

Cultural Diversity and European Dimension in Education with Special Reference to Greece

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Abstract

The main aim of this presentation is to investigate whether European education policies related to cultural diversity are being satisfactorily implemented in the Greek educational system.

The first part of the presentation attempts to give a description of the concept of “the European dimension in education”, as this refers to cultural diversity and constitutes an element of European education policies.

Then, European policies on diversity are interpreted in the Greek educational system with special reference to the conceptualization of exclusion and inclusion.

Finally, this presentation examines innovations to the National Curriculum, which might promote or restrict diversity in Greek education and attempts to provide explanations about what is going on.

Keywords: Greece, European dimension, cultural and linguistic diversity, intercultural education, educational policies.

“All societies have been with the expectation to provide some good to their members; since then, all human beings, in everything they do, they do it with only one motive, the expectation of this good”.

Aristotle (384-322 BC), “Politika”

Diversity and European Dimension in Education

Diversity is one of the basic issues in European education. Cultural and linguistic diversity is a challenge for education and for national and supra-national cultural policies. Since World War II, international organisations such as the UN, UNESCO (Boven, 1993) and in particular the Council of Europe (Perotti, 1994) have developed intensive activities and issued norms and documents concerning diversity and cohesion. The EU, in contrast, seems to be much less engaged in this field (De Witte, 2000). There are several interdependent reasons for this, the majority of them because the integration process has primarily been an economic project.

The concept of “*European dimension*” is a highly complex area in the Community’s activities. European dimension in education is a multi-dimensional concept (Ryba, 1992, p.10). Tolerance and respect for cultural differences are present in the European dimension and are mirrored in EU resolutions for education.

The origins of the European Community are to be found in World War II. In the Preamble to the 1957 Treaty of Rome, the parties stated that they were resolved to preserve and strengthen peace and liberty. That new organisation was based on a newly established common belief in the fundamental values of democracy and human dignity. The EC was considered basically an economic league according to a number of resolutions and conferences (Lynch, 1992) while, education was only of indirect importance.

It was only in the 1970s that closer educational co-operation between the Member States was introduced (Bekemans and Lombaert, 1996, p.194). At the centre of this was the “*Action Programme on Education 1976*” for co-operation in education (Ryba, 1992, p.12). This

programme introduced measures for the schooling of migrant workers' children, and for more intensive exchanges of information (European Economic Community, 1976). The Member States agreed to undertake the following measures:

“They would develop and organise reception centres for language courses for migrants in the tongue of the host country;
They would provide facilities for teaching migrant children their mother tongue and culture;
They would provide more information for migrant families about the training and educational facilities available to them”

(Neave, 1984, p.25).

A breakthrough came in 1986 with the signing of the Single European Act (Ryba, 1992, pp.12-13, 24), which led to a new dynamism within the European Community including different programmes that promoted mobility and co-operation within the fields of education and diversity. In the same year, a common declaration of the Council, the Commission, and the European Parliament condemned racism and xenophobia and declared respect for human dignity.

According to the Council of Europe's final report on education and cultural development of migrants (Project no 7), “*education should basically be characterised by creative and mutual interaction of civilisations and review of the ethnocentric criteria of school*” (Porcher, 1986). The stress on the “*common market*” had partly to give way to a stress on a “*common culture*” (Morley and Robins, 1995), as this was reflected in the Resolution for enhancing the European dimension in education, which the European Council and the Ministers of Education meeting within the Council adopted on 24 May 1988 (Commission of the European Communities, 1988).

In 1989 the European Council and the Ministers of Education approved a resolution about the school education of Gypsies' and travellers' children (Commission of the European Communities, 1989). The next major event in the development of the European Union, that was to have a direct effect on education, was the signing of the Treaty on the European Union in Maastricht in 1992 (Commission of the European Communities, 1994; European Commission of the Communities, 2000). Article 126 of this Treaty introduced new objectives and activities for the convergence of educational systems of the Member States within a framework of linguistic and cultural plurality (Mavrogiorgos, 1993).

“The poor educational provision for minorities and working class children could be tackled from a broader European view that avoided narrow nationalisms and narrow perspectives on working class education that prevailed in certain member states”

(Coulby and Jones, 1995, p.11).

The European Council meeting in Corfu in 1994 decided to establish a consultative commission on racism and xenophobia (Hurwitz, 2000). In 1995 the European programme SOCRATES for co-operation in education was approved and gave a new dimension in education and diversity (European Commission, 1997). In 1996 the criminalisation of racist acts was defined to combat racism and xenophobia. In the same year, the Council approved the establishment of a European monitoring centre on racism and xenophobia.

However, it was not until 1997 in the Treaty of Amsterdam, that several of the provisions affirming the fundamental character of non-discrimination and anti-racism were introduced (European Parliament, 2001; European Commission, 2001).

