Who Carries the National Flag? The politics of Cultural Identity in an Increasingly Multicultural Greek School

Abstract

Over the years, Greek society has been rightfully considered to be mono-cultural. The education system had managed to forge a strong national identity. The paper looks into the concept of national identity as it has evolved, interpreted and institutionalized over the last two centuries as well as into the role of education in this process. The purpose of this investigation is to understand and appreciate the problems and prospects of using the education system to instill a common identity and purpose to the Greek society, which has been gradually becoming multicultural for the first time ever.

As if it were a recurrent natural phenomenon a novel issue is hotly debated in the press and the TV every October[1] over the last five years: Should a non-Greek citizen, a young person who does not really feel Greek, a newcomer immigrant who still remains loyal to his country of origin, be allowed to carry the national flag, the most cherished national emblem? To some –including conservative political circles as well as a number of local communities– this is totally unacceptable. To their way of thinking the national flag symbolizes the glorious wars for independence and for national integration and it should not therefore be belittled by turning it into a mere prize to pupils with excelling school performance all the more so when this prize is awarded to foreigners. At the other end of public opinion discrimination against immigrant children in the case of the flag does not only hurt their feelings but it also constitutes a violation of democratic principles and of fundamental human rights. Although circumstantial, intermittent and deficient the debate on who should carry the flag is revealing

of the broader ideological agitation that has been taking place –to some extent in a roundabout and tangled way– in Greek society over the last fifteen years and of the entailing confusion in the value system of its education. The paper looks into the concept of national identity as it has evolved, interpreted and institutionalized over the last two centuries as well as into the role of education in this process. The purpose of this investigation is to understand and appreciate the problems and prospects of using the education system to instill a common identity and purpose to the Greek society, which has been gradually becoming multicultural for the first time ever.

The formation of national identity: The success story of Greek Education

Up to fifteen years ago Greek society was rightfully considered to be mono-cultural[2]. Greek was the formal and everyday language in the country; the great majority of the Greeks belonged to the Greek Orthodox Church (this was formally stated in their identity cards); above all they shared the view of common ancestry directly from ancient Greece through the Hellenistic and the Byzantine eras (Paparigopoulos, 1955). Given that modern Greece became an independent nation state only during the first half of the 19th century, after four hundred years of harsh slavery, which had left behind a mostly illiterate population and practically no institutional infrastructure, education seems to have done an excellent job in developing the Greek national identity. The task was certainly not easy at all. In the first place the founding fathers of the new nation state had to decide which this identity should be and what values the education system should consequently promote. Some among them envisaged the new nation state to be the rightful heir of classical Greek antiquity: of its language and literature. Some others gave more emphasis to the heritage of the Byzantium empire and to the traditions of the Greek Orthodox Church. Both agreed however that culture rather than race was the

unifying force of the nation and that cultural were also the fundamental elements of national identity education should develop (Tsaousis, 1983). National historians were among the first to overtly use this notion in repelling Fallmerayer's[3] theory on the discontinuity of the Greek nation; an argument based on racial assumptions. Culture on the other hand was seen as the socially cohesive substance between the conservative landowners of the mainland, the outward looking merchants and the intelligentsia brought up in the Greek Diaspora. Culture in this sense was over and above social divisions, the safety valve that defused social tensions (Svoronos, 2004). Finally, emphasis on culture diverted public attention from the many inadequacies of the political system and its unpreparedness to give democratic principles and institutions all due care (SSMHC, 1994). Thus, under the circumstances and reflecting national assumptions and priorities education was primarily allocated the task to instil in the minds and the souls of young generations the idea of the unity and of the uninterrupted continuity of the Greek nation as well as a sense of pride for the nation's valuable contribution to civilization and to human thought. Hence, ancient Greek language and literature, history and religious instruction –the main vehicles of the precious intellectual heritage– became for the decades to come the cornerstones of elementary and secondary school curricula (Zambeta, 2000).

