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RECEIVED 25 November 2025  
REVISED 23 March 2026  
ACCEPTED 30 March 2026  
PUBLISHED 22 April 2026

CITATION  
Gotovos A (2026) Countering  
antisemitism through education:  
conditions for a successful intervention  
in Greek schools.  
Front. Educ. 11:1754313.  
doi: 10.3389/educ.2026.1754313

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# Countering antisemitism through education: conditions for a successful intervention in Greek schools

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## KEYWORDS

antisemitism, history teaching, holocaust education, teacher education, teaching methodology

## 1 Introduction

In the international context, schools are widely regarded as one of the most important institutions for preventing and combating antisemitism. This role is fulfilled either through the transmission of historical knowledge concerning the genocide of the Jews, through the establishment of memory policies—such as commemorative days dedicated to the genocide or the allocation of school time to Holocaust-related remembrance activities—or through a combination of these two approaches ([Holocaust Education and Antisemitism Lessons Act, 2023](#)). Notably, educational initiatives are explicitly referenced as a means of countering antisemitism in the Stockholm Declaration (27–29 January 2000) issued by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA, 2000). At the same time, the declaration also underscores the importance of scholarly research—particularly historical research—in supporting and strengthening educational efforts aimed at preventing and combating antisemitism.

Since then, this international organization, of which Greece has been a member since 2005, has placed particular emphasis on the need for education addressing antisemitism and the Holocaust, issuing proposals and recommendations periodically. The focus on education is closely linked to concerns about rising trends of antisemitism in Europe and beyond ([FRA, 2023](#)), as highlighted in the 2020 declaration by the ministers of IHRA member states ([IHRA, 2020](#)). This is particularly true for a European country such as Greece, where in 2025 an increasing wave of anti-Israeli protests was observed in response to the recent Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Antisemitic attitudes and prejudices were present in Greece long before the outbreak of the conflict between Israel and Hamas ([Antonioni et al., 2017: 21–25](#); [Droumpouki, 2013: 193](#); [Kovács and Fischer, 2021: 22](#)); however, the scale and intensity of the recent protests against Israel in the country have once again brought to the forefront the issue of addressing forms of antisemitism through education.

Regarding the value of acquiring historical knowledge through the teaching of history in schools, two main schools of thought have emerged. The first, primarily represented by [Hirsch \(1983, 1987, 2016\)](#), argues that the acquisition of knowledge about the past is the core of historical learning. Accordingly, this perspective advocates for a content-centered model of history instruction, in which the primary goal is the acquisition of as much factual knowledge as possible; teaching is considered successful to the extent that this goal is achieved.

In contrast, an alternative school of thought shifts the focus from the accumulation of knowledge to students' engagement in historical inquiry. Within the framework of

historical thinking, emphasis is placed on the ability to question, analyze sources, evaluate evidence, and construct interpretations of the past (Monte-Sano and Reisman, 2016). History education is thus understood not as the transmission of fixed narratives, but as an epistemic practice through which historical knowledge is produced and contested. Recent scholarship highlights that this approach involves disciplinary concepts such as evidence, causation, and perspective-taking, enabling students to critically engage with competing accounts (Gibson et al., 2025). Given that school history is often shaped by political and ideological priorities (Foster, 2020, p. 30), this perspective may be described as deconstructive, as it encourages students to question dominant narratives and the selection of historical content.

## 2 Teaching the genocide without adequate references to antisemitism

However, even if one acknowledges the unquestionable value of cultivating an investigative mindset and critical thinking skills, as well as acquiring tools that facilitate the analysis of dominant narratives about the past, such critical engagement cannot occur in isolation. It must always be conducted in comparison with the narrative it seeks to examine and challenge. Therefore, knowledge alone may not suffice for a deep understanding of historical reality, but it is a necessary prerequisite for connecting historical events and actors.

