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Multiculturalism and teacher preparedness to deal with the new reality: the view from Greece

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Introduction

Geopolitical, social and economic factors have in recent years altered the once monocultural nature of Greek society. In recent decades the numbers of students of different ages representing different ethnic origins and speaking Greek as a second language has increased dramatically in Greek public school classrooms. Are teachers prepared to deal with the ever-changing paradigm of education and help all students integrate and become effective citizens of Greece and of Europe? This paper discusses issues related to Greek teachers' readiness and their related beliefs and attitudes within the context of multiculturalism and integration, with examples drawn from studies conducted in the Western Peloponnese which has over 4,000 elementary school teachers.

Changing realities

Over the last twenty years the demographic ethno-cultural profile of Greece and many other European countries has undergone a very basic and fundamental transformation. For countries like Greece which were historically countries from which people emigrated to other more industrially and economically advanced ones, the change brought many thousands of immigrants, both legal and illegal, who were seeking to advance economically. In a clear role reversal, Greece has become a country to which people emigrate seeking a brighter tomorrow. The number of immigrants is staggering, both for the swiftness of their arrival and the impact the numbers have had on the synthesis of the school-age population (Malkidi 2003; Nicolaou, 2000; Drettakis, 1996). In 1995 foreign-born students represented 1.6% of the school population; now over 10% of the school-age population in the Greek public educational system representing non-Greek origins - an increase of nearly 350% in the last 8 years (Baris & Spinthourakis 2002). With them the newcomers have brought different linguistic and cultural realities which, for an essentially monolingual and relatively monocultural society presents new challenges. Among a plethora of others, these challenges include the provision of appropriate and effective teaching for academic, socialisation and integration purposes.

Few would argue with the premise that education is based on the knowledge, beliefs and the values of a society. Through formal and informal means, the education system promotes the learning of elements of its culture to develop productive members of society. The nature of the world in general, and more specifically, challenges our schools in terms of the curriculum, instructional techniques and the training provided for educators (Spinthourakis & Papoulia-Tzelepi, 2001). Thus an acknowledged role of the school to a certain extent recognises and plans for the efficacious transmission of the norms and values of the society. Furthermore as the ethno-cultural profile of a society changes, so too the need arises to find ways of integrating the newcomers, balancing the transmission of the existing norms and values with the sometimes subtle and at others not so subtle nuances the newcomers bring to the existing reality in an effort to prepare for an integrated modern society of critical thinking and socially proactive citizens. Newcomers

and the indigenous majority require different approaches to enable both parties to advance towards effective citizenship and equality.

Questions about the degree to which a given society, through its elected representatives, is prepared to embrace these changing realities are both directly and indirectly linked to its willingness and ability to plan and implement needed reforms of the system. On paper at least EU member states have expressed their support for multiculturalism and diversity (see Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe 2000, Matheiou, Karatzia-Stavlioti & Spithourakis, 2001). In Greece the Hellenic Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs (YPEPTH) has in recent years introduced changes that include a national curriculum reform which encompass such themes as social issues, cross-curricular teaching and intercultural education (Pedagogical Institute, 1999, 2001). Several analyses of the Greek legal framework for intercultural education (N. 2413/96) have focused on both interpretation and implementation of this effort with the appropriate and specialised teaching material required as well as the teacher and stakeholder training needs (e.g. Lambropoulos, Karatzia & Spithourakis 2000).

In Greece, educational decisions taken on what 'should be' are usually made at the higher administrative levels (YPEPTH) of a highly centralised educational system, after which these decisions filter down to the parties charged with their implementation, the teachers. With few exceptions these policy decisions are not preceded by an in-depth needs analysis of the status quo, nor are they accompanied by well thought out, systematic and robust in-service teacher training that is founded on the continuing and in-service education needs of the teachers who will implement the decisions. Efforts are made to inform the teachers charged with the implementation of educational decisions, but the training provided has tended to be patchy, short and generally lacking the depth needed to provide a full understanding of both the theoretical underpinnings and the practical implications (Papanoutsio Didaskaleio Teacher comments, 2001-03).

The importance and value of appropriate and timely in-service training for effective programme implementation is well known and indisputable. A number of studies have shown that teacher's attitudes, expectations and opinions impact on their teaching practice with linguistically and culturally differentiated groups (Banks, 1989; Grant and Sleeter, 1989; Tomlinson, 1981). Teachers' cultural misconceptions may also lead to difficulties in making an appropriate assessment of students' skills and abilities (Bank, 1989). Tomlinson (1981:58) argues that their own ethnocentric education, experiences, and lack of information about minority groups makes them susceptible to inappropriate assumptions about their students. Teacher education programmes which focus on diversity tend to provide teachers with the technical knowledge and skills to handle cultural diversity, to adapt instruction to the diverse needs of their students, and to incorporate knowledge in a curriculum transformed to accommodate diversity (Morine-Dershimer, 1985; Burstein and Cabello, 1989).

A view from Greece

Greek elementary school teachers' see themselves as unready to deal with the challenges that come with cultural diversity and to teach the changing school population. This is not to say that they do not work towards ameliorating the problems they encounter. It does however mean that they feel that they are working more from instinct than from a strong theoretical and practical understanding of intercultural pedagogy.

One Greek study examined the issue of teaching social issues in the classroom: when asked what social issues had they taught, 55% of the elementary school teachers surveyed said interculturalism, 48% racism-xenophobia and 45% human rights, while only 13% dealt with issues related to minority education (Spinthourakis & Papoulia-Tzelepi 2001). It is not surprising that when the same group was asked if they were prepared to deal with actual linguistic and cultural minority students in the classroom in terms of being able to teach them along with their native Greek student population, less than 10% felt they could do so (Papanoutsio Didaskaleio Teacher comments, 2001-03).

