Dimitris Zachos

Aristotle's University of Thessaloniki, Greece
ORCID: 0000-0001-9416-9023

Konstantinos-Antonios Angelopoulos

Greek Primary School Teacher, Greece

Political climate and schooling: teachers' perceptions and practices on social differentiation and intercultural education

Klimat polityczny i edukacja szkolna: postrzeganie i praktyki nauczycieli w zakresie zróżnicowania społecznego i edukacji międzykulturowej

Abstract

Intercultural education focuses on how social differentiations affect schooling. The issues promoted by intercultural education, especially those related to human, individual and collective rights, are particularly topical nowadays, since in many countries they are in the crosshairs of the far right and populist political movements and leaders.

In this paper we present research in which we explored teachers' perceptions and practices regarding social differentiation and intercultural education. The role of teachers is important in shaping the dominant ideology, because of their position and their interaction with future citizens. Therefore, teachers' role is crucial in combating or maintaining economic inequalities and unequal distribution of power. Our research strategy was Case Study, and semi-structured interview was our research technique. According to our research results, although teachers are aware of the issues of social differentiation, they are not able to clearly define what intercultural education is, who it is aimed at and what its goals are. this confusion hampers teachers' efforts and ultimately the quality of education provided to the children who need it most.

Keywords: Greece, primary education, teachers, public schools

Streszczenie

Edukacja międzykulturowa koncentruje się na tym, w jaki sposób różnice społeczne wpływają na edukację szkolną. Kwestie promowane przez edukację międzykulturową, zwłaszcza te związane z prawami człowieka, prawami indywidualnymi i zbiorowymi, są obecnie szczególnie aktualne, ponieważ w wielu krajach znajdują się na celowniku skrajnie prawicowych i populistycznych ruchów politycznych i przywódców.

W niniejszym artykule przedstawiamy badania dotyczące postrzegania i praktyk nauczycieli w zakresie zróżnicowania społecznego i edukacji międzykulturowej. Rola nauczycieli jest ważna

w kształtowaniu dominującej ideologii ze względu na ich pozycję i interakcję z przyszłymi obywatelami. Jest również kluczowa w zwalczaniu lub utrzymywaniu nierówności ekonomicznych i nierównego podziału władzy. Naszą strategią badawczą było studium przypadku, a techniką badawczą wywiad częściowo ustrukturyzowany. Zgodnie z wynikami naszych badań chociaż nauczyciele są świadomi kwestii zróżnicowania społecznego, nie są w stanie wyraźnie zdefiniować, czym jest edukacja międzykulturowa, do kogo jest skierowana i jakie są jej cele. To zamieszanie utrudnia wysiłki nauczycieli, a ostatecznie ma wpływ na jakość edukacji dzieci, które najbardziej jej potrzebują.

Introduction

For about the last thirty years, in Greece, as in many Western countries, far-right ideology has been promoting and spreading from public figures and politicians, who are highly visible in the mass media. In the spread of ideas of hatred and of echropathy, an important role seems to be played by social media, which in addition contributed to the dissemination of false news, conspiracy theories and the consolidation of irrationalism and anti-intellectualism[1].

Schools and its communities are part of society, and the latter's ideological trends influence the perceptions, attitudes, and practices of teachers. Teachers can play a key role in shaping active citizens, i.e. people who can think critically and actively participate in society. In addition, the role of teachers in combating social inequalities is also critical[2], since their relationship with knowledge enables them to be well informed about pressing social issues. So, teachers should be able to create a classroom climate that will facilitate and encourage their students to challenge dominant ideas and perceptions, to think critically, to engage in reasoned debate and to assert their rights. In this way, they (teachers) can help people from different social class, ethnic or national groups or with different language, religion, sexual orientation, and abilities / disabilities to receive the best possible education. In other words, teachers can create the conditions so that all students are empowered, emancipated, develop empathy and solidarity, and seek to maximize their potential. In this way, teachers and students can fight for human rights, as well as for the elimination of economic inequalities and unequal distribution of power, and ultimately for a better society.

In the research presented below, we attempted to explore whether and to what extent the toxic political climate affects school life. To serve this aim, we chose a Greek town, where far-right ideology seems to have a significant impact. Our

---

[1] D. Zachos, *Why do we need an intercultural education for social justice today?*, Vranje 2023.

[2] D. Solomon, V. Battistich, A. Hom, *Teacher beliefs and practices in schools serving communities that differ in socioeconomic level*, "The Journal of Experimental Education" 1996, 64(4); M. Duru-Bellat, *Social inequality at school and educational policies*, Paris 2004.

main research question was exactly whether and to what extent teachers' perceptions and practices related to social variations and Intercultural Education are influenced by political climate.

