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Migrant education: the case of Greece

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The very large Greek Diaspora, outnumbering perhaps the motherland inhabitants, speaks very loudly of the fact that Greece used to be a country ‘exporting’ migrants, not receiving them. When the influx of migrants started, some two decades ago, the state and civil society were totally unprepared to receive them properly. Added to this, Greek society has always been monolingual, monocultural and mono-religious. Gradually the initial awkward numbness, hostility perhaps, or indifference receded and several laws have tried to address the current situation, which is that the migrant population, legal and illegal, might reach or exceed 20% of the population. In the field of education three laws were fundamental: in 1996, the law for Intercultural Education, in 2000 the law for the Reception and Accommodation of Ethnic Greeks coming from countries of the old Soviet Union and in 2001, the law for the Reception and Accommodation of Migrants from countries other than the EU.

In terms of access to educational provision, this legal framework stipulates that all foreign children living in Greece are obliged to attend compulsory education schools (6-15), and that they have free access to all forms of school life. Schools accept all children, regardless of the legal status of their parents (documented or undocumented), indicating a strong attachment to the right to education of all children.

Regarding policies targeting specific needs to promote equality of outcomes, measures taken include Induction Classes I and II, which run parallel to the regular classes and, for older students in the secondary education Tutorials (*frontistirion*) in after school hours. In places where the migrant concentration is high, Intercultural Schools were established, in which the official curriculum is modified according to the needs of the students. In Intercultural Schools the specific language of origin of the students is taught, as well as the Greek language to the students’ parents. Knowing that teachers’ attitudes and skills are crucial for the success of any centrally-devised measures led to several courses in teacher initial and in-service training specifically about migrant education.

On the issue of giving new opportunities and supporting migrant in the wider communities, the role of Intercultural Schools should be noted, specifically for the possibility of teaching the languages of origin, supporting migrant parents to learn Greek, and parents being involved in the education of their children.

Regarding policies directed to the population as a whole to accept and appreciate diversity, the National Curriculum does not speak specifically of multiculturalism, but the idea is integrated in several courses in literature, history and art. The role of NGO and civil society, as well as of local authorities and municipalities, in raising awareness about migrants and their culture, with the help of EU funding, is also worth mentioning.

The legal framework and the various activities of several sectors and agencies speak for the intentions to accommodate migrants, but the monitoring and statistical analysis of the

implementation of this is very weak. We do not know exactly if, or to what degree, the targets have been reached.

In the overview of the MIPEX III it is stated:

Despite the crisis, the population and workforce kept growing with more immigrants and asylum seekers, as Greece becomes one of Europe's major countries of transit and destination, partly due to EU policies (e.g. Dublin II). After previous governments' limited integration actions (e.g. Estia programme), Greece made the greatest overall progress of any MIPEX country (+10) with just 3 laws from the new government, though politicised among right-wing parties. Immigrants and their descendants may see slight improvements in all MIPEX areas, except long term residence and anti-discrimination. To know whether these reforms are properly implemented in practice, Greece must develop a culture of using statistics and policy evaluation for integration.

Greece's integration policies are now average for Europe, scoring in-between new countries of immigration in Southern Europe. Policies are also more coherent, with strands ranging from 40 to 57 instead of 18 to 56. Both political participation and citizenship were improved in the same law, with reference to European standards and established immigration countries' policies. Where most European countries do best (family reunion, long term residence, anti-discrimination), Greece only follows minimum standards from EU law.'

Looking at the area of education of migrants in Greece as a whole, one discerns as its strongest achievement the obligation of all migrant children to attend compulsory schooling, regardless of their legal status. This insistence reflects the implicit rather than explicit idea of migrant inclusion through assimilation by the means of a common education. Part of migrant population too, especially Albanians, want to be assimilated, to be like the Greek majority.

The current very bad financial situation in Greece makes further measures for migrants unlikely and also raises the incidence of migrant crime, which may also produce xenophobia and hatred.

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¹ The references provided here pertain to the symposium as a whole rather than to the individual paper.

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