



Perceptions of Diversity, Curriculum and Intercultural Practices: The Case of a Greek Intercultural School

Dimitris T. Zachos*, Loreta Moutsas

Department of Primary Education, School of Pedagogy, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Thessaloniki, Greece
Email: *dimzachos@eled.auth.gr

How to cite this paper: Zachos, D.T. and Moutsas, L. (2024) Perceptions of Diversity, Curriculum and Intercultural Practices: The Case of a Greek Intercultural School. *Open Access Library Journal*, 11: e11962. <https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1111962>

Received: July 17, 2024

Accepted: August 25, 2024

Published: August 28, 2024

Copyright © 2024 by author(s) and Open Access Library Inc.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

Abstract

In this paper we present research on how early years teachers perceive the relationship between the curriculum and social differentiation and how this affects their practices. All participants were teachers serving in an experimental primary intercultural school in Thessaloniki. Our research was qualitative, our research strategy was the Case Study, and our main research technique was the in-depth interview. According to the results of the research, teachers seem to understand the criticality of the curriculum for “diversity” issues, but their practices are not in line with an intercultural education that aims at social justice.

Subject Areas

Curriculum Development, Educational Technology, Sociology

Keywords

Intercultural Education, Social Justice, School Curriculum, Greece

1. Introduction

The discourse of equality in education has been adopted in the rhetoric of many Western governments and is one of the key objectives of their education policies. Although this discourse emphasizes equality of opportunity rather than equality of outcomes, *i.e.* that all children should have access to all educational institutions rather than that they should have the resources and conditions to achieve the best outcomes, it nevertheless leaves the field open so that those educational approaches and practices aimed at social justice can be cultivated.

In this context, a sub-discipline of pedagogy has developed and consolidated

over the last thirty years, which aims to make education a favourable institution for all students, regardless of their social class, gender, ethnicity, nationality, it is ethnic group, religion, their first language spoken, their sexual orientation and their abilities/disabilities. Based on its central objectives, this sub-area of Pedagogy seems to have three strands: multicultural, anti-racist and intercultural education. Multicultural education proposes a comprehensive revision of education with the aim of deepening democracy and equality in schools and society [1]. The same is suggested by anti-racist education, which according to its proponents stands out mainly because it combats not only individual but also institutional racism [2]. Finally, intercultural education emphasizes communication between “different” social (especially ethnic) groups to achieve social cohesion. Our own assessment is that a significant proportion of theorists and educators whose theoretical approaches and educational actions fall within the above three strands can help to identify and combat the ways in which schools favour members of some social groups and disadvantage and marginalize others.

The approach we advocate, which we call Intercultural Education for Social Justice [3]-[5] moves beyond the recognition of fragmented identities [6] and emphasizes the social structures and power relations that perpetuate social injustices [7]. For us, an effective pedagogy oriented towards the goals of Intercultural Education for Social Justice is a continuous process [8], which runs through all aspects of teaching [9] and addresses all students without exception. Intercultural Education for Social Justice aims to consolidate those necessary changes, whereby no child is ashamed of who they are.

In terms of the context of origin, Intercultural Education for Social Justice accepts that people derive strength from their culture and therefore it is important that all children in the classroom maintain their identity, but also acquire the skills necessary to function in the wider society [10]. In this context, a curriculum of an Intercultural Education for Social Justice is distinguished from a traditional one: Firstly, because it incorporates the knowledge, experiences and learning styles of all students and secondly because it raises issues of social inequalities and injustices [11]. Such a curriculum requires teachers to make knowledge choices [12] so that the learning process can raise children’s awareness of the multiple forms of social inequalities and marginalization and how they are created and reproduced.

We emphasize the fact that the way students understand reality depends -perhaps to a significant extent- on the knowledge and perceptions of teachers and therefore the latter should be equipped with the necessary insight and skills to mediate this process [13]. Because there is a section of teachers, whose members consciously or unconsciously hold prejudices [14], they embrace ethnocentric and xenophobic views, discriminate against ‘different’ students and declare themselves interculturally inadequate and unprepared to manage social differentiation [15], therefore we believe that their basic studies and further training in intercultural education issues need to be strengthened. Teacher education is a

means for teachers to acquire intercultural competence and preparedness, to get rid of stereotypes and to be able to create the conditions so that diverse students can achieve the goals of education [16].

