

STUDENTS FROM DIFFERENT CULTURAL BACKGROUNDS, THEIR DIFFICULTIES UPON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL ENTRY IN GREECE AND TEACHERS' INTERCULTURAL EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES

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ABSTRACT: *The present research aims to explore intercultural practices that are adopted by primary school teachers so as to address the difficulties faced by students from multicultural backgrounds upon their school entry. Moreover, it aims to explore teachers' perceptions regarding the counselling dimension of their role. For that purpose, a questionnaire was used including open and close type questions. The sample was composed of 106 teachers from Primary Schools of Achaia in South West Greece (86 women and 20 men, 25-55 years old). The results indicate that intercultural activities adopted by teachers as long as their pedagogical suggestions are mainly stereotypical. They also refer to an early conception of intercultural pedagogy based more on acceptance than in coexistence / inclusion. Moreover, teachers do not seek further counselling to address students' difficulties, although they acknowledge the major problems faced by students coming from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds.*

KEYWORDS: Intercultural education, teachers, counselling, educational practices

INTRODUCTION

The last twenty years, Greece is continuously accepting immigration flows that transformed it in a multicultural and multilingual society (Baltatzis & Ntavelos, 2014; Bougioukli, 2014; Triandafyllidou, Maroufof, Dimitriadi, & Yousef, 2014; Chatzisotiriou & Xenofontos, 2014). Thus, the intercultural education model is not a luxury, but a necessity in a society constantly changing, where individuals' multicultural identity is under a constant negotiation. According to Banks (1991), the ultimate goal of intercultural education is school's reformation so as all students - regardless of gender, race, cultural origin, or social class - to experience educational equality and equal opportunities for educational mobility. More specifically, intercultural education criticizes racism, while rejects it along with other forms of discrimination within schools and society. At the same time, intercultural education promotes and validates the pluralism (ethnic, gender, racial, religious, economic and linguistic) that students, their communities and teachers represent (Nieto & Bode, 2008). On that basis, intercultural educational puts emphasis on the change of attitudes, which is only possible through the interaction of mainstream population with the cultural minority groups (Guo & Jamal, 2007).

Teachers play a multidimensional role since they function as students' mediators to the transition to the society of knowledge. They also play an active role in reproducing modern cultural and ideological norms and values (Pasias, 2006; Lobb, 2012). At the same time, teachers bear their own ethical, political, ideological, cultural values that have been transmitted to them and shaped through their own socialization process. It has to be pointed out that teachers cannot easily get rid of these values (Saint-Hilaire, 2014; Kohli, 2013).

In recent years, there is an increased need for teachers to work without prejudices (religious, linguistic, social or other form) and with critical thinking. The target is for teachers to create an equal, friendly and productive educational environment (Matthaiou, 2009; Baltatzis & Ntavelos, 2014; Papavasiliou, 2015). Moreover, intercultural education is believed to be an effort for social reconstruction where a dynamic cultural identity is formed (Chatziosotiriou & Xenofontos, 2014). In order for the teachers to reach intercultural competency level, it is necessary to follow lifelong education along with acquiring teaching experience in the classroom (Palaiologou & Evaggelou, 2003).

Furthermore, several studies indicate the importance for students to have a sense of belonging within the school environment and their group of peers, ensuring their mental well-being and their improved participation in the learning process. Such context refrains multicultural students from dropping-out of school as well from being victimized at bullying phenomena (Ferreira, Cardoso & Abrantes, 2011; Raufelder, Sahabandu, Martínez, & Escobar, 2015; Wormington et al., 2014). More specifically, issues related to low self-esteem is often identified in students coming from different cultural backgrounds, while their sense of belonging is usually low (Gummadam, Pittman & Ioffe 2015). Also, these students often face difficulties in linguistic communication at the school environment (Geraris, 2011), which affect both their learning process and their social adaptation (Chiu, Chow, McBride, & Mol, 2015).

On that basis, teachers' role and their practices in intercultural education environments are multidimensional and an essential part of the efforts for social reconstruction leading to a new cultural identity (Chatziosotiriou & Xenofontos, 2014). In addition, teacher as an intercultural educator should bridge the linguistic and communicational gap between students and their school environment (Papavasiliou, 2015).

#Aim of the Study

In light of this, the present research aims to examine (a) teachers' views about the difficulties faced by students from multicultural backgrounds, and (b) the cross-cultural practices teachers adopt in classrooms including such students.

