

Intercultural education in contemporary Greece:

The teachers point of view.

- More than 10% of the students in primary and secondary Greek schools are immigrants.
- More than 60% among them are coming from neighbouring Balkan countries.
- From the mid 90s onwards, **the Greek government**, seeking to meet the challenge of multicultural classes **enacted laws and other legal acts** for the implementation of **intercultural education** dealing mainly with the teaching of Greek language as a foreign language.

I explore intercultural education in Greece at the level of the implementation, as *praxis*, because immigration policies on education are tested predominantly at the level of school implementation and not at the level of legal and normative regulation.

Drawing on research conducted among teachers in three *intercultural schools* of secondary education in Athens, I argue that the content of intercultural education in Greece is *assimilative*. I focus on curriculum content, on teachers training and on the options provided to students regarding their religious education.

- My data come from qualitative interviews among teachers and ethnographic observation of informal debates among them regarding their particular school predicaments.

- I draw on anthropological theory and the category of 'cultural shock' to analyze a range of cultural misunderstandings with regard to the context in which they occur.

I •The law of 1996 on intercultural education characterised 26 schools as intercultural for the first time in Greece for both the primary and the secondary education.

•**These schools are subject to the same regulations with other secondary public school of Greece** and use exactly the same curriculum with other schools.

•According to the law the activation of other ‘special curricula’ it is possible only after a decision signed by the Minister of education.

An extensive **literature demonstrates** that curriculum is not a secondary matter especially for schools planned for and addressed mainly to immigrants but the *sine qua non* in the practise of intercultural education.

This issue becomes more important if we take into account that investigations of diverse theoretical orientation make clear that, **the content of the textbooks in language, geography and history is ethnocentric and that their representations of neighbor Balkan countries is negative despite that most students come from these countries**

Theorising the 'intercultural'.

- Micheline Rey argues that, “ the use of the word **'intercultural'** necessarily implies - if the prefix 'inter' is given its full meaning - **interaction, exchange, breaking down barriers, reciprocity, and** objective **solidarity**.
- If the term **'culture'** is given its full force, it also implies recognition of the values, lifestyles, and symbolic representations to which human beings, both individuals and societies, refer in their relations with others and in their world outlook;”.
- Some of the previous key concepts that we need in our approach of **interculturality** in education are **'interaction, exchange, breaking down barriers, reciprocity, solidarity'** and institutional recognition of other cultures and other styles of life. Other approaches stress that “I.E. is a **transnational activity** and neither students nor its subject matter could be delimited by familiar borders”

With the words of J. Donald & A. Rattansi “focusing on the superficial manifestations of culture, **multiculturalism** [in the UK] failed to recognise the continuous *hierarchies* of power [emphasis in the original] and legitimization existing between these different centres of cultural authority”.

In other words, these established **systems of power**, knowledge and representation, both ethnocentric and eurocentric, exercise a driving force in the ways in which cultural difference is recognised, represented and structured in the field of education.

Interrogating intercultural dialogue in contemporary Greek education
The curriculum of intercultural schools is exactly the same with other schools of Greece.

Extensive research concerning **the books of language, history and geography** are *ethnocentric* and *essentialist* with regard the Greek national culture.

Most **teachers** have an ambivalent attitude regarding the **Balkan identity of Greece** despite the fact that it is located in the Southern edge of the Balkan peninsula.

Αβδελά, a Greek historian remarks that “**in the discourse of the books, continuity** [with ancient past], **homogeneity, resistance** (to foreign impacts) and **superiority**” vis-à-vis **significant others** (emphasis in the original) *are* coming out as the foundations of the Greek national identity”.

The Ministry of Education has never provided additional teaching materials to facilitate the teachers who are compelled to deal with students from some thirty different countries.

Strangely enough, **the current legal regulations for these schools provide the possibility for usage of extra-curricular teaching materials.**

However, due to **strict and complicate bureaucratic procedures** these legal provisions have never been implemented in neither of these three schools.

This point fits with the point made by sociologists of education that **the Greek educational system is characterised as too hierchical .**

Issues around **curriculum** become extremely critical if we take into account the **sociopolitical context**.

Understandings of history contribute to the ways that modern phenomena and relations between neighbouring countries are understood.

Most students in both intercultural and other schools come from Balkan countries such as Albania and Bulgaria.

Due to **antagonistic relation of Greece with these countries** throughout the late 19th and 20th centuries and especially due **current tension over minorities and immigration between Greece and Albania** the **ethnocentric views of history** may become sources of tension between **students of different origin** and drive them to become alienated from the Greek educational system overall.

The teaching of Greek as a foreign language is another critical issue related to curriculum.

