Article

Direct democracy in high school: An experiment from Greece

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- Only 5% of Greek secondary education students are satisfied with the *modus operandi* of student communities and councils.

- 71.5% of Greek adults are not interested in politics.

- The School Community Assembly (SCA) is a new decision-making and deliberative institution in which all high school students and all faculty members participate under conditions of equality.

- SCA promotes student's direct participation in democratic decision-making and democratic school governance.

- SCA serves educational goals such as making students more considerate and public-spirited, more respectful of others and more responsible concerning their relation with the school community.

Purpose: We discuss and preliminarily evaluate the SCA, a novel educational experiment that takes place in a Greek high school. Drawing on contemporary educational and political theory as well as the rich history of democratic ideas SCA has a twofold aim: to enable students to substantially participate in direct democratic decision-making procedures and to engage them along with their teachers in democratic school governance.

Design/methodology/approach: SCA operates under conditions of democratic equality and mutual respect, since all students and teachers have one vote and the same speech rights, and its decisions are binding for the school community. The preliminary results that SCA has yielded so far, are based on the systematic observation of the SCA proceedings and on a structured self-report questionnaire for students.

Findings: SCA promotes democratic school governance, improves the school's social climate, contributes to the development of certain democratic attitudes and skills, and helps students to become more responsible and public-spirited citizens.

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1   INTRODUCTION

In this article, we describe and preliminarily assess an ongoing educational experiment that started in December 2018 at the 1st Experimental High School (Lyceum) in Thessaloniki, Greece. It concerns the implementation of a novel institution called the School Community Assembly (hereafter SCA) in which all students (10th-12th grades) and all faculty members participate on equal terms. The main, innovative feature of the SCA is that its members can reach final and binding decisions in a deliberative setting. These decisions concern the school by-laws and other relevant issues that had previously been decided by the headmaster or the faculty without student participation. In parallel, we empirically test the following research questions: Does the SCA a) promote students' direct participation in democratic decision-making and democratic school governance, b) improve the school's social climate, and c) contribute to the development of certain democratic attitudes and skills? Before presenting its structure and our findings so far, we will elaborate on its underlying theoretical assumptions and the decision-making model that served as its main source of inspiration. As institutions, even micro-level ones, are not created in a theoretical void, SCA draws heavily on contemporary educational theory and practice, political theory as well as on certain insights that are part of the legacy of classical democratic Athens.

2   UNDERLYING THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS

Civic education was introduced in the Greek curriculum in the early thirties but failed to a great extent to gain much attention or achieve any educational results (Dimaras, 2003). The situation has been improved since the fall of the junta in 1974 but, as a 2000 study on the attitudes of junior high school students on pivotal political issues including their conception of democracy showed, they kept forming "their views on civic engagement independently   of   textbooks,   curriculum   content,   and   school   practices" (Kontogiannopoulou-Polydorides et al., 2000, p. 300).

   More specifically, the Greek state aims to raise the democratic consciousness of secondary school students by adopting two distinct pedagogical approaches: the first theoretical and the second practical (cf. also Eurydice Report, 2017; Kesidou, 2017). The first approach involves the inclusion in the curriculum of only two closely related subjects: "Social and civic education" (9th grade 2h/w), and "Civic education" (10th grade 2h/w). Unfortunately, another relevant course ("Contemporary world: Citizen and democracy"), which was being taught in the 11th grade was abolished in 2020. The official textbooks used in these courses cover a broad range of issues and draw on political theory, political science, public law, sociology, history, ecology, economics and European studies. They are definitely more up-to-date and reader-friendly than those used in the past as is attested by the wide variety of diagrams, pictures, excerpts from primary sources, and exercises they contain. However, as happens with many other theoretical courses, at the end of the day students are expected to memorize a large amount of information to pass a series of

written tests and examinations. It is not at all clear if this imparting of information fulfils its educational goal of being "conducive to the development of students' power of judgment and their ability to make decisions" (Reinhardt, 2015, p. 18-20). Moreover, most students tend to underestimate the significance of all these subjects, since they do not form part of the national examination that allows them to find a place in tertiary education (Karakatsani & Ververi, 2019). Finally, as it has been remarked, given the limited number of political scientists employed in secondary education, these courses are usually taught by philologists, who do not understand the more quantitative aspects of democratic politics like statistics and the mechanics of electoral systems, instead of political scientists who are more fit to the task (Papaoikonomou, 2020). Thus, we have serious doubts as to whether the traditional/theoretical approach to education in democratic citizenship is sufficient for inculcating in students all the virtues, motives, skills and attitudes that enable an ordinary individual to contribute to the proper function of a liberal democracy (Veugelers & de Groot, 2019).