Human rights and Intercultural education

Human rights are moral principles that set specific standards of human behaviour and are usually protected by national and international law. Human rights are fundamental rights to which every individual has a legal right from the moment of her / his birth, simply because he or she is human[3]. As far as the right to education is concerned, it should be open to all, conducted on equal terms for all, free and compulsory at its basic levels, and should promote understanding, tolerance and friendship between all nations, ethnic and religious groups and, finally, it should be conducive to the maintenance of peace[4]. Multicultural / intercultural education can contribute to the achievement of the above objectives[5].

What is intercultural education, what are the objectives it serves and who it concerns are issues on which there is no consensus among those who deal with it. Based on the answers that academics, researchers, teachers, politicians, pundits, journalists, and public figures give to before mentions questions, various directions of intercultural education have been classified in scientific and public discourse. With the arbitrariness and lack of precision that characterizes any classification / grouping, we distinguish three directions of / approaches to intercultural education: conservative, liberal and intercultural education for social justice[6].

---

[3] M. Sepulveda, T. van Banning, G. Gudmundsdottir, C. Chamoun, W.G.M. van Gynegten (eds.), *Human Rights reference handbook*, Ciudad Colon, Costa Rica 2004, 3.

[4] United Nations, *Universal declaration of human rights*, 1948, https://www.multiculturalaustralia.edu.au/doc/unrights_1.pdf (accessed: 30.03.2021).

[5] For us, the common elements that characterize these two approaches are more than those that distinguish them, so we use the terms as identical (See D. Zachos, *A Critical Analysis of an Intercultural Education for Social Justice*, "The Swiss Journal of Intercultural Education, Training and Research" 2022, 1(1)).

[6] D. Nylund, *Critical multiculturalism, whiteness, and social work towards a more radical view of cultural competence*, "Journal of Progressive Human Services" 2006, 17(2); O. Özturgut, *Understanding multicultural education*, "Current Issues in Education" 2011, 14(20; H. Aydin, *A literature-based approaches on multicultural education*, "Anthropologist" 2013, 16(1–2); B. Annastacia, P. du Plessis, *Ethnic diversity and school leadership: lessons from Johannesburg schools*, "Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences" 2014, 5(20); O. Agirdag, S.M. Michael, M. Van Houtte, *Teachers' understanding of multicultural education and the correlates of multicultural content integration in Flanders*, "Education and Urban Society" 2016, 48(6); L.E. Smithers, P.W. Eaton, *Reordering student affairs: from minority absorption to a radical new*, "Critical Studies in Education" 2019, 62(5); A. Ivenicki, *Multicultural Brazil in the BRICS countries: potentials for the social sciences and humanities*, "Space and Culture, India" 2020, 7(5); T.M. Durand, C.L. Tavaras, *Countering complacency with radical reflection: supporting white teachers in the enactment of critical multicultural praxis*, "Education and Urban Society" 2020, 53(2).

A part of academics, researchers and teachers consider that intercultural education concerns only the children of ethnic minority groups (immigrants, refugees, Roma, and other ethnic different groups). Those who support this conservative approach believe that "our" differences from "them" (us vs. them) are unbridgeable and therefore those who are "different"[7] ("them") should be assimilated into the "host society" ("us"). As a result, intercultural interventions' main objective must be to help "different" children to learn the language, as well as the values, rules, history, and culture of the "host" country, so that they abandon their different characteristics and assimilate into their new society.

Another part of the academics, researchers and teachers believe that intercultural education is for all students, no matter their "race", national or ethnic group. Since all people are equal, schools should recognize all cultures and promote all voices. This liberal intercultural education approach proposes actions and interventions in schools that aim to ensure harmonious coexistence of all students and to provide them with an environment conducive to achieving their educational aspirations and social goals (integration and upper mobility). For liberal intercultural education, schools must help "different" children to integrate, but also to help children from the majority group so that they can accept the former. This is usually done with some changes in the curriculum, i.e. with additions for heroes, national and religious holidays and thematic celebrations for music and cuisine for the 'different' pupils.

The two approaches mentioned above, namely the conservative and the liberal, consider as cultural only 'racial', ethnic, and national differences and leave out of their scope issues of social class, gender, and sexual preference. In other words, they ignore the issues of economic inequalities and the unequal distribution of power. The third approach, which we call intercultural education for social justice[8], is also (like the liberal) interested in all students. As it concerns its educational applications, these are not limited to one lesson, one project, but run through the whole curriculum. Those who support intercultural education for social justice critically examine culture and how it is created, and they reject simplistic schemes (such as 'us' versus 'them'). In addition, they believe that all students, regardless of their social class, ethnic, national, cultural, or religious group they come from, their gender or sexual orientation, should have equal learning opportunities[9], and

---

[7] The quotation marks signal our opposition to this, as to any other term in which we put them. We believe that groupings of people's differences according to their supposed cultural elements contribute to suspicion and prejudice and ultimately to the creation of barriers between 'different' people. In addition, the use of such terms may contribute to the labelling of the people concerned, as well as to the reinforcement of the process of ostracism ("othering"), i.e. assumptions, perceptions, attitudes, and actions that may or may not be conscious and which contribute to members of a social group being excluded or marginalized. We only use these terms for descriptive purposes.

