

# GREEK-CYPRriot TEACHERS' UNDERSTANDINGS OF INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION IN AN INCREASINGLY DIVERSE SOCIETY

Elena Papamichael

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## Abstract

There is an increasing acknowledgement of cultural diversity as the norm in societies around the world, which creates further challenges for the educational systems, especially the teachers. Cyprus is not an exception; at the moment Greek-Cypriot teachers are working in highly diverse environments in the context of a predominantly monocultural educational system in a multicultural, still ethnically divided society. Based on research still in progress, this article aims to explore intercultural education in Greek-Cypriot primary schools, with a focus on the teachers' role. A review of the field of multicultural education, its approaches and critics provides the framework for this study. The article discusses the preliminary findings of an ethnographic study conducted in two highly diverse Greek-Cypriot public primary schools, focusing on the teachers' understandings and practices of intercultural education. The analysis shows that most participants consider acceptance of diversity and challenging negative elements of racism and xenophobia in children's attitudes as the main aims of intercultural education. The teachers attribute a cross-curricular character to intercultural education and offer no standard 'recipes' for its implementation in everyday practices. In both schools, the practices mainly involve events for the 'celebration of diversity'. The article concludes that intercultural education, as described by the participants in this study, represents the additive approach of multicultural education, which has been heavily criticised for tokenism and failure to challenge institutional racism. However, some teachers' critical reflections and policy developments point to the possibility of moving toward a transformation approach of the curriculum.

**Keywords:** intercultural education, multicultural education approaches, teachers' understandings, diversity, Greek-Cypriot primary schools

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## Introduction

“Diversity is as inevitable and as restrictive as gravity. It is not to be deplored, nor to be exalted. It is simply there, to be used as a resource” (Blommaert and Verschueren, 1998, p. 14).

Diversity is, and always has been, a common characteristic of societies in one way or another. At the same time, in Cyprus, as in other parts of the world, the idea of a homogenised national group has been presented as the ideal, though it can never really exist. However, there are ‘processes that aim at achieving it, and practices that tend to uniform individuals, forsaking or denying diversity’ (Aguado and Malik, 2006, p. 456). One of these has been education. Education was the main means through which nation-states were maintained during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with the promotion of strong national identities (Gellner, 1983). This is still a phenomenon common in countries that have only recently become independent or are under threat. However, national education systems are now facing the challenge to adjust in order to accommodate the increasing population diversity due to the internationalisation of economy. Economic migrants are both the effects and the victims of this change, as their movements follow the market needs and, at the same time, their presence exacerbates local chauvinism (Perotti, 1994). The assertion of narrow national identities has caused a rise of xenophobia and racism and the subsequent exclusion of asylum seekers, immigrants and refugees through unemployment, racial disadvantage, deprivation and impoverishment (Gundara, 2000). In their attempt to include minority groups into education systems designed for majority populations, many ethnically plural societies introduced policies aiming to reduce such inequalities and accommodate the needs of minorities; however, the outcome was often the continuation of assimilation, discrimination and inequality, and sometimes the persistence of racist exclusion and inequities (Tomlinson, 2003). This article is an attempt to explore how this global picture translates in Greek-Cypriot education.

The island of Cyprus has been characterised by ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious diversity throughout its history. Recent socio-political developments, like the partial lifting of the restrictions of movement across the Green Line and the accession of Cyprus to the European Union led to an increase of the population’s diversity. Out of a total of 867,600 inhabitants, the estimated percentage of ‘foreign’ residents was 13.7% (Statistical Service of the Republic of Cyprus, 2006, p. 12). This reality is reflected on the pupil population. During 2005-2006 there were 3,759 non-Greek-Cypriot pupils, mainly from the former Soviet Union countries, in a total of 55,868 pupils in 341 primary schools – a percentage of 6.7% (Cyprus Ministry of Education and Culture, 2006). A more recent report states that the 7.3% of the pupils attending public primary schools do not speak Greek as a mother tongue (Cyprus Ministry of Education and Culture, 2007). Considering the constant arrivals

of asylum seekers and refugees from neighbouring countries in conflict, as well as economic migrants, this number is expected to increase. At the same time, as a member of the European Union, Cyprus is expected to ascribe to the European norms of human rights and anti-racism. Consequently, the Ministry of Education and Culture has introduced the concept of intercultural education in Greek-Cypriot schools.

This article discusses the preliminary findings of a study which is still in progress, aiming to explore Greek-Cypriot teachers' understandings and practices of intercultural education. A description of the Greek-Cypriot education context is initially provided through a review of previous studies on diversity and education, which identify issues of nationalism and racism in need of further research and highlight the importance of the teachers' role. Mapping the field of multi/intercultural education, the various approaches and criticisms provides the framework within which this study is situated and which informs the data analysis. Intercultural education in Greek-Cypriot primary education policy is then reviewed. Having described the methodological approach of this study, a discussion follows of a preliminary analysis of the findings in relation to the teachers' understandings of intercultural education and the related school practices. In conclusion some remarks on the implications of these findings are made.

### **Diversity in Greek-Cypriot Education and the Teachers' Role**

Taking into consideration that intercultural education cannot be investigated outside the multiple contexts within which it is placed (Nieto and Bode, 2008), in this section I introduce the research setting in relation to diversity and Greek-Cypriot education and the teachers' role. The field of intercultural education in Cyprus is under-investigated; however, there is a growing interest in the area, evident in a number of qualitative studies. Previous research in the Greek-Cypriot education system emphasised its nationalistic, ethnocentric, hellenocentric and monocultural character (Trimikliniotis, 2004) and pointed to the dominant ethnocentric ideology and lack of critical pedagogic principles which hinder mutual respect and reunification (Makriyianni, in press). Angelides et al., (2003) confirm the monocultural and monolingual framework in which the schools continue to function. Elsewhere they argue that the educational system assimilates non-Greek-Cypriot pupils into the Cypriot culture through the textbooks and the curriculum (Angelides et al., 2004). Spyrou's (2004) study in schools with Turkish-speaking children identified the inappropriate curriculum, the lack of a common language with teachers and classmates, as well as prejudice and racism as serious problems facing these children. Similar research (Demetriou and Trimikliniotis, 2006) identified factors such as the language barriers and the lack of recognition of the contribution of Roma culture to society as contributing to the Roma children's poor educational performance.