2. The Research

2.1. Aim and Research Questions

The aim of our research was to explore how teachers perceive the relationship between the school curriculum and social differentiation, as well as the intercultural practices they implement in their classrooms. Our central research question was: “How teachers perceive the relationship between school curriculum and the goals of intercultural education”. Our two sub-research questions were:

First: “what do teachers perceive to be the relationship between their basic studies and their continuing training with their perceptions and attitudes towards social differences (diversity)”?

Second, how do teachers describe their initiatives, interventions and practices related to intercultural education?

2.2. Research Strategy and Technique

Our research aimed to understand and interpret the meanings, experiences and the way the teachers who took part in it experienced their reality. This goal is served by the qualitative approach [17], which focuses on providing such a wealth of data that contributes to our understanding of the complexity of social phenomena. Qualitative research does not seek to extract laws and regularities, but rather to help those who read it to evaluate how its findings relate to other contexts or social groups.

Our research strategy was case study [18] and our “case” was a model [pro-tipo] intercultural primary school in Thessaloniki (Greece), in which 30% of the total student population - 66 out of 210 - had an ethnically and culturally diverse background (refugees, migrants, Roma). The main technique of our research was the semi-structured interview, which enables the researcher to ask open-ended questions about the issues under consideration, allows for clarifying questions on the interviewees’ answers, while providing freedom for the interviewees to focus on what they consider important [19]. Using semi-structured interviews, we were able to explore in depth the perceptions of teachers and to link them to their practices. A second technique, by which we ‘checked’ the truth of teachers’ statements was participatory observation. More specifically, we attended three weeks in total to the work and activities of three different school classes. The focus of the observation was on how teachers introduced the issues of social inequalities and differentiations in their classrooms, as well as on the teaching materials they used. We also recorded the cultural position of ‘different’ pupils in the classrooms, the teacher’s teaching methods and their attitudes towards these children.

Our data were collected during the period of October-December 2022. All in-

interviews, except one during which we took notes, were recorded on a tape recorder.

3. Participants

A total of 13 school staff members took part in our research. In more detail, 11 teachers, the school nurse and the school principal were interviewed, and three of them agreed to be observed in their classrooms. In terms of gender, the individuals who took part in our research were ten females and three males. In terms of years of experience in education, most of them (9/12, excluding the nurse) had more than 10 years. In terms of their education and training, 7 of them had a postgraduate diploma, and indeed four of them were related to PP, while nine said they had attended seminars and workshops related to PP issues. (See **Tables 1-3**)

Table 1. Professional experience of teachers.

Years	Number of teachers	%
0 - 10	4	31%
10 - 20	2	15%
20 - 30	5	39%
>30	2	15%

Table 2. Gender.

	Number of teachers	%
Women	9	69%
Men	4	31%
Total	13	100%

Table 3. Teachers' credentials.

Master's degree in education		Seminars & sessions Related to intercultural education	
Teachers number	%	Teachers number	%
7	54	9	69

4. Results

Our data are divided into two categories: Those obtained from interviews and those obtained from observation.

4.1. Data from the Interviews

The qualitative data from the interviews were processed using thematic analysis, which according to Braun and Clarke [20] is a method to identify, organize, analyze and present (record and report) in detail the themes that emerge from data. In our treatment, we followed the model proposed by Tsiolis [21], as it pro-

vides a specific guiding framework, based on which the researcher follows five steps: a) record the data b) familiarise herself with the data c) codes the data d) transitions from codes to themes and e) presents the data.

Four themes emerged from the analysis of the interviews: First, the role of the curriculum. Second, the theoretical knowledge about the issues of interculturality and intercultural education. Third, intercultural practices and fourth, teacher education and training on intercultural issues. In the next subsection we present these themes, with an emphasis on the participants' discourse.

