

Teacher training in Roma education in Greece: Intercultural and critical educational necessities

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This paper first outlines briefly the present status and position of the Roma/Gypsies in the Greek context while it gives a review of education policy and provision. Secondly, it indicates that Greek primary teachers lack adequate preparedness for the challenges accompanying contemporary educational multiculturalism and social justice issues. The following part is focused on the training of teachers and the need to educate and prepare them further on specific intercultural issues as well as methodologies for teaching in multicultural classes. Finally, the paper indicates the importance of teacher training to combat racism and promote social justice in classrooms and schools through critical education and empowerment/ emancipation processes of Roma children, and how those two pedagogical philosophies (intercultural and critical) may converge within teacher training praxis.

Introduction: Underachievement and exclusion

In modern and post-modern complex and multicultural societies, education plays a major role to integrate all children and endow them for making the best use of living in diversity by developing social justice discourses (Churchill, 1985; Coulby, 1997; Sleeter, 2001). The 'Learning to live together' message is central to UNESCO's mission as one of the four pillars of knowledge essential to full personal and social development in the 21st century (Tibbitts, 2005).

Meanwhile, education is reckoned by many minority ethnic groups worldwide as the pathway out of discrimination and dispossession for their children. However, some groups seem to fare worse than others. The Roma comprise one of the most vulnerable and stigmatised ethnic, cultural and linguistic minorities in Europe and is a socially excluded group in Greece (Tressou, 1997).

Both in the European Union countries as well as to those of Eastern and Central Europe (Ringold, 2000; United Nations Development Programme/ UNDP, 2003; 2006; European Roma Rights Centre, 2005) Roma people and their children have suffered considerably in the past and many of them still suffer (Fraser, 1992; Liegeois, 1994; Kenrick & Puxon, 1995; Brearley, 1996; Amnesty International, 2006). The situation of Roma communities is generally poor due to denials, tensions and conflicts, and this has a fundamental impact on children's school attendance (Faure, 2003).

Many studies have pointed to the educational exclusion and underachievement of Roma (Ivatts, 1999; Mariano, 2004; Demetriou & Trimikliniotis, 2007; Cudworth, 2008; Hawke, Seghedi & Gheorghiu, 2008 among others). The educational state of

Roma children in Greece is also described as “low school enrollment percentages, premature termination of compulsory education, unmannerly stance by classmates, parents and teachers” (Markou, 1997, p.60).

More concretely, several Roma children live out of reach of schools, and if there is a school accessible, it is mostly dependent on the attitude of the teachers and the other children whether the Roma students will feel welcome. This state of affairs has caused the creation of predominantly Roma schools in various areas around Greece (ghettoisation) (Greek Helsinki Monitor and Minority Rights Group, 2000). Consequently, other reports on Roma (as national or autochthonous minorities) in Greece (Luciak, 2004) show inequitable treatment on a daily basis and underachievement (Katsikas & Politou, 1999; Frangoudaki & Dragonas, 2000; Georgiadis & Zisimos, 2005).

The responsibility is primarily put on Roma children, in blaming their way of life as an obstruction in integrating in the school system. The Roma culture is often seen as something inferior and is not recognised within the majority school system. Therefore, Roma children are condemned to school failure by the organisation of the school system, which stigmatises them and takes into consideration only their 'virtual reality', the identity that the society has constructed for them (Goffman, 1963), and not their actual reality, that is, the identity an individual has created for him/herself.

Policies and teachers

The formal policy from the Greek Ministry of Education was based on assimilating the Roma children in the Greek culture and way of life since the school has a strong ethnocentric character. In 1985, the Ministry initiated information to schools about the existence of Roma children to be included in all the other sensitive population groups. In 1987 national responsibility of education of Roma children changed hands and is under the supervision of the General Secretariat for Public Education.

The pressure from the European Union on the Greek Ministry of Education to reform educational policies, including the provisions made for the Roma students has forced it to take action in this particular matter in 1994-1995. The implementation of Reception Classes and Support Classes for Roma students was the scheme that was put into practice. The above policies were moving under an assimilationist perspective, valuing the dominant culture before other culture(s). It seems that “the Roma children are introduced into the Greek educational system as special case and as their progress in the school system continues it is silenced by the formal educational talk” (Katsikas & Politou, 1999, p.95).

The only encouraging action that has been put into practice was an experimental programme by the Ministry of Education in co-operation with the University of Ioannina focused on educational needs of the Roma students. Its duration spanned over three years. The programme was divided into three parts: The first part was research and studying with the aim to conduct special curricula and supporting educational material. The second part was the production of new teaching materials and the choice

of a modern methodology in order to rewrite some of the school textbooks, i.e. the language textbooks or the production of dictionaries and writing guides for the Greek language. The third part was focused on the training of teachers and the attempt to train them on specific intercultural issues as well as the methodology to teach in multicultural classes.