Research in relation to the teachers' perceptions of diversity found evidence of University of Cyprus student teachers' prejudices toward people from the African and Asian Mediterranean sub-regions (Theophilides and Koutselini-Ioannides, 1999). Other research accentuated that even teachers who were willing to implement intercultural education could not do so because of the lack of appropriate training and teaching materials (Trimikliniotis, 2001). According to the European Dilemma Research Project XENOPHOB (Trimikliniotis, 2005), the vast majority of teachers were either unaware or in denial about it despite the evidence of everyday racial discrimination. Similarly, in previous research (Papamichael, 2006) the concept of colour-blindness was identified in teachers' understandings of diversity, which did not allow them to recognise and challenge racist incidents they observed among their pupils. Panayiotopoulos and Nicolaidou (2007) argue that educational practices they observed treat diversity as a type of deficiency which needs to be treated and point to racist incidents and bullying because of dress, financial status and skin colour that became evident in their interviews with the children.

Philippou's (2005, p. 308) qualitative study on children's construction of national and European identities, indicates that Greek-Cypriot children showed "no multiculturally sophisticated understandings of 'Cypriot' as inclusive of any other community of Cyprus, but was rather synonymous to Greek-Cypriot, an understanding encouraged by the Hellenocentrism of the school context". Spyrou (2007, forthcoming) interviewed fifth and sixth grade children and investigated their views of Sri Lankan and Filipino domestic workers; the findings suggest that children's understandings are filled with stereotypes, prejudices and ignorance. Spyrou also explored the nationalistic discourse of Greek-Cypriot education and society, which essentialise identities and lead to the identification of Turks as the eternal enemy (Spyrou, 2000; Spyrou, 2001; Spyrou, 2002; Spyrou, 2006).

The report of the Commission for Educational Reform (2004a, p. 4), evaluated the Cypriot educational system and concluded that:

"[t]he ideological-political context of contemporary Cypriot education remains helleno-cyprio-centric, narrowly ethnocentric and culturally monolithic. The current ideological context ignores the interculturalism and multiculturalism of Cypriot society, as well as the Europeanization and internationalisation of Cypriot education".

Furthermore, in relation to the teachers' role, the Commission (2004b) has reported that they are troubled about their abilities to respond to their duties, when working in diverse schools with traditional ethos. The teachers "acknowledge the danger that, in a traditional school, children with a different cultural background are at risk of falling behind and/or facing many psychological problems because of the ignorance or contempt towards their cultural specificities" and are "troubled by the

relations of the local children with the migrants' children and the specific problems that the latter face in an unfamiliar environment which is not always characterised by elements of an open society" (Commission for Educational Reform, 2004b, p. 287). Considering that this report was a result of the Ministry's initiative to provide an evaluation of the educational system, these findings establish the need for intercultural education and intercultural teacher training and also identify these issues as fields in need of further research.

Overall, the previous studies mentioned above identify nationalism, exclusion, racism and discrimination as key issues in the Cypriot educational system, in need of further research. They point to the responsibilities of the educational policies which promote assimilatory practices in relation to diversity and to the need that teachers should be equipped with the knowledge and strategies to work in multicultural environments. The Commission for Educational Reform (2004b), and the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (2006) suggest that the existing efforts in the field of intercultural education in Cyprus need to be emphasised and strengthened. The ongoing research presented in this paper explores some of the issues identified by previous studies in the Greek-Cypriot context, with an emphasis on the teachers' understandings of intercultural education and diversity, which remain under-investigated. The need for further research in this area is strengthened by the emphasis in the international literature on the importance of the teachers' role in the context of education for diversity.

Teachers' identities are determined by their educational experiences, their professional training and their views of the school and wider educational communities, shaping their actions and priorities; therefore, their perceptions of their selves and their professional role and responsibilities are central on the research agenda (Starkey, 2007). Teachers can be agents of change from narrow nationalism to universalism, from ethnic and cultural prejudice to understanding and pluralism (Delors, 1996). Delors (1996, p. 93) highlights the significance of the teachers' role as crucial in the development of their pupils' ability "to be receptive to others and face the inevitable tensions between people, groups and nations". Their role as political actors has also been emphasised, aiming to provide children with an education which will enable them to succeed socially, economically and personally (Wilkins, 2001; Cochran-Smith, 2004; Pearce, 2005). Teachers are in a position to build upon, acknowledge and value their pupils' previous cultural knowledge and origin; eradicate preconceived ideas and stereotypes about cultural supremacy that generate racism and discrimination; develop strategies for the exploration of diversity and reflect on the learning process; and, design participative and dynamic activities, in which students engage and transfer what they learn to real-life situations (Aguado and Malik, 2001). In Gundara's words (2000, p. 118), they need to "challenge the muteness that has been imposed upon the knowledge and images of oppressed civilizations". Bartolome argues that teachers are human

beings with tremendous agency and if they “learn to unmask and question hurtful dominant ideologies as they manifest in their classrooms, they can work on behalf of their students to transform their schools into more humane and democratic places” (2008, p. xxi). However, the structural inequalities and political ideologies involved make such attempts extremely complex and challenging.

Having considered the importance of the role of teachers for intercultural education and previous studies in the Greek-Cypriot context, this study aims to provide some insights into the teachers’ understandings and practices of intercultural education. A review of the field is necessary before exploring the case of Cyprus.

### **Mapping the Field of Intercultural Education**

Multi/intercultural education is an internationally established field, with a huge amount of literature. The recent, six-volume publication *History of Multicultural Education* (Grant and Chapman, 2008) and *The Routledge International Companion to Multicultural Education* (Banks, 2009) are examples of the breadth of literature and of the use of the concept internationally. The educational approach generally known as multicultural education is rooted in the beginning of the nineteenth century and the response by African American scholars to the negative schooling experiences of Black people (Banks and Banks, 2004) and developed during the period of the civil rights’ movement in the 1960s in the US (Banks, 2004b). Multicultural education emerged as a powerful challenge to the Eurocentric foundations of the US curriculum and became the product of “a particular historical conjuncture of relations among the state, contending racial minority and majority groups, educators, and policy intellectuals in the US when the discourse over schools became increasingly racialised” (McCarthy, 1993, p. 289).