The cultural function and the literary character of Greek education was reaffirmed and further enhanced in the 1920s when some 1,5 million Greeks were expatriated from Minor Asia and the Black Sea and came as refugees to the mainland. Education capitalized on the intellectual creativity of the returning Greek Diaspora's intelligentsia and at the same time it provided to the unschooled refugees the necessary literary support for their incorporation in the Greek society. Yet, besides this, the social agitation caused by the influx of refugees together with the political instability that followed defeat in Asia Minor –which were both favoring the circulation of subversive ideas (Veremis, 1997)– obliged state education to play the same old

card of cultural unity only this time with clearly defensive socio-political undertones. From an integrating and all inclusive force education was gradually slipping into an interpretation which considered culture as the demarcation line between those who really belonged to the Greek nation and those who were politically dangerous for it and who should therefore be excluded; social revisionists and revolutionaries of all sorts came under the second category.

This situation was further aggravated after the civil war (1944-1949). “Helleno-christian” ideals –narrowly interpreted, in the eve of the defeat of the communist camp, to exclude both the ecumenicalism of the Hellenic spirit and the social solidarity of Christianity– were officially declared as the core elements of Greek national identity. Attempts (in the 1960s) to redress the balance in the political system as well in education came to an abrupt end during the dictatorship (1967-1974): an even narrower “helleno-christianism” became the cultural basis of national identity. It was an enforced identity detested and rejected by the majority of the Greek people and by its political, social and intellectual leadership.

The fall of the dictatorship marked the end of the ideologically unilateral and conceptually narrow interpretation of national identity. This in turn activated reform in education. National identity certainly retained its fundamentally cultural character developed over the years. It was still widely accepted that he who shares Greek cultural values and traditions –the Greek paedeia, according to the ancient Greek philosopher and orator Isocrates– is by definition a Greek; in principle he should be allowed access to all the privileges, including civic and social rights, bestowed on Greek citizens. In this sense Greek Paedeia and hence education which cultivates it became the frame of reference both for national identity and for Greek citizenship. Up to the early 1990s national identity and citizenship were notions evidently inseparable, if not identical, in the minds of politicians, of education planners and of the wider public.

Yet, general agreement as to the cultural character of national identity and as to the relevant role of education in its development should not underrate the significance of two basically different interpretations and points of view concerning the real meaning of national identity. The first is rather conservative and more introvert. Being a ramification of the relevant 19th century brand of national ideology, it builds upon the peculiarity and the uniqueness of Greekness –the "brotherlessness" of the Greek nation, as a past President of the Greek Democracy has put it– whose core cultural elements should therefore be preserved and protected by all means. Consequently, the education system should promote language, history, ancient and modern Greek literature and religious instruction and it should encourage school performances, ceremonies and parades that would commemorate important historic events and that would in a symbolic way instill in pupils a sense of belonging and national pride. The second one is in a sense more cosmopolitan and outgoing. It looks on Greece as a modern European State that should respect the principles of democracy, human rights, individuality, religious tolerance and so on. It places greater emphasis on different aspects of the inherited ancient Greek culture; on democratic citizenship, respect for diversity, critical thinking, aesthetic appreciation etc. Obviously, as all these cultural aspects are open to various interpretations, variant political attitudes and behaviors are expected an indeed found in the realities of political life.

By early 1990s the traditionally mono-cultural Greek society had to face the challenges posed by major global events. Their implications prepared the ground for a major test of all these various interpretations and points of view concerning national identity. Under the new circumstances developed in the country, education too had to reconsider its role in forming national identity an in safeguarding social cohesion and a unity of purpose.