According to all the documentation previously mentioned, education should be placed within the context of the abolition of discrimination, promotion of equality, mutual understanding, acceptance and solidarity as well as prevention of racism and xenophobia. Such issues lay stress upon the need for re-examination of school curricula, generally accepted policies, processes and structures. Efforts have been made at the school level to mediate conflicting values through educational programmes that try to promote harmony amongst social groups. Discussions about cultural diversity have taken place for over a decade in the northern European educational context.

In contrast, Southern European countries, including Greece, have initiated work in this field only in recent years. Recommendations from the European Union or Council of Europe have exercised only a marginal impact on national policies because the educational systems are still strongly dominated by nation-states and ethnocentrism. The educational policy for immigrants and minorities is not simply “imported” from the EU. It is consolidated within the

policies and the interests of the respective national governments and it is implemented through this particular policy.

Implementation of European Policies for Diversity in Greek Primary Educational Reality and Curricula.

EU policy considers the educational system to play a very important role in fighting the negative stereotypes, assumed by each national group, about the "other", (Frangoudaki and Dragonas, 2000, p.167) with regards to cultural diversity.

The Roma people, the Muslims in Thrace and later, the repatriated Greeks contributed multicultural elements to Greek society. These elements were multiplied and reinforced by the arrival of large numbers of economic immigrants and refugees from various countries who henceforth worked and lived permanently in Greece (Markou, 1997; Dousas, 1997). The children of these people have added a more diverse dimension to the Greek educational arena and policy.

The educational policy of Greece is today under pressure and demand a degree of reconstruction. Up to the 1970's the issues at stake were how to ensure the cultural survival of ethnic Greek communities, how to teach modern Greek or how to teach "*proper Greek*" to the children. At the same time, Greece was generally perceived as an ethnically homogeneous state.

"Yet in Greece, as elsewhere, national homogeneity was more a declared goal and less a depiction of the social reality"

(Markou, 1997, p.57).

The Greek educational policy to date, which deals with the diversity of repatriated and foreign pupils, has been within the framework of "*deficit hypothesis*" and "*assimilation*" (Damanakis, 1998, pp.77-79). In particular, the limited acquisition of the Greek language was considered a serious deficit. To alter this situation Reception Classes, "Preparatory Courses" or Greek Language Rapid Acquisition Courses were established aiming at the recovery of this deficit and consequent re-adjustment with the "local" pupils. However, the adjustment and homogenisation did not develop the educative capital of culturally diverse individuals and increased exclusion (ibid).

Immigrant children are present in the classrooms of the Greek schools, but many of them remain out of the educational process due to various reasons. There are many groups of pupils that suffer exclusion from education: Roma children, children of migrants, repatriated Greeks and refugees, children of remote areas, street children (Tsiakalos, 1997, pp.6-7; Tressou, 1998). Certain groups are excluded indirectly: e.g. minorities that are compelled to study in a educational system that does not take into account of their particularities or in a educational system of lower quality than the one for the wider society.

The policies that have been implemented throughout the years such as the "*Schooling for Gypsies' and Travellers' Children*" presented in the 35th Council of Europe, are described as exclusionary. These policies coincide with the policies that were implemented by many governments, and are still in practice, for example, the social control of the Roma people. The first response on both educational and social control policies was to reject the Roma pupils from schools and the one that followed rejection was "*violent and forced integration*" (Council for Cultural Co-operation, 1987, p.7; Liegeois, 1994, p.136).

Additionally, a 2001 UNICEF research titled "*Discriminations, Racism, Xenophobia and the Greek Educational System*" gave the social perspective of cultural diversity in education (UNICEF, 2001). According to the results of this research, in a lot of cases, the schools constitute a space of discrimination for foreign pupils. This discrimination comes primarily from other pupils and their parents as well as from teachers and school headmasters. The frequency of xenophobic behaviour and opinion is recorded as high. The schoolteachers, the professors and the parents are presented as being negative about the children of immigrants and their presence in the Greek schools. In fact, the research revealed that the majority of parents of primary and secondary education students present elements of xenophobic behaviour.

Thus, when cultural diversity gets connected to social, economic and geographic inequality causes problems and accelerates processes of alienation among the population of a country. Consequently, the deconstruction of stereotypes and the release from biases becomes difficult. Political intervention or influence is needed. With the "new" Law No 2413, 17-6-1996 about intercultural education for Greece, a wide spectrum of new and varied programmes and projects has been recently implemented.

The outcomes of these programmes, which are funded by the European Union financial support framework, are to be examined and studied in the near future.

Beyond the general weaknesses of the Greek educational system, such as, the lack of space, restrict elements of school life in the implementation of the National Curriculum and the “*shadow education*” (“*frontistiria*”), certain other special traits of the Greek educational system make the smooth integration of “*allophone*” pupils much more complicated. The compact school tradition and culture, the ethnocentric and monolithic National Curriculum and the centralised evaluation system are some of these depriving obstacles. Ethnocentrism is a principal issue of the Greek education. Ethnocentrism is defined as:

The attitude of a group which consists of attributing to itself a central position compared to other groups, valuing positively its achievements and particular characteristics, adopting a projective type of behavior towards outgroups and interpreting the outgroups’ behaviour through the ingroup’s mode of thinking
(Preiswerk and Perrot, 1978, p.14).