It is necessary to make a note on the terminological issues surrounding the terms multicultural and intercultural education. Education for cultural diversity is described with various terms in the literature, often used interchangeably – the most common are multicultural, anti-racist, and intercultural education.<sup>1</sup> Multicultural education is the term preferred in the literature of North America, Britain and Australia, describing the responses of these nations to issues of ‘race’, ethnicity, and intercultural interaction in education (Cushner, 1998a). In Britain, the discourse evolved mainly through the debate between multicultural and anti-racist education advocates (May, 1999; Banks, 2006 (1984)). Intercultural education is the term preferred by the Council of Europe (Council of Europe Committee of Ministers of Education, 2003), UNESCO (2006) and most European countries (Perotti, 1994; Dragonas, Frangoudaki and Inglessi, 1996); it was first significantly taken up by the Council of Europe in their No. 7 project in relation to the education of migrant children in 1981 (Fyfe, 1993). Coulby (2006) suggests that the terminological shift

from multicultural to intercultural education in Europe “seemed to offer a fresh start and one less influenced by the previously dominant and self-contained theory and practice emanating from the USA and the UK” (p. 246). As the term intercultural education is the one used by Greek-Cypriot educational authorities and academia, it is the one being adopted in this article, unless referring to literature from Britain and the US.

Multicultural education, according to Banks and Banks (2004, p. 3), is “an idea or concept, an educational reform movement, and a process”. Gorski (2006) identifies five common key principles in the definitions of multicultural education provided by the main theorists in the field in the US (Sleeter, 1996; Grant and Sleeter, 1998; Nieto, 2000; Banks, 2004a). All support that multicultural education is “a political movement and process that attempts to secure social justice for historically and presently underserved students”; recognises that “social justice is an institutional matter and as such, can be secured only through comprehensive school reform”; “insists that comprehensive school reform can be achieved only through a critical analysis of systems of power and privilege”; aims to eliminate educational inequities; and is “good education for all students” (Gorski, 2006, pp. 164-165). However, each of the theorists that Gorski reviewed gives their own specific definition of multicultural education. Recent international efforts on a theoretical (Banks et al., 2005) and a policy level (UNESCO, 2006) to provide internationally agreed upon definitions of education for citizens in a multicultural world, concluded in sets of principles and concepts but not water-tight definitions. This indicates the great difficulty in defining such a broadly used and variously understood concept.

### **Multicultural Education Dimensions, Approaches and Criticisms**

To refer to one of the most widely accepted definitions, I present the five dimensions of multicultural education, proposed by Banks (2001, pp. 8-15). The dimension of content integration refers to the extent to which teachers use examples and content from a variety of cultures to illustrate key concepts, principles, generalisations, and theories; the knowledge construction process relates to the extent to which teachers help their students understand and investigate how the implicit cultural assumptions, frames of references, perspectives, and biases within a discipline influence the ways in which knowledge is constructed within it; thirdly, the dimension of prejudice reduction focuses on the characteristics of students’ ‘racial’ attitudes and how these can be modified through teaching. This is a similar approach to the one identified by Sleeter and Grant (1988; Grant and Sleeter, 1998; Grant and Sleeter, 2004) as the human relations approach, which aims to promote positive feelings among all students and to promote group identity and eliminate prejudice and bias. The dimension of equity pedagogy is achieved when teachers modify their teaching, to respond to the wide range of learning styles and to ensure

that students from diverse racial, cultural and social class groups succeed academically; last, multicultural education requires an empowering school culture and social structure for students from diverse racial, ethnic and cultural groups by challenging grouping and labelling practices, disproportionality in achievement, and by examining the interactions between staff and students across ethnic and racial lines (Banks, 2001). These dimensions could be present in multicultural education approaches at various levels and implemented into practice in different ways and with varying outcomes. After all, as Banks and Banks (2004, p. 4) have put it, “[m]ulticultural education is also a process whose goals will never be fully realised”. Depending on their interpretation and implementation into practice, these dimensions may lead to the opposite results than the ones aimed for. Consequently, a number of approaches of multicultural education have been developed across various contexts: the contributions, the additive, the transformation and social action approach (Banks, 2006 [1988], pp. 140-143).

The contributions and additive approaches are the most criticised types of multicultural education. The contributions approach is the most frequent, especially in schools who attempt for the first time to work towards a multicultural curriculum. It is characterised by the insertion of ethnic heroes and heroines and cultural elements such as food, dances and music, with little attention paid to their meanings and importance, during special days, weeks or months that are related to ethnic celebrations or events. The additive approach involves the addition of ethnic content, concepts and perspectives, chosen based on Eurocentric criteria, to the curriculum without restructuring it; it requires little time and effort on behalf of the teachers and is therefore the easiest way of doing multicultural education (Banks, 2006 [1988]). Activities in the context of both these approaches have been heavily criticised and rejected for their often tokenistic character (Massey, 1991; Troyna and Hatcher, 1992; Gaine, 1995; Coelho, 1998; Leeman, 2003; Gaine, 2005; Pearce, 2005; Coulby, 2006; Parekh, 2006) and became known as the “3Fs: Food, Festivals and Famous men” in the US (Coelho, 1998) and the “3Ss: Saris, Samosas and Steelbands” in the UK (Troyna and Williams, 1986). In such ‘celebrations of diversity’, opening up minority cultures to examination and avoiding to criticise the dominant one results in the trivialisation of ethnic cultures; in the study of their strange and exotic characteristics; and, in the reinforcement of stereotypes and misconceptions of minority cultures as inadequate and simple (Phoenix, 1998; Banks, 2006 [1988]). As Ann Phoenix (1998, p. 867) explains, these types of multicultural education are based on Allport’s (1954) theory that prejudice results from individual ignorance and that if there is intercultural contact between groups of people, they begin to like each other and, therefore, racism is eliminated. However, “familiarity does not necessarily therefore breed liking” and, consequently, multiculturalism, by dealing only with individualised notions of prejudice, fails to deal with racism (Phoenix, 1998). In the words of Wetherell and Potter (1992, p. 217), “the psychologizing of racism seems to misplace the problem”. Some other



approaches of multicultural education move further than the additive ones in terms of addressing social inequalities. For example, the transformation approach requires a change in the fundamental goals, structure, basic assumptions, and perspectives of the curriculum and aims to enable students to view issues from multiple perspectives, of which the mainstream point of view is merely one (Banks, 2006 [1988]). The social action approach moves a step further by requiring that students are educated for social criticism and are taught decision-making skills in order to become involved in social action. In this context, teachers become agents of social change aiming to promote democratic values and empower their students (Banks, 2006 [1988]). I am more sympathetic to this approach, which emphasises the dimension of empowering school culture and social structure mentioned at the beginning of this section, and thus takes into consideration structural inequalities at a school and a social level.

