Multiculturalism, diversity and the need for tolerance and Greek kindergarten teachers

Introduction

The meaning of the term multiculturalism has been debated and often criticized as lacking one fixed meaning, with some going so far as to dispute that it has a theoretical underpinning. Initially employed in North America and specifically Canada in the late 1950s and later in the United States and Australia, the migration of people in the latter half of twentieth century as well as the consequences of geopolitical realities, has resulted in the term being used by other countries. But while the same term may be used, people often use it to mean different things. The rise of the multicultural movement in Western societies in the past four decades has led to discussions as to how to deal with the phenomenon of multiculturalism. The manner in which it is visualized affects policy makers and implementers. According to Lord Parekh

“Multiculturalism is sometimes taken to mean that different cultural communities should live their own ways of life in a self-contained manner. This is not its only meaning and in fact it has long been obsolete. Multiculturalism basically means that no culture is perfect or represents the best life and that it can therefore benefit from a critical dialogue with other cultures. In this sense multiculturalism requires that all cultures should be open, self-critical, and interactive in their relations with other each other.”

The education community also faces the question of what to do with multiculturalism. In this paper we will be examining the concepts of multiculturalism, diversity and tolerance as perceived by kindergarten teachers.

Multiculturalism, diversity and tolerance

Discussing multiculturalism begins by looking at ‘culture’. Kymlicka views culture's importance as stemming from its serving as a context for individual choices, others as constituting a person's identity or as “the common world of experiences, values and knowledge.

---

1 The author wishes to thank Professor Argyris Kyridis and his co-researchers at the Department of Nursery and Kindergarten Education - University of Western Macedonia for making the data set available.


that a certain social group constitutes”. In other words culture may be seen as determining the way a person perceives his/her position in the social and natural worlds and within a person's life. Multiply this by the number of different groups involved and we have an idea of what multiculturalism can represent.

We perceive multiculturalism as being concerned with the principles and practices of "accommodating diversity" in ways that guarantee interconnectedness. Thus, a basic objective of multiculturalism is not the promotion of minorities as such, but the evolution of a society in which diversity is recognized as a legitimate and integral facet of the society. Multiculturalism in itself has a transformative power which requires ‘identification with a growing circle’. In essence, multiculturalism refers to the belief that, within a framework of key common values, members of different cultural and ethnic groups have the right to retain distinctive identities. If we accept that multiculturalism is intrinsically good and valuable, then diversity itself is a virtue and should be seen as such and maximized within the educational arena. Therefore, policies and programs need to reflect and support this and to include efforts to ensure equality of opportunity.

From policy maker down to layman the issue of the multiculturalism of Europe as a whole as well as its individual parts has been discussed at all levels of society. This in part is because Europe is not made up of nations established by immigrants. Almost all European countries have seen a dramatic increase in the percentage of foreigners making up their population.

The issue of diversity has been and remains central to discussions on the future of Europe. Principles of social equality, integration and acceptance of cultural diversity are evident in both the policy and rhetoric of European society. However, cultural change and cultural power can produce anxiety, often articulated as xenophobic rhetoric, among ethnic and cultural majorities as well as minorities. Diversity impacts not only individuals but the society in which they live. Developing understanding of others is fundamental to accepting diversity. This

---

9 Committee of Ministers..., op. cit.
acceptance, along with the ideals of equality and integration, can be transmitted through the process of socialization; a fundamental role of schooling. Schools have the opportunity to create positive inter-group climates within which diverse groups can interact, learn from and develop positive attitudes towards one another\textsuperscript{10}. The manner in which teachers understand, plan, and execute their responsibilities in the classroom, with the children and their parents, can foster those understandings needed to maximize the potential of all children. Commensurately, they have a fundamental role to play in the efficacy of the entire process by helping native born children and newcomers develop the skills, attitudes and behaviors needed to become critical thinking and active citizens.

The concept of tolerance has to do with knowledge of the “other”. A key moral virtue in the development of free and open societies, tolerance is the foundation of democracy and human rights. Acknowledging and accepting cultural difference, while being wary of stereotyping, is basic to developing an environment that fosters tolerance. Intolerance in multicultural societies has often led to discrimination, marginalization leading to human rights violations and even exclusion. Tolerance isn’t benign indifference towards cultural and social differences among individuals, but rather active acceptance of cultural diversity coupled with a willingness to defend this value.

