

Teaching Greek As A Second/Foreign Language In Modern Multicultural Environments

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Abstract:

In recent years, Greece has turned into a host country for immigrants and refugees. As a result of this, there are changes in the structure of society. Here comes the turn of education to form the character of citizens. However, the difficulties of integrating foreign students are many. The solution is the cross-cultural approach and teaching Greek as a second/foreign language. Therefore, the purpose of this work is to highlight and reduce, as much as possible, the difficulties faced by the students. This can happen on the one hand through the essential understanding of the problem and on the other hand through proposals to deal with them.

Key Word: foreign students, inclusion, intercultural approach

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I. Introduction

The paper deals with the most important difficulties encountered during the course of a student from another country to join the Greek Educational System. As is well known, unfortunately, the difficulties are varied and numerous. The issue, in particular, of the difficulties in integrating refugee children into Greek Educational System, given the geopolitical situation, is an issue that is now present in our daily lives and needs to be addressed immediately. After all, it is an issue that now concerns the whole world, and not only those involved with intercultural education.

In recent years, Greece has turned into a country that welcomes immigrants and exports its workforce. This has the effect of affecting the population of the country but also the structure of the entire society, even at the local level. The phenomenon of immigration in general has left its mark on the Greek reality.

Today's refugee children, therefore, make up the largest percentage of foreign students in Greece. For this reason, we should realize that if they are not already, they will be our fellow citizens of tomorrow. If we even consider the role that education has in shaping a person's character, we must ask ourselves what kind of citizens we will be in the future if we have not laid a solid foundation for our education and training. This means that today we have to face the difficulties of integrating all these students into our education system.

Nevertheless, it is a fact that the possibility of social inclusion in today's era is extremely difficult and this is because great changes are taking place at a social, political and economic level. This situation, unfortunately, particularly affects children who come from non-privileged socio-cultural environments, such as the children of immigrants, who are mainly stigmatized by school failure and are therefore exposed to the difficulties of social integration (Γώγου, 2001). For this reason, in this paper, the problems faced by those students who do not speak the Greek language will also be taken into account.

The only solution for these children seems to be the intercultural approach to the educational process. The correct approach of expert teachers combined with the help of the state and the local society are some of the factors that can influence the intercultural school and make it able to offer foreign students not only knowledge at a linguistic level but also and the necessary supplies to integrate smoothly into society. Therefore, the purpose of this work is to highlight and reduce, as much as possible, the difficulties faced by the students. This can happen on the one hand through the essential understanding of the problem and on the other hand through proposals to deal with them.

II. Difficulties in implementing intercultural education

As we have already mentioned, the difficulties of integrating foreign students into Greek education system exist and a main reason is that they are refugee children who have found themselves in our country. If you consider the origin and living conditions of these children, you will find great differences in the school environment. Moreover, in many cases the phenomenon of illiteracy is also evident.

More specifically, how developed the country of origin is and the level of education there is of particular importance. Unfortunately, in many of the countries of origin, this level is not so high, with the result that the school infrastructure is not suitable for the children. Many children, in fact, have never been in a school environment in their lives, which increases the levels of illiteracy. This means that in an intercultural school class, there may be children who speak two or more languages at a time when others do not speak any. However, this should not act as an inhibiting factor as in Intercultural education the acceptance of the principle of the equality of cultures, cultural capital and the acceptance of the educational capital of each student is a necessary condition and indeed independent of his ethnic, racial and social origin (Δαμανάκης, 2002).

Of course, at this point it is worth mentioning that there are cases in which the foreign student comes from a more developed country and therefore does not face the problem of illiteracy. However, it faces a problem with the general education system of the country as it is not as organized as another developed country abroad. So in these cases, the student has difficulty in adapting, while there are many times when they resort to private education in order to be able to have a better treatment. As for the students who arrived in Greece due to the immigration wave that had made its presence felt in the previous years, it was observed that the level of the educational system of their country of origin was not high and this made it difficult for them to adapt to Greek conditions. Many children therefore had difficulty and still have difficulty adapting to it, as there was no special care for an easier adaptation, as a result of which they have difficulty not only at the language level but also in the other subjects of a school unit.

It is a fact that the environment in which one has lived or grown up determines the attitudes of one's life. One of them is discipline and how much he is used to obeying rules or not. So, all foreign students come from different places, with a completely different culture compared to Greek. Some of these societies are more favored and others less so. It follows therefore that they have different life attitudes and are more or less receptive to conforming to rules. In fact, in cases where these students are refugee children, it must be taken into account that many lived in nomadic communities, something completely different from the Western way of life, while their only concerns were agricultural and livestock issues. For this reason, the inclusion of such children in the school environment may encounter problems. However, the starting point of the intercultural model is the "hypothesis of difference", which considers foreign students as individuals not with "deficient", but with "different" cultural capital (Μάρκου, 1998).