Multicultural education was criticised from a conservative/Right/nationalist position, which argued that school practices and knowledge should embody those of the state and only the state in terms of language(s), religion, culture or values (Coulby, 2006). It also had critics from within the field, known as advocates of radical or leftist critique, for failing to address and challenge social class inequalities (McLaren and Torres, 1999), structural inequalities, and institutional racism (McCarthy, 1990; Troyna, 1993; Gillborn, 2002; Tomlinson, 2008). Multicultural education has been criticised because the immediate context and the wider framework are too often under-theorised and effectively de-politicised (Coulby, 2006; Gorski, 2006). As Ladson-Billings (1998, p. 22) characteristically describes for the US context, "in its current practice iteration, multicultural education is but a shadow of its conceptual self", because it fails to engage students in critical thinking about the actual social realities and ends up being manifested through the superficial 'celebrations of diversity' described above. The field could benefit from attempts to develop a cross-national perspective instead of only focusing on national contexts with their specific histories and ideologies (May, 1999). A third set of criticisms comes from a postmodernist perspective, arguing that multicultural education failed to consider the multiplicity of identities and, consequently, the multiplicity of racisms (Rattansi, 1999). Otherwise described as intercultural education from a narrow perspective, it has been criticised for failing to acknowledge the connections between 'race', class and gender, as opposed to a more critical approach, which places education in a broader social context, in which the teachers become reflective and socially and politically oriented (Leeman and Ledoux, 2003). A further criticism has been the inability of multicultural education to make effective connections between theory, policy and practice (May, 1999). Coulby (2006) suggests that the field may be reinforced theoretically by borrowing elements from the social sciences and comparative education, and by establishing links to related debates in the wider academic area, such as postmodernism, identity politics, and nationalism. Despite such concerns about the lack of

theoretical agreement on the concept of multi/intercultural education, on a policy level there are international treaties, recommendations and declarations from international and European organisations like the United Nations, UNESCO, the Organisation on Security and Co-operation in Europe, the Council of Europe, and the European Union, which bring obligations and responsibilities in each subscribing state to implement intercultural education (Batelaan and Coomans, 1999). The next section provides a brief review of the policy of intercultural education in Greek-Cypriot primary education.

### **Intercultural Education in Greek-Cypriot Primary Education**

Intercultural education is not part of the Greek-Cypriot mainstream curriculum of Greek-Cypriot education, but is based on school initiatives. In 2001-2002 the Ministry of Education and Culture introduced for the first time the “rhetoric of multicultural education in order to acknowledge the ‘becoming multicultural’ of the Cypriot society”; however, “the welcoming of multiculturalism became the inspiration for an invocation to our historically ‘homogeneous’ society” and multiculturalism has been “addressed as an effect of global socio-economic change rather than as a question pointing to the re-appreciation of our historical ethnic diversity and ethnic divides” (Gregoriou, 2004, p. 245). This is also apparent in the definition provided by the first main policy document on intercultural education, the Ministry’s Report Intercultural Education in Cyprus (Roussou and Hadjiyianni-Yiangou, 2001), which defines intercultural education as:

“the education which prepares people for the social, political and economic situations that they will have to face in a multicultural society and at the same time offers them the opportunity to develop the necessary abilities for critical thought and way of behaviour in various cultural/social environments”, aiming to “create such circumstances which will help the other-language children to become naturally and evenly integrated in the Greek-Cypriot Public School, giving them, at the same time, opportunities to develop and nurture their own language and civilization” (p. 27).

The discourse used refers to minoritised children as “other-language” [“alloglossa”], indicative of the emphasis placed upon Greek language learning. While religious diversity is acknowledged in the policy by providing to non-Christian Orthodox pupils the right of exception from Religious Education, generally the Ministry’s discourse refers to all minoritised pupils in terms of ethnicity, religion, language and culture as “other-language”. The definition provided for intercultural education seems to be based on a pragmatic perspective of intercultural education as a means of preparation for life in a multicultural society, where critical thought and intercultural ways of conduct are valued as useful. However, as the definition concludes, the aim is the minoritised pupils’ ‘even’ and ‘natural’ integration into the majority culture – which points to the assimilationist assumptions of the policy.

A summary of this report (Roussou and Hadjiyianni-Yiangou, 2001) was disseminated to all schools through a Circular (Cyprus Ministry of Education and Culture Primary Education Department, 2002). Intercultural education and an emphasis on diversity were set as the priority objectives and the schools were asked to become involved "in activities which reinforce this aspect of education and create attitudes of tolerance and respect for diversity in both pupils and teachers, at all levels of teaching and learning" (Nicolaidis, 2005, p. 71). The circular offers guidelines for the linguistic, social and cultural support of "other-language" pupils. The linguistic support is identified with the teaching of Greek as a second language. This focus is confirmed when looking at the majority of aims and measures taken in the context of intercultural education, which deal with the teaching and learning of Greek as a second language. Concerning the social and cultural support of minoritised children, the suggestions include the promotion of their own cultural identity and respect for difference. The activities suggested include celebrations involving traditional dress, flags, maps, stamps, songs, folklore, fairy tales, food and dance. The circular emphasises that:

"such activities contribute to the foregrounding of the other-language children's culture and civilization and to their easier acceptance by the native children and their parents, as well as to the fight against xenophobia and any racist tendencies" (Cyprus Ministry of Education and Culture Primary Education Department, 2002, p. 10, original emphasis).

This approach falls into the category of the additive approach of multicultural education, with an emphasis on celebrations of diversity. As discussed earlier in the paper, such activities suggested do not necessarily challenge xenophobia and racist tendencies; on the contrary, by highlighting the minority cultures, they may reinforce the assumption that the dominant culture is the normal one (Coelho, 1998).

