

THE ISSUE OF SOCIAL JUSTICE IN EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES AND THE ROLE OF TEACHERS IN TODAY'S SCHOOL: A STUDY OF TEACHERS' DISCOURSE FACED WITH THE CHALLENGE OF MIGRATING

EVMORFIA KIPOUROPOULOU

Adjunct Lecturer
Department of Primary Education
School of Humanities and Social Sciences
University of Western Macedonia
53100 Florina, Greece

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ABSTRACT

This paper is mainly exploring primary school teachers' discourse about immigrant children inclusion in Greek schools. More specifically it focuses on how teachers construct their discourse while talking about refugee and immigrant students expressing their view regarding the issue of social justice in educational practice. Social justice is a precondition for inclusive education. Within the framework of the application of social justice in the school system, teachers need to be interculturally sensitized, to know themselves and to be open to difference and change and to act as agents of inclusion and social justice. Teachers who composed the research sample, while referring to social justice, express the principles of equality, equal educational opportunity, access to educational necessities, respect of different cultural provenance, empathy and collaboration with parents. Twenty-five interviews were conducted and have been initially analyzed using Critical Discourse Analysis techniques.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Social Justice, immigrant students

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Following the great influx of refugee populations over the past years, Greece was faced with the challenge to manage the reception and accommodation –temporary or permanent- of a significant number of refugees and their families. Beyond the registration of these newly – arrived populations¹, their accommodation, nutrition and medical care had to be provided for, as well. The educational sector was also immediately influenced considering that a few thousand among the newly-arrived refugees were pre-school and primary school children.

¹According to data published by UNHCR in 2019, the refugee influx in Greece counts 62.190 individuals, out of whom 49.438 arrived over sea and 12.752 over land. In 2018 the percentage of children and women refugees was over 59% of the total refugee population. <https://www.immigration.gov.gr>

The inclusion of refugee children in Greek schools is a major issue that has been preoccupying Greek society and the educational community since 2016, when the first ministerial decisions were made and the first action on the children's education was taken². In the effort made for the inclusion and the future of refugees coming to Greece, education prevails as an institution of priority. The educational system is, therefore, called upon to find effective ways of co-education among the local and refugee student populations, by focusing on the creation of an intercultural mentality within school units and in the educational practices in the school environment, making inclusion a rather one-way street in the school culture.

2.0 EDUCATIONAL INCLUSION AND THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER

The concept of inclusive education consists of two dimensions, the social and the pedagogical one, which exclude any process of assimilation. The social, as well as the educational, aim is for all students to be treated as equal members of the educational community, without exceptions. Primary values which inclusive education upholds are the provision of equal opportunity for all students and the acceptance and respect of the equality and difference of all students. There is, therefore, no such thing as an "unteachable" student in the classroom (Choleva, 2017). This is a new philosophy concerning the alteration of all methods and practices of today's school, which includes reform changes for all students and aims at everyone's inclusion (Evangelou & Moula, 2016: p. 157).

For inclusive education to be successful, not only the strategies and specific teaching methods are enough, but the stance, convictions, and teaching practices need to change drastically so that all students, male and female, have an equal opportunity to learn. Inclusion does not only aim at academic progress but also at the social development of the students, by encouraging their equal participation in the social sphere (Mamas, 2014: pp. 81-83).

According to Florian & Hawkins (2011:p. 826), Pantic,N.&Florian,L. (2015) basic principles of the Education of Inclusion are, on the one hand, the reduction of inequalities in education and, on the other, the role that the teacher can play in the progress of students along the education of teachers as promoters of social change. Following this model of education, individual differences are accepted without necessarily being based on individualised approaches. This involves the expansion of already available approaches and teaching practices that are applied in the frame of inclusive education and that can be supported by the relevant school units, while the hierarchy of the "majority" and "minority" of the educated is rejected.

Within this framework, the active agents in the practice of Inclusive Education are the teachers themselves who have to be responsible "active agents", aware of their role, capable of recognizing social exclusion, dealing with the problems their students face as dilemmas and questions and not as deficiencies, eager to collaborate with other institutions or groups,

²Significant change was achieved with law N.4415/2016 (GG.A.159) "Amendment for Greek-language education, intercultural education".

such as fellow teachers, social services and their students' families. These teachers need to reflect on their actions, as well.

Research has shown that teachers conceptualize the coexistence of students from various countries coming to school in a different way (Pickert & Chock, 1997; Leighton & Harkins, 2010; Kipouropoulou, 2019), while they also present varying views. Research, thus, concludes that it is necessary for educators to interact and actively participate in the classroom, as well as to be trained through educational programmes in order to alter the way they deal with issues of identity and difference.