This is equally true in the case of teaching and presenting the genocide of the Jews (Shoah) by the German National Socialist regime (1933–1945). In a study by Foster and colleagues (Foster et al., 2016), which investigated secondary school students' attitudes in British schools toward studying the Holocaust, as well as the historical knowledge they had acquired from various sources, it was found that students' foundational knowledge was very limited and, in many cases, incorrect. For example, a significant proportion of students did not know the meaning of the term “antisemitism”, nor could they link the genocide of the Jews to this concept (Foster, 2020, 33). Similarly, many students were unaware of when and where the mass killings of Jews in territories occupied by the German army occurred, and whether the majority of those exterminated were German Jews or Jews from other countries.

There were also considerable gaps in students' knowledge of the Holocaust regarding key historical facts, such as the involvement of multiple organizations and individuals in the genocide, the number of victims, and the attribution of responsibility for the crime. Foster et al. (2016) observed that many secondary school students in the United Kingdom lacked central knowledge about the Holocaust, making it impossible for them to fully understand the causes that led to this atrocity. Perhaps the clearest example of this limited understanding is the personalization of responsibility for the genocide in the figure of Hitler (Foster, 2020: 38). Even when other Nazis are identified as responsible, students often perceive them merely as a small group of “bad actors” executing Hitler's orders, rather than as part of a broad social network of supporters and followers of the National Socialist Party that, after 1933, established a harsh dictatorship in Germany. According to Foster, the lack of historical knowledge among students prevented them from

understanding the involvement of a much wider group of individuals in the genocide, and thus from accurately grasping the full scope of responsibility for the crime (Foster, 2020, p. 40).

Against the necessity of acquiring detailed knowledge about such a significant event as the Holocaust, an opposing view holds that students do not need precise knowledge of the chronological sequence of events, the beliefs and ideology of the leadership that planned and executed the genocide, the identities of perpetrators and victims, or the methods of extermination. Rather, it is sufficient for students to understand that the events were morally reprehensible and must not be repeated, and that similar phenomena in the present should be recognized and condemned. This perspective emphasizes the moral-educative purpose of history teaching: the formation of an ethical framework for evaluating past and present events, with particular weight placed on the present (Pettigrew, 2017; Pettigrew et al., 2009). Adopting this view would imply that students' knowledge of the Holocaust may be somewhat “childlike”, presented in a simplified narrative form, as long as the teaching of history fosters an ethical stance of rejection and condemnation of the event (Eleftheriou, 2021). The central question, therefore, is whether students' knowledge of the Holocaust should be limited to simplified, morally-driven narratives or whether it should correspond to historically accurate representations of reality. Recent scholarship in history education has further elaborated this perspective by examining how ethical reflection can be meaningfully integrated into historical understanding. For instance, Milligan et al. (2018) argue that ethical judgments in history education should be “enriched” through engagement with historical context, complexity, and perspective-taking, rather than reduced to simplistic moral binaries. Similarly, Ammert et al. (2022) highlight the interplay between historical and moral consciousness, suggesting that ethical learning in history contributes to the development of democratic citizenship by enabling students to critically relate past events to present moral concerns. From a pedagogical perspective, there is some validity to the argument that the knowledge students are expected to acquire must align with their cognitive and emotional development. The genocide of the Jews was conceived, planned, and executed not by children but by adults. Attempting an interpretative approach to the motivations, roles, and alternative courses of action of these historical actors presupposes familiarity with the adult world—an experience that students, particularly younger ones, lack (Szejnmann et al., 2018, p.116).

A “translation” of scholarly historical narratives—typically produced for adult and often specialized audiences—into forms suitable for classroom use is therefore pedagogically unavoidable. This need arises not only from students' cognitive capacities but also from their emotional resilience when encountering traumatic past events. Within the field of history education, such content is often conceptualized as “difficult knowledge”, referring to histories that are emotionally disturbing, ethically challenging, and resistant to straightforward representation (Gross and Terra, 2018; Stoddard, 2022). The emergence of Holocaust memory is inherently distressing (Varon-Vasar, 2012); consequently, its presentation in schools—whether through texts, oral narratives, or multimedia resources—must balance historical accuracy with pedagogical sensitivity.

Research on teaching difficult pasts emphasizes that effective engagement requires making content accessible and meaningful while supporting students' emotional and interpretive engagement (Gross and Terra, 2018; Stoddard, 2022). Without such considerations, even accurate and comprehensive historical knowledge may prove educationally ineffective, as it risks overwhelming students or failing to produce meaningful learning outcomes.

