

Integration of foreign students into school: Teacher's role and challenges

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Abstract: Nowadays, more than ever, it seems necessary to study the issue of the integration of foreign students into the school environment and the management of the heterogeneity observed at the educational level, in order to find ways to deal social and cultural conflicts. A teacher is expected to play a decisive role as the main manager of the ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity of the class, since s/he is expected to identify and solve problems and needs arisen by the multicultural composition of the school class. The purpose of this study is to investigate the issue of integration of foreign students into school, focusing on the role of the teacher in the process of integration, as well as the problems that emerge during this process.

Keywords: Foreign Students, Intercultural Education, Inclusion of Minorities

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I. Introduction

Greece has been for the last thirty years a “migrant-receiving” country. In the early ‘90s thousands economic migrants, especially from Eastern European countries, migrated to Greece, looking for job opportunities and better life conditions. This situation is reflected in the Greek state schools with the increasing number of foreign students [1]. Thus, student population is composed of students of different national, linguistic and cultural identity. Therefore, it is observed that there is a significant change of the educational situation in the country and, moreover, a rise of new educational needs. At the same time, Greek education system has attempted to create schemes for education of foreign students.

Greek schools host a random number of students with different linguistic and cultural origins. With the exception of the minority schools of the area of Thrace, the Greek education system, despite the large number of foreign and bilingual students, has been resolutely monolingual in orientation. For this cause, the Greek state developed the institution of “hosting classes” and “reception departments”. At the same time, the legislative framework for intercultural education seems to focus more on the rapid integration of foreign pupils, their linguistic improvement and their assimilation into the mainstream culture [2], than on its essential function; smooth integration of foreign pupils into the school environment [3]. Thus, despite the recommendation made by Ministerial Decree (SGEI2/378/C1/1124, 3e) regarding the teaching of mother tongue, this has never been put into practice and the function of the host classes has been limited to its “countervailing” role; a tool for language improvement and cultural assimilation of foreign pupils [4].

The lack of educational policy results in the emergence of problems and conflicts between students, teachers and parents. This happens because of the monocultural character of the Greek educational system, the lack of respect for foreigners and acceptance of diversity, as well as poor training of teachers. In fact, the existence of foreign pupils in school is seen as harmful, as large parts of them is considered to be a low-performance group, with significant rates of school failure, something that is linked to issues of marginalization and offending behavior [5].

Furthermore, the integration of foreign pupils into the school environment is also held back, due to the lack of acceptance from the prevailing linguistic and cultural community. As a result, the orientation of intercultural education should not be given to assimilation methods aimed at full integration of foreign pupils and creation of cultural boundaries leading to their ghettoization [6]. On the contrary, educational programs should focus on the development of a genuine intercultural education aimed at enhancing intercultural consciousness and behavior of all those involved in the Greek education system [7].

On this basis, the difficulties faced by foreign students attending Greek schools is understandable. Moreover, more than ever, it seems necessary to study the issue of the management of heterogeneity, observed at educational level, in order to find ways of dealing with social and cultural conflicts. Therefore, in the present study, the issue of integration of foreign pupils into school should be investigated. In this case, teacher should play a key role as the main manager of issues related to national, linguistic and cultural diversity of the school class. Since s/he is virtually alone, most of the time, s/he is expected to identify and solve problems and the needs created by the multicultural composition of the school class.

In the light of the above, two research questions have been arisen:

- What is the role of the teacher in the process of integration of foreign pupils into school?
- What problems/difficulties does the teacher encounter in his/her to integrate foreign students into school?

II. The inclusion of students in school

The school is, without doubt, a fundamental social institution; an agent of socialization; an institution which focuses on student's gradual integration into the political, economic system of labor organization and distribution; an agent that contributes towards the process of creating a political self in an individual aiming at his/her integration into society [8]. Education, therefore, seems to be the key to the gradual social and cultural integration of immigrants in the Greek society and the formation of a healthy intercultural identity of society. For this reason, and, moreover, due to the fact that the teacher is one of the most crucial parts of the educational system, his/her role in the process of integration of foreign students into school will be explored and, in a second phase, the problems and difficulties s/he may encounter in this effort.

The role of the teacher in the integration of foreign students into school

A large number of research has shown that the continuous support of students from the educational system and the creation of a good psycho-pedagogical climate and image of acceptance in the school class is able to strengthen student's self-esteem, as well as his/her performance [9-14]. In fact, it is argued that pupil's self-esteem and school performance are promoted when there is an atmosphere of equality and recognition [15-18]. School is, therefore, able to act as a tool for cultural and individual change, since it can achieve a change in the way people understand things, connections and commitments, promoting mutual cooperation between people of different national, linguistic and cultural origins [7], with the ultimate aim of the smooth integration and coexistence of foreigners with native students.

It is therefore necessary that the educator abandon his/her traditional and mediating role; his/her role as an implementer of educational and political planning that pays attention to the strengthening and enforcement of the dominant culture. On the contrary, it is necessary for him/her to develop a highly pedagogical and social role. By altering his/her educational role, s/he will, therefore, be able to change the quality of his/her pedagogical practice strengthening its effectiveness. It is also important that the teacher should reach a level of cultural self-knowledge which eventually leads to self-reflection [19]. In addition to this, the teacher should highlight and analyze the various levels created during the educational process and adapt his role to the new multicultural reality. In this way, s/he teacher will be able to identify the diversities of the school context; the potential and limits of the education system; his/her personal contradictions.