The Ministry of Education and Culture (2008) has recently disseminated further guidelines on intercultural education, through a circular which situates intercultural education in the context of the aims identified by the Commission for Educational Reform (2004b). It states that the aims should be the creation of "a democratic school which integrates and does not exclude. This means equality of opportunities for access, participation, success and 'treatment' within the school, by acknowledging the diversity and multiculturalism of the pupil population, as well as their personal needs", and "a school system/education which respects diversity, pluralism (cultural, linguistic, religious) and multiple intelligence" (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2008, p. 1). The measures suggested for the attainment of these goals emphasise, similarly to previous policy documents, the teaching of, and teacher education for, Greek as a second language. It also includes new elements, such as the preparation of a Welcome Guide for newly arrived pupils and their

families in the eight most common foreign languages found in Greek-Cypriot schools. Additionally, the circular argues that since “intercultural education does not only address the other-language children, but also the children of the majority”, the Ministry is planning to add “intercultural elements in the new curricula and textbooks which are planned in the context of the changes in the structure and content of education” (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2008, p. 3). Similarly to other policy documents, there is no reference to challenging racism and discrimination, while the term “other-language” continues to be used, pointing to the continuous focus of the policy on the importance of learning Greek as a second language. It is important to note that the fieldwork which generated the data presented in this article was carried out before these additional guidelines were published. In the next section I discuss the methodology of this study.

### **An Ethnographic Study of Intercultural Education in Cyprus**

Ethnography has been the main qualitative research approach employed to explore the diverse experiences of school life; it is “well-suited to the task, as a result of its open-ended orientation and concern with detailed investigation of diverse perspectives and of the complexities of human interaction” (Woods and Hammersley, 1993, p. 1). The first phase of ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in two highly diverse primary schools in a town centre at the south part of Cyprus for one month during May 2007. The schools were School A, with the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Grades (6-9-year-olds) and School B, including the 4th, 5th and 6th Grades (10-12-year-olds). The schools are situated in the same space and share the garden, yard and sporting facilities. They have a common Parents’ Association, but are run separately by two Headteachers with separate teaching staff – with the exception of the PE teacher. Considering the general situation in Cyprus, the majority of teachers in both schools were, unsurprisingly, female.

The choice of schools was first based on the high ethnic, religious, linguistic, and cultural diversity of the school population. Both schools are attended by a large percentage of non-Greek-Cypriot pupils (approximately 50% with one non-Greek-Cypriot parent and 30% with both non-Greek-Cypriot parents). This allowed the exploration of the everyday realities of teachers and children in a multicultural school environment and provided rich interview and observational data. Despite this diversity, the schools function like any other public primary school, with the provision of extra teaching periods for the teaching of Greek as a second language. The minoritised pupils mainly come from migrant workers’ families. The schools have gained a reputation of a ‘ghetto’, and so has the area in which they are situated, because of the low rents in the town centre. On the contrary, most Greek-Cypriot pupils come from higher social class backgrounds, including the children of the doctors, lawyers and businessmen who have offices close by. As noted in field notes: a characteristic of this school is that next to the Greek-Cypriot doctors’

daughters sit the sons of the doctors' Pontian cleaning ladies. This was another reason for choosing the above as a setting for the current study, as it provided an opportunity to relate research in intercultural education with issues of social class, popular discourses on migrants, and ethnic stereotypes found, for example, in the mass media and political discourse.

The data collection methods included interviewing, observations at a classroom and whole-school level, and, collection of documents related to intercultural education (curriculum, policy documents, teaching material, children's work, reports, pupil population demographics etc). The interviews include the recorded semi-structured interviews with the Ministry officials and Inspectors, unstructured conversations with the Heads and teachers, planned discussion groups with children, and the random casual conversations in the school corridors, the staffroom or the schoolyard. Recorded interviews provided more structured data, as did themes that were introduced in all conversations with the teachers, while the off-the-record conversations complement the interview data. The observations recorded in field notes also complement, and often contradict, the interview data. According to the social constructionism paradigm, all data collection methods that were employed aimed at providing accounts of how participants construct their everyday realities. In total, 27 periods of classroom observations were carried out in 15 classes; 17 interviews with teachers and the two Headteachers; 2 interviews with Ministry officials; 2 interviews with the Inspectors; and, 34 planned group discussions with 90 children from 9 classes. Interviews with adults on average lasted 31 minutes and in total 11.63 hours, while group discussions lasted around 9 minutes and in total 5.44 hours, and usually involved 3 children. The ethical guidelines for educational research of BERA were followed throughout the research process (British Educational Research Association, 2004).

The data analysis is informed by the constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006) and discourse analysis (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Both approaches are based on the theoretical orientation of social constructionism (Burr, 2003) and are suitable for analysing ethnographic data (Wetherell and Potter, 1992; Charmaz, 2006). A series of codings were performed on the large body of transcripts by searching through the data for themes, which had either arisen from the research questions or emerged during the fieldwork or the transcription process. Atlas.ti software was used to organise and manage the transcripts and develop the codes into families. The Atlas.ti was chosen because it is designed on the basis of grounded theory approach and uses the same terminology. All interviews were transcribed in Greek and the necessary quotes were translated for this article, which deals only with the most frequently found codes, of 'intercultural education aims/definitions', 'intercultural education practices' and the relevant code of 'teachers' critical reflections' in order to examine the participants' definitions and practices of intercultural education.

**“What Does Intercultural Education Mean to You?”  
Aims of Intercultural Education for Greek-Cypriot Teachers**

The data discussed in this section are drawn from interviews with the participants and refer to their understandings of what intercultural education is. The aims most frequently suggested by the participants were acceptance of diversity and challenging xenophobia, discrimination and racism.

**Acceptance of Diversity**

A number of teachers emphasise that acceptance as learning to live together is the aim of intercultural education. The aim of acceptance was presented in three ways: as a synonym to learning to live together, as achievable through learning about other cultures, and, as the opposite of assimilation into the majority culture. The most characteristic example of the first understanding of acceptance was given by Headteacher Anna<sup>2</sup> (School A, 39),<sup>3</sup> who stated:

“our goals in intercultural education are acceptance and love. Through diversity. It’s a goal of the school. That in this garden we all have a right to live. All kinds of flowers, all kinds of colours. And through this diversity harmony is achieved.”

