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Does intercultural education as a medium of citizenship education lead to student integration?

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Introduction

Partly because of the many social, political and economic changes that have taken place in the Balkans and the former USSR since the early 1990s there have been massive movements of political and economic immigrants to economically vigorous and politically stable countries. Greece, as a member of the European Union with economic and political stability, has been host to a great number of these. The Greek state, society in general and the educational system have faced the influx of these numerous multicultural groups: they found themselves unable to react in an organised manner for several years. More recently the main problem faced by Greek society and the Greek educational system remains the acceptance of and co-existence with students deemed to be 'other' and/or 'different' (see Kossivakis and Dendias 2003).

Education is one of the areas of Greek social life that suffered major turbulence from this immigration. The modification of the structure and quality of the population of Greek schools was not dealt with successfully by the Greek educational system. This phenomenon is complex and multifaceted, concerning not only the education system, but society as a whole (Petrućijova, 2004): it creates multiple reactions and generates phenomena such as racially discriminatory and xenophobic tendencies (Spinthourakis, Moustairas, Skartsilas and Synesiou, 2000).

In this paper we attempt a comparative estimation of foreign and homecoming students that have attended primary schools in the Prefecture of Argolida since 1990. Greece, which, in the past has served as a diaspora country, has in recent years seen thousands returning: these individuals were termed the 'homecoming' (*epanapatrizomeni*) population. We attempt to ascertain whether the great difficulties observed in the early 1990s continue today, and if not, what factors have helped to ameliorate the situation. What were the experiences of primary education teachers during the influx of these students into the education system? What aspects of citizenship education practices followed in the past have changed and what sort of practices are used today? Was there any further education and support provided by the institutional educational agents (i.e. state school counsellors)? Furthermore, is there any evidence that this amelioration, if indeed there was any, shows that the Greek educational system has adapted to and/or accepted the principles of intercultural (multicultural) education as expressed by national legislation (*National Gazette* –ΦΕΚ– 2413/96), or was it the result of other reasons and/or coincidence?

In an attempt to answer these questions, we conducted an analysis of data from ten schools in Argolida that share a common characteristics, and we discuss the results in this paper. More than 20% of the participating schools' population is of foreign or homecoming students. The questions posed in this study are examined through a combination of research designs and data collection methods. These include a questionnaire and personal semi-constructed interviews with selected teachers with several years' experience in these schools.

The state of primary education in the Prefecture of Argolida

Argolida, as an agricultural and tourist area with expansive crop cultivation and extensive tourist facilities and the concomitant high demand for labour, has attracted a large number of economic immigrants over the last ten years. Consequently there has been an influx of many new students in the schools of the area. Table 1 shows the entrance of foreign and homecoming students in primary education into the Prefecture of Argolida during the last decade. There has been a continuously increasing influx rate of foreign and homecoming students, and a quintuple increase through the period between 1995 and 2000.

Table 1: Foreign and homecoming students in the Prefecture of Argolida during the decade 1993-2003

| Scholastic year | Homecoming students | Foreign students | Total number of students |
|-----------------|---------------------|------------------|--------------------------|
| 1992-1993 | 30 | 43 | 73 |
| 1993-1994 | 20 | 45 | 65 |
| 1994-1995 | 14 | 106 | 120 |
| 1999-2000 | 72 | 576 | 648 |
| 2000-2001 | 62 | 608 | 670 |
| 2001-2002 | 45 | 653 | 698 |
| 2002-2003 | 38 | 726 | 764 |

Source: Direction of Primary Education of Argolida

Table 2 shows evidence concerning schools of primary education in Argolida where a percentage of foreign and homecoming students above 20% is readily apparent. This highlights the fact that in many schools in this area we can almost term it an 'invasion' of foreign and homecoming students that disrupts the pattern in primary education.

Table 2: Schools of primary education in Argolida with a rate of foreign and homecoming students above 20% during the scholastic year 2003-2004.

| Schools | Number of students | | |
|------------|--------------------------|---|--------------------------------------|
| | Total number of students | Number of foreign and homecoming students | % of foreign and homecoming students |
| Iria | 53 | 24 | 45% |
| Asini | 41 | 11 | 27% |
| Didima | 60 | 15 | 25% |
| Drepano | 95 | 22 | 24% |
| Thermhsia | 23 | 11 | 48% |
| Lefkakia | 32 | 8 | 25% |
| Manesi | 32 | 8 | 25% |
| Poullakida | 28 | 6 | 22% |
| Pertoheli | 150 | 85 | 57% |
| Tolo | 90 | 32 | 36% |

Source: Direction of Primary Education of Argolida

Comparison of the situation in the 1990s and in recent years

Foreign and homecoming students in the early 1990s faced numerous difficulties, which can be divided into those concerning the learning process and integration into a new educational system, and those concerning social interaction with peers and the school staff.