[8] D. Zachos, *Intercultural education for social justice* (in Greek), Athens–Greece 2023.

[9] J. Banks, C. Banks (eds.), *Multicultural education issues and perspectives*, New Jersey – USA 2007, p. 3.

therefore they must have access to the resources they need and more generally to the highest quality education. In everyday educational practice they use the learner-centered model and make it easier for students to learn, to critique and reflect.

Teachers' perceptions of intercultural education

As we have already mentioned in the introductory sub-chapter, teachers are part of society and therefore they are influenced by the dominant ideology. But they are also individuals that can study, analyze, judge, infer, and have informed positions on social issues. That is, they can have an elaborate understanding of economic and social inequalities, racism, nationalism, religious conflicts, etc.

A second-important for the present study-remark on the role of teachers, has to do with the fact that during the course of their work, they meet, interact, and engage not only with children, but also with adults who have a direct relationship with schools (parents and guardians of pupils, local community stakeholders). These people may belong to a different social class, ethnic or national group or have a different language, religion, and sexual orientation. In these interactions, teachers' perceptions of social differentiation and intercultural education matter, since they affect the immediate and long-term goals they set, the curriculum they propose, the expectations they have of their students, the practices they implement and school – parents' relationships. More analytically, teachers' perceptions of social differentiation and intercultural education shape their professional competence, i.e. their ability to interact effectively and appropriately in an intercultural situation or context, as well as teachers' effectiveness[10]. In other words, what they believe intercultural education to be and who it concerns, may have a decisive influence on the way they shape their daily action. A positive perception of diversity and awareness of the issues related to it are elements that teachers should possess in order to achieve the objectives of intercultural education[11]. If teachers are sensitized, then they can put themselves in their students' shoes, not hide their feelings and respect their cultural background[12]. In addition, if teachers are aware of the issues

---

[10] D. Dike, L. Parida, I. Welerubun, *Teachers' awareness on multicultural values and attitudes: a case of multicultural education in Indonesian elementary schools*, "Journal of Critical Reviews" 2020, 7(7); J. Banks, C. Banks (eds.), *Multicultural education*…, p. 48; G. Gay, *Teaching to and through cultural diversity*, "Curriculum Inquiry" 2013, 43(1).

[11] N. Humphrey, P. Bartolo, P. Ale, C. Calleja, T. Hofsaess, V. Janikova, L.A. Mol, V. Vilkiene, G.M. Wetso, *Understanding and responding to diversity in the primary classroom: an international study*, "European Journal of Teacher Education" 2006, 29(3); B. Tonbuloglu, D. Aslan, H. Aydin, *Teachers' awareness of multicultural education and diversity in school settings*, "Egitim Arastirmalari – Eurasian Journal of Educational Research" 2016, 16(64); D. Martines, *Teacher perceptions of multicultural issues in school settings*, "The Qualitative Report" 2005, 10(1).

[12] G. McAllister, J.J. Irvine, *The role of empathy in teaching culturally diverse students: a qualitative study of teachers' beliefs*, "Journal of Teacher Education" 2002, 53(5).

of social inequalities and differences, then they will seek and acquire the knowledge and skills needed to successfully fulfil their role. Teachers' knowledge of issues of social differentiation can be a 'weapon', so that they can more fully understand the contemporary socio-cultural environment and help students to do the same[13].

A key step in raising awareness is for teachers to get in touch and develop relationships with students and their communities. This requires patience in teachers' interactions with their students, as well as genuine concern and warmth, in order to gain their trust. Sensitive teachers can guide their students, especially those who need them most, i.e. those living in poverty and social marginalization[14]. Nieto[15] argued that to best respond to multicultural environments, teachers need to develop the following five skills / competences:
– A sense of mission (missionary profession)
– Empathy and solidarity with the students
– To be able to empathize with the students and to challenge their own beliefs
– Passion for social justice

On the other hand, negative perceptions about cultural diversity, prejudices, and confusion about various concepts and themes of intercultural education act as a barrier, as they contribute to teachers' rejection of the cultural elements of different groups and their lack of awareness of the difficulties they face[16]. We stress that teachers' negative attitudes towards inclusion are one of the biggest obstacles to an inclusive school, a school that accepts, embraces and cares for every student so that they have the maximum opportunity to reach their potential. Teachers, therefore, need to overcome the barrier of national / ethnic diversity, which affects and creates barriers in their relationship with their pupils, i.e. to break down the stereotypes they may carry for their students, which contribute to the maintenance and expansion of economic and social inequalities, racism, and discrimination[17].