The role of the curriculum

Teachers who took part in our research consider the existing curriculum to be interculturally oriented:

“Yes, yes, they meet the needs of students (....) Basically, they have been updated now. Actually, it should be done since we have this explosion with refugees, and I think it is” (D3).

“(...) the acceptance of diversity is included within our curriculum (...) there is a lesson that says I accept disabled people, so I accept and the children from foreign countries” (D1).

Some of them, however, consider that the interculturality of the curriculum is superficial, as well as that teachers should have more autonomy and a greater role in its development:

“The curriculum was written 16 years ago; some minor improvements have been made. What has been done? They have put some names of heroes in the books and some words of other languages. They are very timidly trying to incorporate the culture of other people. I hope the new curriculum will be more open and innovative” (D11).

“It could definitely be more progressive. (...) to be able to open the gap to get more and more groups in, we need to open that up a bit and trust the teachers who want to take these on” (D12).

Teachers who took part in our research, while acknowledging that the curriculum is a framework in which they must operate, on the other hand, they stress that there is - for the time being - a great deal of freedom in the way they implement it and therefore that they themselves are responsible for whether or not to follow the guidelines related to intercultural issues:

“The curriculum exists to give us a direction and to help us in what to teach. Beyond that we have a great degree of freedom” (D5).

“So, I say again, if we want, we can bring other material (...) The obstacle I think is our mindset or the knowledge that we don't have” (D4).

“Since the legal framework also enables us to do intercultural projects, I think that the obstacles now in 2022 are a pretext and an excuse” (D7).

Theoretical knowledge on the issues of interculturality and intercultural education

A part of the teachers who participated in our research claim to be intercultural-ly oriented and perceive social differences as an asset. They even appreciate that this is an element that makes their school different from other neighbouring schools, which may also have a diverse student population:

“The difference [between the two neighbouring schools is] in the way children who are not Greek natives are treated, let’s say... I don’t know if it has to do with the school, but from recess to class, you can see the differences very much. Because I am working in both schools, these differences are very obvious” (D12).

These teachers consider that intercultural education and the actions and attitudes it promotes, such as dialogue and the interaction of cultures, is an essential element for all children as it can combat racism and discrimination, foster empathy and lay the foundations for the creation of a better society:

“I believe that intercultural education should be taught and cultivated in all schools in Greece, not only in intercultural schools, because it is not only the issue related to the acceptance of different children by the children of the majority. A mentality of acceptance of other cultures must also be cultivated, which does not now exist even among Greek children attending schools where there are no ethnically diverse pupils (D1).

“Intercultural education? (...) To enable children to adapt to school, to accept diversity without prejudice” (D3).

“I believe that language is a cultural element that should always be respected and used in all teaching subjects (D7).

“Talk about their country of origin, use their language, which is very important” (D10).

We underline that the perception of the teachers who took part in our research on intercultural education is such that it focuses on the individual attitudes, sensitivity and personal interest that should govern a teacher. Absent from their perspective are issues of socio-economic inequalities and unequal distribution of power, which produce and reproduce racism, discrimination and social categorisation. A typical extract of their perception is the following:

“To be more sensitive and aware of the many issues we have and the many young students we have. The school here does do welcome events, very, very great, but believe it, those who do” (D4).

A part of the teachers who took part in our research seem not to embrace basic principles of intercultural education, such as the usefulness of cultivating children’s first language:

“... the kids are 7 years old, born and raised here [in Greece], (...) so their parents speak Greek without a problem, so the kids even better. Of course, they speak quite a bit of both language at home and their native language and the language of the country here, which is, Greek. (...) Sometimes [this]

is a problem, because Greek is a difficult language, it's not easy to understand. Let alone a child who is bilingual or trilingual" (D2).

Some of our teachers seem not to have rid themselves of stereotypes and myths about the determinant role of "race" and culture in both academic performance and student behavior:

"Roma (Gypsies), for example, have their own philosophy, there is a problem and a prejudice both from us to them and from them to us, that is, they don't easily accept that they have to work at home with their children. They believe that the child can only be helped here at school, and that they can't do anything because they are not educated either. It's another level, another race, other customs and traditions" (D1).