Difficulties on the educational level

Foreign and homecoming students faced many difficulties in the learning process concerning the reading and writing of the Greek language. Serious difficulties were encountered by the comparatively older children entering the Greek educational system, since they had already internalised the structures of their native language and acquired Greek as a second or foreign language (Spinthourakis and Moustairas, 2000). They also exhibited difficulty expressing themselves verbally and in communicating, as well as in the comprehension of various cognitive subjects. Students faced more difficulties in theoretical subjects (such as citizenship education, history and Greek language) than in practical subjects, due to the major difficulties in the comprehension of the Greek language. Thus, foreign and homecoming students had lower levels of educational achievement when compared to their Greek counterparts.

Difficulties on the socio-psychological level

New students faced many difficulties in their endeavour to communicate and interact with their Greek schoolmates. Their cultural differentiation was not always acceptable, and they were often forced to interrupt the process of communication, withdraw from the students groups and face forced isolation and being ostracised. This isolation occasionally led to the adoption of an aggressive and anti-social stance towards schoolmates and teachers.

As is apparent from the responses of Greek teachers, many problems on the educational level appear to have been ameliorated, especially for foreign students who entered the educational system at pre-school ages. This is not the case with older children, for whom the cultural shock is greater. In this case several negative consequences come to the fore. Children that attended Greek kindergarten or/and were born in Greece appear to have none of or, at least, considerably fewer, of the educational or socio-psychological problems mentioned above.

Difficulties that confront Greek teachers

Greek teachers in the early 1990s faced several difficulties in the educational practices of everyday life, because of their interaction with the foreign students in the classroom. These difficulties may be due in part to the following factors:

1. Although it has been repeatedly pointed out, there is not yet an appropriate test of competence in Greek language for foreign and homecoming students. Although the Pedagogical Institute has formed an analogous diagnostic test of linguistic competence (Nikolaou, 2000), this test has not been made available to any of the schools in our study. A lack of appropriate testing and evaluation of students' Greek language competency level means it has been difficult to establish the appropriate grade in which they should be enrolled. Their entrance should be based on achievement in such a test, not simply according to their age or the grade that they attended in their native country.

It has to be possible to evaluate the linguistic competency of foreign students according to the demands of the educational system, as opposed to their ability to communicate with people in their everyday life. In other words, there is a vast difference between a foreign student being able to satisfy the needs of communication in day to day life, and his or her being able to satisfy the needs of the scholastic process.

2. There is a lack of appropriate textbooks and curriculum for the instruction of Greek as a second or foreign language as well as for citizenship education, especially for students entering Greek schools at advanced ages. The books of the course *Open the Window, 1 and 2* (Greek as a Second Language textbooks), have only been used by one of the sampled schools (Portoheli) and this was in the context of compensatory instruction. In that same school, during the academic year 2003-2004, and for the same purpose, books from the National Institute of Education for Homecoming Students and Intercultural Education (IPODE), in collaboration with the University of Patras Department of Primary Education, have been used. In the rest of the schools sampled, the teachers were not even aware of the existence of such books.
3. The lack of appropriate tests for the evaluation of the cognitive performance of the foreign students. These students are evaluated in the same manner as their Greek schoolmates, despite their 'particularity' and 'otherness' having been recognised by all.
4. The lack of systematic guidance from the Hellenic Pedagogical Institute (HPI) and the Ministry of Education (YPEPTH). Further education and training of teachers in subjects concerning intercultural education has constituted a necessary and fixed demand for many years (Spinthourakis and Katsillis, 2003). Greek teachers require help and support in their mission, which can only come from continuous and accurate training, based on the acknowledgement of their needs. Although both the HPI and YPEPTH have organised intercultural training programs and seminars for teachers and managers of education, none of the teachers sampled received systematic training on issues concerning intercultural education. The majority reports, at best, attendance at a conference or congress on related issues. None have attended anything constituting a formal extension of their knowledge of citizenship education.