Nevertheless, the outcomes of this programme were vague, fragmented and not sufficient enough to ameliorate the situation. There are still no provisions in place for encouraging effectively the promotion of diversity in Roma education: the language, history and culture of various minorities is still not taught in any school; very limited language support is offered to students whose mother tongue is not Greek; the curricula and textbooks developed by this project are not used in those schools with Roma students; there is no provision for teacher training in diversity management (Dimitrakopoulos, 2004).

Therefore, it seems that the educational policies for Roma students are very poor and inadequate to cover the wide range of problems that exist in Greek society. There seems to be a tendency for schools try and keep Roma away for fear of damaging the school's reputation and prestige. A larger problem is that many Roma children are not aware of their rights. They fear possible harmful consequences if they file a complaint, and they often do not trust official institutions to solve their problems.

With the exception of the *Programme for the Education of Muslim Children* (PEM) (cited in Dragonas & Frangoudaki, 2009), there is no educational initiative in the Greek educational terrain that takes into account Roma children's home language (Kostouli & Mitakidou, 2009). With the motto 'addition not subtraction, multiplication not division', PEM as a large-scale, interdisciplinary project for reforming the education of Muslim children in Thrace, and has been running without major disruptions in administrative or staff services since 1997 (Dragonas & Frangoudaki, 2008; 2009). Hatzisavvidis (2007) suggests that the school for Roma children might attempt radical changes in its structural, morphological and functional elements. To be successful, such changes have to be undertaken by the Roma community (Hatzinikolaou & Mitakidou, 2005; Mitakidou & Tressou, 2007).

PEM has been appeared capable in building bridges across differences, negotiating conflicts, and inventing successful compromises. Lately, PEM informs that participation in education of Muslim minority pupils, including Roma pupils, has highly and quickly improved (Fragoudaki & Dragonas, 2004; PEM, 2007). The PEM's new educational materials and teachers training (Androussou, 2002; Androussou & Askouni, 2003) proved to be the most challenging fields. For an average of 120 hours per year, both primary and secondary teachers were trained in bilingualism, didactic and pedagogic skills, use of the new materials, social and gender inequalities, classroom dynamics, identity issues, discriminations and the negotiation of differences (Androussou, 2002).

From this perspective, teachers have an important role to play in turning exclusion into inclusion and empowerment (Gundara, 2006; Vuolasranta, 2006). It is essential for the

case of Roma, that in the effort to accommodate and gain the benefits of attaining diversity in classrooms, teachers are placed on the front lines. Teachers are in a unique position to influence the course of events in those places where racism comes to the surface. But in order to contribute to such enterprises, teachers need to be capable of identifying aspects of racism in their schools and understanding its workings.

Yet teachers are often poorly prepared and trained for working with diverse groups of children. Education departments around the European Union are beginning to prepare teachers for in pedagogical theory for multicultural classrooms, but there is considerable variation in how departments interpret this discipline. Although most teacher training programmes may include some issues of multicultural /intercultural education into their course offerings, evidence suggests that these efforts have been insufficient to keep pace with diversity management.

Moreover, if teachers are expected to meet the challenges associated with cultural diversity, then they will need to acquire new knowledge and attitudes. Many teachers have been educated in an environment and at a time when little notice was afforded to evidence of prejudice and discrimination. Their community experiences were often sheltered and circumscribed (Gay, 1993; Nieto, 2000; Au & Blake, 2003). Additionally, Marshall (2004) argues that traditional training for teachers reflects a culture that has marginalised issues and concern for social justice. Thus, equity and justice cannot be an 'add-on' to regular education, but needs to be interwoven into all aspects of teacher training. Thus, there is a need for a more elaborated provision of teacher training when it comes to intercultural education and critical pedagogy.

Teacher training for Roma education

The intercultural obligation

Teachers' training is a crucial responsibility in education that has attracted the attention it deserves within intercultural terrain recently (Banks, 1991; Gay, 1992; 1993; 2000; 2002; Goodwin, 1994; Chisholm, 1994; Grant & Sleeter, 2006). Pena (1997) stresses that research on teachers' perceptions, indicates that teachers have very little knowledge about their students, since they spend little time in getting to know them. At the same time students from minority groups (especially the Roma) experience a sense of rejection due to their teachers' perceptions (Vavrus, 2002; Cochran-Smith, 2004).