The practical approach seeks to prepare students for their future political role by allowing them to elect representatives to deal with certain issues concerning school life and interact with the administration. In particular, student council elections are held in junior high and high schools (7th to 12th grade) once a year (every September) according to the following pattern. Students first elect the five members of the Class Council and then the fifteen members of the School Council, which is supposed to represent the entire school. From a democratic point of view, these councils have an educative role to play on condition they function properly, have real powers and represent the interests and the preferences of the majority of students. However, for a variety of reasons, such as the lack of a democratic school culture, the mutual distrust among students and teachers, which sometimes turns into hostility, and an educational system that puts a high premium on formal teaching, the aforementioned institutions do not contribute much to the democratic formation of students. Meetings and assemblies are convened infrequently and at inconvenient hours; they are usually occupied with minor, "soft" issues, such as the organization of parties and proms, while any student decision affecting the operation of the school runs the danger of being overturned or rejected by the administration (Kesidou, 2017, p. 111). According to a recent survey conducted by the Greek Ombudsman among 37,488 secondary education students, only 5% of them are satisfied with the *modus operandi* of student communities and councils (The Greek Ombudsman, 2017). This is much less than the percentage (19%) of UK and Northern Ireland students, who in a similar 1997-1998 research stated "that their school council helps to make the school a better place to be in" (Alderson, 2000). What troubles us most is that students run the danger of being convinced that they do not possess the power to change anything in school through collective democratic action, that is, by weighing the reasons for and against particular proposals and by taking a vote about the most preferred option. If youngsters continue to be dominated by this sense of political powerlessness in their adult lives, then political apathy might appear to them a convenient choice.

Nevertheless, it is not only the internal deficiencies of the Greek educational system that prevent education in democratic citizenship from fully achieving its goals. Greek youngsters are constantly exposed to various versions of an antidemocratic discourse that has reached a wider audience since 2009 when the first signs of an enduring and devastating financial, institutional and social crisis became visible (Theocharis & van Deth, 2015; Koniordos, 2018). In practice, this fact means that, on many occasions, they have to listen to adults proclaiming in all tones that we should not trust the government, that all MPs are scoundrels, or, even worse, if their parents, peers or acquaintances belong to the extreme right or left, that liberal democracy is a sham. Under these circumstances, it is not unlikely for many Greek adolescents to join the 71.5% of the adult population who claims that it is not interested in politics (Koniordos, 2018).

In the face of all these difficulties, we believe that education in democratic citizenship should be radicalized to become effective. As one Greek scholar pointed out, it should aim at turning "schools into a place where collective action takes place and where a learning ground for the promotion of democratic empowerment is created" (Panagiotou, 2011, p. 558). Apart from learning about the facts and values of liberal democracies, electing council members or even participating in mock elections that take place alongside national elections as de Groot (2018) has suggested, high school students *should substantially participate in direct democratic decision-making procedures*. By "substantially," we mean that students not merely express their opinion or make suggestions to the administration, but that they are jointly led to final and valid decisions either unanimously or through majority rule, while the term "direct democratic" implies that students do not merely "authorize" a handful of their classmates to act on their behalf, but that they are personally involved in determining what should be done concerning certain aspects of school life.

One could reasonably wonder why having experience of direct democratic procedures is an essential part of substantive education in democratic citizenship given the fact that students will become citizens of democratic regimes that are more or less representative. This implies that, if they do not live in a democratic culture that favors frequent referenda, they will only be asked to decide by whom they want to be governed every four or five years. The answer is that, only in direct democracy can participants achieve the maximum of their sovereignty as political agents, since the onus of decision-making falls equally on their shoulders, and the expression of their will is not distorted by the intervention of third parties who might ignore or misconceive their mandate (Peonidis, 2013). In addition, involvement in the above procedures renders them more responsible for their acts and omissions. If they make an unfortunate choice, they have no one else to blame but themselves. Moreover, if they have the chance to deliberate, in the minimal sense of weighing the pros and cons of particular proposals under conditions of equality (Mansbridge, 2015), as happens in small democratically-governed groups (mini-publics, citizen assemblies etc.), they become more open-minded, less partisan and acquire a serious motive to become informed about what is at stake (Fournier et al., 2011, pp.113-

125; Dryzek, 2010, pp. 155-161). Our point is that students' engagement with direct democratic procedures would enable them (other things being equal) to become better citizens by making them more responsible and public-spirited and less prone to political apathy, misinformation and manipulation. In addition, in the future, it is not unlikely for students to find themselves in various deliberative settings where much depends on their active engagement and argumentative powers. It is to be hoped that their school experience in debating will prove invaluable.