The multicultural model highlights diversity to such an extent that, instead of fostering interaction, it leads to the limitation and closure of everyone in their "cultural shell" (Νικολάου, 2011). So, we have to be very careful, as the wrong interpretation of the other's behavior is likely to lead us to attribute to him quite bad characteristics such as: cheeky, neurotic, uncivilized and others (Burgoon, 1989).

It is a common phenomenon that when children find themselves in a class, they may have feelings of enmity with each other and this is something that makes the integration process more difficult. These enmities and rivalries are most likely due to ideologies which may stem from religion, history, geopolitical situation and more.

It has been observed that the concept of nationality in itself is a defining cultural characteristic for Christians, while for Muslims it is not a cultural quality of corresponding weight, as the concepts of nationality and religiosity are connected to a much greater extent (Βακαλιός, 1997).

It is therefore not improbable that in one class there are children from countries whose religions are diametrically opposed or from countries that are at war or have cultivated a climate of enmity with another country over the years. A typical example is Islam, which is highly critical of polytheistic religions and this causes enmity between Muslims and Yezidis.

A true cultural assimilation can be understood when people of different ethnic or religious origin interact and participate in everyday life regardless of their ethnic origin. A complete form of assimilation is identified with the disappearance of the national or racial characteristics with which a multi-ethnic – multi-racial society is structured (Μάρκου, 1997). Also, if the children acquire historical and cultural knowledge about the various immigrant groups, it becomes easier to accept differences in terms of lifestyle, religion and others, mistakes due to ignorance are prevented and the process of their integration is facilitated. What is of particular importance is to realize how important is the understanding of the "foreigner", the cultivation of tolerance and respect for fellow human beings with different religion, color, moral and ideological perceptions and beliefs (Ξωχέλλης, 1994).

In the continuation of the work, it is necessary to mention another difficulty that foreign students face. This problem lies in the fact that it is possible to encounter many different mother tongues within an intercultural education classroom. Syrian Farsi, Iranian Farsi, Kurdish-speaking Farsi, Arabic, Pashto, Dari, Turkish are just some of them in a single class. Many children may even speak many of them. So the more the number of these languages increases in a class, the more the teacher's action in the class decreases. This makes sense as if there were fewer or one, then he would be able to handle the training process better. Of course, many teachers find it difficult to teach Greek as a second or foreign language, they consider bilingualism an obstacle

in the pedagogical process and many times they do not allow non-native students to speak their language in the classroom (Μάγος, 2007).

This phenomenon is particularly observed in the islands, where in the educational structures are located children from many countries and from many cultures and later when these children are transferred to another part of the country, they are grouped based on their common origins. It is important for all to realize that it is by no means easy to develop good relationships and a good psychological approach to people who come from powerful cultures or have increased wealth, from ethnic groups or peoples, who experience severe poverty (Bochner, 1982).

Thus, racist phenomena, the main thorn in society and intercultural education, begin to increase more and more. The reasons for racist comments vary, but some of the most common racist comments are based on religion, gender or social criteria. For example, one person's religion may not be acceptable to another, or one's social class may not be acceptable to another, while of course there is racism on many levels in terms of women being considered inferior to men. In a school and in general in a society there cannot be a harmonious coexistence of citizens without respect for the other's culture. Acceptance is the main key for this to happen and all educational processes should be governed by a feeling of safety.

According to the radical position on the school, all children are required to be considered equal and no one should stand in the linguistic, cultural and racial differences that they may present (Μάρκου, 1997). Multicultural education is an approach that enhances the importance, representation and vitality of different ethnic and cultural groups within society (Gay, 1985). Besides, the school failure and leakage of the student population had as a generative cause the negative image that the students acquired of themselves, due to the depreciation of their linguistic and cultural capital (Γκόβαρης, 2001).

It is worth noting that many difficulties also appear in pre-school education in the context of intercultural education. The reason lies in the fact that the infrastructure is not suitable as the courses are mainly conducted in containers within the camps. So it is logical that there are several deficiencies, which make it difficult for the children's daily life, such as air conditioning, heating, absence of a toilet and others.

In primary and secondary intercultural education, existing structures are mainly used. However, the number of facilities is not large and unfortunately it seems that neither the staff nor the respective associations of parents and guardians are willing to hold courses in intercultural classes. Intercultural education must provide equal opportunities to all students, but only a small percentage of them attend school structures. So, their integration would be easier if more and better structures and facilities were provided.

Of course, beyond the facilities, special importance must also be given to the empowerment of the educational staff. The greater the expertise of the staff at the level of intercultural education or learning Greek as a second foreign language, the better will be the framing of the students at school. In this way, their integration into the educational system will be easier. The highest and most important purpose of intercultural education is to transform the school so that all students, regardless of their social and cultural background, have access to and a successful path to high-quality education provided (Aguado & Mali, 2001).

