

Cultural Diversity and Intercultural Education

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Abstract: The problem of coexistence and interaction of culturally different populations is a reality for Greek society, as since the 1980s Greece has been a host country for immigrants and refugees. In this paper we will attempt to approach the way of integrating the children of immigrants/refugees in the Greek educational system, where the principles of interculturality are promoted and is necessary to strengthen social cohesion, the harmonious coexistence of cultural and ethnic groups living in the country. Integration into society goes through education. The main objective is the intercultural sensitivity and training of primary and secondary education teachers on issues of cultural diversity and education of immigrant/refugee children. Within the framework of the European Union's education policy, education systems must operate in an inclusive manner, and a series of institutional measures and educational policies relating to the protection of cultural diversity and the application of the principles of interculturality in their integration process are required.

Key words: cultural diversity, integration, intercultural approach, education policy

1. Introduction

The dimensions of the immigration and refugee phenomenon affect modern societies which, with the continuous flow of culturally different individuals or groups and their subsequent interaction and communication, are characterized by cultural diversity (Ξωχέλλης, 1997–1998). The political, social, and economic developments of the host country are being created on a new basis. In the Greek state, focusing on its needs, the labor market and economy as well as the harmonization with the European framework of principles and values, the development and implementation of a modern policy for the reception and integration of immigrants and refugees is required, with different priorities and goals. As a host country for immigrant and refugee populations, it ensures that these people are integrated into its educational system, recognizing their right to education and at the same time their cultural diversity. The integration process concerns a complex educational process, which initially includes the basic provisions, i.e., reception, housing, access to health, education, social services and insurance, vocational guidance as well as training and adaptation to new professional conditions and requirements. In a second phase, it concerns the gradual familiarization with behavioral attitudes, and exchanges with the citizens of the host country. Integration is therefore an integral part of the Social Policy of each state. A key tool in this effort is the intercultural model of education, which is governed by four basic principles: a) education for empathy, b) education for solidarity, c) education for respect for cultural diversity and d) education for the elimination of the nationalist way of thinking (Κεσίδου, 2007; Ξωχέλλης Π., 2007).

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2. Clarification of the Terms: Cultural Diversity, Migrant, Refugee, Interculturality

2.1 Cultural Diversity

“Diversity” is defined as the difference by class, species, position, or other quality and refers to both physical or demographic characteristics, as well as attitudes, values, or beliefs (Ely & Thomas, 2001; Harrison, Price, & Bell, 1998), such as language, religion, and ethnic and cultural origin. “They may be approaches, opinions, lifestyles, practices and attitudes that differ from each other, but they are found in the same place, revealing the existence of diversity. Diversity in the classroom refers to heterogeneous academic skills, language skills, and the heterogeneous environment of origin, culture, or religion” (Keast J., 2007).

2.2 Immigrant

The term refers to people who move to another country to seek better material and social conditions and improve the life expectancy of themselves and their family members (IOM, Migration Glossary, International Migration Law, vol.20).

Immigrants are divided into two groups: a. the permanently settled, who settle with the prospect of permanence in the new place and often ask for their family reunification and b. temporary migrant workers, who are skilled or unskilled professionally, and are opportunistically looking for work (International Organization of Migration (IOM))¹.

2.3 Refugee

A refugee, according to the Geneva Convention of 1951 and the Protocol of 1967, is a person who is forced to leave their country because their life is in danger or is persecuted on grounds of race, religion, nationality of social class or political beliefs and flees to another country seeking protection. to be granted asylum or be recognized as a genuine refugee in order to obtain legal protection and special assistance provided for by UN international conventions².

3. Intercultural Education and Cultural Diversity Management

Raising awareness and mobilizing the local community for the successful integration process and development is a basic prerequisite. Integration, in any case, aims at a smooth transition from the applicant's protection status to entry into the host society through programs that combine temporary housing with the parallel provision of financial assistance, Greek language courses, but also ensuring their participation in public affairs.

The state is called upon to provide protection and basic special reception conditions. It is called upon to ensure the necessary conditions for their successful integration into the host society³.

In our country, within the framework of the national strategy, an integration model is promoted, which is based on the social model of integration and is adapted to the dynamics, specifics and peculiarities of Greek society and the state. The aim of this model is to approach interculturality. Basic principles of intercultural education are considered to be openness, critical thinking, responsibility, communication, cooperation, empathy, appropriate information, international orientation, respect and tolerance, a different way of seeing things (Batelaan & Gundare, 2000). The understanding and acceptance of cultural reality and the elimination of stereotypical views

¹ Available online at: <http://www.iom.int> <https://www.iom.int>

² Available online at: <http://www.unhcr.ch>.

³ Available online at: <https://government.gov.gr/parousiasi-ethnikis-stratigikis-gia-tin-entaxi>.

on the dominance of a language/culture promote the dialectical relationship of individuals, who belong to different cultural backgrounds, and promote communication through processes of mutual trust and mutual acceptance (Καγκά, 2001).