However, the SCA should not be seen only as an instance of what Gert J. J. Biesta (2011, 2016) has called the "individualistic approach to democratic education", that is a systematic endeavor which aims to impart political knowledge and skills to individuals for future use. If democracy is about action and interaction among disagreeing parties in various social contexts, then schools should allow for this type of action and interaction by giving students the opportunity to take initiatives, to get a grasp of their powers and limitations, and to start treating others as democratic subjects. According to Biesta (2016, p. 139-140), "schools with a student parliament or schools based on the idea of democratic deliberation" do make democracy a "real possibility", although, he hastens to add, this outcome can and should also be brought about through various formal and informal channels, which far exceed the boundaries of the school community.

The second theoretical assumption underlying SCA stresses the significance of involving *all high school students and teachers alike in the administration of their school.* Although children's and young people's participation rights are now seen in a more favorable light than in the past (Lansdown, 2010), our position could still be dismissed by some as overly extreme and troublesome. However, in our view there is nothing radical or groundbreaking with the two reasons we adduce in its support. The first is the Roman legal maxim "what touches all similarly is to be approved by all" (*ut quod omnes similiter tangit, ab omnibus comprobetur*). Historically, it was revived during the 12th and the 13th century, and it was used not only in the process of litigation, but in the canonical elections of bishops and in the efforts of the clergy to resist the pope's plans to levy a tax on their revenues (Monahan, 1987, p. 97-111). If it is applied in a modern school context, it can be construed *prima facie* as asserting that, since the interests of all students are affected by decisions made by educational authorities, they must be involved in the relevant decision-making. Of course, more has to be said on the type of decisions in which they should have a voice, but what is taken for granted here is that adolescents are generally regarded capable of serious and responsible reflection "on what touches them all" as students. The second reason we invoke is an epistemic one. According to an old argument in favor of democratic procedures (dating back to Aristotle and sometimes referred to as "the wisdom of the multitude"), wide deliberative bodies tend to make wiser decisions than smaller groups or separate individuals. Contemporary democratic theorists based on the emerging evidence from certain recent experiments point out that the argument works when deliberators are not of the same mind so that conflicting positions are taken into consideration (Landemore, 2013; Estlund & Landemore, 2018). In our case, this means that

school administration can be improved by including all students in the governing body as far as certain types of decisions are concerned.

Along these lines, we thought that the two theoretical assumptions comprising our starting-point unavoidably lead us to the "General or Whole School Meeting" tradition, which requires that "students and staff sit down together as equals, reflect on their work and aspirations, raise matters of individual and communal significance, celebrate achievements, hold each other into account, and decide on what to do next" (Fielding, 2013, p. 124). However, when we started working on the specific structure of a Whole School Assembly designed for a 21st century Greek high school that could function within the constraints set by a highly centralized and bureaucratic public educational system, we realized that we cannot much rely on actual General Meeting examples from various radical or anarchist schools (Apple & Beane, 1999; Fremeaux & Jordan, 2012; Fielding, 2013). For instance, the Epping House School Meeting concerned "a primary/elementary residential school for what were then (in the sixties) known as 'maladjusted' children" (Fielding, 2013, p. 125). We were more attracted to the Just Community School inspired by Kohlberg's theory of moral development and his fervent advocacy of the view that "the most basic way in which the high school can promote experiences of civic participation is to govern itself through a process of participatory democracy" (Kohlberg, 1980, p. 35), but this school was designed from scratch including the curriculum and was staffed by teachers committed to democratic school governance (Wasserman, 1980). In addition, the two assumptions we endorse are more modest than Kohlberg's overarching educational project, which aimed "(a) to develop moral judgment through deliberative discourse .... (b) to bridge moral judgment and moral agency and (c) to develop shared norms with a subtle sense of community and central aspects of solidarity" (Oser, 2014, pp. 204-205). The pursuit of at least the first two educational objectives requires a set of arrangements and interventions that diverge significantly from those dictated by our two theoretical assumptions. Thus, we decided to turn for guidance to a real direct democracy that has successfully passed the test of time, the Athenian democracy (508/7 - 323 BC). The study of its structure, institutions and ideology is not merely of historical interest; it can offer us certain useful insights concerning the operation of self-governing bodies whose size prevents everyone from participating in the discussion (Ober, 2008).

Before proceeding to a concise description of the Athenian deliberation and decision-making model we would like to point out that it has not escaped our attention that democratic school assemblies have also been the object of various criticisms in the relevant literature. Thornberg (2010, p. 925), for instance, warned that "school democratic meetings […] can easily be undermined by the typical pupil control discourse in school and its underlying assumption of childhood as a stage of ignorance, incompetence and subordination". The evidence he offered came from his observation of five school meetings of this type that took place in a typical Swedish elementary school. It became evident that teachers exercised supreme authority over pupils by preparing the agenda, chairing the meetings and manipulating them to accept the decisions they and their

colleagues had made in advance without the children's involvement. Another Swedish study -focusing this time on secondary school meetings (Tholander 2007)- showed that teachers, despite their intentions to the contrary, cannot easily set aside their pre-existing antidemocratic attitudes to the effect of conveying contradictory messages to their students. Undoubtedly, these findings potentially constitute a threat to any effort to administer schools in a democratic manner. These findings make all the more necessary to establish formal equality between teachers and students and let the elected representatives of the latter chair the assembly and have an active and substantial role in preparing the agenda.