Anna argues that the main aim of intercultural education is acceptance of diversity, through learning to live together. She draws on the discourse of human rights to emphasise the universality of everyone’s right to live, regardless of their differences from the majority. On a similar note, Stella (School B, 15) argued that intercultural education should promote acceptance, so that the Greek-Cypriot children will “learn to live with these children, to accept them, to be friends with them”, while Yiorgos (both schools, 7) considers that intercultural education needs “to cultivate acceptance of diversity in all the children. It is not just about the other-language children, it is also for the Greek-Cypriots”. Soula (School A, 16) emphasised that the children “must understand that we must not be racists, that we should accept everyone”. However, most teachers argued that the aim of acceptance as learning to live together is not fully realised at their school at the moment. Their statements in this paragraph are indicative of the assumption that Greek-Cypriot children at the moment do not accept the other-language pupils and of the recognition that teachers have a role in the process of promoting this acceptance.

Secondly, acceptance was perceived as achievable through knowledge of other cultures. Caterina (School B, 18) explains how awareness of cultural differences can help children focus on their similarities instead:

“To experience our celebrations and to tell us about theirs. To understand what unites us and what divides us, what brings us closer and that, in the end, differences bring us closer and make our life more interesting; they offer knowledge. A different language, religion or origin are not elements that divide us but they could also unite us.”

The reasoning behind this approach is made explicit by Anna who argues that “if I don’t get to know the other, get under their skin, understand the way they are thinking, I don’t accept them and I don’t want them”. Her argument emphasises the importance of the process and the outcomes of trying to understand each other. Additionally, Angela (School B, 21) argues that getting to know other civilizations is a strategy for challenging xenophobia and racism; she explains how she attempts to achieve this in her lessons:

“Like now we are teaching clothing. I bring images of Indians, of a woman from Afghanistan, of our own traditional costumes. From these they get to know the civilization, how important it is to dress, and to show that I am a moral human being – for example, in the primitive tribes of Africa walking around naked is not considered immoral; for us yes, for them no. This is intercultural education. To get to know my own civilization and that of those next to me.”

Angela's aim is to promote respect for and understanding of other ways of life in order to challenge racist beliefs. However, anti-racist strategies may often have the opposite consequences if implemented based on false assumptions. Angela's use of ‘primitive tribes of Africa’ might promote the view that while having different values is normal, the African civilization is considered to be inferior to the dominant cultures in Europe. Therefore, the pupils may learn to respect others' moral values and understand why Africans might ‘walk around naked’, but will they consider this to be a culture of the same value as theirs? Angela's lesson can be classified under the additive approach of multicultural education described earlier, where ethnic content which is chosen and judged based on Eurocentric values is added to the curriculum.

Zoe (School B, 11) views acceptance of minoritised pupils as the opposite of their assimilation into the majority culture:

“The pupil must not be assimilated; I will not take away from him any of his own elements, but, it doesn’t mean that he must impose anything on us, that we should terminate what we are and accept any element of his culture.”

This is a positive approach for the non-Greek-Cypriot pupils in Zoe's class, as she does not consciously attempt to assimilate them into the group. However, she seems to view cultures as having rigid boundaries and specific elements that can either be maintained or lost when in contact with other cultures. Such an essentialist view can be an obstacle for meaningful intercultural exchanges in Zoe's class.

### **Challenging Negative Attitudes and Beliefs**

Another aim that informants attribute to intercultural education is challenging negative attitudes and beliefs such as xenophobia, cultural superiority, racism, and the perception of diversity as a problem. Some teachers consider these to be characteristics of Cypriots in general that need to be challenged through intercultural education. As Vaso (School B, 24) put it, “it must teach us to live with everyone ... We haven’t accepted that there will be others next to us”. Rebecca believes that if intercultural education becomes an integral part of the mainstream curriculum and school policies, it might contribute to challenging Cypriots’ “snobbism towards the foreigners”. Similarly, Antigoni (School B, 14) argues that it can challenge the presence of racism in Cypriot society, and Marilena (School A, 10) thinks that intercultural education should be challenging the prejudices of Cypriots toward the foreigners. Very few teachers specifically referred to racism as a characteristic of children’s relations, with Stella stating that “there is intense racism at our school” and Caterina (School B, 18) arguing that intercultural education needs to challenge the “fear of the foreigner” and “the sense of superiority” that she observes among her pupils. They both argued that intercultural education has a role to play, but also acknowledged serious difficulties in its implementation.

Interestingly, however, these teachers provide justifications for the existence of xenophobia and racism in Greek-Cypriot society – specifically the small size of the island, the national problem and the ‘natural’ fear of the ‘foreign element’. Antigoni (School B, 14) sees the fear of the foreigners that leads to racism as “our defence” because “we have been one small island on its own, cut, divided. It is no accident that we are experiencing this phobia”. The perception of Cyprus as a small island, semi-occupied, enhances negative attitudes towards non-Greek-Cypriots. Some teachers argued that there is “not enough space” and that the continuous “national threat” makes accepting the “foreigners” even harder. These teachers do recognise the phenomenon of racism and are concerned about its causes and implications; yet their understandings of it are highly influenced by the discourses surrounding the national problem of Cyprus and the realities that persist in a still ethnically divided island.

Overall, the participants’ suggestion for intercultural education as an approach which should challenge negative attitudes in children reflects the dimension of prejudice reduction described earlier. However, as already discussed, such individualistic perceptions of racism may fail to challenge the racism and discrimination experiences by minoritised pupils or eliminate popular negative discourses on diversity.



