# Critical Reflection on Intercultural Education and School Leadership by Elementary School Principals

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this study is to explore the role and importance of critical reflection of primary school principals regarding practices in their daily work in a multicultural environment. The sample of the research consisted of 15 primary school principals of Thessaloniki. The qualitative method was used to conduct the research, using semi-structured interviews as a research tool for data collection. The analysis of the results was done through thematic qualitative analysis. The key findings of this research primarily highlighted the importance of the background of the school principals in terms of their attitudes and perceptions of their work. Furthermore, it revealed their relatively poor training in terms of knowledge of intercultural education, but showed their readiness to take responsibility and respond to the needs of all students. In addition to this, the characteristics that underpin the practices of principals were highlighted, which are engaging in critical discussions about multicultural education, adopting a transformational leadership style, implementing democratic leadership and equity in education, being free of stereotypes, cultivating trust and an environment where all feel welcome. The results of this research attempt to highlight the importance of reflection and to contribute to the illustration of the intercultural dimension of leadership in the Greek educational system.

**Key words:** critical reflection, intercultural education, school principals

## 1. Introduction

Since the early 20th century, school leadership has been the focus of scientific research, particularly due to its association with enhancing productivity in business and the effectiveness of educational systems (Gumus et al., 2016). School leadership plays a vital role in shaping the educational environment and outcomes of students. Research has consistently shown that effective school leaders can have a positive impact on student achievement, teacher morale, and school culture (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). School leadership entails a highly intricate and challenging role with various obstacles. School leaders play a crucial role in ensuring and enhancing quality, requiring consideration of diverse approaches and perspectives. The leadership role significantly influences equal opportunity provision and the cultivation of a culture of respect for students from various cultural backgrounds. School leaders profoundly influence student performance and results, underscoring the importance of fostering inclusive school environments where all students feel valued, irrespective of their language, cultural, or religious affiliations (Calnin et al., 2018). School leaders are tasked with evaluating the efficacy of their practices through reflective processes. Critical reflection serves as a tool to aid practitioners in

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gaining deeper insights into their knowledge and actions, facilitating the development of their practical expertise by assessing their experiences, reflecting on the implications of their actions, understanding conflicts, and seeking resolutions (Higgins, 2011).

The study examines the significance of critical reflection and its application by primary education principals to assess their performance in the educational setting, considering the school's intercultural aspect. In recent decades, migration patterns and the integration of new populations in Europe have given rise to a multicultural society, impacting the educational landscape and influencing educational priorities (Gotovos, 2002). Reflexivity and a structured approach to reflective leadership are essential elements for ensuring the long-term success of school advancement.

## 2. School leadership and Intercultural Education

The principal, as the leader and primary representative of the school, bears the responsibility for the social and cultural environment in which it operates, embodying its essence and serving as the official point of contact for all related communications (Gougas & Kamarianos, 2006). It is imperative for the principal to foster connections between the school and the broader community, achieved through partnerships with various organizations and initiatives (Gasouka, 2011). Collaboration with external entities, school faculty, and parents/guardians contributes to both the acceptance and seamless integration of students from diverse backgrounds. A profound understanding of intercultural matters and a resolute commitment to acting are crucial (Hatzisotiriou & Angelidis, 2018). As highlighted by Getha-Taylor et al. (2020), school leaders must go beyond merely acknowledging, tolerating, and adapting to diversity, and instead, embrace and leverage differences to tackle the daily challenges within the school environment.

Research on school leadership and principals indicates that effective school management relies significantly on their personal "mastery" (Garcia-Morales et al., 2007). Personal mastery aligns with the concept of "personal vision", encompassing goal achievement and insight to perceive the current reality clearly, enabling the development of a distinct vision (Blackan & Henderson, 2005). According to Bui Baruch (2010), personal values, guiding personal dedication to growth, motivation, individual learning, personal vision, and ultimately, development and training, constitute the fundamental aspects of personal mastery. Self-awareness is an ongoing process involving the comprehension of one's unique talents, strengths, purpose, core values, beliefs, and aspirations (Secretan, 2006). Furthermore, research in leadership emphasizes the significance of self-awareness and a commitment to continuous learning as crucial components of effective school leadership (Loughran, 2002). Personal mastery, self-awareness, the commitment to personal development and learning are intricately connected and initiated through critical reflection, serving as a method to evaluate personal thoughts about self-identity (Elmore, 2000).