Another set of critical approaches places emphasis on various inegalitarian outcomes produced by the discourses of participating students. Wilson (2015; cf. Gawlicz & Millei 2022), who studied for two years the weekly school meeting of a radical democratic Sudbury school in California, pointed out that, despite the highly publicized by the school ideals of egalitarianism and empowerment, females, younger students and newcomers, tended to be marginalized by an informal hierarchy structure that was making its presence felt in these meetings. This is surely a cause of worry, but in this initial stage we thought it appropriate to deal with the most direct and conspicuous exclusions, namely those caused by the use of explicitly derogatory and foul language against particular students. Thus, we encouraged participants to establish and observe certain conversational rules of civility. Concerning the thorough exploration of the hidden dynamics of our meetings, the understanding of which requires meticulous, systematic and lengthy observation (including the sex and the capacity of speakers, the nuances of the language used, the body language of the participants and so forth), it was postponed for a future stage where the SCA would become a routine and we will have gathered sufficient material to assess. In this essay we refer only to the decisions made by the SCA and we offer a more detailed analysis of the arguments exchanged in the third meeting.

3   AN OLD BUT NOT REDUNDANT DELIBERATION AND DECISION-MAKING MODEL

The major political institution of the Athenian Democracy was the People's Assembly (*ecclesia*) (Hansen, 1999, pp. 125-160). All adult, male Athenians who had the status of citizen were entitled to participate in the Assembly, but attendance rarely exceeded 5,000-6,000. It was burdened with a variety of tasks such as deciding about peace and war, dealing with more trivial and ordinary political matters, regulating public finance, legislating or (during the 4th century) initiating legislative procedures, electing or selecting magistrates, conducting political trials, honoring citizens, supervising religious festivals and others. Its decisions were final and authoritative unless it turned out that its members were misled into taking a particular decision that contravened the existing legislation. On these rare occasions, a decision could be annulled through a trial in which a significant number of randomly selected citizens served as judges (Lanni, 2010).

Unfortunately, many details concerning the operation of the Assembly are missing, and scholars often disagree about the significance and the aims of particular rules and procedures. We, however, believe that the following set of principles, arrangements and beliefs characterizing its operation are supported by sufficient for our purposes textual evidence.

a. Since the Assembly had to deal with a variety of complex issues, some division of labor was deemed necessary. For this reason, the Athenians had established another institution, the Council (*voule*) of the Five Hundred, which was responsible for setting the agenda of the Assembly meetings and for making specific proposals to facilitate the work of the demos. However, there was a special meeting of the Assembly where citizens could bring up for discussion any topic they thought pertinent (Aristotle, *The Athenian Constitution* 2-6).

b. Athenians maintained that they made better political decisions if they had the benefit of a free and public prior discussion concerning the issue at stake (Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War* II.40 23-26). All members of the Assembly were allowed to speak (even for a second time), but, in practice, there was a debate among a few speakers. The rest listened to their arguments and proposals, reacted vocally and finally expressed their preference by raising their hands. Decisions were determined by majority rule with the exception of certain routine decrees which could be approved without debate if no one objected (Rhodes, 1981; Hansen, 1983, pp. 123-130; Canevaro, 2018; Cammack, 2021).

c. Although a small number of skilled orators who intended to convince the audience that their policies best served the good of the polis almost monopolized important discussions, it was believed that all citizens were capable of contributing to the debate. As Isocrates characteristically says in one of his speeches "sometimes those considered to be the best judges are in error concerning the interests of the polis, while someone from the most wicked and disrespected manages to gain recognition for his proper counsel" (*Panathenaicus* 248).

d. The debates that took place in the meetings of the Assembly had an impact upon participants in the sense of occasionally making them revise their prior views on particular issues. This fact can be deduced from the complaints expressed by orators when the demos voted against their expectations (Cammack, 2021). Isocrates makes this point when he tactfully asserts "when we gather in the Assembly, we vote in favor of those we were rejecting before" (*On Peace* 52).

e. The audience could express its disagreement by jeering at speakers (*thorybos*). Sometimes an orator had to leave the podium before finishing his speech because of the people's hostile reaction. There are various interpretations regarding the political ends served by thorybos, but there is no doubt that it was something that speakers were afraid of especially if part of the audience was instructed by their political opponents to express its disapproval (Demosthenes, *On the Crown* 143; *Third Philippic* 3; Schwartzberg, 2010).

f. All speakers were accountable to the demos for the content of their speeches. Any citizen could press charges against a particular speaker for making illegal proposals, for

deceiving the people or for serving foreign interests. If the accused speaker could not win the ensuing trial, he would face severe penalties (Landauer, 2019).

