shifts are important not only for historical reasoning but also for civic and democratic engagement. Students who begin to see history as constructed, partial, and open to debate are more likely to resist ethnocentric or exclusionary discourses. Moreover, the link between epistemic reflection and emotional complexity is pedagogically rich: as students' beliefs about history evolve, so too do their emotional investments in it. Rather than portraying these students as either indoctrinated or enlightened, our analysis highlights their capacity for epistemic growth when provided with dialogic, reflective spaces that invite uncertainty and moral reasoning.

In what follows, we discuss the broader theoretical, pedagogical, and research implications of these findings. We also consider the significance of this study for future peace education efforts in similar sociopolitical contexts.

Discussion and implications

This study set out to explore the emotional and epistemic responses of students when they engage with controversial issues emerging from the 1974 Turkish invasion of Cyprus. In doing so, it draws on and contributes to theoretical frameworks that conceptualize both epistemic cognition (Iordanou 2016, 2022; Kuhn, Cheney, and Weinstock 2000) and the sociopolitical construction of emotions (Ahmed 2004). The developmental model of epistemic cognition (Kuhn, Cheney, and Weinstock 2000) offers a valuable lens through which to interpret students' shifts from absolutist or multiplist understandings of history to a more evaluativist stance. Students began to demonstrate an emerging ability to evaluate claims in light of multiple sources and articulate reasoned positions that moved beyond binary thinking. These shifts are especially significant given that the Cyprus conflict is often presented through monologic historical narratives that leave little room for ambiguity or pluralism.

However, what our findings suggest is that these epistemic shifts do not occur in a social and political vacuum. Rather, they are entangled with emotions that are themselves shaped by collective memory, national narratives, and dominant emotional regimes (Zembylas, Charalambous, and Charalambous 2014, 2016). In the Greek-Cypriot context, particular emotional styles such as patriotic grief, righteous anger, and sacred victimhood, are not only taught but also expected in relation to the 1974 events. As Zembylas, Charalambous, and Charalambous (2014) argue, the classroom often becomes a site where these 'correct' emotions are rehearsed and regulated. This helps explain why some students in our study continued to express strong feelings of injustice or unfairness

even as their anger diminished and their reasoning grew more complex. What we may be seeing, then, is a process of negotiating between publicly sanctioned emotional scripts and emerging personal understandings.

Additionally, earlier ethnographic studies on Greek-Cypriot students' discourses such as Spyrou's (2006) analysis of students' construction of the 'image of the Turk' and Christou's (2007) work on 'sacred patriotism', remain highly relevant to interpreting our findings. Spyrou (2006) showed how children's narratives often reproduce collective stereotypes, rooted in ethnic nationalism and fear of the 'Other.' In our study, while some stereotypical discourses remain detectable, there is also evidence that students are beginning to reframe these emotional and symbolic constructs, especially when prompted to consider controversial issues that entail the perspectives of others. For example, the student who proposed including Turkish-Cypriot stories in a museum exhibit demonstrates both a cognitive and emotional opening to alterity — something less common in previous studies.

Christou (2007) emphasized how the 'I don't forget' imperative around 1974 operates as a mechanism of mnemonic socialization, closely tied to nationalist curricula. Our findings do not refute this logic but rather show that pedagogical interventions that center argumentation may offer an opening for students to navigate, reinterpret, or even partially resist this injunction. While the imperative to remember is still present, students began to ask how remembering might be done differently through dialogue, museums, or family stories, rather than simply reproducing official accounts. This suggests a subtle shift from ritualized remembering to reflective remembering, in which emotions are no longer prescribed but negotiated.

Charalambous (2013, 2023) adds further nuance to this interpretation. Her work on the 'burden of emotions' and 'navigating liminality' emphasizes the ways students grapple with both individual feelings and public discourses in and outside the classroom. Our study affirms this tension: students did not reject national emotions but began to articulate dissonance and ambivalence. These moments of emotional ambivalence—e.g. when sadness was accompanied by curiosity, or when anger gave way to reflection—point to the possibility of what Charalambous (2023) calls 'liminal spaces' where students temporarily inhabit in-between positions. In these spaces, the performance of socially acceptable emotions coexists with more personal or critical emotional explorations. Such findings suggest that pedagogical approaches which legitimize this liminality by inviting rather than policing emotional complexity are more likely to promote both critical and empathetic thinking. In sum, what our findings contribute to research on peace education in conflict-affected societies such as Cyprus, N. Ireland and Israel/Palestine is evidence that students' emotional and epistemic discourses are not fixed but malleable, particularly when students are supported in developing argumentation skills and are encouraged to coordinate emotional reactions with evidence-based reasoning.