"Our school children are very lively; we have 20 Roma pupils, and they don't understand. What can we do? We've been with them for 4 hours. (...) You know, it all comes from home" (D1).

"(...) There are various incentives given to them [the Roma] but nevertheless it is a mentality that is valid in their cultural identity. (...) It's an element of their identity that is difficult to overturn" (D5).

These teachers, who seem to have stereotypes and prejudices against their "different" pupils, do not consider it useful to intervene in the curriculum and confine themselves to the clerical dimension of their role, *i.e.* the one that wants them not to take initiative and to "faithfully" carry out their bureaucratic obligations:

"No, my job is to teach them to read and write. If there happens to be a text in the textbook that refers to religion, I will teach it, but I will not go further, I will not look for other sources" (D3).

Intercultural practices

Those teachers who participated in our research and declared themselves interculturally oriented, claimed that they differentiate themselves from the orders of the curriculum, by adapting their teaching to the needs of their students. They do this by applying appropriate (in their estimation) teaching methods and practices and by creating an appropriate, safe and creative classroom climate:

"Many times, the objectives described in the curriculum can be achieved beyond interdisciplinary activities and through other alternative activities related to visual arts, cinema, and theatre events. It is not necessary to follow the exercises in the book" (D7).

"My aim is to create a framework, a climate of safety in the classroom, a sense that we are all a team, that we all try to do our best, that we help each other, that we accept others regardless of color, race, religion, etc." (D10).

These teachers (who are interculturally oriented) know the value of the first language and therefore do not prevent its use in the classroom and in the school in general:

“I definitely promote and encourage them to use their mother tongue because first of all that’s what I’ve been taught we should do and I think it’s right” (D4).

“(…) in their everyday communication they speak Russian in the classroom (…) as soon as they see the picture they say the word in Russian, but then they learn Greek and remember it. They remember both” (D11).

These same teachers stated that they incorporate certain elements of their students’ culture into their teaching:

“I mainly use songs on the occasion of various holidays, such as Mother’s Day etc” (D11).

“Kitchen - shared food, shared games” (D6).

These intercultural teachers use team teaching, as they:

“(…) if you try to do a frontal teaching as you would in any other school, you will probably fail, because these children usually like to work in groups” (D10).

In contrast, teachers who do not support the intercultural approach, stated that they do not use group teaching:

“I teach the way I would do it if I had only Greek children in my class. Each student should be responsible for what he or she does and I should be able to check and see his or her progress” (D5).

“Ethnic different students usually have different levels of knowledge from each other and that’s why I believe that frontal teaching is better for them.” (D1).

The education and the training of teachers on intercultural issues

All the teachers who took part in our research consider that the role of education and training on intercultural issues is important:

“Apart from the ideas, the philosophy that I learned through these courses, they certainly strengthened my knowledge and the material I work with” (D4).

“The trainings have helped me well to cope with my role in the intercultural school” (D2).

Some teachers in our research stressed that studies play a role, but personal interests play the most important role:

“Well, the master’s degree certainly gave me some theoretical background for intercultural education (…) but I think, more than the studies, it’s a personal issue how well you can manage a classroom, such a cultural environment” (D10).

“Yes, theoretical knowledge about intercultural education will help us, but if you don’t have a specific social approach, you can’t do it. So, if you don’t

accept these things you can't bring them into the classroom, that's my opinion, it's not learned" (D4).

4.2. The Data from Participant Observation

In the first observation we made (classroom of the teacher we refer to as D4), we found a discrepancy between what she told us in the interview and her practices. More specifically, this teacher stated that she follows an intercultural education aimed at social justice, but we found that in her daily classroom activities she did not address issues of economic inequalities, nor did she introduce elements from her students' lives and cultures into the curriculum.

