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Diversity in History classroom in Greece: Research on teaching History to culturally diverse pupils

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1. The Research Question

This study was guided by the following central research question:
What are teachers’ own perceptions of cultural diversity and history education in an intercultural primary school in Greece?

2. History Education, Ethnocentrism and Cultural Diversity

A postmodernist standpoint favours the adoption of intercultural theory and practice in European educational systems (Coulby and Jones, 1995) because multiplicity and complexity have been persistent, but not recognised, characteristics of European states for many years. Meanwhile, UNESCO’s Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (Coomans, 1999) and the framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, Council of Europe (Batelaan, 1999) point out that states should encourage knowledge of the History, traditions, language

and culture of the minorities existing within their territory. Nevertheless, the educational reality in Greece is different since ethnocentric elements do not only affect teachers' education, but also curriculum and school textbooks (Millas, 1991; Frangoudaki and Dragonas, 1997). Within this curriculum Greek language and History are the alleged pillars of 'Hellenism'.

Aldrich and Dean (1991) point out to the use of school History as a form of "*social cement*", to bind the nation together. The notion of nation in Europe includes a monolingual and monocultural *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1981; 1991) ideologically based on the notion of cultural homogeneity of a people (Hobsbawm, 1990). History is an essential ingredient of the formation of national identity, a process by which certain stories and events are highlighted while others are minimized or ignored (Bush and Saltarelli, 2000). Ethnocentrism is one of the main ideologies which nation-states have assigned to History (Schleicher, 1992; Kozma, 1992a, b) and involves the development of prejudice and stereotypes against certain groups and societies or often becomes a form of discrimination directed against individuals or groups on the basis of their ethnic background (Maw, 1991a; Schleicher, 1992). The role of education systems to construct '*notions of an imagined and glorious History which excludes their neighbour is largely based on curricular fictions by re-inventing pasts*' (Gundara, 2002, 142). Characteristic examples constitute the prejudices in the content of the Greek National Curriculum guidelines, teaching methods and textbooks in which opinions about national continuity are supported in the fables and contradictions of 19th century nationalism (Avdela, 1998; 2000).

Thus, the History curriculum has always held a primary position in the transmission of national identity and national values. Additionally, the History textbook has always been an important tool in this process (Preiswerk and Perrot 1978; Berghahn and Schissler, 1987; Maw, 1991b; Coulby, 1995; Frangoudaki and Dragonas, 1997; Kapsalis *et al.*, 2000; Koulouri, 2001). In the highly centralized Greek educational system, History education is organized around a National Curriculum and a single textbook (Avdela, 2000). The ethnocentric orientation of Greek History curriculum basically focuses on "Western European civilizations", whereas African and Asian ones are ignored and somewhat rejected (Frangoudaki and Dragonas, 1997). But, "*omissions and distortions of History play a major role in allowing gossip or stereotypes to become crystallised*" (Gundara, 2000, 136).

The most recent legislation about intercultural education in Greece (2413/1996) seems to attempt a radical break away from traditional perceptions, but from a total of 37 articles, only 4 articles have been devoted to "intercultural education" with the remainder of the text dealing with issues concerning the

education of Greek Diaspora. These provisions do not seem to take into account any ideas promoted by 'cultural pluralism', according to which the various value systems of individuals are considered to be of equal value and deserve the same respect in society (Katsikas and Politou, 1999; Dimitrakopoulos and Mavromatis, 2002). Greek schools do not cultivate critical dialogue or exchange of ideas among different cultures (Mouzelis, 1998), whereas the Greek History curriculum and textbooks remain highly ethnocentric (Koulouri, 1988; Zambeta, 2000). Steiner-Khamsi (1994) argues the need to fill in the gaps and break the silences in History education and textbooks by promoting a counter narrative that is not ethnically exclusive, and that does not scapegoat minorities. Meanwhile, Höpken (1994) writes that the nation is constructed with a variety of identities and should be a mirror of all layers. Additionally, Edgington (1982) refers to the *healing powers of school History* to promote cultural pluralism and anti-racism. History teaching has the potential to promote global understanding and to reduce racist misunderstandings within a culturally diverse society. What is more, as Ferro (1981) points out, History education exercises a dual function that is, therapeutic and militant. The modernisation of History curricula and their enhancement with appropriate material and activities could unite the different ethnic groups. Studying and teaching the History of others and other societies from their own perspectives and for their own sake counteracts tendencies to insularity without devaluing local or national achievements, values and traditions (Bourdillon, 1994). When weight is given to other cultures, histories, civilisations and societies, recognition is given to interculturality. The comparative study of the History of other societies and countries can help the pupils to see the History of their countries in a fresh light and from a new perspective. The question is what aspect of these differing histories to select and on what principles to make that selection. Thereby, it is incumbent on the teacher to try to ensure that all the children of all ethnic origins can make sense of a past that is their collective heritage (Davies, 1994).

This is an important issue for younger children and for the teaching of History in contemporary multicultural Primary schools. The teaching of History, much more so now than in the past, is challenged and called upon to provide a variety of perspectives and offer concepts on promoting human rights within the context of an intercultural education. Themes that emerge from literature call not only for the incorporation of intercultural aspects of History, but also for the re-evaluation and re-consideration of pedagogies to allow for new ways of teaching and learning to develop. It is explicit in this literature that innovation involves a change of perceptions and practices at both teacher and

organizational levels, and that teachers require due incentives to introduce and promote the intercultural dimension in History education.