It appears that Greek teachers are unaware of (or overlook) the existence of legislation which set the institutional context for the education of children of different cultural origins. They also appear unaware of the fact that intercultural procedure is the official educational policy in subjects of incorporation and education of students hailing from such cultural milieus (Nikolaou, 2000). Therefore they are unable to recognise fundamental elements of intercultural education and commensurately citizenship education; one that brings together two or more cultures on the basis of equal treatment in the eyes of the law and that seeks to abolish discrimination, advance respect, acceptance and solidarity (Pappas, 1998). Teachers are unaware of the exact meaning of terms such as integration, incorporation, assimilation, intercultural education, citizenship education, and of special instructive models for bilingual and/or bicultural students. These teachers are left to face all these difficulties without additional support and knowledge and can rely on nothing more than their own good will and intentions.

Possible Interventions

It is apparent that teachers, when faced with limited viable and workable solutions, tend to rely on their own good intentions. These intentions and practices, however, are not necessarily in alignment with proven good intercultural and citizenship education practices. In the light of this, possible interventions need to move from the theoretical to the practical. Such interventions include in-school continuing education seminars based on the real needs of the schools in question. Among others, state school counsellors, subject specialists (e.g., intercultural education, citizenship education) as well as individual teachers participating in European exchange programs, have the ability to organise working groups geared towards sharing best practice experiences. They can also organise workshops and seminars dealing with the means of making integration versus assimilation teachers' goal. Thus, they will be able to move towards actualising real intercultural education rather than dealing with a façade. Such efforts are now becoming part of a concentrated effort by several schools in Argolida (TEAM-In Europe, 2003-05).

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to investigate and identify the situation concerning foreign and homecoming students who have attended schools of primary education in the Prefecture of Argolida since the early 1990s. The great difficulties faced in the initial years appear to have been greatly ameliorated. The main factors contributing to this apparent reduction in problems are:

- the fact that most of these children have been born in Greece, which assures that they learn the Greek language very well before entering school
- their commensurate Greek socialisation in the school system, and
- attendance at pre-school education.

These three factors have contributed to most of these children not facing serious problems on the cognitive level.

The apparent minimisation of both cognitive difficulties and socialisation issues encountered by current foreign-born or homecoming students in contrast to their earlier counterparts 'relieved' all the members of the educational process. However, it conceals both a truth and a myth. The truth is that problems encountered in the schools sampled did not decrease because they began cooperating with the intercultural education principles, as explicitly expressed in national legislation (N. 2413/1996) nor has citizenship education played a role. Rather the circumstances concerning the entry of these students to the educational system have changed. The myth lies in the fact that Greek schools did not change. If they had, the practice they would have followed (intercultural education) should have resulted in a real and effective pedagogical action (Nikolaou, 2000). Greek primary schools, barring brilliant exceptions, appear to continue to be to a great extent, monolingual, monocultural schools where intercultural education appears to be a fable. Nor has the teaching of citizenship education become a resource through which to help both Greek and foreign or homecoming students become aware of and accepting of 'otherness' and/or 'difference'. This is apparent in their approach to foreign students, which is based chiefly in the ascendant Greek language and dominant Greek culture, neglecting to take into account students' individual cultural needs and particularities.

Furthermore, those who believe that all of the above problems have been solved, due simply to adequate progress on the part of the students in the dominant (Greek) language, do not realise that the students thereby accomplish their assimilation, rather than their integration, faster (Markou, 1996). It appears there is a contradiction between what is quickly becoming the reality and what should be done on the part of official educational policy. On the one hand everyone attempts to resolve the ‘educational problem’, which is to say the weakness shown by foreign students in the language of and socialisation to the reception country. This denotes the adoption of an assimilative model to confront similar circumstances (Nikolaou, 2000:121; Nikolaou, 2004). On the other hand, official educational policy clearly identifies intercultural education as the prescribed approach in Greek primary schools: the fact that foreign students lack adequate linguistic control of the Greek language does not appear to constitute a ‘pedagogical problem’. Nor were we able to identify any innovative citizenship education practices being employed.

In conclusion, in the schools of Argolida which have a high percentage of foreign or homecoming students, there appears to be a moderation of the problems faced in the early 1990s. This moderation, however, is not a result of the adoption of the principals of intercultural education via citizenship education but rather the final effect of anecdotal factors. Thus, to the extent that schools of Argolida are representative of Greek primary schools in general, we would argue that we remain a great distance from the generation of schools that will respect cultural differences and particularities.

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