What are the lessons that can be drawn from the Athenian Assembly concerning the design of a Whole School Meeting? There is no doubt that a small and flexible body is required to prepare the agenda provided that its specific proposals should not prevent individual members from coming up with their own proposals. Moreover, the oratory model of debate fits our purposes perfectly, since time constraints prevent all participants from speaking in a high school assembly. Finally, we share with the Athenians the view that everyone is in principle capable of contributing something to the debate, and we hope that the Assembly will make some of the participants reconsider the views they held previously. Nevertheless, we cannot endorse (e) and (f). Ousting someone from the podium because you disagree with her views, also known as the "heckler's veto," is a profoundly demeaning and disrespectful act, and mutual respect is a *conditio sine qua non* in any modern, organized and rule-governed deliberation. It implies recognition of the "fundamental worth and dignity of others" (Mansbridge, 2015, p. 35), without which the argument of the strongest and not the strongest argument wins the day. As far as (f) is concerned, we would like participants in SCA to be responsible for what they say, in the sense of taking into account the good of the school community and the long-term consequences of their suggestions, but we do not want them to be insincere or remain silent because of fear of punishment. This policy amounts to coercion, which restricts communication and "prevents the better argument from being raised and determining the outcome of the discussion" (Habermas, 2008, p. 50). The worst thing that should happen to a speaker is to be stopped by the Chair for exceeding her allotted time or for violating agreed rules of civility. Finally, in contradistinction to modern democracy, which champions a relentless and divisive competition among leading political parties for the people's vote, this model puts a premium on co-operation and a sense of community among the members of the demos. Incorporating these values to the normative framework of our schools is necessary to offset the unprecedented emphasis on competition "for grades, for status, for resources, for programs and so on" marking modern education (Apple & Beane, 1999, p. 13).

4   THE SCA: SCOPE, STRUCTURE, AND DECISIONS

Having set the theoretical framework, the first author, then a social science teacher, started having informal consultations with students and faculty members of the 1st Experimental High School of Thessaloniki to explore the possibility of introducing a novel school institution. Experimental schools are public schools established almost a century ago, which differ from standard schools on three counts. First, students are selected by lot. This practically means that, although their selection is not determined by socioeconomic criteria and everyone is free to apply, the majority of students come from middle class families whose educational level is beyond average (Sykas & Poimenidou, 2016). Second, the faculty is hired through a strict evaluation procedure, and only teachers with extra

qualifications can be assigned to these schools. Third, they are experimental in the sense that they are allowed by statute to test and apply various groundbreaking ideas and procedures concerning teaching methods, school administration, curriculum design and extra-curricular activities, often in collaboration with neighboring university Departments of Education. They serve as testing grounds for educational interventions that can be standardized and applied to every public school. Therefore, the whole endeavor was perfectly in line with the school's history and philosophy.

At the beginning of the school year the first author and coordinator of the SCA made an analytical presentation of the SCA to the headmaster and the faculty members. During the first three weeks and before the Class Council and School Council elections were held, a similar presentation was made to the school students. This presentation was accompanied by extensive discussions on various topics regarding democratic decision making, the significance of giving equal respect to all SCA members regardless of personal sympathies and antipathies, the need to abide by democratically established rules, the precise meaning of the common good in the school community and so forth.

Although the SCA was warmly welcomed by most members of the school community, certain concerns were expressed. A senior member of the faculty questioned the maturity of teenagers to actively participate in an institution that gives them real powers. He also expressed his worry about the possibility of loosing authority and prestige, since this new body could easily get out of control. Similar reservations were voiced by a small number of other faculty members. Accustomed to a hierarchical and authoritarian model of school governance that generally characterizes Greek secondary education, they were skeptical about devolving part of their power to a "legislative" assembly dominated by students. Moreover, some students initially saw in SCA an opportunity to resist to teachers' authority and promote their narrowly defined personal interests. The possibility of imposing their will upon their teachers without any repercussions was unprecedented and exciting.