More specifically, burden falls on the educator, since s/he must create an open educational environment, which will be characterized by autonomy and creativity. In fact, due to the fact that school environment is a miniature of modern multicultural society, differentiation of teaching methods is necessary. Carrasquillo and Rodrigues [20] propose the use of collaborative methods of knowledge building, experiential methods with the effective involvement of students in practical activities, as well as the use of illustration and supervision during teaching. In addition, use of dialogs, as well as work plans are suggested. Apart from those, role-playing games and education through art are also beneficial. It also necessary for the educator to create an environment that contributes to the enhancement of students' self-confidence and self-esteem, especially foreigners, by acquiring knowledge on a cross-subject basis [21].

Furthermore, the teacher must pay particular attention to the difficulties of every pupil irrespective of their country of origin and, acting as a role- model of behavior, should instill, through teaching, respect and acceptance for every 'different' pupil. The use of appropriate teaching methods, undoubtedly, contributes to the linguistic and psychological support of the group. It goes without saying that the development of a friendly and collaborative climate within the classroom, facilitates the acceptance of foreign students and the cultural "load" they carry from the group of the dominant culture, resulting, thus, in the smooth integration of foreign students in the school environment [2].

At the same time, as Cummins [22] stresses, teachers who encourage foreign students to develop the language and culture they bring from their country and to use their previous experiences in the classroom, succeed in challenging the perception of society that these characteristics are inferior or without value.

Therefore, the teacher, through appropriate actions within the curriculum, is able to promote equality and recognition of "different," principles that can offer unity and uniformity within diversity and diversity through the unity of people [23].

Problems encountered by teachers in their efforts to integrate foreign students into school

The process of foreign students' integration, according to the intercultural model, seems to be a continuous and dynamic process of interaction and cooperation between the stakeholders of the educational act with the ultimate aim of creating societies characterized by equality, solidarity and acceptance [24]. In this process, however, the teacher is called upon to solve a number of issues in order to reach the desired result: full integration of foreign students in the school environment. Nikolaou and Korilakis [25] underline that teachers who teach in classes with large numbers of foreign students confront multi-leveled problems.

More specifically, the research states that one of most important problems faced by foreign students is the lack of knowledge of Greek and difficulties in response and participation, emphasizing issues of poor syntax and grammar, spelling mistakes, poor vocabulary and difficulties in understanding. Of course, it is stated that the problems in the oral speech are less than in the written form of language. Moreover, difficulty of communicating with foreign students and their parents is very important, since poor knowledge of the language puts obstacles to their participation in school life. At this point, the issue of teachers' poor training on intercultural educations is also noteworthy [26].

Apart from the above, successful integration of foreign pupils is made more difficult by the lack of appropriate supporting teaching material, which is necessary for the integration of foreign pupils into the school class [24, 27]. Besides, the creation of teaching material by teachers themselves is also mentioned, which questions the quality and effectiveness of such material, since it is produced by teachers who, in their vast majority, are not trained and qualified for this process [4].

Problems related to students' lack of interest for school are also reported, as well as the problem of non-systematic schooling. The latter seems to be a challenge that the teacher is expected to overcome in cooperation with the parents of foreign students [25]. Perhaps this situation is caused by foreign students' difficulty of adapting to the Greek education system and to Greek society. At this point, one could criticize the Greek Curricula and its superficial efforts regarding intercultural education; the latter can be considered to be the safest means for the smooth integration of foreign students in both schools and society [28].

Of course, despite the state's reaction to the new multicultural educational reality with the development of reception classes and tutoring departments for foreign students, there are dozens of problems that remain unsolved and fall on the integration of these students into the school system. More specifically, Nikolaou [29] mentions a number of problems that teachers in multicultural schools have to face, such as their late start and their problematic staffing. Problems relating to the dysfunctionality of the host departments are also mentioned in the same category, since, in most cases, a host department operates in each school unit and, therefore, the work of teachers is made more difficult by the joint education of foreign pupils who are not at the same level.

Finally, regarding problems faced by teacher in the process integration of foreign pupils into school, the issue of low educational demands of foreign pupils and their parents (compared to Greek students) could also be included [25]. The latter is linked to the degree of interest shown by foreign students for school, as well as their parents' cooperation with school community.

III. Discussion

In conclusion, integration of foreign students into school initially requires a redefinition of the way the educational process is organized and planned, focusing on the effective participation of all students in the class. However, in order to achieve this, teacher's pedagogical and teaching readiness for an efficient integration, cooperative education of all students is necessary. Successful integration of foreign students necessarily requires their empowerment and, undoubtedly, this process begins with the teacher, who is expected to perform a key role, provided that s/he will strengthen himself/herself so as to be able to do his/her best.

Integration of foreign students is seen as a complicated process, a process which should be governed by values such as democracy, equality, solidarity, respect and acceptance. Through the provision of psychological services and the implementation of differentiated teaching, the teacher will be able to influence the school integration of foreign students and their school success.

All the above, however, can and must be achieved with the help of the state and the implementation of changes in the intercultural educational policy. In order to successfully integrate these children into school, the curricula focusing on intercultural education should be adapted to the different status, (national-linguistic-

cultural), as well as the needs of each foreign pupil. Thus, a school open to all and a society of inclusion will be developed.

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