## 3. School Leadership and Critical Reflection

Critical reflection involves examining personal experiences, thoughts, and emotions to gain a deeper self-understanding (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). In education, critical reflection is crucial for school leaders, such as primary school principals, enabling them to assess their practices, values, and biases to enhance their leadership approach.

Gronn (2003) discovered that reflective practice is a fundamental trait of successful school principals,

enabling them to adjust to changing situations and make well-informed decisions. Similarly, Harris (2006) contended that reflective practice is crucial for principals to enhance their leadership abilities and enhance student outcomes. Various studies have emphasized the significance of critical reflection in fostering teacher growth and advancement (Day & Leithwood, 2007; Harris & Chrispeels, 2006). For instance, Day and Leithwood determined that principals who embraced reflective practice were more capable of supporting teachers' professional growth and enhancing student learning results. Moreover, critical reflection is especially vital for principals dealing with students from diverse linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds (Bennett, 2011). Research has indicated that critical reflection can result in heightened self-awareness, improved relationships with students and staff, and more efficient decision-making (Killion & Guerra, 2009; Moon, 2004). In a multicultural setting, critical reflection can assist principals in recognizing and addressing systemic obstacles that may impact student learning and success (Glickman, 2008). Furthermore, it can promote the cultivation of leadership practices that are culturally sensitive and supportive of the diverse needs of students (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

In the realm of multicultural education, principals must engage in critical reflection to gain insight into their cultural biases and assumptions (Bennett, 2011). This involves acknowledging how their cultural backgrounds influence their interactions with students from diverse backgrounds. Through critical reflection, principals can enhance their understanding of students' cultural contexts and make well-informed decisions to support student learning and success. Despite its significance, critical reflection can pose challenges for elementary school principals. Research indicates that managers may encounter obstacles like time constraints, heavy workloads, and competing demands (Browne-Ferris & Koppich, 2010; Furman & Starrat, 2000). Additionally, some managers may underestimate the importance of critical reflection or lack the knowledge to engage in reflective practices (Gronn, 2003).

## 4. Research Methodology

The present study was conducted to explore the significance of critical reflection among primary school principals in a multicultural setting. The research aimed to investigate the reflective practices utilized by elementary school principals, their impact on daily operations in multicultural schools, and the factors influencing the depth and frequency of critical reflection. The research sample comprised 15 primary school principals from the Prefecture of Thessaloniki, selected through purposive sampling to ensure a diverse group with experience in multicultural environments. A qualitative approach, employing semi-structured interviews, was utilized to gather insights on the role and importance of critical reflection in their professional lives. Qualitative research plays a crucial role in understanding human behavior, social phenomena, and cultural contexts, offering a profound understanding of phenomena and providing valuable insights into individuals' thoughts, emotions, and experiences. Semi-structured interviews facilitate in-depth exploration of themes, encourage participant engagement, and foster authentic and reliable data collection.

To uphold research ethics and safeguard participant confidentiality and anonymity, the initial step involved securing written informed consent from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were thoroughly briefed on the study's objectives and their involvement via a detailed form, emphasizing the importance of upholding their autonomy and dignity during the research. Interviews, held in the principals' offices and lasting 45–60 minutes each, were meticulously transcribed from audio recordings. Data organization and storage were securely managed with password protection.

## 5. Results

The collected data was analyzed using thematic qualitative analysis, revealing 6 central themes that are discussed below.

### 5.1 Prinicipals' Reflective Practices

In terms of reflective practices, most respondents (10 out of 15) reported utilizing a personal reflective journal in physical form to document thoughts, goal setting, or any relevant information for self-reflection. The frequency of journaling varies, with most noting its importance during challenging situations (e.g., conflicts with parents) or specific circumstances (e.g., financial management). Among the remaining participants, three highlighted a collaborative approach with educators and community members, while two principals preferred verbal feedback from colleagues when they deemed it necessary.

