



## **POLICY BRIEF**

### **Greek Education Policy and the Challenge of Migration: 'An Intercultural View of Assimilation'**

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The last two decades of immigration have significantly, and irreversibly, altered the social, cultural, economic, ethnic, racial and religious characteristics of the population residing within Greece. The education sector is probably one of the most sensitive and politically charged areas of public policy that responds to the challenges of a society that is culturally and ethnically diverse like Greek society is today.

The core questions that we have explored in this study are: how has inter-cultural education been designed in Greece in response to growing immigration? How is it perceived to relate to Greek identity? What are the main objectives of Greek educational policy as regards contemporary Greek society overall and the immigrant population in particular? Are these changing, and if so in what direction? Are there differences in perception on the part of the various stakeholders? Is the European dimension relevant (and if yes, in what ways) in the development of an intercultural/multicultural approach in Greek education?

The findings presented here are based on a comprehensive analysis of policy documents and other relevant data collected in the course of our fieldwork in the Ministry of Education and at meetings with NGOs and with other relevant actors in the education domain. The primary material analysed includes fourteen qualitative interviews with policy actors and two discussion groups with teachers and pupils of an intercultural schools as well as a number of informal discussions with researchers and other key informants.

The Greek education system has undergone important changes in the last two decades with a view to modernizing its framework and to adapting it to the changing international environment. Two types of changes are identified in the system:

First, a general reform of the structures and methods of the educational system. Laws 2525/97 and 2640/98 reformed the educational system in Greece in 1997-1998. The former concentrated on the Comprehensive Lykeio (upper high school), the establishment of day-long pre- and elementary school, 'second' opportunity schools, the enrolment list of teachers to be appointed, the modernization of the Pedagogical Institute, a system with which to evaluate educational achievement and educators, the creation of an Open University, and the enrichment of curricula and departments of Universities. The latter, concentrated on Secondary Technical-Vocational education through institutionalizing Technical-Vocational Schools.

Second, an intercultural education dimension was developed in the Greek public education system. There are two components within this. One has to do with the need to respond to and address the educational, cultural, linguistic needs principally of the Greek Muslim minority mainly concentrated in the north-east of the country, and to a lesser degree of the Roma population. These initiatives fall outside the scope of this study.

The other component has to do with the need to respond to and address the educational, cultural, and linguistic needs of the new arrivals; in short, of the repatriates and their descendants, and of the foreign nationals who have been arriving and settling in Greece since the early 1990s. These needs were mainly addressed through the creation of reception classes. Reception classes were first set up in gymnasiums and lyceums in the 1980s. It was not until the mid 1990s that a more comprehensive legislative framework was developed with the aim to respond to the changing educational needs of contemporary Greek society. Law 2416/96 set the foundations for intercultural education in Greece. It established intercultural schools as a special category of schools and institute reception classes for students with little or no knowledge of Greek.

During the 1970s and 1980s, intercultural education was developed primarily with the intention to integrate the children of repatriates mainly from Germany, and also from the USA, Canada, Australia and South Africa. Over the 1980s this repatriation trickled down in intensity and was replaced by repatriation of ethnic Greeks and immigrants from Southeast Europe and the former Soviet Republics. Law 1894/1990 revised the 1404/1983 legislation on reception classes, incorporated these classes in the mainstream public school system and focused on Greek language, culture and history courses for pupils who did not have Greek as their mother-tongue.

The assimilation approach of the early phases continues to define Greek educational policy today even though the overwhelming majority of the immigrant population in Greece does not fall within the co-ethnic, returnee category.

Considering the methods and tools of intercultural education, our research highlighted the following core issues:

First, mother-tongue learning has been rather restricted so far. The subject of teaching the mother-tongue language or the culture of origin to foreign pupils, has not been considered to be a priority since learning Greek is considered as the key vehicle to integration. Knowledge of the language of their country of residence is fundamental in avoiding social and economic exclusion. However, in agreement

with much of the literature on intercultural education, teachers interviewed supported mother-tongue learning and the development of corresponding instruction material as a valuable learning method.

Second, intercultural education requires acknowledgement of the difference that exists within the immigrant school population. Intercultural education initiatives in Greece have tended to ignore the diversity within the linguistic background of the foreign student population and the ensuing linguistic needs in how to learn Greek.

Third, individual initiative remains the most important factor and motor of intercultural education in Greece. The private initiative, preparedness to 'go the extra mile' outside the scope of their professional duties, investment of personal time and resources on the part of teachers and school principals was underlined by all parties (by the teachers, the immigrant associations and the students) as the key factor making a difference in the way and extent to which education incorporates an intercultural dimension.

As regards teachers and people involved in intercultural education, it is necessary to underline that in the sample that we came into contact with during our fieldwork, all demonstrated a very committed effort to make the schools a venue in which immigrant children would not feel as a minority, or excluded. Emphasis is placed on anti-racist messages, equality and learning about each other's country and culture of origin. At the same time, great pride was taken in showing the impressive progress accomplished on the part of immigrant children in their aptitude and speed to learn Greek and to become accustomed with Greek literature, poetry, culture, mythology.