The signatories to UNESCO's \textit{Declaration of Principles on Tolerance} in 1995 accepted that tolerance is neither indulgence nor indifference but that in fact it is respect and appreciation of the rich variety of our world's cultures; varying forms of expression and ways of being human. As Georgiou\textsuperscript{11} argues, “people are naturally diverse; only tolerance can ensure the survival of mixed communities in every region of the globe. The diversity of our world's many religions, languages, cultures and ethnicities is not a pretext for conflict, but is a treasure that enriches us all.”

Teachers are increasingly confronted with classrooms that are ethnically, religiously and racially diverse. It is very important that teachers are prepared with knowledge and skills to meet the needs of every child and to do so with tolerance, that is, with an acceptance of diversity. Examining whether or not tolerance is evident can be seen in: expressions of interpersonal


\textsuperscript{11} P. Georgiou, \textit{Multiculturalism and the war on terror}.
awareness, closeness, and sensitivity\textsuperscript{12}. Furthermore, signs of apprehension, uncertainty and a semblance of intolerance to diversity in the classroom may be a result of inadequate training\textsuperscript{13}.

**Multicultural Greece**

Multiculturalism can be seen as a foundation for a new demographic realism. The school population demographics we see in Greece present just such a profile, which on the one hand is increasingly multicultural while on the other sees native born populations decreasing.\textsuperscript{14} A comparison of the 1981-1991-2001 Greek Census indicates that while in the first two censuses the population increase due to immigrants was around 33\% by 2001 it was 95\%.\textsuperscript{15}

Consequently, the demographic changes of the last two and half decades have seen an increasing need for Greek society to come to terms with this new multicultural reality. It is no longer one of the most homogeneously racial, cultural and linguistic societies in Europe, but rather one where the multiculturality is at the forefront, especially in the context of education. The newcomers can be characterized as economic immigrants, political refugees and ethnic Greek immigrants from countries of the former Soviet Union. Their arrival in Greece has created a new reality of multilingualism and multiculturalism whereas, until the newcomers’ arrival, Greece was considered to be linguistically and culturally homogenous. As a result, the Greek teacher needed to be prepared to deal with the new school reality and able to face it with sensitivity and appropriate training.

**The role of pre-school/early childhood education and multiculturalism**

Research has shown that the experiences of young children have particular relevance in the development of their cultural models\textsuperscript{16}. Experiences and interactions with significant others,

\begin{itemize}
  \item F. Malkidi, *Aspects of the demographic…*, op. cit.
\end{itemize}
(i.e., parents, teachers and cohorts) from a very early age serve as a foundation for what they know and conceive. As Gomez points out children’s attitudes about other cultural groups begin to be formed early in the pre-school years. Therefore, pre-school/early childhood education and kindergarten teachers play a very important role in the process. Both help transmit the need for recognition and acceptance of diversity and the contributions of different nationality groups in the growth of world culture. Thus, they can both help decrease intolerance and increase positively oriented collaboration. As researchers have pointed out, effective teaching in multicultural classes presupposes teacher training. This training needs to incorporate, among other things, issues of integration, identity, diversity and the problems of language teaching, communication and collaboration with parents.

Ensuring children’s active participation, socialization within diversity and success in school requires cooperation and collaboration. The social integration of students from linguistically different environments entails dealing with their linguistic problems. The role of family is also very important. Living together in an increasingly multicultural society has as a prerequisite the support of the family along three axes: education of parents, participation in school activities and collaboration between parents and teachers. Swick argues that

---


18 R.A. Gomez, Teaching with a multicultural perspective. ERIC Digest 1991, ED339548.


23 K. Swick, Perspectives on understanding…, op. cit.
preparing parents to become involved in their children’s schooling may be achieved by helping them acquire self-confidence and recognizing their importance as role models for their children.