Positive attitude, awareness and intercultural knowledge are the elements needed to implement the intercultural curriculum. A curriculum that challenges economic

---

[13] M. Suswandari, *Multicultural approach in learning as the attempt of reinforcing Indonesian diversity in elementary school*, International Conference on Teacher Training and Education, 2017.

[14] T.M. Durand, C.L. Tavaras, *Countering complacency with radical reflection: supporting white teachers in the enactment of critical multicultural praxis*, "Education and Urban Society" 2021, 53(2).

[15] S. Nieto, *Solidarity, courage, and heart: what teacher educators can learn from a new generation of teachers*, "Intercultural Education" 2006, 17(5).

[16] S. Yildirim, E. Tezci, *Teachers' attitudes, beliefs and self-efficacy about multicultural education: a scale development*, "Universal Journal of Educational Research" 2016, 4(12A); Q. Yusuf, S. Marimuthu, S.Q. Yusuf, *Multicultural awareness and practices among malaysian primary school teachers*, "Al-Ta Lim Journal" 2018, 25(2); D. Zachos, *Teachers' perceptions, attitudes, and feelings towards pupils of Roma origin*, "International Journal of Inclusive Education" 2017, 21(10).

[17] A. Chouari, *Cultural diversity, and the challenges of teaching multicultural classes in the twenty-first century*, "Arab World English Journal" 2016, 7(3).

inequalities, racism, and the unequal distribution of power. But it seems that teachers believe that intercultural education should not be a part of the whole curriculum. In a number of cases, it seems that teachers perceive intercultural education as a separate part of the curriculum[18].

If teachers make small, weak, disconnected and fragmented interventions in the curriculum, with references to holidays, heroes, dances and food, they contribute to an image of "different" groups' culture as exotic and incompatible with that of the "host" society. This way in which teachers perceive and implement intercultural education, regardless of their intentions, can exacerbate rather than mitigate social injustices[19]. We emphasize that these perceptions are not easy to change, since teachers seem to lack adequate education and training on these issues[20] and as a result, they find it difficult to develop intercultural skills, introduce intercultural curriculum and implement intercultural teaching methods and techniques.

The intercultural competence of teachers, however, is necessary for them to grasp social phenomena and consequently help their students to do the same[21]. In order for intercultural education to be implemented in an effective way in schools, teachers need to be sensitized on the issues of social differentiation, as well as to acquire the appropriate knowledge and skills. To achieve this goal, teacher training colleges must strengthen courses on social differentiation, and all educational institutions to strengthen their training programs. Finally, teachers themselves need to show interest, empathy, and solidarity with students from poor or low-income families, ethnically, culturally, religiously, and linguistically diverse groups, as well as with students of different sexual orientation and abilities.

Methodology

The aim of our research is to explore teachers' perceptions of social differentiation and intercultural education and the way they influence their educational practices. Our research questions were: first, how do teachers perceive and address social differentiation? Second, how do they believe that Intercultural Education should be implemented in the school and third, how do they deal with social diversity in the classroom and what intercultural practices they use?

---

[18] B. Annastacia, P. du Plessis, *Ethnic diversity*…; O. Agirdag, S.M. Michael, M. Van Houtte, *Teachers' understanding*…

[19] M. Jay, *Critical race theory, multicultural education, and the hidden curriculum of hegemony*, "Multicultural Perspectives: An Official Journal of the National Association for Multicultural Education" 2003, 5(4).

[20] M. Edward, C. Joseph, *Reflections on the role of the teacher in promoting multicultural pedagogy in teaching and learning at secondary school*, "International Journal of Education and Research" 2014, 2(4).

[21] M. Suswandari, *Multicultural approach in learning*…

In order to meet the objectives of our research we chose qualitative research, so as to study in depth the particular aspects of the phenomenon[22]. Our research strategy was Case Study and its technique was semi-structured interview[23], which gives the researcher a lot of data with rich descriptions.

Our research took place in three primary schools in Giannitsa, a city in Northern Greece. We chose this city because in 2015 there were strong reactions to the establishment of a refugee accommodation center, followed by an upsurge of nationalist and racist comments on social media. Characteristic of the political climate in the region is that in the recent national elections of June 2023, the percentage of the various far-right parties in Giannitsa approached 25%[24].

Participants

Our research was conducted between January and May 2022. Twenty (20) teachers who served in public Greek primary schools took part in it. In the tables below, we list their demographic data (gender, years of service, years in the school they were in during our research, degrees and diplomas related to intercultural education).

Table 1. Gender

Gender	School 1	School 2	School 3	Total
Woman	4	5	4	**13**
Man	4	0	3	**7**
Other	0	0	0	**0**
Total	8	5	7	**20**

Table 2. Years of service in primary education

Years	School 1	School 2	School 3	Total
1 to 10	2	0	0	**2**
11 to 20	1	0	3	**4**
21 to 30	2	4	2	**8**
31 and over	3	1	2	**6**
Total	8	5	7	**20**

---

[22] F. Isari, M. Pourkos, *Qualitative Research Methodology: Applications in Psychology and Education*, Athens 2015, p. 40.