### 5.2 Factors Influencing Critical Reflection

The data analysis on factors influencing critical reflection among principals revealed two key elements: the leadership style of the principal and the school's culture and climate. Findings from the study showed that a transformational leader can cultivate a collaborative culture that embraces diverse perspectives, fostering critical reflection among educators. Moreover, participants highlighted the importance of democratic leadership, emphasizing values like empathy, impartiality, and fairness in creating an inclusive environment where all stakeholders feel respected, ultimately enhancing critical reflection. A positive school climate was also identified as a significant contributor, characterized by inclusivity, supportiveness, feedback mechanisms, cooperative learning, student-centered approaches, stereotype elimination, and trust-building.

### 5.3 Reflection for Cultural Competence

All principals (15/15) acknowledged the significance of examining their biases and cultural backgrounds to enhance their comprehension of their diverse student body's requirements. They explained how self-reflection enhances their awareness of their cultural assumptions and biases, enabling them to make well-informed choices regarding curriculum development and teaching methods. Furthermore, concerning relationship-building, principals underscored the value of reflective practice in establishing trust with students, educators, parents, and community members from various backgrounds. They stressed that reflection enables them to grasp the needs and issues of these stakeholders, subsequently influencing their decision-making and leadership approaches.

Moreover, school leaders collectively underscored the significance of cultural competence in their daily responsibilities, emphasizing the necessity to comprehend and value the varied backgrounds, values, and customs of students, parents, and staff. It is noteworthy that overall, the administrators indicated a lack of training in cultural competence, which could have enhanced their ability to effectively operate in a diverse setting.

### 5.4 Reflection as a Tool for Overcoming Obstacles

Participants identified barriers hindering critical reflection, such as time constraints, resource scarcity, and external pressures. One manager highlighted the challenge of finding time for reflection amidst overwhelming responsibilities. They emphasized the impact of dedicating a few minutes daily to reflection on their practice. The majority of managers (11/15) cited language barriers as a significant daily obstacle. Communicating effectively with students and parents who speak languages different from the school's official language posed challenges for

principals. Some managers (2/11) mentioned relying on interpreters or translators for communication. School principals stressed the importance of cultural awareness in a multicultural school setting, noting that cultural disparities could lead to misunderstandings and conflicts.

Overall, all 15 principals emphasized the importance of training and professional development to assist educators in gaining a deeper understanding and respect for the various cultures present in their educational institutions. School administrators acknowledged that stereotypes and biases could pose substantial challenges in diverse school settings. They noted encountering situations of bias among faculty or students, leading to an inhospitable atmosphere for certain students.

### 5.5 Reflection for Enhancing Teaching Practices

Overall, principals have expressed the importance of reflecting on their teaching practices, discerning effective strategies, and adapting as needed. Seven of the principals involved acknowledged the significance of reflective practice in fostering teacher collaboration and professional growth. They highlighted that reflection enables them to offer tailored assistance and direction to educators, resulting in enhanced teaching methods and student outcomes.

### 5.6 The Influence of Reflective Practices

The examination of the research data unveiled four primary dimensions concerning the influence of principals' reflective practice: a) Enhancing teachers' morale and job satisfaction, b) Fostering commitment and inspiring teachers and students, c) Heightening the sense of belonging among students from diverse backgrounds and d) Increased self-awareness. What was commonly agreed by the principals was that reflective practice helps them to gain a better understanding of their own biases, values, and emotions, which can lead to more effective communication and relationships with staff, students, and parents and also promote professional growth among principals as they continue to learn and develop as leaders.

## 6. Conclusion

This study emphasizes the vital role that critical reflection plays in the daily responsibilities of school principals in multicultural environments. Principals employ reflection to enhance cultural proficiency, refine instructional methods, navigate complexity, and facilitate systemic change. The findings underscore the significance of offering principals continuous professional development opportunities and support to cultivate their reflective practice.

This approach enables schools to better equip leaders in navigating the intricacies of multicultural education and advancing equitable outcomes for all students. Moreover, the research underscores the importance of incorporating critical reflection into upcoming teacher training programs to ready them for diverse classrooms, alongside providing guidance and coaching to current principals to boost their critical reflection abilities. Furthermore, there is a recognized need at a research level to stress the exploration of the role critical reflection plays in principals across primary and secondary education. This emphasis aims to shed light on the conditions and practices involved in managing multicultural settings on a broader scale.

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