In **Gymnasium** (3 first years of Secondary Education) there are reception classes for non Greek speaking students. In these classes students have access to courses of Greek as a foreign language for two years.

However, in **Lyceum** (3 latter years of secondary education) **are not implemented language courses at all**, so the student that arrives in Greece during August and s/he it is enrolled in one of these schools has to attend all the classes without understanding a word of Greek.

While the legal regulations allow the teaching of **mother tongue** of immigrant students, the bureaucratic procedures for their implementation are very complicate and the education authorities are very reluctant to facilitate these proedures.

The celebration of national days

- in Greek schools may be seen as complementary to the ethnocentrism of the curriculum.
- According to school regulations **the best among the senior students of the school should bear the flag** in the parade organised in the occasion of these days.
- However, the fact that in some cases the **best student it occurred to be an Albanian one**, provoked many debates in the Media and among the public.
- The issue arisen was if it would be acceptable or not for an Albanian to hold the Greek flag in the occasion of a national celebration.
- Due to stress and anxiety that these debates provoked to Albanian students in some cases they resigned of their rights to hold the Greek flag.

The celebration of national days in I.S.

The performance of poems or theatrical plays with national content by non Greek students may have funny consequences. According to national myths, *klefts* are seen as heroes of the war of independence of Greeks against the Ottoman authorities in the 1830s.

Staging one of these performances for the 25th of March, celebrated as the day of declaration of the War of Independence, the literature teacher demanded a male black student to perform a patriotic song with the title '**what a black is our life of black *klefts***'.

The student broke into lough arguing that: 'Don't you see Mme that I am totally black? My colleagues will laugh at me if they listen to me stating this song'. The teacher suggested then to change the words '**black life**' with '**bitter life**' but the student insisted on his negation.

In another case,
a teacher reported the reaction of one of her colleagues who
addressed to a student from Nigeria bearing a mark on his
face and asked him if he had been attacked by a cat.

‘Actually’, the teacher went on to explain that ‘this facial mark
had been made by his grandfather back in homeland in the
context of certain family ritual’.

Most teachers I interviewed explained that they had to do
much more effort and psychic labor rather than when working
into a ‘normal’ school. ‘Otherwise’, they clarified, ‘it was easy
to say or to do something that would be insulting for our
students’.

Only 3 out of 15 teachers had **pre-service training** in intercultural education. According to the provisions of Law of 1996, teachers in I.S. should be well qualified but not necessarily in Int. Educ.

For some of the teachers, the motives for their intergration in I.S. was the fact that they had to teach less hours weekly compared with their colleagues in regular schools.

Relevant litterature stress that **teachers training is the *sine qua non* of intercultural education** for performing their new task (Rolandi-Ricci 1996:65), and that teachers should be involved into all the stages of implementation of an intercultural program including research and planing.

As Dragonas, Frangoudaki, Inglessi argue “teachers education has naturally incorporated the dominant educational paradigms and their version of interculturalism.

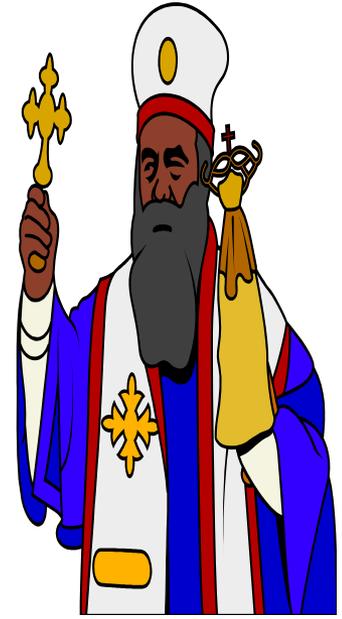
Religious education

The students of immigrant origin participate in the morning Orthodox Christian prayer if they want to. If they do not want to participate they can abstain.

The only option they have regarding the course of religion education that draws predominantly from Orthodox faith is to abstain.

In both occasions their only option is to become *invisible* in the public space.

The **situation of invisibility** in education and other public spheres is quite common for countries which consider the presence of immigrants as a provisional work force.



Intercultural education as a critique of education?

Freire, McLaren & Giroux focus on the active participation of students across all levels of educational *praxis*, that is: curriculum planing, teaching methods and the consideration of the broader political aspects of both *what* is taught and *how* it is taught.

Greek education is authoritarian, centralized and conservative at all the levels.

Similarly, **Greek intercultural education** seems to be deeply *assimilative*.

Speaking on the relation of the school with administrative executives a teacher with long experience told me, “goverments remember us only when they seek to demonstrate that they have intercultural education”.

And another teacher of literature argued that “if the board, just outside of the school indicating that it is intercultural, throws down, nothing will remain intercultural, except the students”.