The inherent tension in any attempt by educators to present teaching materials (images, videos, texts) about the Holocaust without simultaneously conveying the horror of the events has also been addressed by authors of children's literature on the subject. Between a presentation of the Holocaust that is rich in historical knowledge but not adapted to students' cognitive and emotional development, and a "mythical" approach—not in the sense of inventing events, but in the sense of storytelling in a fairy-tale-like form, which shifts the emphasis toward the moral-educative dimension of teaching (Foster, 2020, 35)—the recommended solution is to present the historical event based on the image that emerges from grounded historical research, while taking into account students' perceptual and cognitive capacities as shaped by their emotional, intellectual, and linguistic development. The question of how deeply the Holocaust can be presented—whether through text, images, sound, or combinations thereof—when addressing younger students is equally critical and does not admit a straightforward answer (Lenga, 2020).

### 3 Discussion

The genocide of the European Jews is not only associated with acts such as marking Jews with the Star of David, submitting lists of Jewish community members to German authorities, images of Jews being rounded up and led to train stations for deportation from Greece to Poland, or photographs of Jews disembarking from trains at extermination camps. It is also connected to far more horrific—and psychologically unsuitable for children—scenes, such as mass executions of Jews in Eastern Europe and rows of corpses buried in mass graves (Friedländer, 2007; Hilberg, 1990). While such images are historically accurate and may fulfill the criterion of expanding historical knowledge, they position the student as a spectator of atrocities that are profoundly different from the "events" they might encounter in war-themed games. In such games, there are clear "good" and "bad" characters, "victims" and "perpetrators," a "leader" issuing orders, and "soldiers" executing them—but all within the safe and imaginary framework of play. The same does not hold true for the case of mass executions as they occurred during the genocide of the Jews, or more broadly, for individuals or groups exterminated by the National Socialist regime during the Second World War. These events confront students with a reality that cannot be mediated by the conventions of play or fantasy, highlighting the unique challenges of teaching the Holocaust in a manner that is both historically accurate and pedagogically responsible.

Therefore, this represents the limit of the appropriateness of materials that can be included in a presentation on the destruction of the Jews of Europe: content that aligns with the

historical record while avoiding traumatic experiences for students, particularly those in primary or lower secondary education. This consideration is somewhat less restrictive for upper secondary students; however, even in these cases, teachers must carefully assess students' emotional capacity to engage with distressing images. Not all students of the same age possess the same resilience when confronted with photographs or videos of atrocious acts, as there are significant individual differences in tolerance for exposure to such material. Consequently, in all cases, obtaining the informed consent of students is essential before a teacher presents disturbing content, whether through photographs or video. The view that only graphic images can emotionally engage students so that they develop a clearly negative perception of the National Socialist regime and sympathy for its victims is highly problematic. It tends to reflect the personal "theories" of authors or educators who assume that the more horrific the material presented, the more effective the teaching, rather than addressing the actual needs of students. The aim of teaching the Holocaust is not merely for students to condemn those who planned and executed it, but to understand how otherwise ordinary individuals could reach the point of ordering or carrying out inhumane acts (Browning, 1992; Welzer, 2005), or how they became willing executors of Hitler and Himmler's commands (Goldhagen, 2007).

Ultimately, neither the volume of information students acquire nor the emotional stimulation elicited by graphic images and descriptions constitutes the decisive factor. Rather, it is the quality of information about the Holocaust and what preceded it that enables students to explain how such atrocities could occur in Europe, and how similar phenomena might arise in the present or future under conducive conditions. One such condition is the resurgence of antisemitism, manifested in Holocaust denial or in blaming the victims for what befell them. Without the necessary historical knowledge, students are vulnerable to revisionist narratives. This, after all, is a central mission of schools: to equip students with the understanding and critical skills needed to resist such revisionist narratives when encountered outside the classroom. Preparing educators through training or professional development to fulfill this mission is an indispensable prerequisite for its success.

### Author contributions

AG: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft.

### Funding

The author declares that financial support was not received for this work and/or its publication.

### Conflict of interest

The author declares that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

## Generative AI statement

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