[23] L. Cohen, L. Manion, K. Morrison, *Research methods in education*, New York 2002; J.W. Creswell, *Educational Research: Planning, Conducting, and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research*, Lincoln, USA 2012.

[24] Greek Ministry of the Interior: *National Elections,* 2023, https://ekloges.ypes.gr/ (accessed: 15.11.2023).

Table 3. Years of service at the school they were serving at the time of our research

Years	School 1	School 2	School 3	Total
1 to 10	4	0	3	7
11 to 20	1	1	0	2
21 to 30	2	3	3	8
31 and over	1	1	1	3

Table 4. Level of studies & qualification related to Intercultural Education

Degree	School 1	School 2	School 3	Total
2nd degree	1	1	1	**3**
two-year special post-graduate training (didaakalio)	3	0	1	**4**
Postgraduate degree (MED)	2	1	4	**7**
PHD	0	0	0	**0**
Studies related to intercultural education	0	0	0	**0**

The interviews took place in areas of the schools (classrooms and offices) and in public places (cafés). Their duration ranged from 50 to 120 minutes. We tried to create a friendly and positive atmosphere with the participants. Before the interview, we stated in a clear and categorical way that participants' names it would not be possible to recognise in any way, and that they could stop the interview at any point they wished.

Research results and analysis

The qualitative data collected from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed through thematic analysis. It is a flexible method of analysis that can be utilized in multiple ways by researchers who start from different theoretical points of view[25]. The purpose of thematic analysis is to create an analytical and systematic record of the coding and themes that emerge from the interviews with the participants[26]. The following five themes emerged from the data analysis process: a) the objectives of intercultural education, b) the students (categories & groups) concerned by intercultural education, c) intercultural education and the curriculum, d) the sources of intercultural education, e) the tools of intercultural education.

The order in which we list and present the topics below is random, since we believe that each of them "feeds" and shapes the other. The main "feeder" is the Objectives of Intercultural Education, which "shapes" the quality and characteristics described in the other themes.

---

[25] V. Braun, V. Clarke, *Thematic analysis* [in:] *APA handbook of research methods in psychology*, vol. 2: *Research designs: Quantitative, qualitative, neuropsychological, and biological*, eds. H. Cooper, P.M. Camic, D.L. Long, A.T. Panter, D. Rindskopf, K.J. Sher, "American Psychological Association" 2012, pp. 57–71, https://doi.org/10.1037/13620-004.

[26] P. Galanis, *Data analysis in qualitative research: Thematic analysis*, "Archives of Hellenistic Medicine" 2018, 35(3), pp. 416–421.

Themes

The objectives of intercultural education

On a general and abstract level, teachers who took part in our research consider that the goal of intercultural education is good, quality education. For them education is a public good and they themselves, as public servants, must provide it to all children, no matter their background. Characteristically:

" our goal is the democratization of society with equal opportunities for all, education cannot be absent from this frame [...] it is a public good" (Markos L.).

However, in a closer look of the transcription, the teachers in our study consider that intercultural education concerns the integration of students from different national / ethnic background (immigrants, refugees, ethnic minorities). Although in a qualitative research, quantitative data (numbers and percentages) are of no particular importance, we should note that a significant part of our teachers (almost half of them), do not restrict the aims of intercultural education to the harmonious coexistence of all students, the tolerance of the difference and to the assimilation of "others" to the local and national society. On the contrary, they consider that the exchange of cultural elements and experiences are useful for all children:

"Intercultural education concerns the process of smooth integration of foreign students [...] in the context of Greek society and reality" (Stella T.).

and:

"{the aim is} to bring together, to unite people from different cultures, with different habits and attitudes, and customs in a new society. Basically, the aim is to bring students together without getting in the way of each other's culture, without the need for assimilation [...] all cultures to develop in parallel [...] and if a kind of exchange of information occurs, even better" (Thodoris X.).

For some of the teachers in our research the aim of intercultural education is to combat discrimination and fear of difference:

"I think that its aim [of intercultural education] is mutual respect, solidarity, acceptance of difference, the reduction and removal of xenophobia among students, because here we have some phenomena, children who have come from Albania, from Bulgaria, we see that there is a prejudice, which has racist characteristics. That is why I believe that Intercultural Education should aim to eliminate such characteristics" (Elissavet T.).

Finally, we think it is worth mentioning that one teacher stated that the aim of intercultural education is:

"…the co-education of different races in the same classroom [...]. In particular, the harmonious coexistence in the school and the possibility for all these different people to be *educatd* within it" (Maria K.).

