

Factors Influencing Intercultural Primary Education in Cyprus: The perceptions of the affected pupils, of their parents and of their teachers

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My area of investigation ‘Intercultural Education’ (hereinafter referred to as IE) has emerged in Cyprus as a new educational necessity that needs to be addressed urgently. During the academic year 2003–2004 4.95% of the public Primary School population were pupils whose mother tongue is not Greek (hereinafter referred to as MTNG). In the academic year 2006-2007 this figure rose to 7.29%. This increase shows that education in Cyprus is facing major changes in the face of multicultural and multiethnic social developments which must be taken into consideration.

As a primary school teacher in the public sector for seventeen consecutive years, I had the chance to teach a variety of subjects at different grades and the experience of teaching first grade for a decade. As a teacher with culturally diverse pupils, I feel strongly about the need for action in this area. Therefore, I chose to investigate a small area of a wide field; examining the factors influencing IE in Primary schools in Cyprus through the perceptions of the affected pupils and those of their parents and teachers. A number of existing studies have investigated IE in Cyprus but not from the perspectives of all the affected parties collectively. I believe the opinions of pupils, teachers and parents are all worth exploring.

The aim of the project is to investigate the factors influencing Intercultural Primary Education of MTNG pupils in Cyprus based on the perceptions of the affected pupils, their parents and their teachers.

Research objectives:

- To discover influential factors affecting primary education of MTNG pupils.
- To identify difficulties faced by teachers in multicultural classrooms, in the teaching/learning process.
- To examine the effectiveness of support programmes currently applied in multicultural schools.
- To investigate family involvement in school activities and the learning process of their children.

Terms of reference:

- In my project I used the term ‘Intercultural Education’ because it is the official term used by the Ministry of Education and Culture (hereinafter referred to as MOEC). The term IE I refer to here, means interaction, exchange, communication, co-operation, surpassing cultural barriers, solidarity, trust, mutual respect. It is not education for non-natives but towards all of us.

- In my project I refer to Multicultural integration in terms of the promotion of educational measures and policies that acknowledge, accept and promote diversity.
- The immigrant pupils I refer to in my research are aged between six and eight years old, and come mainly from the former Soviet Union, Syria, Romania and the Philippines. For the purposes of this study, the sample group will be referred to as ‘pupils whose mother tongue is not Greek’. This is also a description used by the European Union and preferred by the MOEC in circulars.

Searching the MOEC’s archives I found the following circulars, measures and targets regarding inclusion that underpin my project:

- Regarding ‘enrolment’ policy every public school in Cyprus is obliged to accept enrolment from immigrants whether legal or illegal.
- ‘Support teaching’ policy ensures that every MTNG pupil receives individual support.
- In the spirit of the European Union’s commitment to ‘Intercultural Dialogue’ 2008, the MOEC has adopted this as one of its focus aims for the academic year 2007-2008.

Circulars were sent to all schools informing teachers of the above policies but no official guidelines were given. As a result, the application of these policies does not meet the requirements of the MOEC for integration when schools attempt putting theory into practice. According to publications, the European Union and UNESCO go a step further by encouraging educators to promote the teaching of MTNG pupils in their native language, while international policies, such as the ones applied in the United States, Nebraska (Banks 2002) and Australia (Evangelou, op.cit) are impressive.

During the academic year 2006, the MOEC officially introduced the programme *Education Action Zones* in Cyprus (ZEP), which was piloted in 2003-04. According to MOEC for a school to be eligible to participate in this programme it must have a high number of MTNG pupils. The programme’s aim is to help the smooth integration of pupils through various activities.

Research samples for the project were selected from two primary schools in Nicosia during the academic year 2006-2007, a small primary school at a village and a large urban primary school. I selected these schools on purpose as I hoped to achieve comparisons or contrasts between different types of schools. For ethical reasons the schools and the participants I investigated will remain anonymous (hereinafter referred to as ‘School ‘A’ and ‘School ‘B’).