Finally, a consensus was reached and the following points on SCA's structure and scope were agreed upon:

a. The SCA will be a new decision-making and deliberative institution in which all high school students and all faculty members will participate under conditions of equality. Each participant will have one vote and decisions will be made through majority rule.

b. The SCA will discuss various issues concerning school life starting with a piecemeal revision of the school by-laws. The SCA shall have no power to strike down state laws or bypass the government's educational policy as it is expressed by ministerial decisions. It should not also take over responsibilities, which are by law assigned exclusively to the faculty meeting, such as decisions about student promotion or disciplinary measures. It can however, offer the faculty suggestions and advice on topics that directly affect the students' academic performance and their wellbeing to the extent that the latter is determined by their membership in the school community. Finally, the SCA can review and improve the procedures governing its operation.

c. Three Task Groups will be formed from the elected Class Councils. Their function was inspired by the aforementioned Council of the Five Hundred. Assisted by a faculty member, who will act as coordinator (the first author), they have to summon the Assembly, to set the agenda and facilitate its proceedings. It was agreed that the first author was the most suitable person to serve as coordinator. The *School Climate Task Group* would be responsible for introducing agenda items concerning personal relations and communication issues and the *Fairness Task Group* would focus on the improvement of rules and regulations. It turned out that both groups and the coordinator were acting jointly to prepare the agenda. All members of the SCA could approach the Task Groups and suggest topics for discussion as well as particular resolutions. During meetings, everyone could make proposals pertaining to an agenda item but bringing in a new topic for discussion was prohibited. In addition, members of these two groups could act on their own initiative to deal with problems of a more personal and delicate nature that could not be discussed in a public assembly. For instance, they could approach students who are cut-off from their peer group or unusually aggressive, discuss their behaviour in a friendly manner and mediate between them and the faculty in an effort to find a fair and mutually-beneficial solution. Finally, the third Task Group's (*the Chair*) job was to chair meetings, take minutes and keep participants and speakers in order.

d. All speakers should abide by a minimum set of conversational rules. A speaker has to be argumentative, to the point, attentive to other people's viewpoints, not exceed her allotted time and abstain from using offensive, sexist or obscene language. Participants are allowed to speak more than once to retain the deliberative character of the assembly. As noted previously, the Chair would oversee the observance of these rules. These conversational rules along with the SCA regulation were prepared by the task Groups with the coordinator's assistance and distributed to all the members of the Assembly. The above regulation addressed among others a series of issues such as the duration of the assembly meetings, the time assigned to each speaker, the voting process, the ways the Chair could discipline misbehaving participants and so forth.

A tight and heavily-burdened schedule that was exhausting for students and teachers alike and the considerable amount of time needed for the preparation of each agenda prevented frequent or long sessions. At this early stage, the SCA was also more occupied with particular rules and regulations that worried most students rather than re-writing all school by-laws from scratch or dealing with less urgent issues. From December 2018 until January 2020, five meetings took place. The outburst of COVID-19 affected heavily the operation of the school and did not allow the continuation of the experiment. The average percentage of students who spoke in each meeting was between 20% and 30%, which is deemed satisfactory given the fact that the duration of the whole event did not exceed one hour or ninety minutes at most. During the above period the following decisions were reached, which now have been incorporated into the official school regulation and are binding for all SCA members. It should be noted that with a few exceptions both students and faculty abide by the set rules.

First meeting: Morning Prayer is obligatory in all Greek schools. In junior and senior high school, a student often volunteers to deliver a prayer from the Greek Orthodox ritual in front of the entire school community. Students can be exempted from this ceremony at the request of their parents or legal guardians. Although many students of the 1st Experimental High School did not object to the Morning Prayer as such, they found it embarrassing to come forward and address the whole school, and therefore volunteers were hardly forthcoming. The ensuing delays often disrupted the daily class schedule. The Headmaster then decided that all students should deliver the Morning Prayer in alphabetical order. This arrangement was not favorably received by many students, and the Task Groups considered it appropriate to bring the matter for discussion to the 1st meeting of the SCA. After an interesting debate, participants decided through majority vote that the Morning Prayer should be jointly delivered by all members of the school community with the exception of those with reasons for abstaining from the ceremony.

Second meeting: The initial proposal of the Task Groups was that a student who comes late to class during the first hour, that is, after the teacher has entered the classroom, should be allowed to stay but her absence would be recorded by the student who takes attendance. However, the majority of students expressed the view that the recording of an absence should be left to the teacher's discretion, after taking the student's excuse into account. This motion was objected to by members of the faculty on the grounds that it is doubtful whether the existing educational legislation grants individual teachers the liberty not to record the absences of latecomers. Finally, the Assembly ruled that latecomers would be allowed to remain in class but be marked absent and that only parents or legal guardians could ask that an absence be cancelled by offering a convincing excuse. The final decision rests with the faculty, which has to abide by the existing legislation.

Third meeting: Students' appearance continues to be debated in Greek secondary education. Of course, many things have changed from the time when male students were expelled from school for having long hair, but the dress code continues to be a point of friction in student-teacher relations. The Assembly did not consider it appropriate to provide specific instructions. Thus, they endorsed the Task Groups motion, which was formulated in more general and abstract terms. In particular, the final decision stressed the significance of reaching a compromise between students' freedom to dress as they like and the special constraints posed by the school environment and its educational goals. Hence, students' stylistic preferences should be informed by taking into account that the school is a special place that values learning, co-operation and mutual respect. If a problem arises, a teacher of the same sex should discuss it with the student to find a workable solution (for certain interesting details concerning the third meeting, see Section 6).