According to Byram (2008), Byram, Nichols and Stevens (2001) and Heller and Wocniak (2009), Vlachou (1997) within the framework of Inclusive Education it is important that teachers are divested of any prejudice regarding other cultures as well as of their biased faith in their "own" culture, and that they acquire knowledge of other social groups, the latter's cultural products, practices and processes of social and interpersonal interaction, and they cultivate the ability to detect and interpret ethnocentric views, intercultural misinterpretations or conflicting interpretations of social phenomena. Intercultural ability is a multi-faceted and dynamic concept for the development of which a good knowledge of the historical and cultural context of these various cultures is required, along with respect, empathy, communicational awareness and effective adjustment in multicultural environments.

3.0 THE ISSUE OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

Social Justice emanates from the principle of equality, which relates to the application of certain rules and practices, based on a shared code of values as well as on an internal sense of justice. Social justice is a basic element and expression of democracy in society, through which the self-value and self-sufficiency of citizens are secured against any form of oppression and injustice.

The various conceptualizations of the term "social justice" regarding either the equal distribution of goods and the provision of equal opportunity, the reciprocation of goods which one earns with her labour, or the right of everyone to participate equally in a democratic society. The latter comprises the kind of social justice linked to the right to difference, which can have biological, cultural or social dimensions (Eleftherakis, 2008).

Justice is the "adherence to the principles of law", within individual social frameworks. Social Justice is an imperative and universal demand of individuals against social injustice. It is a claim which demands the abolition of privileges, the allocation and protection of civil rights so that all citizens have the rights of social equality, freedom, equality before the law, meritocracy, egalitarianism and brotherhood (Diamantopoulos, 2008: pp. 268-269). The concept of social justice is connected, according to Bell (1997) and Furman & Shields (2003), to the development of democratic societies, meaning that social justice delineated equal participation in this democracy, which in turn allows the equal distribution of wealth to all its citizens, who are characterized by freedom of will and interdependence. Social justice, therefore, is a precondition for inclusive education. Within the framework of the application of social justice in the school system, teachers need to be interculturally sensitized, to know

themselves and to be open to difference and change, to have a well-developed philosophy of education, to possess a good knowledge of the educational material, and to apply educational psychology in multicultural educational environments (Grant & Gillette, 2006).

4.0 RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

In the present proposition the results of an initial investigation in the views of primary-education teachers are presented, as those were framed within the study. The research material was compiled through semi-constructed interviews of 25 primary school teachers (16 women and 9 men), whose discourse was analyzed with the use of Critical Discourse Analysis techniques (Fairclough 1992, 1995), and out of whom seven (7) had received some kind of intercultural training. Convenient sampling methods were used due to the specific situation of the pandemic of covid 19.

The research aims at:

- The investigation of the views of primary-school teachers regarding the inclusion of refugee and immigrant students in the educational system
- The investigation of any intercultural awareness of these primary-school teachers
- The study of their view regarding the issue of social justice in educational practice

The point under investigation here relates to the way in which teachers perceive the concept of social justice and its application in education.

5.0 RESULTS

5.1 The issue of social justice: definition and application in educational practice

Teachers express with certainty the basic principles of social justice, which can be formulated as follows: development of an ethical basis with a devotion on the pursuit of social justice and equal opportunity, emphasis on local action and on realistic conditions within each school unit, the connection of school and educational practice with the wider community and especially the family. These principles are also encountered in the relevant literature.

Some excerpts from the discourse of the teachers are presented as examples, in which the application of inclusive education is expressed by allusion to the concept of social justice, while needs and difficulties are also defined:

"We need to respect differences and create conditions so that children can feel safe at school, just as their families will. Especially trained staff is required, however." (female teacher).

"I believe that the infrastructure has to exist, along with information and training provided to parents, and systematic efforts. Only then will inequality be reduced." (female teacher).

"Basically (refugee) students should not be educated in separate facilities, but within public schools. This will improve their self-respect, and all will benefit from their contact with

refugee children. It is very important for a climate of solidarity and respect to be created" (female teacher).

The use of the third grammatical person is dominant while teachers talk about student's inclusion as they seem to distance themselves through their discourse and promote the need for the State to manage the improvement of infrastructure and the development of teachers' training courses. Less is the uses of the first person in combination with metaphors (climate of solidarity and respect) which denote a sentimental tone.