Teacher training institutions have a key role to play in enhancing intercultural education as the teachers educated within such institutions affect the lives of many future generations (Gundara, 2006). Munn (1996) suggests that teacher training faculties at colleges and universities need to be suitably prepared in cultural diversity pedagogy in order to be able to provide pre- or in-service training on the topic. Gorski (2000) recommends that teachers, researchers, activists, and social justice advocates must continue to practice and apply multicultural education inside and outside the classroom. Moreover, Wallace (2001) emphasises the need to increase multicultural educational provisions in the mainstream curriculum for pre-service teachers, who also need to involve themselves in critical reflection about the ethnic make-up of their local

community. Gay (1994) and Ladson-Billings (1994, 1995) recommend that the teacher training interventions might develop a theoretical and practical connection between cultural relevance and achievement.

In addition and within the framework of the European Union member states' education systems and in-service teachers' training schemes, there is a need through training programmes to combat discrimination (Gill, Mayor & Blair 1992; Derman-Sparks & Phillips, 1997; Roman & Eyre, 1997; Bhopal, 2004) and focus at social inclusion, integration and empowerment of Roma people and Romani culture in education (Cockrell, Peggy, Placier, Cockrell & Middleton, 1999; Faure, 2003).

Within this line of thoughts, the major step towards social inclusion and empowerment of Roma lies in the improvement of their access to education and in improvement of their involvement in educational institutions. This is where social justice must become a cornerstone of teachers' praxis and has to constitute a main interest within teacher training especially in the Greek context regarding Roma.

The critical necessity

Social justice has become a core critically oriented concept in teacher training because it is defined in terms of its educational Reconstructionist function. It has been described as an idea of questioning and analysing school practices and policies (Nieto, 2000); values and politics pervading education (Oakes, 1995); teaching consciously for social change (Ayers, 1998), social empowerment and activism (Sleeter, 1996). Social justice is the most important term of critical pedagogy that includes the entire key terminology of critical pedagogy: 'empowerment', 'voice', 'emancipation', 'dialogue', 'social change'.

Scholars of critical pedagogy indicate that the primary charter of critical teachers is to empower the powerless and transform those conditions which perpetuate human injustice and inequity (Freire, 1973; McLaren, 1998). It also aims to restore stolen 'voice' to marginalised groups (e.g. Roma) (Freire, 1973; Hatzinikolaou & Mitakidou, 2005). Socio-cultural awareness and emancipation (Giroux, 1994; McLaren, 1997) further entails an understanding that differences in social location are not neutral, while some positions are accorded greater status than others and differential access to power (Foucault, 1977). Because differences in access to power profoundly influence one's experience in the world, teachers need to comprehend how Greek society is stratified along racial and ethnic (e.g. Roma), social class but also along gender and sexuality issues.

Teachers might engage themselves in their training to deepen their knowledge base and uncover their own assumptions about equity, race, poverty, language, gender, sexuality, and disability. This training will help to build a solid knowledge base and allow teachers to better understand themselves, their beliefs and values vital to their teaching. It must confront inequalities and expose the system of domination and the structures of oppression (hooks, 1990). Teacher training might enable teachers to provide witness and testimony to the subjugated, the forgotten, the oppressed, and the

victimised. We cannot achieve democracy and social justice in education without understanding power, what it is, who has it, and how it is exercised (Foucault, 1977). Teachers might demystify the social discourse by being dialectical and dialogical (Freire & Shor, 1987).

The purpose of the educator and the educated in a dialogue between equal partners is called praxis. Praxis in education aims to bridge the gap between theory and action that effectively brings change and transformation. Therefore, teaching for social change (Freire, 1973; Greene, 1998; Nieto, 2004; Giroux, 1988) means that teachers can be prepared to develop the habits and minds of transformative practice, and to understand teaching as a socio-cultural and political endeavour (Cochran-Smith, 2004; McLaren, 1998; Nieto, 2004) and change agency (Ayers, 1998; Giroux, 1988).

In this line of thoughts, teachers might become 'cultural workers' (Freire, 1998; Gay, 1993) and 'transformative intellectuals' (Giroux, 1985). Such teachers are socially, politically, personally and professionally devoted to educating excluded or poorly served children (Nieto, 2000) (e.g. Roma). Teachers might comprehend that social inequities are produced and perpetuated through systemic discrimination. They need to critically examine the role that schools play in this reproduction and legitimisation process. Consequently, teachers might improve their abilities and efficiencies especially on handling racism. "Schools, teachers and head-teachers have been expected among other important tasks to rescue children from poverty and destitution; to develop tolerance among children in a world where adults are divided by religious and ethnic conflicts, and to cultivate democratic sentiments in societies that bear the scars of totalitarianism" (Hargreaves, 2003, p.3).