Fourth meeting: The only issue in the agenda of this meeting was students' attention in class. The Task Groups expressed the view that student indifference is inconsistent with the educational goals served in the classroom and that students are co-responsible for the

achievement of these goals. Therefore, the school should not tolerate this type of behavior. Surprisingly, the Headmaster retorted that attentiveness is not something that should be imposed on students. Finally, the Assembly decided that students should not be reprimanded for not paying attention in class provided that their behavior (a) does not disturb their interested classmates and (b) does not prevent teachers from doing their job. In addition, it was stressed by everyone that all students should be aware that being withdrawn from the class proceedings badly affects their academic performance.

Fifth meeting: Cheating in the exams is a serious problem from elementary school to university. The Task Groups and the Chair decided to summon the Assembly to discuss it with a view to highlighting what is morally wrong with it, to pinpoint its long-term consequences and to make recommendations on how to combat it in the classroom. After a long and lively debate in which an unusually large number of students and faculty took an active part and a variety of views were expressed, the Assembly came up with a list of suggestions addressed to students and teachers alike. They ranged from the most easily applied (teachers should stay at the back of the classroom) to the most demanding and hard to achieve (students should come to terms with the fact that tolerating cheaters amounts to tolerating injustice and causing harm to diligent students). The public endorsement of the latter assumption by an Assembly in which students prevail was unprecedented, considering the prevailing student-culture in Greece.

5   RESEARCH METHOD

Apart from designing the SCA and securing its smooth operation (as the possibility of its collapsing in chaos or of an intervention "from above" was real), we were interested in testing its impact upon students concerning certain attitudes of them. As stated earlier, we would like to investigate whether SCA (a) promotes direct participation in democratic decision-making and democratic school governance, (b) improves the school's social climate, and (c) contributes to the development of certain democratic attitudes and skills. In more colloquial terms, we were interested in whether this assembly makes the school "a better place to be in".

To answer the above questions, we relied on two basic methodological tools. The first one was a structured, self-report questionnaire covering different possible desirable effects of SCA on students. It was distributed by the first author to the total student population of the school, that is 168 students (16-18 years old), and it mainly included quantitative statements (items). Students evaluated the importance of each item on a Likert scale of 1 to 5, where 5 = Strongly agree and 1 = Strongly disagree. The questionnaire had a good internal consistency (Cronbach's Alpha=0.834).

The second includes the systematic observation of all activities pertaining to the SCA. Being the coordinator of SCA, the first author had the opportunity to observe all its aspects (i.e., the Task Groups work, the school meetings, the quality and the variety of the arguments expressed, the decision-making processes, the implementation of voted rules, how teachers and students made sense of the SCA, etc.). His observations were recorded

by field notes on a daily basis. Field notes were also taken by the second author after the systematic observation of the school meetings.

In the following section we provide some preliminary findings based on the self-report questionnaire. Based on our field-notes, we also provide some interesting details regarding the 3rd school meeting, in order to further highlight various aspects of the SCA, such as the job of the Task Groups, the deliberation and the decision-making processes during the school meetings, and the democratic skills and attitudes promoted.

6   SOME PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

We can offer only a preliminary assessment of the SCA, since more time is needed and, most importantly, this institution should be tested in more average public high schools all over the country. Table 1 below depicts the average score of the students on each item of the questionnaire.

Table 1. SCA evaluation

Statements	Average Score
SCA gives voice to students and allows them to freely express themselves.	4,5
SCA makes teacher-student relations more equal.	4,2
SCA improves teacher-student relations.	3,8
SCA promotes democratic decision-making.	4,6
SCA promotes fair decision-making.	3,8
SCA contributes to the improvement of the school climate.	4,0
SCA promotes a democratic school culture.	4,4
SCA makes students more responsible.	4,2
SCA makes me feel that the school cares about me.	3,7
Conversational rules make me more attentive to the views of other students.	3,8
Conversational rules help me become more respectful to others.	4,4
SCA promotes democratic school governance.	4,3
SCA gives me the opportunity to participate in decision-making procedures that concern my school community.	4,1
SCA helps me decide more responsibly on matters related to my school community.	4,0

SCA has helps me think more seriously about the consequences of my actions for others.	4,1
SCA helps me realize the significance of electing serious and able persons in student councils.	4,3
SCA makes me think in a more public-spirited manner.	4,0
SCA helps me become a democratic and responsible citizen.	4,2
SCA should be implemented in more schools.	4,7

Source: Questionnaire Processing

From these data, it follows that, according to students, SCA yields encouraging results concerning the promotion of the main goals underlying its operation, that is student's direct participation in democratic decision-making and democratic school governance. Moreover, it seems to help students acquire certain democratic skills and attitudes such as becoming more considerate and public-spirited, more respectful of others and more responsible concerning their relation with the school community. To these we can add the encouraging finding that most students realized the significance of electing "serious and able persons" as their representatives. In contrast, there is no strong agreement among students as to whether SCA improves overall student-teacher relations, leads to fair decision-making, makes them feel that the school cares about them and renders them more attentive to other people's views. An important issue that should be explored in the future is whether participants change their prior views on particular proposals because of the arguments to which they are exposed.