The pre-school education curriculum is intended to provide young children experiences for interaction between themselves, their teachers and a wider social environment through activities appropriate for their age and development\(^\text{24}\). The experiences and activities deriving from the curriculum can also contribute to the development of expertise in the domain of racial and cultural diversity\(^\text{25}\). The kindergarten teacher needs to be aware of many things when teaching in multicultural settings where tolerance needs to be present. Students from different cultural environments have grown up with different sounds, rhythms and priorities and when coming to school encounter cultural models different from those of their home environment. The choices teachers make on what to include or exclude in their teaching supports the fact that they teach culture, even if they are not directly aware of it\(^\text{26}\). The same content can have different importance to diverse groups of children. Furthermore, the child’s language ability also plays its role in the process to be followed\(^\text{27}\). Beyond this though, the teacher needs to be mindful that his/her minority pupil and parents often face extremely difficult conditions often leading them to be marginalized, discriminated against and possibly excluded. Better training and resources are needed\(^\text{28}\).

Pre-school teachers can adopt a variety of strategies in the classroom that link multiculturalism, diversity, tolerance, and student integration. Children while perhaps not being ready to deal with laws and discrimination are however capable of understanding issues of fairness and individual rights through role-playing and other activities designed to engage both hands and minds\(^\text{29}\). Teachers can collaborate with the children in developing projects that focus on cultural elements represented in the class make-up or from other cultures. Other strategies


could include utilizing play as a means of promoting cultural awareness, social action, cooperative decision-making and recognition of various social problems such as racism, but also by activating resolution strategies.

From the aforementioned literature we are able to identify five broad categories that make up the parameters that can be linked to multiculturalism and tolerance. These include: language-communication, school and socialization, school-family relations, learning environment (curriculum/experiences/collaboration), and teacher training.

**Methodology**

The aim of the research was to examine how kindergarten teachers view teaching in multicultural classes. Professional teaching experience in culturally and linguistically homogeneous classes was a pre-condition and constituted a criterion for participation in the research. Thus, all the kindergarten teachers participating in the study had more than 10 years of service and therefore would have been teaching long enough to have had such experiences.

Content analysis was selected as the research tool. Written texts of twenty-two Greek kindergarten teachers (Northern mainland Greece, n=16; Southern Greek Island, n=2; Southern Peninsular Greece, n=2; Central mainland Greece, n=2) working in multicultural classes were analyzed. The texts were in the form of reports on the theme: "The problems that we face in multicultural classes". Our analysis differed from the original in that we included an analysis of tolerance and diversity and not merely problems faced in multicultural classes. Our analysis however, differed less directly with the categorization of the teachers’ references, although here too there were differences. The basic unit of analysis remained the theme (problem) with efforts made to associate it with the parameters of multiculturalism, tolerance and diversity. In conjunction with our review of the literature and consideration of the reports given by the study participants, we identified five categories within which two were made up of two subcategories.

---


The five categories include: a) language-communication, b) school and socialization (subcategories: behavior of young child and acceptance by age cohorts), c) school-family relations (subcategories: collaboration with foreign parents and attitude of native parents), d) learning environment and participation in class activities, and e) teacher training. There were 120 references identified during the review of the study participant reports. The distributions by thematic category/subcategory are presented along with the analysis of each category which follows.

Data presentation and analysis by thematic category

Language-communication: Our first thematic category deals with references by the kindergarten teachers to linguistic problems and/or difficulties that the children with cultural particularities often face. Language-communication assembled 19 references (15.8%). Ten of the identified references characterize the subject of language as a “common and even extreme problem”. In two cases the subject of language is considered “a problem but easily handled”. Finally in only one case, when the children of multicultural class were not from an indigenous cultural minority, does language not constitute either a communication obstacle or one that affects the educational process. This is because “they have experience with the language”. The fact that the teachers make references to language-communication related problems and/or difficulties is not unusual as numerous studies support this finding. However, what is noteworthy is that there are no references that show tolerance in terms of the newcomers being able to either maintain their native language, use it to transition to their second language or deal with the problems that are apparent.