Greek education at the crossroads of multiculturalism

It can be argued that since the 1970s there has been a slow, gradual change in the ethnic composition of the Greek society. The first foreign immigrants came to Greece from the turbulent Middle East area in the late 1970s. They were mostly Iranians who had fled the newly established Islamic regime, Iraqis, Palestinians and Kurds (Zografou, 2003, p. 183). At the same time, a significant number of Greeks who had migrated to Western Europe and Overseas in the 1950s and the 1960s returned home. Repatriation of emigrants continued even more intensely in the 1980s, including this time the Greeks who had left the country after the defeat of the communist party in the Civil War, to live in the socialist countries of Eastern Europe.

The Greek Ministry of Education and Religions (MOER) reacted rather numbly to the fact that it had to deal with the education of children raised in different cultural environments and whose mother tongue, in several cases, was not Greek. While, at that time, several European countries re-evaluated their relevant education policies[4], favoring "integration" over "assimilation", the MOER chose to take only administrative measures considering that their recipients were not many, they were dispersed and above all they were mostly of Greek origin. These measures facilitated the "accommodation" of these children in the existing educational structures, and their "assimilation" to the Greek culture and society[5]. They did not distinguish between the education of the repatriate (which were the majority) and immigrant children, although their educational needs were different; they uncritically treated both groups as "culturally deficient"[6].

First, in demonstration of "charity" spirit (Nikolaou, 2000, p. 60), the MOER facilitated class promotion and university access for repatriate and foreign children enrolled in Greek schools on the basis of their "limited knowledge of Greek" due to their short stay in Greece. While this policy favored repatriates, it did not improve the drop-out rate of foreigners.

Second, it provided for the establishment of “Repatriate Children’s Schools” (Law Decree 339/1974). These were established only in Athens and Thessaloniki, the two major urban areas of Greece and operated as bilingual schools, where instruction was provided in Greek and English or German. The narrow choice of instructional language restricted their student target group to children (mainly repatriates) coming from English-speaking countries (mainly Australia and the U.S.) and Germany. The schools’ main task was perceived to be the “education and the enculturation of the Greek children coming from abroad to the values of the Greek and Christian civilization”. This task remained practically unaltered even in the late 1980s, despite the fact that the majority of the school population were by then repatriates from Albania or the Former Soviet Republics (the only notably exception being perhaps the introduction of Russian a second language of instruction in the Thessaloniki school), many among which did not speak Greek at all. As a result, these schools gradually became ghetto-schools, totally discredited by the local communities (Nikolaou, 2000, p. 61, Damanakis, 1997, pp. 65-69).

Finally, in the 1980s, schools in which foreign children represented a considerable fragment of their population were entitled to establish “reception classes”, in order to assist them to learn Greek faster. In essence these classes offered additional Greek language lessons, delivered sometimes by bilingual instructors. They aimed at the advancement, as soon as possible, of the children’s linguistic skills, in order for them to “catch up” with the Greek children, and not to “become an obstacle to the normal workings of their class”.

One could argue that such measures were characteristic of the hazy perception of the Greek state held vis-à-vis the education of children coming from different cultural backgrounds and hence its ineffectiveness to develop a coherent education policy addressing their needs. Its priority remained the effacement of the linguistic and cultural deficit of immigrant children.

After all, from the State's point of view, the majority of those children were actually Greeks; they were feeling Greeks deep inside, and hence the only thing that education should be doing was to crystallize and strengthen their national identity by enriching their Greek cultural capital.

The immigrant influx to Greece increased dramatically in the late 1980s and early 1990s (See Table 1). Greece, in less than five years, received an unprecedented number of economic immigrants, which could be distinguished in two broad categories: First, there was a significant number of ethnic Greeks coming from the collapsing former Soviet republics and Southern Albania[7]. Many of them did not speak Greek and did not possess the Greek citizenship, as was the case with past repatriates. Second, there were hundreds of thousands of foreign immigrants coming from the turbulent Balkan countries (Bulgaria, the Yugoslav Republics strifed from the civil war, Romania) and from Central and Eastern Europe (mainly Poland, Moldava, the Czech and the Slovak Republics), Middle East, Asia and Africa.