METHODOLOGY

During the last academic year, in the Regional Unit of Achaia worked 1445 primary school teachers. This research took place from March to May 2016, while the sample was 151 teachers working in Achaia (10%). There were teachers chosen from fifteen (15) public elementary schools of Achaia. The schools were located in different areas

(urban, suburban and rural)¹ and they had students from different socioeconomic categories. The subjects of the sample filled questionnaires and 106 questionnaires were gathered (70.19%). The majority of the subjects were women (86, 81.1%), aged 46-55 years (M = 2.15, F = 44, 41.5%), having 11 to 20 years' service/working experience (M = 2.00, F = 57, 53.8%). They have evenly worked in all primary school grades and had lots of teaching experience. Also, the vast majority of teachers who took part received a Pedagogical College degree (M = 1.22, F = 83, 78.3%), while only 20.8% of them had a Masters degree (M = .21, F = 84).

In order for the researcher to detect any ambiguities in the questionnaire and make the necessary changes in the design, a pilot study was conducted in January 2016 on a sample of 30 primary school teachers. A questionnaire was designed based on the literature review mentioned above. It consists of a total of nineteen (19) questions: five (5) open type questions, three (3) YES / NO questions (closed selection), four (4) closed type questions (choice between numbers of statements) and seven (7) multiple choice questions (five point Likert scale).

There were two research questions: *“Which are the difficulties of multicultural students upon their entry at school?”* and *“Which are the intercultural practices that teachers adopt in a multicultural classroom?”* At the end of the questionnaire, teachers participating in the study could suggest actions for improving the implementation of intercultural pedagogy within the Greek school context.

Ethics rules were followed when collecting and analyzing the data for the research (Fontana & Frey, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994). A letter of purpose was given to all subjects participating explaining the aims and the value of the research, the dissemination of the results as long as their right to withdraw their participation at any point and preserving their anonymity.

For the analysis of open questions, thematic analysis was used. This method is used for the identification, analysis and presentation of the patterns that can be found in the data set (Boyatzis, 1998). Inductive thematic analysis was used, thus enabling the researchers to be flexible with the identifiable themes and coding procedure and not to follow up any pre-existing theoretical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Also, thematic analysis is associated with coding which refers to the creation of categories related to data that contribute to a theme (Gibson, 2006; Saldana, 2009).

The sample used in the study was stratified and randomly selected. Due to the limited sample size - small number of participants from only one region, the results cannot be generalized. There may be different teachers' perceptions on intercultural teaching practices depending on the region. Nevertheless, the findings are considered important, serving as a starting base for further investigations.

¹ Regarding the criterion for the degree of urbanization, we used the classification of Statistics (<http://www.statistics.gr/el/home>), according to which urban areas are placed local districts with more than 10,000 inhabitants, with the suburban 2000-9999 residents and rural residents to 1,999.

RESULTS/FINDINGS

The findings are divided into three thematic areas which are: (a) the review of the major difficulties faced by students coming from different cultural backgrounds, (b) the implementation of intercultural activities by teachers, as well as (c) their proposals concerning the future of intercultural pedagogy.

(a) *Multicultural students and their difficulties upon school entry*

Teachers were asked to indicate which are the main difficulties faced by students from different cultural backgrounds when entering school. From the analysis two main categories were formed, the "integration and acceptance in schools" (a total of 63 responses) and "learning problems" (a total of 27 responses).

More specifically, with regards to the first category, teachers mention as very important the difficulty regarding integration, inclusion and creation of relationship with important others. They characteristically stated:

"Issues of acceptance from the school environment, mainly on socializing, being the target of bullying by classmates or other students,"

"Accept, reassurance, respect"

"Risk of being isolated from other pupils, difficulty in communication"

"The existing mentality, also the integration in different environments"

"Their socialization, acceptance and respect to diversity in their cultural environment"

"Difficulty in acceptance by other studentsreactions from other students' parents."

Also, an important barrier to students' gradual integration is thought to be the difficulty in learning Greek and developing their communication skills, as they shared:

"...difficulty in communication due to troubles in using the language and to different culture"

"...difficulty in attending lessons"

"Communication issues with other children due to different language ..."

"Understanding the language and interpersonal relationships with peers"

"The problem of different language, difficulties in communication with the teacher, difficulty in understanding the teaching content, reduced socialization"

"They do not know the language and there are difficulties in communication, fear of the unknown and anxiety about acceptance."

(b) *Teachers' intercultural activities*

Regarding the implementation of an intercultural activity by teachers within classroom or school context, it seems that most teachers made an effort and implemented various projects on interculturalism. They mainly focused on the issues of acceptance, integration and inclusion of children from different cultural backgrounds in schools.