Students concerned by intercultural education

About half of the teachers who took part in our research think that Intercultural Education concerns all students:

"It concerns all students regardless of ethnic origin, religion and social origin and I point this out [...] because we have identified Intercultural Education with students from other countries or other races such as the Roma race. Yes, Intercultural Education is also about the integration of minorities [...] but it does not mean that it is only for them" (Basilis K.).

"...in essence all students, it is not only focused on the so-called intercultural schools but on all schools because all schools are culturally diverse, and within them of course there are Greek students who have to coexist with all kinds of cultural groups that exist in the school and in the future in society" (Miranda L.).

The other half of our research participants believe that intercultural education is only for children from ethnically and ethnically diverse groups:

"Intercultural Education concerns the education of foreign pupils and, in general, pupils belonging to cultural groups other than Greek" (Balia M.).

"[Intercultural Education]… is needed by Greek Roma who have difficulties integrating into society" (Maria L.).

"Depending on whether there are minority students. There is no need to make extensive reference to interculturalism, a simple reference is enough for students to know that there are different cultural groups when they go out into society tomorrow" (Leonidas B.).

Intercultural education and the curriculum

Teachers who took part in our research make intercultural changes in the curriculum in two ways: First, through the project method, where students select relevant educational material. With this, our teachers' aim is to familiarize students with each other and develop their relationships, but also to address phenomena such as racism and discrimination. Second, with modules on cultural elements of minority groups in specific subjects such as language, history, and geography.

"Educational methods such as projects are necessary because they enable teachers to »expose« students to educational material and educational themes that promote the strengthening of relationships between children, e.g. a project on racism or poverty" (Eleni T.).

"There could be some lessons 2 or 3 in Language, History and Geography which refer to cultural elements of minorities" (Zoi T.).

Some kind / form of Intercultural interventions seems to take place out of the curriculum, when opportunities are given (school and local festivals):

"School celebrations can have an intercultural content… to study the customs and traditions of other people's, such things" (Miranda L.).

The sources of intercultural education

For several of the teachers who took part in our research, studies of folklore (Laografia) are a valuable source for their intercultural curriculum interventions. They believe that customs, traditions, dances, food, and costumes are elements that can contribute to the elimination of prejudices and -in general- to the fulfilment of the mission of Intercultural Education:

"It is important to present cultural elements from all cultural groups in the classroom, not only for encyclopaedic reasons [...] that is, but the native child will also not be sensitized if he or she learns the history of the Albanians [...]. We must focus on what unites the peoples in common customs and traditions, in common food, in traditional costumes. In this way, prejudices are also removed" (Basilis K.).

For several teachers who participated in our research, a second "source" of intercultural material is literature. Literature gives teachers the opportunity to introduce social issues, such as discrimination and racism, into their classrooms:

"I think that there are very nice literary texts which are a very, very, very nice reason to talk to children, to discuss issues and to put some issues on the table, such as racist elements" (Georgia B.).

The "different" students themselves are also a source for adding intercultural content, with their narratives, as well as with which students can gather material on the history and activities of their communities:

"I think that it could become... what we call a connection with the daily life of children... even for native students, since the syllabus is disconnected from reality" (Stella T.).

"it has happened, and I often try to do it myself, that stories and elements from the culture of each student [...] either personal experiences or stories told by relatives are heard in the classrooms. The children bring their 'world' into the classroom in this way, it is wonderful" (Anna B.).

A part of the participants in our study are in favour of linking the curriculum to the experiences of all students, since they believe that this will develop students' critical thinking:

"In the flexible zone lesson, I try to organize projects and discussions in order to cultivate the social awareness of the children [...] e.g. we talk about vulnerable groups of the population such as people with special needs, elderly people [...] we talk about types of families especially single parent families" (Zoi T.).

Tools of intercultural education

The tools of intercultural education are those teaching methods and practices that promote its objectives. Group work and classroom dialogue are, according to the opinion of our teachers, the most important tools of intercultural education,

since they help children to develop relationships with all their classmates. However, in order to use these tools properly, the teacher should be well aware of the characteristics (economic, ethnic, cultural, religious, linguistic) of his/her students:

"I think group / team work really helps students to come closer together, because okay they have formed friendships, we can't interfere with that but in the learning process we can get students who are not such good friends to work together" (Anna B.).

"it is very important to build teams, and especially mixed teams in terms of characteristics" (Magda T.).

Dialogue in the classroom encourages students to reflect on various issues, such as economic, social, and cultural issues:

"Dialogue is very important... and is achieved through group activities, group projects, role-playing games to promote and foster the participation of all children and their reflection" (Irini A.).

Play is another tool that serves the goals of intercultural education, since it brings children closer together, while at the same time it strengthens them on a cognitive level:

"Whatever is in playful form brings children closer together, now on a cognitive level: group work, educational games such as crypto or hangman's games" (Magda T.).