In the second observation we conducted (class of D7), we found that this teacher applied the collaborative (team) teaching method; introduced in her class various alternative activities, such as reading literature books; implemented a project on the topic of combating truancy, during which she tried to facilitate her students to see the issues from various different perspectives. We note that in general, this teacher was trying to foster critical thinking in her students. As an example, during the history lesson (in unit 8: Christianity becomes an official religion), the teacher asked the following question:

Based on their stance on religious issues Julian was labelled a "Parabaptist" or "Apostate" and Theodosius was declared "Great". Do you agree with this;

We stress that this question does not appear in the school textbook. Afterwards, in the discussion that took place, various informed opinions were heard, which were respected and contributed to the reflection of several children in the classroom.

Despite this activity, the teacher in question does not introduce elements of her students' culture into the curriculum, which contradicts what she said in the interview. In addition, during the period of our observation and despite the occasions, issues of economic inequalities, unequal distribution of power of discrimination and exclusion were not raised.

In our third observation (class of D1), contrary to what the teacher stated in her interview, the class did not work in groups, and followed the official curriculum closely.

In conclusion, from the observation we made in the three classrooms of the school, it appeared that the teachers who took part in our research are making some changes in the curriculum, which are related to superficial issues. These changes fall into the category that Banks (2016) calls the 'contributions approach' and involve introducing some harmless elements of history and culture to 'diverse' students. The structure and aims of the curriculum remain unchanged, the dominant perspective is not challenged, as no units that address social inequalities and the unequal distribution of power are introduced.

5. Conclusions

From the analysis of our data, it appears that the teachers who participated in our research believe that the current curriculum of primary education introduc-

es and promotes the philosophy of interculturality and intercultural education in schools. Our teachers feel that this curriculum gives them a certain freedom to introduce elements and modules when they see fit. We note, however, that even those who stated in the interviews that they understand that elements are introduced into the curriculum and textbooks that are not capable of bringing about significant change, do not seem to recognize that such a curriculum has a negative impact on the implementation of intercultural practices aimed at social justice.

The omissions in the curriculum, which relate to the historical paths and actions of “different” groups, as well as the way in which national myths are presented, do not seem to help in the fight against nationalism and prejudice [22] [23]. The integration of elements from the culture of “different” groups is very limited in the current Greek primary education curriculum and concerns mainly heroes, dances, foods, festivals and traditional songs.

A second point we want to emphasize relates to our finding that the teachers who took part in our research do not seem to be interested in introducing ‘controversial’ issues, such as economic inequalities and unequal distribution of power into their curriculum and their daily teaching. Whatever intercultural initiatives and practices they take, they are implemented piecemeal and do not serve a comprehensive plan. The way most teachers participating in our research perceives and implement intercultural education seems to be determined by and limited to general references to ‘tolerance’ and ‘acceptance of diversity’, to the introduction of folkloric elements in the curriculum and to painless humanistic appeals and practices. In other words, it seems that these teachers often perceive interculturality in humanistic and simplistic terms and usually focus on folkloric issues [13].

Finally, for our participants, the education and training of teachers in intercultural education is necessary. However, our assessment coincides with that of some of our teachers, according to which further study and training in intercultural issues may help to improve teachers’ intercultural competence but does not seem to be sufficient to change both their beliefs and practices. Education is an institution that can fight the ideological mechanisms of the state, but it cannot alone change society. In our opinion, a coordinated action is needed from all institutional actors (politicians, state high administrators, judges, teachers at all levels).

In conclusion, we emphasize that our work does not claim generalization of its findings. However, we believe that case studies of schools with socially diverse populations can help interested individuals (educators, educational policymakers, parents) to have a more valid picture of systemic conditions (economic inequalities, racism, discrimination) and their impact on educational legislation and school practice. By looking for and highlighting both ineffective and effective teacher practices, we can create a narrative about what we can achieve and in what ways. Such a narrative can contribute to improving the education of all children and ultimately to a better society.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