A principled teacher will be proficient enough to take steps to empower those who are socially deprived (Gold & Evans, 1998). The challenging issues for teachers in such school contexts call for an approach that aims at ensuring, at least, that policies and initiatives are implemented in just and equitable ways. The difficulty in transforming the reduced social capital into cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) limits the capacity of children stigmatised as 'different' to take advantage of the cultural capital that the schools offer. This usually means building on the forms of 'social capital' (Gamarnikow & Green, 1999) that students do possess rather than being restricted by the social capital they do not possess.

Epilogue: Conclusions and future training hopes

Educational and exclusion failure of Roma students are the major problems in most European educational systems, including Greece. The reasons that cause the problem and the myths that exist around these causes, which are most frequently attributed to the Roma themselves, were critically juxtaposed in relation to the educational policies that have been implemented or not implemented in Greece, during the past few years. Teacher training is part of the 'picture'.

Research all over the world signifies that teacher training on these issues, as far as intercultural education is concerned, is insufficient or in many instances, non-existent

(Allemann-Ghionda, 2008). In many cases it is regarded as a luxury which cannot be afforded in a time of scarcity of resources, or as a controversial politically sensitive area best avoided. Teachers cannot be expected to be successful in teaching 'interculturally' without specific training (Le Roux & Möller, 2002).

Therefore, today it is no longer adequate for teachers to merely learn how to be sensitive to their 'different' Roma students and their culture(s); they must practice the habits of transformative praxis and social change agency, too. Training Greek teachers is mostly focused on technical proficiency while ideology and social change is neglected. Thus, a critical teacher of social justice would commit to preparing teachers for transformation, socio-political realisation and social change. Given the complexity of contemporary multicultural Greek society and the challenges of an interdependent world, teachers develop a critical pedagogy that makes them from 'technicist' (Kincheloe, 1993; McLaren, 1998; Shor, 1992) to transformative practitioners and change agents.

Greek teachers might be offered, through professional development initiatives, an opportunity to investigate their pedagogical philosophy and values regarding cultural background, race, social class and social justice. They might also be offered the opportunity to become erudite on cultural differences in order to realise the function of knowledge, beliefs and values as determinants of behaviour towards culturally diverse students. It would enhance teachers' awareness and preparation, and move them towards a celebration of multiculturalism and a striving for equality for all students. What is more, recognition of the labyrinthine link between practice and academic theory signals the need for close collaboration in planning and distributing school teaching programmes. What seems to be lacking is the element of independence. Most of the training programmes in Greece, even the 'newer' ones, which are supposed to comprise mirrors of the educational reform, have a top-down structure, are sporadically organised and have neither clear task posing nor proper regime. They also suffer from the bureaucratic mechanisms of the Ministry of Education which gives the involved parts no option for cooperation.

Nevertheless, there are promising programmes like *Teacher-IN-Service-Training-for-Roma-inclusion* (INSETRom, 2010) programme (Symeou et al., 2009; Project Participating Countries (Austria, Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Romania, Slovak Republic and the U.K.) Evaluation Reports, 2010; Georgiadis, Nikolajevic, & van Driel, 2011) that constitute excellent examples of transnational educational programmes of 'teachers' good training practice' in Europe and such training schemes might be used as tools for dissemination of inclusive practices for teaching ethnic minority groups of students like the Roma.

The INSETRom programme is an international teachers' training project due to bridge the gap between Roma and non-Roma communities and improve the educational achievement of Roma children within the mainstream educational system. This 2-year project aimed to develop school and Roma community partnerships through a specially organised teacher training scheme (Georgiadis, Nikolajevic, & vanDriel, 2011). The general intention was to establish an environment of collaboration and shared goals to

help schools better cater to their Roma student population and the communities they come from (Georgiadis, et.al., 2011). The project focused not just on interventions involving “Roma communities but also identified primary and secondary school teachers as the principal agents who are in a position to change educational outcomes for Roma students” (Georgiadis, et.al., 2011, p.2). As Georgiadis, et.al., (2011, p.3) conclude: “Its major component aimed at training teachers: to adjust their perceptions, approaches and methodologies according to the needs and perspectives of multicultural societies to that they can improve their effectiveness in approaching Roma parents and involving them in the school life of their children; and, to improve their intercultural, socio-psychological and educational skills in order to enhance teachers’ awareness of Roma culture, which can in turn help them to better engage with Roma parents to become active agents in their children’s education”. Additional focus is indeed needed on this and similar efforts and the dissemination of such expertise are warranted.

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