It is the ideology of those who are “on the inside” towards those who are “outsiders” (Maw, 1991).

The ideological-political frame of the Modern Greek education remains narrowly ethnocentric. The curriculum represents the intention of the Greek State to encode, and create a national identity and conscience (Frangoudaki and Dragonas, 2000, p.169), while central control of the curriculum is one aspect of bureaucracy in national systems of education.

Education in Greece is perhaps one of the least flexible areas, which reflect tradition and resistance to change. The ethnocentric character of knowledge and traditional forms of educational policy formation and control still persist (Zambeta, 2000b, p.63). The ethnocentrism deeply rooted in the Greek culture does not allow much to be done at national level. It causes many problematic situations and among them the basic problem of the Greek education, its weakness to be modernised.

Conclusions

Issues related to European education systems’ failure to meet the needs of many groups of minority and other disadvantaged groups of children and young people are many. Amongst the most significant are inadequate educational policies and funding, as well as inappropriate curricula (Coulby and Jones, 1995, p.16).

Educational systems have been regarded in many places as the core of the institutional reproduction of national identities. The educational systems are by their nature destined to reproduce certain dominant values in society, through the curricula of schools, thereby mediating both political power and ethnocentrism (Moschonas, 1998, p.91). The Greek educational system is not an exception.

As European citizens, Greeks receive an education, which, according to their constitution, aims at the reproduction of social structure, ensuring of stability, social cohesion and preservation of the values and tradition
(Smith, 1986, p.58).

Not only the content of the knowledge transmitted, but the ideology and practices of the subjects as well, reproduce the imaginary concept of a national identity (Frangoudaki and Dragonas, 1995). Nation states have effectively enforced their ideas and structures on different ethnicities through their educational systems (Schleicher, 1992). Through this process, outside influences and cultures have been stereotyped and education based on nation state principles has been used to transmit a highly selective depiction of culture, history and traditions (Green, 1990).

The alleged fundamental “pillars of Greek-ness” within the curriculum are predominantly the Greek language and history. The Greek history curriculum and textbooks are highly ethnocentric. They both refer almost exclusively to the history of the country, while making some eclectic references to ancient civilisations and Europe. Greek culture is depicted in the schoolbooks and becomes perceptible from educators as a product without historical and social dimension, without reports in cultural effects and contributions of “others”, as a homogeneous entity (Frangoudaki and Dragonas, 1995, pp.15-17). Thus, the national “self” is built with exclusion and depreciation of the “other”.

Such a perception is translated in the daily educational practice with ethnocentric and xenophobic attitudes. Importantly, religion provides the continuity and transition from Ancient to modern Greece, through Byzantium. In this context, Greek language and the Orthodox

Christian religion are considered as the crucial distinctive elements of Greek-ness (Zambeta, 2000a).

The Greek school uses the past and the Ancient Greek tradition excessively in order to shape its students' picture of the national "self". The problem, consequently, with the Greek school is its continuing "nailing" in a ritual form of ethnocentrism; Or, considered differently, its failure to modernise the version of ethnocentrism, which it has inherited.

It is also known that behind the rhetoric for equal opportunities, the Greek school initially dealt with the migrant children like a "procrustean bed": they laid on it and were cut to size. In the primary school they often failed to learn the Greek language and in the first grade of high school they would frequently fail once, twice, three times, and end up dropping out. The excluded students have common social and cultural characteristics (Katsikas and Politou, 1999, p. 138). The way the state exercises identity politics and forms the dominant culture has certain consequences regarding the perspective of social inclusion and exclusion for non-dominant social groups and identities. It is the way in which school knowledge as a whole is organised and should be restructured in order to avoid being prejudicial to non-dominant identities. Therefore, implementation of the European dimension in education regarding cultural diversity presupposes reconstruction and modernisation of the educational system. Changes in educational systems tend to be costly in terms of financial, as well as human resources, while the state with its powerful political groups greatly influences and controls the educational policy formation. The Greek system is highly centralised. Central government, through the Ministry of Education and its departments formulates and adopts education policy (Ifanti, 1995, p.271). Decentralisation can often be intended to meet minority demands for greater control of their educational futures, although few states are yet prepared to move beyond the educationally less significant (Gundara and Jones, 1994, pp.13-14).

Resistance to the rationalisation of pedagogic thought and educational policy and their "translations" in action continue to exist in Greece. Fighting discrimination between sexes, nations, religions, languages, and the cultures could have vital importance for national self-knowledge, comprehension of social world and attendance of citizens in the effort for the improvement of society. The students through the educational system should see the world through the "other's" point of view. The Greek school, as a part of the European school, should not be afraid of cultural diversity. It should not be regarded as a "non-Greek" characteristic. The Greek school should provide the possibility of learning an additional cultural code to all the students.

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