[insert table 1]

Current estimates (IMEPO, 2004) indicate that up to 1,15 million foreigners reside in Greece, a figure equivalent to 10,3% of its population[8], four times the number of foreigners who lived in Greece in 1991. This abrupt ethnic change came as a shock to the predominantly mono-cultural Greek society. The magnitude and the endurance of this immigrant influx indicate that this is not a transient phenomenon. It constitutes a rather permanent restructuring in the Greek society which would undoubtedly have significant impact on the Greek system of education as well.

In less than half a decade foreign or repatriate students amounted to an average of 10 percent of the school population in primary and secondary education (see Table 2). They did not have Greek as their mother tongue and their cultural capital was significantly different that of the Greeks. This above percentage was noticeably higher in Athens, where the number of students coming from immigrant families reached 26 percent.

[insert Table 2]

The Greek system of education came to terms with the situation belatedly. When more schools reported the growing number of immigrant and repatriate students enrolled, especially in the outskirts of the larger cities and in downgraded inner city areas, the MOER resorted to the administrative measures legislated in the 1970s and early 1980s, despite the fact that these measures addressed a different immigrant population with significantly different educational needs.

It extended the establishment of reception classes for immigrant children and, in a bald move, it gave schools the opportunity to introduce freedom of the native language and culture of the major immigrant group in these classes. At that time very few educational authorities took advantage of this provision.

In 1996, when the immigrant wave had reached its peak, the MOER passed the first Law explicitly referring to “intercultural education” (Law 2413/1996). Both the title (“Greek education abroad, intercultural education, and other arrangements”) and its structure (eleven chapters, with only one referring to intercultural education in Greece) reaffirmed however that, while the Greek system faced significant challenges concerning the education of immigrant children, the focus remained on the education of Greek children abroad; the

"indispensable element of an intercultural national strategy for the Hellenism" (Introductory Statement, L. 2413/96). The primacy of the Greek culture in education remained unchallenged: "Our intervention is also intercultural, in the sense that Greek culture constitutes a contribution to the enrichment of the broader European and global culture, and by the same token on a par with the cultures of other people whom our people encounter" (op.cit.). One can argue that while the Law was a step in the right direction, it failed to confront effectively the prevailing "assimilationist educational culture" and again favored repatriate, ethnic Greeks over foreigners[9].

The Law established the *Institute of Greek Diaspora and Cross-Cultural Education* (IPODE), as the administrative and academic unit responsible for the study "of every aspect of education of Greek children abroad, intercultural education and the education of groups with special cultural characteristics inside the country". Among its responsibilities were the development of relevant curricula and instructional materials to be used in schools that were awarded the status of "School of Intercultural Education". These schools were allegedly given the opportunity to introduce several innovative forms of class organization and instruction in tandem with their students' needs. So far only twenty-six schools (13 primary, 9 lower secondary and 4 upper secondary education) have been awarded this status, a number indicative of the limited impact of the measure to the education of immigrant children (see Table 3).

[insert Table 3]

The Government also decided to allocate funds from the 2nd Community Support Framework (2nd CSF) to the MOER through its Operational Programme of Education and Initial Training

(OPEIT) for the development of intercultural education. European Union money financed four large scale projects involving the education of "culturally different" students. Only one of them dealt with the education of foreign immigrant and repatriate children, while the other three focused on Greek children abroad and on long resident minority groups (Muslim and Roma). All these projects have financed the development of new school curricula, instructional materials, in-service training of teachers and social workers and in some cases the development of infrastructures, construction or repair of school buildings etc.

The efforts to ensure and improve the education of children from repatriate and immigrant groups, along with a renewed interest for the education of children from the Muslim minority and the Roma groups had certainly an impact on the prevailing view that Greek schools were mono-cultural. It did not however change decisively the views of the educational authorities as to the policies that should be developed. Greek language and Greek culture continued to dominate intercultural instruction. Moreover, the ordinary textbooks still used in primary and lower secondary schools, were written in the 1980s, projecting images of "brotherlessness" which clearly affect school climate.