Fifth, the gap that may exist with regard to interculturalism as it is defined in the policy and how it is implemented in practice also has to do with the fact that information does not trickle up from the schools to the Ministry. Bureaucratic hurdles and lack of funds render the situation more challenging. In many cases, Ministry officials appeared to not be aware of challenges faced by teachers and schools regarding the overall integration of immigrant students in the classrooms. For instance, they did not seem to be aware of the difficulties frequently faced by teachers who may have one or two foreign students who speak no Greek in integrating these students into the curriculum and the classroom. In rural areas where there is no easily available support system, or no provisions for reception or tutorial classes or Greek language classes, and no bilingual educational material and textbooks to assist the teaching the difficulties become even more significant. At the same time, teachers and staff from the intercultural schools we came into contact with expressed a deep frustration with the long bureaucratic delays, the lack of available resources (in terms of material and textbooks, bilingual teachers, additional staff to run the reception and support classes, etc.), and the frequent lack of interest in supporting their efforts.

Finally, an additional finding that may be discerned from our interviews is that the European dimension in education is largely irrelevant. It appeared to not be an issue for education policy in general because it is considered as integrated within the Greek dimension. There is limited awareness of EU directives that may affect Greek curricula or the Greek education system with the exception of the Directorate on European Affairs at the Ministry. There was thus no perception that 'Europe,' its internal diversity or the set of values that it represents were posing challenges that required Greece to reassess its educational system.

To conclude, migration and the need to accommodate and respond to the challenges arising from the current diversity within Greek society is fully acknowledged by the Greek authorities. Particularly in

the past decade, the institutional and legislative system has incorporated an intercultural dimension in Greek education.

However, until recently the provisions mainly consisted of measures relevant for the immigrant school population only, and these measures were part of an implicit assimilation approach.

In more recent years, there has been a persistent pressure on the part of the academic community and educators involved in intercultural education to engage in a wider debate on the subject of intercultural education and to redefine the objectives, methods and approaches of educational policy. From this perspective, the intercultural dimension ought to transcend all aspects, levels and disciplines of the educational system since it is equally relevant for the immigrant and the majority student populations.

In this context, the following set of policy relevant considerations is put forward for discussion:

Teachers and staff in the field of education underlined that existing practices and provisions for intercultural education are inadequate. Their underlying orientation towards assimilation is being questioned by educators concerned with the longer term needs to integrate foreign and Greek pupils in a multicultural society and a wider multicultural environment. Although there was no mention of overt cases of discrimination, racism and xenophobia in schools, the need to promote initiatives that will facilitate communication between different ethnic, linguistic and religious groups, and **tap into the cultural capital of foreign students** were highlighted as issues requiring the attention of policy makers. In this context, **mother tongue courses and classes on history and culture of country of origin are valuable assets** in intercultural education.

Continued and consistent training and support to educators and teachers in the field of multicultural education is required. As one of our middle rank officials of the Ministry interviewed noted, there is a need for additional screening of teachers who offer to serve in schools with a high percentage of non Greek mother tongue pupils with a view to ensuring that people with expertise on the subject and/or motivated to tackle the challenge of cultural diversity would be appointed. Another measure proposed by this interviewee that we endorse is a special provision that schools with a high percentage of non-Greek mother tongue pupils are enabled to have smaller classes (about half the size of the standard class size, i.e. 15 instead of 30 students per class). The smaller class-size would facilitate learning as well as class cohesion while making these schools attractive to Greek mother tongue pupils and their parents, thus also preventing the ghettoisation of some neighbourhood schools in central Athens.

It is necessary to underline that intercultural education is a cross cutting dimension that ought to transcend the Greek education system from pre-school to secondary education embracing all schools, curricula, school programming, disciplines and materials. Moreover, its objective ought not only be to integrate foreign pupils, but equally to expose majority students to other cultures and thereby substantially engage in an intercultural dialogue and substantive exchange and understanding of diversity and own identity.

We therefore propose a substantial reform of law 2413/1996 with a view to expand and complement the scope and means of intercultural education in Greece. In particular we propose that

- The meaning and scope of the intercultural dimension in education needs to be clearly stated in a new law.
- We put forward the following definition of intercultural education: *intercultural education involves not only intercultural exchange and knowledge of other cultures but also a*

*reconsideration of the ingroup culture through the integration of culturally diverse pupils into a cohesive societal whole.*

- The new law should also state clearly the measures that need to be taken to implement the intercultural dimension in education.
- In our view such measures include: the continuation of reception and support classes for non Greek mother tongue pupils; the promotion of the teaching of the language and culture of the main countries of origin in optional courses during afternoon hours for all students; further revisions in school curricula and textbooks with a view to acknowledging and celebrating the plural character of Greek society and culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> century;
- Curricula and textbooks, especially of history, civic education and geography, should also be checked with a view to eliminating attitudes and interpretations of events that present hierarchies of civilizations or that include – implicitly or explicitly – racist/discriminatory content.
- Finally, contrary to what has been common practice so far, intercultural education should be vested with appropriate resources rather than being left to the initiative and conscience (*φιλότιμο* - *filotimo*) of teachers and school principals.