References

- [1] Banks, J.A. (1995) Multicultural Education and Curriculum Transformation. *The Journal of Negro Education*, **64**, 390-400. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2967262>
- [2] Pedersen, A., Walker, I., Rapley, M. and Wise, M. (2003) Anti-Racism-What Works. An Evaluation of the Effectiveness of Anti-Racism Strategies. Centre for Social Change & Social Equity, Murdoch University, Perth, Australia.
- [3] Zachos, D. (2022) A Critical Analysis of an Intercultural Education for Social Justice. *The Swiss Journal of Intercultural Education, Training and Research*, **1**, 41-52.
- [4] Zachos, D. (2023) Intercultural Education for Social Justice. Kallipos, Open Academic Publications. (In Greek)
- [5] Zachos, D. (2024) For an Intercultural Education Aimed at Social Justice. *Race and Pedagogy Journal: Teaching and Learning for Justice*, **6**, 1-23. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.37319512?seq=1>
- [6] McLaren, P. and Farahmandpur, R. (2013) For a Pedagogy of Resistance: Teaching against Global Capitalism and the New Imperialism. Topos. (In Greek)
- [7] Cho, H. (2017) Navigating the Meanings of Social Justice, Teaching for Social Justice, and Multicultural Education. *International Journal of Multicultural Education*, **19**, 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.18251/ijme.v19i2.1307>
- [8] Banks, A.J. (2016) Approaches to Multicultural Curriculum Reform. In: Banks, A.J. and McGee Banks, A.C., Eds., *Multicultural Education: Issues and Perspectives*, Wiley, 151-170.
- [9] Roiha, A. and Sommier, M. (2021) Exploring Teachers' Perceptions and Practices of Intercultural Education in an International School. *Intercultural Education*, **32**, 446-463. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14675986.2021.1893986>
- [10] McCrachen, J. (1993) Valuing Diversity: The Primary Years. National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- [11] Sleeter, C. (2018) A Framework to Improve Teaching in Multicultural Contexts. *Education & Self-Development*, **13**, 43-54. <https://doi.org/10.26907/esd13.1.05>
- [12] Sleeter, C. (2009) Developing Teacher Epistemological Sophistication about Multicultural Curriculum: A Case Study. *Action in Teacher Education*, **31**, 3-13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01626620.2009.10463506>
- [13] Watkins, M. and Noble, G. (2019) Lazy Multiculturalism: Cultural Essentialism and the Persistence of the Multicultural Day in Australian Schools. *Ethnography and Education*, **14**, 295-310. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17457823.2019.1581821>
- [14] Sharma, S. (2005) Multicultural Education: Teachers Perceptions and Preparation. *Journal of College Teaching & Learning (TLC)*, **2**, 53-64. <https://doi.org/10.19030/tlc.v2i5.1825>
- [15] Papachristos, K. (2009) Intercultural Readiness of Teachers and Problems of Teaching Greek as a Mother Tongue, Second and Foreign Language in Multicultural Classes. (In Greek) https://fourtounis.gr/arthra/pap_diapol.html
- [16] Grand, C. and Gibson, M. (2011) Diversity and Teacher Education: A Historical Perspective on Research and Policy. In: Ball, A.F. and Tyson, C.A., Eds., *Studying Diversity in Teacher Education*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 19-23.

- [17] Creswell, J.W. and Poth, C.N. (2018) *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*. Sage.
- [18] Creswell, J. (1997) *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Traditions*. Sage Publications.
- [19] Bryman, A. (2016) *Social Research Methods*. Gutenberg. (In Greek)
- [20] Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, **3**, 77-101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>
- [21] Tsiolis, G. (2018) Thematic Analysis of Qualitative Data. In: Zamakis, G., Ed., *Research Trajectories in the Social Sciences. Theoretical-Methodological Contributions and Case Studies*, University of Crete-Lab of Social Analysis and Applied Social Research, 97-125. (In Greek)
- [22] Zachos, D. and Michailidou, A. (2014) "Others" in Textbooks: The Case of Greek Sixth Grade's History Textbook. *Theory in Action*, **7**, 1-25. <https://doi.org/10.3798/tia.1937-0237.14016>
- [23] Zachos, D.T. (2017) Roma, Curriculum, and Textbooks: The Case of Greece. *Creative Education*, **8**, 1656-1672. <https://doi.org/10.4236/ce.2017.810112>