Some teachers relate the concept and application of social justice to the absence of discrimination, equal treatment and the cultivation of social and political identities, the inalienable right of every child to the learning process, love and respect, and express these views with complete certainty in their discourse. They develop their utterances with high modality (such as the use of the simple present form, the use of the direct speech forms), expressing their opinions with certainty (I refer to the right to education, it cannot be otherwise, end of the discussion, it is my belief, I am firm), using an argumentation structure full of nominalizations that characterize a humanitarian discourse, the properties of which express the values of social justice, as mentioned above:

"It (social justice) relates to human rights. I refer to the right to education. If an individual is deprived of this right, she is also deprived socially and, thus, excluded. The smooth inclusion in the classroom assists the equally smooth inclusion of the individual in the social sphere, where she can have friends and fellow students, in a small or greater community and, finally, in society" (male teacher).

"It cannot be otherwise. Since it is guaranteed as a right, education is among the basic rights of all citizens. End of discussion. Even when access to the refugee child's papers is impossible, as these can be lost during the journey to the host country. Even then the state must ensure that refugee students will be included in the school system." (female teacher).

"In a classroom where there are either refugee or immigrant students from other countries, on account of their parents' work. As we have students from Albania or Germany [sic]. I do not think that this changes anything when it comes to children. I believe that we should treat children equally, with respect and be objective. Everything starts with love and respect. It is my belief, I am firm." (female teacher).

The difficulty in applying these principles of social justice is grounded on the economic crisis in a state, the lack of intercultural training programmes and support, the inability to treat the children's trauma and the poor provision of appropriate psychological support.

Teachers seem to agree on the necessity to apply Inclusive Education, they, nonetheless, consider it to be inadequate without the assistance of social justice and equal opportunity in the frame of educational processes, a claim which is in dialogue with the relevant literature (Laskaridou 2003: pp. 98-99).

Most teachers related social justice to the acceptance of difference and equal treatment, without discrimination. References to the need for mutual respect between teacher and student were also important. Some teachers also underlined that the expression of different cultures in the classroom can promote the smooth inclusion of children in the social sphere and, as a result, the development of social justice.

Teachers underline that inclusion is a difficult and time-consuming process that requires the support of the state. Teachers are also willing to receive any kind of intercultural training and treat their students equally, based on the respect of the latter's needs.

6.0 DISCUSSION

Teachers who composed the research sample, while referring to social justice, and connecting it to Inclusive Education of refugee and immigrant students, express with their discourse the principles of equality, equal educational opportunity, access to educational necessities, respect of different cultural provenance, empathy and collaboration with parents.

Comparing the results of this study to those of a previous one which was conducted in 2018 (Kipouropoulou 2019), it is obvious that after two years, teachers, according to their adjustment to the new educational environment, the efforts made mainly by the Universities to academically train teachers in Intercultural Education and after some changes of educational policies that concern immigrant children's education (though the pandemic of covid 19 had radically stopped the whole effort) are more certain about their competencies and are more familiar with terms and strategies which are embedded in the discourse of Intercultural Pedagogy. The above is a finding that needs further investigation. Consequently, the results of the research show the need for Teacher Training programmes to be created, with a vision for social justice.

The educational policy of assimilation applied in Greek schools was proven ineffective and, thus, unsuccessful. Despite educational changes that have happened so far, the educational and cultural "capital" of immigrant students is not put to good use, leading to discrimination and the poor performance of students with immigrant backgrounds. Evidently, collaboration among all interested parties -namely teachers, immigrant students and their parents- is needed so that a framework of cultural awareness can be created (Pantic & Florian *ibid.* Griva & Stamou, 2014).

Within the framework of educational practices in educational institutions, teacher-training programmes, or by individual efforts, informed by educational equality for all, we need to keep in mind that our awareness and sensitivity concerning issues of otherness:

"means that we are open to the "other" even when she does not wish to be defined as such, even if she wishes –or believes -to be unnoticeable. The "other" might wish to be assimilated or to highlight her identity selectively, whenever she wishes. Even further, the "other" might be ambivalent regarding her ethnic identity [...] Minorities should have the last say when it comes to their self-determination and their claims and demands. All other attitudes are paternalistic (Hodolidou, 2003: pp. 13, 16).

Within a postmodernist society, globalization and the constant flux of populations, it is necessary to finally apply the vision in the work of Dewey concerning the democratic and participatory dimension of education which is relevant now more than ever: The creation of educational environments which empower minorities and infringed upon social groups, providing strategies and visions for the creation of a just world, and aiming at the cultivation of citizens oriented toward justice, must become a priority.

The results of the present study shed light on the views of active teachers pressed for the necessity of improving the profile of the inter-culturally sensitive teacher and they also underpin the need for training teachers in matters of intercultural education, while posing questions for further investigation.

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