School and socialization: In this category we find nearly one third of all the references (34 or 28.3%) clustered. In this category we distinguished two subcategories. In the first subcategory we classified the references that concern the Behavior of young child as a result of a cultural environment different from the majority group (14 or 11.6%). Two of the fourteen references classified as belonging to this subcategory noted that the children “generally adapt easily” to the new cultural environment. All the other references note obstacles such as “difficulties exist” or “more time is needed for adaptation”. The latter text excerpt is perhaps the only one that can be interpreted as broadly expressing tolerance (but not as specifically due to diversity) in that they acknowledge that more time is needed. Other texts allude to the children being introverted and/or mingling only with classmates from their own background,
stating for example “they usually don't communicate and isolate themselves”, “they are introverted or interact with children like themselves”. Others focus on how the children exhibit reticence, fear and aggression. Acceptance by age cohorts makes up the second subcategory. Twenty (or 16.7%) of the references are in this subcategory. What distinguishes these references is that here the teachers note the Greek children’s stance towards the foreign children. The teachers references focus on the subject along a range of stances: comparative-benign (“Greek children are equally prone to opening up with difficulty/the other children do not accept them easily); negative (“the [Greek] children treat them harshly”); racist (“they disapprove of them because they are not Greek and turn them away/the children [Greek] call them ‘Alvavanaki’” [while not derogatory in and of itself, its use here is meant as a demeaning reference to Albanians]); and ultimately exclusionist (“they are kept apart, segregated in separate areas and groups”). There is a notable lack of discussion or references on how to deal with the manner in which the native born children treat the foreign born in both subcategories. This does not appear to be a result of tolerance, either in terms of acceptance of diversity (tolerance) or as acceptance of the status quo (tolerating). Rather it seems to be almost due to a separation from the issue, without recognition of the benefits that come either from diversity or respect for the newcomer’s cultural heritage.

School-family relations: Classified in this thematic category are the references (38 or 31.6%) concerned with the school-family and in particular parents of the children (foreign and native born). In this category we distinguished two subcategories. In the first subcategory, entitled Collaboration with the foreign parents, we classified the 19 references (or 15.8%), linking the foreign born parents to the school. Only two cases give positive references to the parents of these children using descriptors such as “dear and collaborative/very polite and dear”. The more common attitude referenced is the lack of parental interest and their absence from school life such as “they show no interest about their children’s progress/a problem exists with the parents that never come”. Interestingly, a few present interpretations to explain the parent’s attitude including, “the parents usually are ashamed to come to ask about their children/apart from the children the parents also feel alienated”. Finally, we find a group of references focusing on communication and cooperation problems, noting for example, “generally we have difficulties in communicating” going so far as to state that “the parents are unreliable and do not collaborate”. In this category, the references tend to be negative and
provide little information that can be used to improve this lack of cooperation/collaboration and build on the very important issue of school-family relationships. The second subcategory, *Attitude of native parents*, has to do with the stance held by the parents of the native born students towards foreign born children. Nineteen texts (or 15.8%) make up this thematic subcategory. Out of the 19 references, only one case reported no existing problems (“*With the parents of the Greek children I do not have problems because the community is small and everyone knows each other*”). In the others, the teachers’ references focus on their belief that Greek parents share responsibility for the situation that prevails in the multicultural kindergartens. Thus, they hold the parents accountable for the negative influence they have on their children, in terms of how they deal with what is "different". Examples of their references include, “*parents are to blame for the problems*” and “*Greek children are negatively influenced by their home environment*”. Others are more explicit and note that Greek parents make it a point of deterring their children from coming into contact with the foreign born children, stating that their Greek pupils have told them: “*my mother told me not to play with Albanians*”. There is a commonality among many of the references as expressed by what several teachers noted, saying: “*the biggest problem I face is with the parents of our own [Greek] children*”, or “*We are pressured to remove the Albanian child from where the Greek children congregate*”. Finally, the study participants in many cases characterized the Greek parent’s behavior as outright racist, i.e., “*the parents sole criteria for choosing a kindergarten is the number of Albanian children that attend, this is racism/the Greek parents are racists/if the parents are racists the children will become racists*”. The native born children’s parents are seen as imposing their home culture onto that of the school. Thus, we would argue that while the teachers apparently see the intolerance on the part of the parents as a detriment, they make no reference to ways of mediating it. This lack of mediating references appears to be an extension of their inability or unwillingness to directly deal with the issues that arise in terms of equity and tolerance in multicultural settings with respect to both sets of parents.

**Learning environment and participation in the class activities:** The 18 references (or 15%) associated with this category are concerned with the in-class participation of young children from different cultural environments. We looked at these references in the context of involvement and congruence. Only two cases reported that a positive correspondence exists between participation and time in class. Indicative of these are: “*The child watches the activities*
carefully and believes that he accomplishes them well” and “In the beginning he did not participate in the activities of the class, but afterwards he was actively involved in everything”. Beyond these two positive notes, half of the remaining references deal with children having difficulties taking part in activities because of their different cultural background. An example of these types of references include: “The teacher cannot collaborate with the child easily because of the child’s cultural background”. In the remainder of the cases the children appear to choose to separate themselves from the activities, i.e. “they are simple observers of activities”, “they feel isolated”, “these children do not participate in the activities and trivialize the school”. Interestingly, here we see that some of the teachers reference reasons for the children’s behavior that may include cultural diversity. However, they do not move beyond this description to propose ways of modeling tolerance.