Specifically, the majority of the activities implemented teachers' attempt to inform students on customs and culture of the multicultural students. They stated:

"We asked from children to say phrases in their native language, so we could learn or rather hear words in Albanian, Romanian and Roma"

"On the occasion of the national holiday of October 28th, we referred to the national holidays of other states. Moreover we painted flags of other states"

"Twice a month and for one teaching hour, we asked from children of different cultural backgrounds to teach us and their fellow students. They teach us commonly used words in their own language and various traditions and customs from their culture"

"Children brought recipes from their countries"

"We prepared sweets and food from different countries - regions and we presented them in class"

There were also few activities implemented teachers' effort to work on the inclusion of multicultural students to the school context. They reported:

"Festival with traditional food from the place of origin of bilingual students"

"Creation of a film on the integration and acceptance of refugees, migrants"

"We built a board of wishes in all languages for sixth grade students' graduation, students from Albania and Roma students translated the wishes"

"Discussion with students in three languages simultaneously under the guidance of educators"

(c) Proposals on intercultural pedagogy

Finally, teachers that participated to the research were asked to make suggestions on intercultural education. Their answers were mainly directed on informative, seminar-type training activities on the subject of intercultural education. They wrote:

"Teachers' seminars and trainings, informing parents' association, printed materials",

"Educational material associated with the student's culture, teachers' training",

"Design suitable material, implement innovative projects on topics of common interest",

"Training on integration methods concerning students from different cultural backgrounds"

In addition, only a few participants indicated the importance of providing specialized support, information and practical advice by specialized staff/experts regarding intercultural education. They stated:

"Invitation to a specialized psychologist, social worker to talk to children and parents",

"Information from services, organization of seminars aiming to indicate practical methods rather than theoretical discussions",

"There should be support of teachers by specialists who can help with problems resolution"

Access to relevant material, meetings with scientists and people who have worked in multicultural classrooms"

DISCUSSION

The aim of this research was to highlight teachers' perceptions on the difficulties faced by students from multicultural backgrounds when they entered the school. Another aim was to explore the "intercultural practices" teachers adopted in order to meet their students' needs.

The findings indicate that teachers consider acceptance and integration problems as the major difficulties of students coming from different cultural backgrounds (Geraris, 2011). They also refer to the difficulty in learning the Greek language and in developing communication with others by immigrant students (Fratzi, 2010). Regarding teachers' training in the intercultural classroom context, new trends indicate that teachers must be trained at a University level in second language (Marsh, Nikula, Takala, Rohiola & Koivisto, 1998) and be mindful regarding biliteracy development in order to be able to understand the teaching of a new language and methods to incorporate bilingual students to the educational process (Antunez, 2002).

Furthermore, regarding the implementation of intercultural activities by teachers, the activities they adopt and their suggestions are outdated, while their perception of intercultural pedagogy is based more on acceptance than in coexistence / inclusion. As teachers perceive intercultural pedagogical practices of being to inform students on customs and culture of the multicultural students and less to work on the inclusion of multicultural students. Although intercultural education literacy indicates that cooperative learning seem to be a form of education that promotes student's interactions and is associated with higher student achievement (Levine & Lezotte, 1995; Lindholm-Leary, 2005), teachers seem not to be aware of the implementation of such form in the activities they applied.

On the other hand, the proposals they suggest regarding the future of intercultural pedagogy are oriented more on educational activities, while at the same time they vaguely express a need for a specialist's intervention. Based on the above, it is clear that although teachers recognize the problems students from multicultural environments face in their entry in schools, they nevertheless do not go on linking these difficulties by seeking further and specialized counseling. Even though students' problems concern specific areas of interaction such as relationship building and developing communication, experiencing acceptance, that is areas beyond teachers' scientific knowledge and responsibility, teachers do not seek for advice from a specialized professional such as a counselor or psychologist.

Finally, their proposals refer neither to teachers' responsibility nor to the educational dimension of their role concerning intercultural pedagogical practice.

IMPLICATION TO RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

The current research is one of the few that have been conducted in Greece and the first that is being conducted in Primary Schools of Achaia (SouthWest Greece). Taking into consideration the major difficulty that Greek schools' face at the time regarding the new entry and inclusion of multicultural students, those research findings could be viewed as a wake-up call for all teachers and especially those who work in multicultural schools. Moreover, this research could be used as suggestion in future research in the field in order for more light to be shed in the field of intercultural education.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, results indicate that intercultural activities adopted by teachers as long as their pedagogical suggestions are mainly stereotypical. They also refer to an early conception of intercultural pedagogy based more on acceptance than in coexistence / inclusion. Moreover, teachers do not seek further counselling to address students' difficulties, although they acknowledge the major problems faced by students coming from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. This behaviour is intriguing taking into consideration that these difficulties refer to scientific areas not covered by teachers' scientific knowledge and responsibility. Finally, results show that teachers do not embrace the counselling aspect of their role

FUTURE RESEARCH

In light of the above findings, further qualitative research is needed on the field of intercultural pedagogy so as the difficulties faced by both teachers and students to be better understood. These difficulties should be considered an essential part of students' learning and socialization process. These students possess a different - than the mainstream - identity as they are children from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

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