Openness to other cultures presupposes mutual respect. Mutual respect means “understanding the individuality of the other, but also their choices about what constitutes a good life for them” (Gutmann, 1987). Intercultural sensitivity is related to the acceptance of cultural difference and includes openness, self-esteem, and social comfort with others. Intercultural competence consists of intercultural knowledge, intercultural sensitivity, and intercultural dexterity. Elements, which are related to the acceptance of diversity and contribute positively by giving opportunities to students, but also to society at large, to understand and become familiar with a culture and with people other than them.

4. Greek Educational System and Intercultural Education

The Greek educational system was affected by the influx of immigrant and refugee populations into the country in recent decades as thousands of students with immigrant or refugee background joined it (Τσιρόνης, 2003).

In the 1970s, with the influx of mainly repatriated but also foreign students into the Greek educational system, were taken the first steps towards an intercultural school. In the period 1980–1986, Reception Classes, Tutorial Departments and Schools for the Reception of Repatriated Persons were established.

In 1996 with the Ministerial Decision (Government Gazette No. 171, vol. B/18.3.96) a Unified Administrative Sector of Issues of Educational Planning, Education of Greek Children Abroad, Intercultural Education and Decentralization is established at the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, while a few months later the framework law 2413/96 (Government Gazette No. 124, vol. A / 17.6.1996) for "Education of the Diaspora and Intercultural Education" is established, which lays the foundations for the institutional framework for the education of culturally different students, and at the same time Intercultural Schools are established. With the Ministerial Decision No. Φ10/20/Γ1/708 (Government Gazette No. 1789, τ. B/28.9.99) — “Intercultural Education, Establishment and operation of Reception Classes and Tutorial Classes” stipulates that each school unit can choose the structure of intercultural education that is considered most appropriate to meet its needs.

In 2000, Laws 2790/2000 (Government Gazette No. 24, vol. A/16.2.2000) and 2817/2000 (Government Gazette No. 78, vol. A/14.3.00) were employed, which mainly concern the education of repatriated expatriate students from the Republics of the former Soviet Union as well as issues of Greek education abroad and minority education.

Law 3386/2005 regulates the access of foreign minors to in the Greek educational system and the minimum time of their school attendance, as well as their equal opportunities to participate in educational activities.

In 2016, the Joint Ministerial Decision 180647/DG4 established the Reception Structures for the Education of Refugees in specific school units, based on a decision of the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, and in accommodation centers. At the same time, the Scientific Committee to assist the work of the Committee for the Support of Migrant and Refugee Children, aiming at the successful integration of children of refugee background, proposes the following:

- a) the teaching of the Greek language to refugee children,
- b) the participation of pupils who have been out of school for a long time in intensive courses, and

c) the support of refugee children who will be integrated into Greek schools (Greek Council for Refugees, 2016).

It is deemed necessary to educate and train teachers on intercultural issues, through educational activities and experiential approaches. Such activities were organized and carried out by UNHCR and the NGO Action Aid Hellas.

With the Ministerial Decision 1/47079/18-03-2016, the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs proceeds with the establishment of an action plan aiming at the smooth integration of refugee children into the Greek educational system. Thus, the Refugee Education Reception Structures are introduced into it and the institution of Refugee Education Coordinators is established, an institution that aims to create a link between refugee populations and school structures.

During the school year 2017–2018, the Ministry of Education aims at the integration of all immigrant and refugee children into the educational system, and at the same time proceeds to the establishment and operation of Refugee Reception and Education Structures kindergartens (23 kindergartens). In addition, it proceeds to the activation of the institution of Educational Priority Zone Reception Classes in secondary education, with particular emphasis on access to both General Lyceums and Vocational Lyceums, and actions were developed, such as the pilot program “Rural Education” for adolescents 15–18 years old.

In February 2018, an Independent Department for the Coordination and Monitoring of Education of Immigrants and Refugees was established in order to systematically respond to the monitoring of refugee education issues. The key point of the year was the establishment of Law 4547/2018 on Education with a Chapter on Refugee Education.

4.1 The Role of Teachers

The ultimate goal of the Greek educational system is the integration of children of immigrant and refugee origin into Greek society, with respect to their cultural diversity, ensuring equal opportunities and eliminating stereotypes and prejudices towards the “other”, elements that will lead to the harmonious and fruitful coexistence of culturally diverse populations in the wider social context. This is the role that the teacher is called to play, creating the conditions for a democratic school environment in the microcosm of his school unit, which will be the starting point for a future democratic society with respect for diversity (Γκόβαρης, 2001).

5. Conclusions — Proposals

The influx of refugees and immigrants in Greece makes it imperative to implement educational methods that focus on integration, smooth socialization, and coexistence in the educational field. The socio-intercultural model followed by our country, highlights cultural diversity, respect, equality, non-discrimination, and the abolishing of exclusion. It emphasizes on the creation of educational opportunities for all children of immigrants and refugees (Schnapper, 2008; Νικολάου Γ., 2000). The importance of the school’s educational work in relation to the educational material and the opportunities to raise students’ awareness is highlighted, so that as tomorrow’s citizens they can develop a multifaceted perspective, accepting diversity and considering the coexistence of people as a natural consequence. The education and training of teachers in the principles of interculturality is crucial, since they implement educational policy and are the ones who face in practice, on a daily basis, the educational reality.

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