3. The Sample

A sample of teachers of the school was selected to be contacted and asked to take part in the research. From those who agreed to participate, four were finally selected according to the grade of Primary education in which they teach History. Following the Greek National Curriculum, History is taught in Years 3, 4, 5 and 6 of Primary school. The sample comprised one male and three female teachers (aliases were formed according to gender and year they teach at: F3, F4, M5, F6).

3. Data Analysis and Interpretation

Perhaps the best way to interpret the findings of this research is through highlighting the diversity of perceptions held by teachers regarding cultural diversity and history teaching. Most of the teachers in this research for different reasons each one mentioned that when teaching history they took presence of those *'other'* pupils into account only to a small degree and only due to their personal initiative. On the one hand, teachers who followed a pedagogical rationale perceived it as a form of *'sympathy'* towards those pupils concerning the difficulty they have coping with the exigent subject of Greek history due to Greek language deficiencies. On the other hand, other teachers mentioned that they dealt with certain historical elements of diverse cultures only occasionally and cautiously, or not at all. All of them, though, shared feelings of uncertainty and hesitation. By combining both parts of the interviews we could observe that teachers remarked on the ethnocentric character of GNC and textbooks and the monolithic dimension of the taught subject. They, additionally, implied that official efforts at assimilating or ghettoizing culturally diverse pupils are more intense than efforts at integrating and respecting their historical-cultural background. Moreover, they expressed their conviction that, even if history is connected with configuration and maintenance of Greek national identity, an intercultural approach to history education properly organised might enhance the training of culturally diverse pupils and their smooth integration into social reality. They demonstrated strong dilemmas between traditional and modern approaches to history teaching regarding cultural diversity while a new understanding model in history education had to

be adopted and the dominance of the official ethnocentric model had to come to an end. It was also emphasised that the negative elements in history harmed education and should be filtered carefully.

In the second part of the interviews issues of history and diversity were discussed in the sphere of ideology. Even though many of those perceptions were either obvious or indirect regarding *'teaching praxis'*, I considered necessary to ask those questions in order to acquire a fuller picture of the conceptual framework in which the teachers move and express themselves. If any perception pattern can stand out, the important finding of this study was the encompassing belief that diversity in history education is enrichment. However, discrepancies were found among teachers' statements. A possible explanation for those inconsistencies could be the relevant confusion that perpetuates in Greece on issues of national identity protection and intercultural education.

Having said that, the most important question emerging from the data is how those issues combined with the interviewees' ideological background affect their teaching practices. The teachers working in a context without much support feel daily tensions and dilemmas but they try to develop practices that take notions of cultural diversity into consideration. They practice their profession in a political context that does not celebrate cultural diversity and in an educational system that mainly promotes ethnocentrism. Teachers' practices also reflect their social, cultural and mainly political backgrounds while they develop competing paradigms and explanations. Some of the teachers indirectly adopt the stereotype of dividing cultures and civilisations into *'lower-minor'* and *'higher-major'* ones giving the primership to the *'Ancient Greek grandeur'*. These stereotypes directly influence their perceptions towards cultural diversity and affect their teaching practices within history sessions.

Furthermore, although experienced teachers hold different patterns of perceptions and beliefs than less experienced ones (F4), they are not noticeably more homogeneous in their beliefs. As an overall comment I would add here that experienced teachers seem to be more informed of issues of interculturalism and diversity. Teacher M5, for example, appeared more sensitive to matters of interculturalism and inclusion. This might have happened due to his previous professional experience abroad.

Generally, teachers' practices appear in accordance to their different worldviews, values and ideas towards culturally diverse pupils. Most teachers in this research employ *'survival strategies'* (Woods, 1996) and engage in conflictual adaptations shaped by teaching demands dependent on circumstances (history curricula and textbooks) and self-requirements (perceptions towards cultural diversity). They follow a narrow passage between determinism and voluntarism, between macro- (educational reality) and micro-

(classroom reality) societal dimensions. Teachers' orientations and practices are shaped by the discursive fields they face, school cultural diversity on the one hand, and official educational policy on the other, while both interact with teachers' ideological field.

A major key finding of this small-scale research project was teachers' diametrically opposed values and how these impact on their teaching, ideas about diversity. We have one teacher who is a very traditional Greek nationalist, for whom education is assimilation into Greek culture, language, history. The other 3 reflect much more pluralist values. In education pluralism gets translated into either multi-culturalism (often essentialist view of different cultures) or interculturalism (very rare – recognition of cultural dynamism and change in relation to each other). Those teachers are multiculturalists and add bits about different cultures. Those very different sets of values of the teachers have severe impact upon their teaching practices. The multiculturalists make a lot of effort to find their own additional materials (i.e. supplementing GNC); the assimilationist attempts to develop pedagogic approaches to make the difficult Greek material more accessible. Both groups reconfigure their values as professional practices – focusing on lesson content or lesson form.

4. References

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