The findings of this study have important implications for practice and policy in peace education, not only in Cyprus but also in other conflict-affected contexts. In particular, these findings emphasize the importance of emotionally responsive pedagogies when addressing controversial issues. Such pedagogies call for classroom practices that validate students' emotional investments in historical narratives while also creating room for critical reflection and epistemic humility. Teacher education programs could, for example, incorporate modules that help future educators recognize and work productively with

emotional ambivalence in their classrooms, learning to facilitate rather than suppress students' uncertainty, doubt, or discomfort. Professional development initiatives might also focus on fostering teachers' capacity for epistemic humility: acknowledging the limits of one's own knowledge, modeling openness to multiple perspectives, and creating dialogical spaces where disagreement can coexist with respect. These skills are crucial for educators navigating the tensions between personal beliefs, official curricula, and students' lived experiences.

Another key implication concerns the transformative potential of structured argumentation. Argumentation should be viewed as a dialogical practice that enables students to interrogate their own assumptions and recognize the legitimacy of competing views. In conflict-affected societies, such capacities are essential not only for academic development but also for the cultivation of civic dispositions necessary for democratic life (International Commission on the Futures of Education 2021; UNESCO 2015). When students learn to make and evaluate claims based on evidence – and to do so in ways that engage, rather than deny, their emotional investments – they become better equipped to participate in meaningful and inclusive public dialogue.

Finally, it is crucial for teachers to understand that emotional and epistemic transformation is rarely linear or complete. Students may hold contradictory views, express confusion, or shift positions only partially, especially when dealing with issues tied to collective memory, national identity, and intergenerational trauma. Teacher education programs can play a key role here by preparing teachers to interpret such ambivalence not as failure or resistance but as evidence of serious engagement. Ambivalence, in this context, is a sign that students are grappling with complexity rather than reverting to rote answers or ideologically driven scripts. Cultivating this stance requires teachers to move from seeking clarity and closure to facilitating ongoing inquiry and reflective discomfort. Classrooms that legitimize this kind of 'in-between' space (Charalambous 2023) are more likely to foster students' critical capacities, empathy, and emotional maturity.

Concluding remarks

This study makes three key contributions to the literature on peace education and the teaching of controversial issues in conflict-affected societies. First, it brings together epistemic cognition and affect theory to show that students' engagement with controversial historical events involves intertwined emotional and cognitive processes rather than separate domains. By illustrating how epistemic shifts such as moving from absolutist to evaluativist reasoning are co-constituted with emotional negotiations, the study offers a more integrated framework for understanding how learning unfolds in emotionally charged contexts. Second, the findings contribute empirical evidence that pedagogical approaches emphasizing structured argumentation can foster both cognitive and emotional transformation. Argumentation is not only a means of reasoning but also a dialogical practice through which students learn to articulate, question, and recalibrate their emotions about controversial issues. Third, the study highlights the pedagogical importance of legitimizing ambivalence and uncertainty as productive emotional states. Rather than interpreting emotional contradictions as confusion or resistance, educators can view them as signs of ethical and epistemic growth. Together, these

contributions suggest that emotionally responsive pedagogies that integrate reasoning, emotion, and dialogue hold transformative potential for education in divided societies.

Needless to say, this study has several limitations. The sample was limited to primary school students, and the methodology relied primarily on interviews. We cannot be certain how students' emotions were manifested in real classroom interactions. While this study provides a window into students' epistemic and emotional development through a single intervention, further research is needed to understand the long-term impact of such approaches. Ethnographic and longitudinal studies could trace how these emotional and epistemic shifts evolve over time and across different educational settings. Future research should also examine how varying configurations of classroom power, teacher positioning, and curriculum design influence students' responses to controversial issues. Finally, as researchers who share linguistic and cultural proximity with the participants, we acknowledge that our positionality may have shaped both data collection and interpretation. While this proximity facilitated trust and openness in students' responses, it may also have influenced the ways in which certain meanings or emotions were elicited and understood.

In conclusion, it is important for researchers to continue building on existing work in Cyprus and other conflict-affected contexts, while seeking comparative insights that highlight both context-specific and universal aspects of how children make sense of traumatic pasts. Universal aspects that might be transferable across contexts include, for example, children's emotional ambivalence toward collective memory narratives, their struggles to reconcile personal and inherited memories, and the role of schooling in shaping emotional and moral orientations toward former 'enemies.' Comparative studies could illuminate how these shared dynamics intersect with local histories, pedagogical practices, and sociopolitical discourses, thereby deepening our understanding of how educational settings can either reproduce or transform conflict legacies.

Note

1. The term 'Turkish invasion' reflects dominant Greek-Cypriot historical narratives. We acknowledge that this terminology is contested and that alternative terms exist, such as 'intervention' or 'peaceful operation,' which reflect differing perspectives on the events of 1974. However, our participants referred to the events of 1974 as an 'invasion.' In using it, we do not seek to endorse a singular or uncritical interpretation of history, but rather to reflect the terminology used by Greek-Cypriot students whose perspectives are the focus of this study.

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