The research follows a qualitative approach, as my topic focuses on social issues. My data collection techniques were observation, semi-structured interviews and focus groups, which allowed me to triangulate my findings and thus obtain more reliable and valid results. In terms of strategies, I used fieldwork where I observed the interaction between pupils in real life situations, and interviewed subjects face to face. Regarding research approaches I selected the Case Study as the suitable one for my role, as an insider researcher, in order to recognise and address the issues that were important to the target audience; primary educators and MOEC. My position facilitated the collection of relevant data in real life contexts.

Having acknowledged the limitations of this kind of research (in this case generalisations for all school going ages, and the fact that the factors chosen do not cover education in full) I believe that many characteristics of the primary schools investigated in my research are common with other primary schools in Cyprus. Findings derived from this research could be judged by the interested practitioners who are in situations similar to the ones investigated.

A class observation of 3x40 minute periods was carried out at each school. The sample I observed was 3 first grade MTNG pupils at 'School A' and 12 first grade MTNG pupils at 'School B'. Although I carried out non-participant observation on colleagues and pupils at both primary schools, I included participant observation and reflection in my project as I feel that my experience in this field warrants inclusion. Semi-structured charts helped me in my observation, the charts allowed ample space for emerging themes to be investigated. As I was dealing with minors, sensitivity, caution and responsibility were paramount. Written permission was secured from parents or guardians, explaining what I expected from the pupils and ensuring them of anonymity. The anonymity, confidentiality and privacy of all participants at every stage of the project were safeguarded.

I used semi-structured interviews to interview; 1 head teacher, 2 class teachers, 1 support teacher, 3 MTNG pupils, 2 MTNG pupils' parents at primary school 'A'. At primary school 'B' I used semi-structured interviews to interview; the head teacher, 4 class teachers, 2 support teachers, 5 MTNG pupils, 4 MTNG pupils' parents and, in addition, the 2 EAZ coordinators. Semi- structured interviews afforded me the chance to gather detailed data, which I triangulated with observation findings in order to compare and contrast them. Interviews were the most suitable choice, taking into consideration the language difficulties faced by many of the parents and pupils in the sample. Having worked with pupils coming from diverse backgrounds, such as minority groups, I used my experience and knowledge of their social circumstances to sensitise the questions appropriately so as not to offend anyone. In addition, I gave considerable consideration to racial issues and discrimination.

I used focus groups to interview 5 native parents and 6 native pupils at 'School A'. This approach allowed me to gain a wide source of information in a limited period of time based on the opinions of many different people. Time restraints were a barrier to carry out a similar focus group at 'School B'. Participants were encouraged to maintain confidentiality and to respect each other's privacy and that of the group. As some of the issues discussed were potentially sensitive, I found it proper to stress this at the outset.

I transcribed the data I gathered myself in order to minimise misinterpretations and to maintain relevancy to the research objectives. Summary memos were written in order to reduce the amount of raw information. Descriptive codes were then given to sections of transcript, in order to focus attention on research objectives. Different colour highlighter pens were used to further code the data. Finally, pattern codes were written next to the data to identify themes. I used triangulation in order to compare and contrast findings generating from the data I gathered from different sources and to correlate my empirical data with literature review.

My conclusions point to the need for practical policies which can be effectively implemented, something which was clearly requested by educators in the field. The official policy of the MOEC is Integration. This however, remains for the most part at theory stage and specific guidelines are not put forward for its implementation, especially in schools with small numbers of MTNG pupils. In schools with large numbers of MTNG pupils, such as the urban school investigated in the study, theory and praxis meet, and the positive effects are obvious. In schools with small numbers

of MTNG pupils, it is apparent that the MOEC does not offer adequate financial or practical support. The integration of the MTNG pupils in these schools is left to the discretion of the educators on site.

The recommendations emerging from this project include enriched curriculum for all pupils, interaction between pupils, teachers and parents, on-going training for teachers and, wherever possible, recruitment of specialised teachers in multi-cultural settings. The MOEC should promote communication between educators in the field and create a forum to compile and assess their findings and suggestions. Thus creating a valuable resource bank to draw upon, when reviewing policies.

I contend that integration should be offered at all schools and should be endorsed as a permanent policy to ensure long term foundations for fundamental changes, in education, and ultimately for society on the whole.