"So, I try to play educational games in the classroom that bring the children closer together" (Leonida B.).

Theatre, role-playing, true stories, as well as painting are tools that give children the opportunity to express themselves in their own way and externalize their feelings. The same applies to sporting events and dancing, which bring children together and foster friendships:

"…that's why for me theatre…, the telling of true stories and experiences through the body, through music, painting, colors, etc. The power of the image is very strong, that is to pass on to children that we respect and accept the different for what it is" (Apostolis A.).

"team sports bring children together especially when there is the language part in the middle... it is very important in general educational practices that involve the body and the movement is very important uh [...] that is the theatre let's say [...] now I as a gymnast many times have happened to learn traditional dances not only in Greece but also in other places it is quite interesting I think" (Balia M.).

Another category of intercultural education tools is the Multimedia presentation of its content. Music and images (films, videos) can help to convey intercultural messages directly to students.

"…we did a project about diversity, and we listened to songs from other countries we learned words from children who have another mother tongue [...] it was very nice" (Maria Λ.).

"Announcements can be made in the language of the students and even if the Greek children do not understand, for example, the Albanian language, they can communicate" (Μαρκος Λ.).

"We read extracts from books with anti-racist content and films. Cinema contributes a lot to provide students with anti-racist messages, even in an indirect way" (Thodoris X.).

In leu of an epilogue

The aim of our research was to investigate teachers' perceptions and practices related to social variations and intercultural education. The teachers who took part in our research did not seem to be influenced by the political climate of their region, as they did not express negative views on social diversities, intercultural education, and its objectives, nor did they mention any practices that would put certain categories of their students at risk. On the contrary, participants in our research seem to care about all their students and want them to have equal opportunities. But "equal opportunities" do not mean the same thing for everyone. Here again it seems that the dominant ideology has led to a – at best liberal – conception of intercultural education, which borders on individualism and does not address structural problems. In other words, while a part of the teachers in our study consider that intercultural education is for all students, it nevertheless limits its objectives to tolerance, understanding and acceptance of diversity. It does not address the unequal power between different groups, nor the economic causes of their economic and social status, as well as the prestige they enjoy. Our participants do not seek the causes of poverty and social differences but intercultural education is limited to fragmentary references to national heroes and anniversaries, as well as to thematic celebrations of musical or culinary content.

For us, it will be able to help address the dangers to democracy posed by far-right propaganda, only if it infuses the entire school curriculum, raising the issues of economic inequalities and the unequal distribution of power. In this way, it will help to create critically thinking people who will actively participate in public life and fight for a better society.

Bibliography

Agirdag O., Michael S.M., Van Houtte M., *Teachers' understanding of multicultural education and the correlates of multicultural content integration in Flanders*, "Education and Urban Society" 2016, 48, 6, doi:10.1177/0013124514536610.

Annastacia B., du Plessis P., *Ethnic diversity and school leadership: lessons from Johannesburg schools*, "Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences" 2014, 5(20), doi: 10.5901/mjss.2014. v5n20p1184.

Aydin H., *A literature-based approaches on multicultural education*, "Anthropologist" 2013, 16(1–2), doi: 10.1080/09720073.2013.11891333.

Banks J., Banks C. (eds.), *Multicultural education issues and perspectives*, New Jersey 2007.

Braun V., Clarke V., *Thematic analysis* [in:] *APA handbook of research methods in psychology*, vol. 2: *Research designs: Quantitative, qualitative, neuropsychological, and biological*, eds. H. Cooper, P.M. Camic, D.L. Long, A.T. Panter, D. Rindskopf, & K. J. Sher, "American Psychological Association" 2012, pp. 57–71, https://doi.org/10.1037/13620-004.

Chouari A., *Cultural diversity, and the challenges of teaching multicultural classes in the twenty-first century*, "Arab World English Journal" 2016, 7(3), doi: 10.24093/awej/vol7no3.1.

Cohen L., Manion L., Morrison K., *Research methods in education*, New York 2002.

Creswell J.W., *Educational Research: Planning, Conducting, and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research*, Lincoln 2012.

Dike D., Parida L., Welerubun I., *Teachers' awareness on multicultural values and attitudes: a case of multicultural education in Indonesian elementary schools*, "Journal of Critical Reviews" 2020, 7(7), doi: 10.31838/jcr.07.07.151.

Durand T.M., Tavaras C.L., *Countering complacency with radical reflection: supporting white teachers in the enactment of critical multicultural praxis*, "Education and Urban Society" 2021, 53(2), doi: 10.1177/0013124520927680.

Duru-Bellat M., *Social inequality at school and educational policies*, Paris 2004.

Edward M., Joseph C., *Reflections on the role of the teacher in promoting multicultural pedagogy in teaching and learning at secondary school*, "International Journal of Education and Research" 2014, 2(4).