But there are practical difficulties that teachers also face. Initially, these difficulties concern their contracts, especially those of intercultural education trainers. The number of instructors should be able to meet the needs of all students and not just a small percentage of them. When teaching is carried out by substitute teachers, their work should be full-time and not part-time so that they too can have a more sustainable daily life and can carry out their work better. Of course, this is purely a matter for the state, which must take action and strengthen teachers instead of weakening them, especially in this case, as the need to cover foreign students. In addition, the situation becomes even more difficult when the existing teaching materials do not meet the needs of the modern intercultural school as there are no writing and teaching materials for foreign and native students because to a large extent our educational system is ethnocentric and does not make references to other cultures (Παλαιολόγου & Ευαγγέλου, 2003).

The way our school is structured, its program is focused on preserving tradition, national heritage, while at the same time, cultivating faith in the timeless value of the national state (Νικολάου, 2000). Unfortunately, however, the difficulties encountered in the process of integration of foreign students go beyond school boundaries. Residents' reactions are often observed in small local communities. For example, many react to the presence of refugee children in school facilities. These reactions are often accompanied by racist comments and hostilities. There are not a few times that this can happen even from parents' associations, who come up with all sorts of excuses to avoid the inclusion of these students. Never once do they even take organized actions, for not conducting intercultural education courses in the same schools that their children attend. So is concluded that this social exclusion is anything but helpful for a student.

In fact, according to studies that have been done, it has been observed that in order not to be an inhibiting factor for the progress of local students, the existence of immigrant children in the school classroom, specific measures were taken. In particular, a restriction was placed on the presence of foreign students, so that they do not exceed 30% of the student population in the school units (Μάρκου, 1998).

Therefore, there must be a milder climate and a friendlier disposition towards these students. The absorption by the native population of culturally and ethnically diverse groups, so that they have the possibility to participate in an equivalent way in the formation and maintenance of society (Νικολάου, 2000). However, it is difficult to implement in practice, as it conflicts with the desire for homogeneous and mono-cultural societies (Rey, 1996).

At this point it would be useful to make a clarification about the difficulties faced by the students. These difficulties are not the same at all ages but differ according to their age group. It has been observed that children who are younger and attend the first grades of primary education or preschool education, face fewer difficulties than older children. This is because they have more time ahead of them to integrate into a school environment or a society and the perception they have developed makes them more receptive and carefree. Thus, they can more easily develop friendships and spend good times with their classmates. All this, of course, on the condition that they have not faced traumatic situations in the past. Older children have a more mature perception and perceive some situations differently. For this reason, many times their faces emit more sadness and they find it difficult to laugh.

Since the education system lacks the presence of specialized psychologists, this automatically means that the integration of students into our education system will be difficult, while the psychological support of the children is deemed necessary. Immigrant students are forced either to make a great effort individually in order to cope with the school program or to remain on the sidelines of school learning (Κυπριανού, 2011).

In fact, if the background of the children is not taken into account, especially the older ones, then it will not be able to get a good result. For example, an older child who has been engaged in agricultural life all his life, if he deals with objects familiar to him in an agricultural production class of a technical high school, he can be led to join our educational system in a short time space.

This would be an ideal condition for such a student, however, our educational system is narrowly ethnocentric, it has high demands on foreign students, while at the same time, it condemns them to the role of extras, as it does not offer them the necessary means to discover and manifest the potential they have as individuals (Μάρκου, 1997). Furthermore, the goal is to make a positive reference to the culture of minority groups, with the ultimate goal of children acquiring skills that will enable them to take part in both the general culture and the particular culture of their group (Γκόβαρης, 2001). So, the main goal of intercultural education is the acceptance and respect for the different and the effort of dialogue and cooperation between people with different cultural identities resulting in their constructive coexistence within the multicultural web (Παπάς, 1998).

III. Conclusion

Facing the difficulties of integrating foreign students, we must also think about the future. We need to answer questions like what do we expect from these children in the future as citizens. If we think seriously about this question, it will help us to better understand our responsibilities and thus we will understand the necessity of their inclusion today. These children are our fellow citizens of tomorrow. However, for this to happen, there must initially be the corresponding political will and a framework to help teachers of intercultural education and more generally of all levels.

Political will be the one that will play a key role in the inclusion of students, as due to school facilities and educational potential changes can occur that will improve this situation. We must therefore not forget that intercultural education is a necessary school reform and is a necessity for the basic school education of all students, as it deals with discrimination, enters teaching and interpersonal relationships within the school classroom and promotes the democratic principles of social justice (Nieto, 2004). In fact, according to Batelaan and Van Hoof (1996), intercultural education is education, which aims to prepare independent people for their participation in a democratic, multicultural society characterized by cultural, ethnic, linguistic and religious difference and inequality.

In summary, we can understand that we must deal thoroughly with the difficulties encountered in the integration of foreign students into our educational system and find solutions that will significantly improve these difficulties. But these actions must be taken immediately so that no more precious time is lost so that a balance can be reached. As we have already mentioned, the causes of these difficulties are many and sometimes they can be a combination of many things. In any case, however, we should bear in mind that these issues concern the fundamental good of education, which in our time should be considered a given for all people and not a privilege of the few and chosen.

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