### **Nature and Implementation of Intercultural Education**

Before presenting the practices for the implementation of intercultural education that teachers referred to in the interviews, it is useful to look at how they define and understand the nature of intercultural education as an educational approach. They consider it to have a cross-curricular character, with no implementation guidelines, 'recipes' or timetable provided, brought into the classroom whenever a teacher considers there is an opportunity to do so, mainly through discussions with the pupils. Consequently, most teachers stated that they "insert intercultural education" into their teaching, when opportunities arise, depending on the characteristics of the pupil population of their classrooms. For Soula (School A, 16), intercultural education consists of finding the opportunities to tell her pupils that "we all have to be united, to play and to be a family. We are few children in the class and it doesn't matter if they are from another country". She is addressing the Greek-Cypriot children in order to convince them that they should accept the children from other countries. Such discussions, as Caterina (School B, 18) explains, are the main way through which the message of acceptance of diversity may be "transmitted" to the children:

"I can't imagine that this is something that happens through written speech or with an exercise that they are going to write. It's more about conversation and the creation of a climate through which these messages will pass into their consciousness."

Other teachers said that their usual intercultural education practice is to find opportunities in the mainstream curriculum where the minoritised children may "say something or bring something from their own culture" (Zoe, School B, 11) or "transfer something from their own space" (Yiota, School A, 13). Most of them, however, argued that they "don't do anything special", as Lydia put it. Angela (School B, 21) also said that "if I didn't have foreign children, I wouldn't have followed this programme", expressing the perspective of intercultural education addressing only diverse classrooms – an approach that has been heavily criticised as inappropriate even in culturally homogeneous schools (for example, Gaine, 2005).

In terms of intercultural education practices, teachers often referred to teaching Greek as a second language to newly arrived children. Additionally, both Headteachers emphasised collaborative learning as a way of promoting acceptance for diversity. The schools organise activities in which the children play in groups that are mixed in terms of gender, ethnicity and achievement. Andreas (School B, 34) argues that "there is no antagonism in games or in the classroom; there is collaboration everywhere. Because, in order to collaborate with someone, first you have to accept them". He considers acceptance a precondition for

collaboration, and Anna (School A, 39) similarly emphasises that “in a group you will accept everyone and everything” and considers team sports to be the most appropriate strategy for this aim.

The main practices for intercultural education in both schools were events for the celebration of diversity. These provided opportunities for diverse children in whole-school and classroom events to present their culture through exchanging phrases and songs in their language, sharing customs and habits, cooking of traditional foods and presenting information about their country. As Headteacher Anna described:

“I dedicate during the whole year at Christmas and at Easter a little something for these children as well. To sing a song from their country, to say a recipe for Christmas or to mention the customs of their country for Easter or Christmas, to tell me their prayer, for me to accept the way they are praying”.

Interestingly, the whole-school events that are referred to as opportunities for non-Greek-Cypriot children to contribute with their own cultural experiences are Christmas and Easter. The majority of non-Greek-Cypriot pupils at the schools come from Eastern European countries and are Greek-speaking and Christian-Orthodox. This might justify why Christian celebrations present opportunities for intercultural exchanges. However, despite the fact that Muslim and Catholic pupils also attend the schools, there was no mention of any celebrations related to other religions. Presentations of other countries were also added to the mainstream events as part of the weekly assemblies at one of the schools. As Caterina (School B, 18) explained, “every Friday morning, during assembly, some child from a different country, not from Cyprus, would present something to everyone”. This could involve pictures, poems or reading a few lines about each country.

The use of other languages parallel to the mainstream lessons is another practice that some teachers referred to as part of intercultural education. Apart from learning to say good morning in all the languages spoken by her pupils, Lydia (School A, 2) finds learning words in new languages to be a strategy to deal with Greek-Cypriot children’s negative reactions whenever they hear someone not speaking Greek: “if a child says something and the others are about to react negatively, I try to present it as a lesson, as learning something new”. Additionally, Nadia (School A, 9) mentioned that when they come across a word with a non-Greek root, she explains how languages borrow words from each other and asks the bilingual children in her class to translate it in their language for the rest: “For example the word humour is in English, so I ask ‘What is it in Russian, Marko?’ ‘In Polish Aleksy, how do you say it?’ So each child gets the opportunity to use their language a little bit”. Songs in other languages were a popular activity among the children, according to Yiota (School A, 13), who asked her Russian pupils to teach the rest of the class a Christmas song and observed positive outcomes:

"I believe that at a classroom level we have achieved something because the children accepted this very positively. They didn't make fun of the other children that sang in Russian. And the children were happy as well because they gave something from their homeland and the others received."

Cooking of traditional foods is part of the agenda for intercultural education in both schools. Angela (School B, 21) told me about a Romanian mother she had asked to come and cook with the children before Christmas:

"We brought to the school a Romanian mother, who was embarrassed to come to the school even, and she made some Christmas foods that they make. We wrote the recipe on the board in Greek and in Romanian and we found that there are common words – for flour she wrote farina (also used for flour in Greek), for eggs she wrote oa (Ancient Greek for eggs). The children made observations. They got to know Romania."

According to Angela, identifying common words in both languages is a way for the Greek-Cypriot children to "get to know" Romania. The question raised here is whether what the children learnt about Romanian cooking and language was worth asking a Romanian mother to become the representative of her culture. As Angela explained to me, the mother was "so embarrassed to come to the school" that she had to "convince" her to do this with the children and "could not understand" why she felt uncomfortable. Zoe (School B, 11) seems to view these events from a different perspective:

"The Ministry asks us to devote two weeks to intercultural education, with fancy slogans and temporary activities, for the pupils' parents come and cook something, to talk about diversity, so that they [the children] will supposedly come closer to each other. I think that by emphasising diversity you pull them apart. At least this has been my experience so far ..."

Even if such practices promote cultural understanding, are they the appropriate way to go about it if they require asking members of cultural minorities to go under the spotlight and become representatives of their whole cultures? And most importantly, how can teachers become equipped with the necessary critical tools to be able to distinguish between what could have more negative than positive implications? Overall, the practices described by the participants fall into the category of the additive approach of multicultural education, described earlier. Even though they do not necessarily lead to positive outcomes, they are usually a first step towards the transformation and social action approaches, especially when schools attempt to implement intercultural education for the first time. Some examples of teachers' critical reflections on their schools' practices are discussed next.