In another study conducted during the same period and in the same geographical area (the western Peloponnese of Greece), 96.6% of the teachers surveyed said they needed continuing and in-service training in intercultural education and related issues to be able to take on the challenge (Baris & Spinthourakis, 2002). 87.8 % went on to state the need for specialisation in Greek as a second language teaching approaches, 82% asked for changes to the national curriculum and 78.5% asked for specialisation in intercultural education. 62% indicated that they felt that they were not well informed on issues related to YPEPTH educational policy for linguistic and culturally differentiated populations. Finally the majority said that they did not want mass in-service training but wanted training to be in smaller groups, to be conducted within the school environment (in-school continuing and in-service training) and that they should be included in the theme determination process (Baris & Spinthourakis 2001; Ksohelis, 2001).

In 2001-2 a second study was conducted which sampled both substitute and permanent elementary school teachers in the Athens as well as the Patras area and included teachers attending the two year continuing teacher education institutes in the respective cities. This study sought to investigate teachers' attitudes towards limited Greek speaking students in the regular Greek classroom, and found something that appears to be common to many of the studies; that Greek teachers are positively inclined and hold a non-discriminatory stance towards these students, but that their training on subjects related to serving this population is virtually non-existent (e.g. Bombas, 1997 and Damanakis, 2000 as cited by Pinga, 2002:13-16). In her study, Pinga (2002) found that 64% of the teachers had never attended a seminar on the subject, but that over 88% had attended seminars on other educational issues. This may indicate that while the teachers were interested in and willing to attend in-service training programmes, they had not been given the opportunity to do so with respect to education for linguistic and culturally differentiated students. Interestingly, 95% of the teachers surveyed attributed the lack of planning for this very important in-service training programmes to either the inability of the administrative services to design and organise such programmes (57%) or to infrastructure deficiencies (38%). As with earlier studies, a large percentage (42%) of the respondents claimed that they were unaware of any regulatory decisions on the part of the YPEPTH on the subject. Responses to a series of questions targeted at uncovering the reasons why the teachers felt unprepared to deal with these new students continued to focus on lack of training programmes (between 22% and 68%). Pinga concludes by stating that the teachers surveyed appeared to lack both information about teaching a multicultural classroom and a lack of both basic and specialised training on the cultures involved, materials to be used, teaching strategies and techniques that are effective.

These findings on teacher preparedness and training needs in various geographic regions of Greece, with an emphasis on that of the Western Peloponnese. are not at all unusual and appear to represent the norm.

In 1998, the Centre for Comparative and International Educational Policy and Communication of the University of Athens conducted a national survey (Matheiou, Karatzia-Stavlioti & Spinthourakis, 2001) in an effort to investigate the general continuing and in-service education needs of elementary teachers. The study sought to identify those domains/priorities which would constitute the basis for developing efficient and effective training programmes for the regional educational administrative organisations assigned the role of supporting teachers. The regionalisation of the training programmes to be developed by these organisations was predicated upon the belief that teachers outside the major metropolitan areas have increased need for educational support mechanisms. The sample of teachers surveyed came from five geographic regions of Greece. Of 386 elementary school teachers, 70% said they had taught a range of classes (1st-6th) and 42% taught in the area in which they lived, giving them a strong background on local history, population demographic and educational needs. When asked what they needed in support terms, 60% asked for continuing and in-service education teacher training. Many of the teachers had immigrant children in their classrooms, but few had taken part in innovative YPEPTH-sponsored education programmes. A large number identified the existence of outdated school texts inappropriate for the changing student population needs as a factor making their task even more difficult, and thought that more communication is needed between teachers and other agencies across Greece to meet the challenges these new realities present. What may be surmised from the first stage of this study is that teachers generally find themselves in need of greater outside support as well as more information. They appear to recognise that to deal with the problems/challenges confronting them more robust and in-depth training is needed. Younger teachers (31-35 year olds), who tend to be assigned to the classes with a higher representation of linguistically and culturally differentiated students, are also the group placing the need for continuing and in-service education teacher training as a central priority and specify intercultural education and its branches as an area that needs more support. Teachers in other age groups do not ignore this area but it is not their first priority: they tend to identify such issues as infrastructure and a lack of information about educational research and how to utilise this research. Looking at the analysis of the overall group responses in terms of intercultural education, we see that as their first priority: 36.6% want specialised training to meet learning difficulties of the new populations; 31.3% want training on alternative methods of instruction and implementation; and 15.5% want training appropriate methods of evaluation and the commensurate teaching methods for dealing with new populations.

Since this study was conducted and reported upon localised efforts at addressing some of the findings have been attempted. A fuller and more comprehensive study in the spirit of the 1998 project has been instituted and will be reported upon in the near future. Clearly, teachers' voices need to be heard: they know what they need and can help identify those areas of continuing and in-service teacher training that will enable them to deal with the challenges of cultural diversity.

Conclusion

There is a need for researchers to continue to study the various multicultural components and experiences that influence teachers' perspectives and teaching strategies to help design continuing and in-service programmes. It is also imperative that more research on the subject be conducted with a focus on the European arena, and this should be shared

among member states. Educational decision-makers need to research the status quo, not from above but from the grass roots, and upon this foundation to design and implement effective programmes. Such programmes are needed if we are to fulfil the goal of achieving effective integration and an awareness of the promise of cultural diversity in a multicultural Greece and Europe.

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