Based on our field notes we will offer more details of the 3rd School Meeting, which are indicative of the *modus operandi* of the SCA.

A great difficulty encountered by the Task Groups during their weekly meetings was to define the term "indecent appearance", since each SCA member could have a different view, and any attempt to give a definitive list of instances of inappropriate dressing would be pointless. Hence, as said before, the Task Groups did not consider it appropriate to provide specific instructions. Their proposal was formulated in more general and abstract terms.

The majority of the SCA members voted for the Task Groups proposal (see Section 4 for the decision made). However, there are two interesting observations regarding the content of the points raised that shed more light on the participants' engagement, the quality of democratic deliberation and the decision-making process within the context of the SCA.

The first one concerns a student's remark, that "the Task Group proposal concerns only the students' side, that is, it does not include teachers' indecent appearance, and thus it undermines equality between teachers and students" (L.Ch., student, 11th grade).

In response, a faculty member tried to explain that "equality does not mean equality in every respect. Teachers have more power than students, but they also have many more

responsibilities. Besides, teachers are accountable to the headmaster and the educational authorities for any inappropriate appearance or behaviour" (D.P., teacher).

It should be noted that the arguments of both sides were expressed under conditions of mutual respect and understanding. Undoubtedly, teachers were more confident in formulating their arguments. It is also worth mentioning that within the SCA setting, teachers and students had a rare opportunity to engage in normative discussions, and exchange arguments on an equal basis. This is something noteworthy, taking into consideration the aforementioned critical studies, which have revealed that certain democratic school meetings have not managed to overcome deeply entrenched hierarchical divisions (Gawlicz & Millei, 2022), and failed to make a shift "from traditional classroom talk to democratic deliberative talk" (Thornberg, 2010, p. 925).

The second observation concerns the criticism leveled by a faculty member against the abstract character of the Task Groups proposal, arguing that "they avoided drafting a detailed dress code that would explicitly prohibit certain forms of dress" (D.S., teacher). An interesting dialogue ensued between this faculty member and a member of the Fairness Task Group regarding the degree of specialization that a dress code could have in the school context. Despite his negative stance and in the absence of other proposals, the faculty member voted for the Task Groups proposal.

Speaking as observers, we were impressed by the quality and the variety of the arguments produced and the students' willingness to contradict their teachers' views. We remember a student who approached a teacher after the meeting and thought it appropriate to tell her that he had nothing personal against her but he simply believed that the point she was making was wrong. It should also be noted that no faculty member was condescending to students and none of the participants openly threatened not to accept a decision with which he or she disagreed. This fact does not imply that the operation of the SCA is not open to further improvement. We observed that a small minority of students just followed their peers, who sat together with them. Perhaps taking a vote in an alphabetical order rather than by raising hands will make them realize that it is their own decision.

7   CONCLUSIONS

The main purpose of this essay was to present the SCA, a novel democratic experiment that took place in a Greek high school and aspired to enable students to substantially participate in direct democratic decision-making processes and democratic school governance. Drawing on the rich history of democratic ideas, radical educational practices and current political theory, SCA operated under conditions of democratic equality and mutual respect, as it is attested by the fact that all students and teachers have the same speech and voting rights, and its decisions are binding for all participants. An additional purpose was to investigate to what extent SCA can a) promote democratic school governance, b) improve the school's social climate, and c) cultivate certain democratic attitudes and skills. Based on the systematic observation of the SCA operation and the

school meetings, as well as on a structured, self-report questionnaire, our preliminary findings show that a) students do feel that they are involved in actual democratic decision-making, b) SCA has a moderate but positive effect on the school climate, and c) participation in the SCA helps students develop certain basic democratic attitudes and skills.

Our conclusions at present are optimistic, but we would like to end on a gloomier note. The legally permissible topics that can be decided by the SCA are quite limited. The rigid hierarchy and bureaucracy that, despite the rhetoric of certain recent official documents, continues to characterize Greek secondary education do not give schools sufficient elbow room for their own initiatives (Katsarou 2020, p. 179-187). Things could improve significantly if the authorities allowed schools to decide about parts of the curriculum and other crucial issues, as is the case in other European countries. If no reforms take place with this end in mind and, if the state does not start showing more confidence to school units, the SCA runs the risk of running out of topics for discussion.

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