### Teachers' Critical Reflections

Considerably few teachers, all younger than 40-years of age, critically questioned the concept of intercultural education and its ability to promote social justice as it is currently implemented. Some teachers argued that intercultural education cannot be effective in challenging social inequality on its own, as this depends on a holistic social intervention. Constandinos (School B, 11) clarified from the beginning that our conversation would be referring to the school practices only, as he believes that the social level is "a completely different issue". Yiorgos (both schools, 7) emphasised that "the school is not the only solution, there are many things in the game ... it's about all of the social situations. But I have no suggestions about what should happen in order to save the world". While he recognises the school's role in promoting social equality, he seems to underestimate his role as a teacher in this aspect. Yiota (School A, 13) argued that intercultural education "helps very much, but does not fight xenophobia on its own". These quotes are evidence for at least some teachers' broader understandings of social inequality. The positive aspect of such statements is that teachers do reflect on their roles as professionals and citizens not just on a school and a local level, but perhaps on a national or global level. However, there is an apparent risk in Yiorgos' words, that when absorbing the big picture, teachers may feel powerless, inadequate, or out of place; thus, they might be unable to take over the responsibility of being active in the promotion of social change.

Lydia (School A, 2) was the only teacher who argued that intercultural education needs to challenge the view that diversity is a problem and promote the idea that it is normal:

"Children should understand that this diversity is not a problem, in terms of the fact that the other is different, doesn't speak the same language, or follow the same religion or dress code. This is what I want them to comprehend."

For Lydia this is the primary aim for intercultural education. As opposed to other teachers, she was the only one to be critical of the perception of diversity as a problem that needs to be "treated", despite the practical problems she faces in her diverse classroom.

In relation to the aims of intercultural education, Constandinos (School B, 11) was the only teacher who referred to challenging nationalism in the curriculum and explained how he tries to "minimise" it in History lessons by telling the pupils that "it's not just the Greeks who began a revolution, there are other peoples that have a history behind them", and in Maths also by mentioning "the Russian villagers" along with "Pythagoras the Greek". Similarly, Zoe (School B, 11) was critical of the curriculum, arguing against the "one-day or two-week celebrations of diversity" and suggested that:

“Since we know that in Cyprus we have Russians, Polish, Moldavians, and in our school we have an Indian boy, the right thing to do would be to have texts in the Language books from the countries of origin of our foreigners; they could include texts of their own literature. By teaching these texts, we would include their cultures in the class as well.”

Zoe's suggestion is not simply an add-on approach for intercultural education. She argues for a reform of the curriculum, so that diversity comes to the centre of teaching and learning and becomes mainstreamed. No other teacher made such a suggestion. However, two teachers did express their discomfort with the practices adopted at the school for the acceptance of diversity. As Marilena (School A, 10) put it,

“Sometimes you're troubled about what should be happening in school. They [the foreigners] 'are supposed to feel that they are maintaining the elements from their countries, their traditions, and their customs. I think it's good for them to know – that is, where they're coming from – but it shouldn't happen in a way that makes them feel they are being stigmatised and that they are different.”

Antigoni (School B, 14), referring to the overall attitude of the Cypriot schools when welcoming newly arrived children, said:

“I believe that we deal with these children very empirically; that is, we welcome them the way we know, we are not trained as to how you welcome a foreign-language child. It's more with our love, with acceptance, but perhaps if there was something ... How are we supposed to welcome them? How long should it take? How should we communicate with the parents? Let's not leave it to trial and error.”

Both teachers are reflecting on their practices and show an understanding of the complexity of the situation. Marilena said that she had some experiences that have made her consider the possibility of the stigmatisation of diverse children during celebrations, while Antigoni argues that love is simply not enough in their effort to accept them. It seems that even the few teachers who are self-reflective have difficulties in formulating, let alone answering, such questions.

### **Concluding Remarks**

“Intercultural education cannot be a fashionable ornament stuck on to an otherwise unchanged school; it is a profound and deeply difficult demand, internalising the drama of the coming-together of the world” (Wimberley, 2003, p. 208).

Teaching and learning in the increasingly culturally diverse Greek-Cypriot schools is happening in the context of globalisation, and, at the same time, in a mainly assimilationist framework, which 'treats' multiculturalism with additions and occasional contributions to the curriculum and school practices. It is important to acknowledge that the monocultural character of education is directly related to the island's modern history and anti-colonialism, which may explain the insistence on ethnocentric curricula (Charalambous and Papamichael, 2008). This article focused on teachers, as their role is crucial for the implementation of intercultural education. Some conclusions can be drawn from the preliminary findings presented, not for the purposes of generalisation, but to provide some insights into teachers' understandings of intercultural education.

That most teachers view acceptance and challenging xenophobia and racism as the primary aims for intercultural education reflects the dimensions found in the literature. So does their perception of intercultural education as a flexible educational approach which needs to permeate all lessons, and does not work in the same way in all contexts. In its implementation, intercultural education needs to inform the teaching and learning of all subjects (Cushner, 1998b) and at all phases of education (Coulby, 2006). There is no formula that will work in all situations, but the successful innovations are the small, shared and closely monitored projects based on an adaptation of current knowledge on cultural issues and school effectiveness by the educators to their own specific context (Cushner, 1998b). Nevertheless, the activities reported by the teachers as implemented in the schools in the context of intercultural education belong to the additive approach; they are sometimes tokenistic and, according to some teachers, unsuccessful in the aims they set out to achieve. The key issue is the teachers' ability to reflect on their own practices and evaluate the results of their practices in a broader context of social inequality and discrimination. While concerns for the current status of diversity at their school were only mentioned by a few teachers, this is a positive step towards a reconsideration of intercultural education in Greek-Cypriot schools and a critical questioning of teachers' own assumptions and teaching practices.

With the recent changes in the Ministry's discourses and policies, and the current efforts to implement the educational reform, Greek-Cypriot education is moving closer to a transformation approach of the curriculum, which bring diversity and respect to its centre and supports teachers who are able to contribute to social action and change for equality. The research presented in this article is ongoing. Seeking to investigate issues of diversity in Greek-Cypriot primary schools, it attempts to explore teachers' understandings of intercultural education and diversity and how these affect their everyday practices. The aim is to develop a picture of intercultural education in Greek-Cypriot schools by drawing on similar ethnographic studies and by taking into consideration the multiple perspectives of the everyday realities of all school actors.

### Notes

1. Others include cross-cultural education, intercultural learning, inclusive education, education for social justice, multicultural citizenship education, multicultural anti-racist education and international education.
2. All names used in this paper are pseudonyms.
3. The numbers in brackets indicate years of service.

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