Conclusions

Summing up, it can be argued that the overall developments concerning the education of immigrant children in Greece since the 1970s indicate that:

(a) There is no clear and coherent education policy addressing the actual needs of culturally diverse populations, especially foreign immigrants. Greek education authorities have not been able so far to respond effectively to the challenges the education of these children poses, resorting to the "more of the same" recipe.

(b) All the measures adopted over the years feature the primacy of the Greek culture and of the Greek language and suit best children of Greek origin (repatriates or emigrant children), downplaying the significance of education of foreign immigrant children.

(c) The Greek educational community (teachers, parents, educational administrators) lacks the mentality and the adequate training to respond effectively to the circumstances[10].

As a matter of fact the whole society seems to vacillate between the two interpretations of Greek cultural identity. Between the uniqueness of Greek culture that should not only be preserved but also instilled to others and its more liberal and cosmopolitan interpretation which puts its emphasis on the principles of democracy, pluralism an respect of otherness. As long as this dilemma remains unsolved, the "flag dispute" breaking out every October will continue to obscure the reality and to afflict district communities and educational authorities.

Notes

1. For those who are not familiar with the realities of Greek education, October is the month when teachers appoint the pupil with the highest marks to carry the flag in the parades commemorating the two national holidays on October 28 and March 25.

2. In Greece minority status is awarded only to the Muslim minority in Thrace, which currently consists of about 120.000 people, 50% of which are of Turkish origin, 35% are Pomaks (an indigenous Thracian group) and 15% are Roma. The status of the Muslim minority (including their educational rights) is prescribed by the Lausanne Treaty of 1923, on a basis reciprocal to the status of the Greek ethnic minority of Istanbul in Turkey. The Census of 1991 revealed that 98,5% of the population were Orthodox Christian ethnic Greeks.

3. The German journalist, traveler and historical investigator Jakob Philipp Fallmerayer in his book "*Ueber die Entstehung der Neugriechen*" (About the Origins of Modern Greeks - Stuttgart, 1835) argued that modern Greeks are of Albanian and Slav descent, with hardly a drop of true Greek blood in their veins. Fallmerayer's book brought great agitation at the newly created Greek State and caused a strong criticism of his views by Greek historians (mainly Paparigopoulos and his "*History of the Greek nation*") who supported the theory of ethnic continuity of the Greeks from Ancient Greece till the present.

4. See, for example the periodisation by W. Nieke (1995), the contributions to the "Second Council of Europe Teacher's Seminar" (Porcher, 1979) and the Council of Europe compendium on intercultural education (CoE, 1983).

5. The Greek Constitution of 1975 (Article 16) states that "Paedeia is a fundamental mission of the State, aiming at the moral, cultural, professional and physical education of the Greeks, the development of national and religious conscience and their formation as free and responsible citizens". This paragraph has not been changed in the subsequent Constitutional Revisions of 1985 and 2002.

6. Although most repatriate children spoke Greek and felt Greek, they were not always easily accepted by their co-students: "they still call us German" they complained.

7. There is a substantial Greek minority population in Southern Albania

8. According to IMEPO, only 700.000 foreigners (out of 1.150.000) possess legal stay permits. 63,2% of them are Albanians, 9,8% are Bulgarians, 4,3% are Romanians, 2,4% are Pakistanis. In toto more than 150 nationalities are present in Greece.

9. For a more comprehensive analysis of the Law 2413/96, see Damanakis (1997), Karadjia & Roussakis (2000), Nikolaou (2000)

10. See, Frangoudaki & Dragona (1997) and Kossyvaki (2002) for a thorough analysis of the perceptions of Greek educators towards intercultural education.

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