**Teacher training:** The last category contains the smallest number of references (11 or 9.2%). These references are concerned with how they can effectively cope with the changing demographic reality as mirrored in the Greek kindergarten. The study participants note that they have insufficient training to deal with multicultural classes. This is made even more relevant when we consider how many years separate them from their initial training which took place at a time when Greek society wasn’t dealing with multiculturalism and diversity. “When we were students, the [kindergarten] classes were homogeneous and courses of cross-cultural education didn’t exist”. They go on to note that the need for further training exists, i.e., “We also need support, that is to say training”. A common theme found here as well as in many of the excerpts is the lack of initiative on the part of the teachers themselves. This may in part be due to the highly centralized and top-down nature of the Greek educational system. On the other hand it may also be a result of the absence of training on how to deal with children from different cultural environments, which they reference a need for.

**Conclusions**

In this paper we discussed issues of multiculturalism, diversity and tolerance and how these link to early childhood education and teaching. These were used as a background for the presentation of research findings of kindergarten teachers’ written texts on problems encountered in multicultural classes.

The analysis of kindergarten teachers’ views constitutes an excellent data source touching upon their thoughts, beliefs, and experiences in multicultural classes, especially in
relation to the broad parameters linked to concepts of multiculturalism and tolerance. With respect to the study described in this paper, the findings appear to show that the kindergarten teachers, while aware of the problems, seem not to get involved with findings ways to overcome or deal with them. We also note that there are few if any direct and/or indirect references to the positive results that recognizing diversity and practicing tolerance may provide all the students. A question that arises and was not part of the study is the degree to which they are cognizant of intervention techniques that may be used to deal with the problems they cite, other than to state that they need training. However, they do not specify what kinds of training they would need, which leads us to hypothesize that while they have a general awareness that problems exist, they appear not to have personally investigated ways in which to overcome these issues.

The school age population of many countries is increasingly multicultural. Ignoring diversity and the need for tolerance can intensify rhetoric and behavior that leads to xenophobia and social racism. The issues of language, socialization, school-family, learning environment-participation and training kindergarten teachers referenced are indeed problems, and will remain so, if we do not promote an awareness of the benefits of diversity and the significance of the role tolerance plays. Educational policies and practices need to take into consideration the challenges facing teachers in multicultural classes. The ultimate goal is for teachers to help all children learn tolerance and the positive message diversity represents, and thereby ensures equitable treatment for all.

As with the other levels of education, the Greek kindergarten needs renewal with regards to the manner in which it can benefit from an appreciation of multiculturalism and diversity. Targeting teachers understanding of the means to help meet the needs of all their students is a potential starting point. Clearly Greek early childhood teacher education programs need to direct their attention to issues of multiculturality.33 Realistic pre-service and continuing education programs based on field research are needed to help teachers become prepared to maximize the benefits of cultural diversity in a multicultural Europe.

Summary

**Multiculturalism, diversity and the need for tolerance and Greek kindergarten teachers**
As prime socializers of the young, teachers are particularly challenged by the expansion of multicultural diversity in Europe. Helping teachers deal with diversity and tolerance has to do with an exploration of their concerns about teaching in multicultural settings. Based on this, the study presented here aimed at analyzing the problems Greek kindergarten teachers encounter in teaching multicultural classes. Content analysis of twenty-two Greek kindergarten teachers’ written texts revealed five thematic categories of problems in working with children from diverse cultural environments. This paper revisits the study findings and attempts to address the issues of multiculturalism, diversity and tolerance through an examination of kindergarten teacher practices. This paper contributes to the ongoing discussion about multiculturalism, diversity and tolerance and how teachers regard these from the perspective of their teaching practice.

Citation:

Spinthourakis, JA (2007). Multiculturalism, diversity and the need for tolerance and Greek kindergarten teachers. *Problemy Wczesnej Edukacji* [Problems of Early Education] [a Polish Journal], 1/2(5-6).