Galanis P., *Data analysis in qualitative research: Thematic analysis*, "Archives of Hellenistic Medicine" 2018, 35(3).

Gay G., *Teaching to and through cultural diversity*, "Curriculum Inquiry" 2013, 43(1), doi: 10.1111/curi.12002.

Humphrey N., Bartolo P., Ale P., Calleja C., Hofsaess T., Janikova V., Mol L.A., Vilkiene V., Wetso G.M., *Understanding and responding to diversity in the primary classroom: an international study*, "European Journal of Teacher Education" 2006, 29(3), doi: 10.1080/02619760600795122.

Isari F., Pourkos M., *Qualitative Research : Applications in Psychology and Education*, Athens 2015.

Ivenicki A., *Multicultural Brazil in the BRICS countries: potentials for the social sciences and humanities*, "Space and Culture, India" 2020, 7(5), doi: 10.20896/SACI.V7I5.641.

Jay M., *Critical race theory, multicultural education, and the hidden curriculum of hegemony*, "Multicultural Perspectives: An Official Journal of the National Association for Multicultural Education" 2003, 5(4), doi: 10.1207/S15327892MCP0504.

McAllister G., Irvine J.J., *The role of empathy in teaching culturally diverse students: a qualitative study of teachers' beliefs*, "Journal of Teacher Education" 2002, 53(5), doi: 10.1177/002248702237397.

Martines D., *Teacher perceptions of multicultural issues in school settings*, "The Qualitative Report" 2005, 10(1), doi: 10.46743/2160-3715/2005.1855.

Nieto S., *Solidarity, courage, and heart: what teacher educators can learn from a new generation of teachers*, "Intercultural Education" 2006, 17(5), doi: 10.1080/14675980601060443.

Nylund D., *Critical multiculturalism, whiteness, and social work towards a more radical view of cultural competence*, "Journal of Progressive Human Services" 2006, 17(2), doi: 10.1300/J059v17n02_03.

Özturgut O., *Understanding multicultural education*, "Current Issues in Education" 2011, 14(2).

Sepulveda M., van Banning T., Gudmundsdottir G., Chamoun C., van Gynegten W.G.M. (eds.), *Human Rights reference handbook*, Ciudad Colon – Costa Rica 2004.

Smithers L.E., Eaton P.W., *Reordering student affairs: from minority absorption to a radical new*, "Critical Studies in Education" 2019, 62(5), doi: 10.1080/17508487.2019.1657159.

Solomon D., Battistich V., Hom A., *Teacher beliefs and practices in schools serving communities that differ in socioeconomic level*, "The Journal of Experimental Education" 1996, 64(4).

Suswandari M., *Multicultural approach in learning as the attempt of reinforcing Indonesian diversity in elementary school*, "International Conference on Teacher Training and Education" 2017 (ICTTE 2017), Atlantis Press, doi: 10.2991/ictte-17.2017.79.

Tonbuloglu B., Aslan D., Aydin H., *Teachers' awareness of multicultural education and diversity in school settings*, "Egitim Arastirmalari – Eurasian Journal of Educational Research" 2016, 16(64), doi: 10.14689/ejer.64.1.

Yildirim S., Tezci E., *Teachers' attitudes, beliefs and self-efficacy about multicultural education: a scale development*, "Universal Journal of Educational Research" 2016, 4(12A), doi: 10.13189/ujer.2016.041325.

Yusuf Q., Marimuthu S., Yusuf. S.Q., *Multicultural awareness and practices among malaysian primary school teachers*, "Al-Ta Lim Journal" 2018, 25(2), doi: 10.15548/jt.v25i2.446.

Zachos D., *Teachers' perceptions, attitudes, and feelings towards pupils of Roma origin*, "International Journal of Inclusive Education" 2017, 21(10), doi: 10.1080/13603116.2017.1326176.

Zachos D., *A Critical Analysis of an Intercultural Education for Social Justice*, "The Swiss Journal of Intercultural Education, Training and Research" 2022, 1(1).

Zachos D., *Why do we need an intercultural education for social justice today?*, "Announcement at the 1st international scientific conference Teaching, Learning and Teacher Education (TLTE)", Vranjie 2023.

Internet sources

Greek Ministry of the Interior, *National Elections* (2023), https://ekloges.ypes.gr/ (accessed: 15.11.2023).

United Nations (1948), *Universal declaration of human rights*, https://www.multiculturalaustralia.edu.au/doc/unhrights_1.pdf (accessed: 30.03.2021).

Zachos D., *Intercultural education for social justice* (in Greek), Kallipos, Open Academic Publications, Athens – Greece 2023, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/373434177_DIAPOLITISMIKE_EKPAIDEUSE_GIA_TEN_KOINONIKE_DIKAIOSYNE (accessed: 15.12.2023).