

## **Improving School and Teaching in the Context of Cultural Pluralism**

**[Βελτιώνοντας το Σχολείο και τη Διδασκαλία σε Συνθήκες Πολιτισμικού Πλουραλισμού]**

**Aimilios Solomou and Christina Hadjisoteriou (eds)**

**Athens: Diadrasi Publications, 2019**

**pp. 222**

**ISBN: 978-618-5059-99-6**

The book features a compilation of ten articles written by educators, teachers and teacher trainers, academics and PhD candidates, mainly from the University of Nicosia. It is not an attempt to impose solutions, but it rather aims at weaving together sociocultural contexts, ideologies and pedagogies, policies, and curricula. The essays allow the reader to follow the complex and conflicting issues that have contributed in formulating the rhetoric and practice of cultural pluralism in educational contexts. The editors attempted to bring together different perspectives on questions that arise in the course of teachers' daily work such as 'How can a framework for the development of an intercultural ethos be created and guide teachers' pedagogical decisions in Cypriot schools?' or 'Can values and practices, such as critical awareness or commitment to equal opportunities and outcomes, be promoted so that teachers can critically examine, document their decisions, recognise and manage their emotions, question entrenched perceptions, and ultimately enable the transformation of society?' and 'Can teachers influence decisions about education policy in the context of cultural pluralism?'

Ideas and suggestions based on research data are used to provide answers to these questions as well as to pose new ones connecting aspects of intercultural education, terms, factors, and conditions with the social and cultural aspects of school life. Thus, the book is addressed to four target groups: school leaders, teachers, people who facilitate teachers in continuous professional learning contexts, and students in the field of Education Sciences.

As the editors note in their introductory preface chapter, at a time defined by globalisation, economic crisis, poverty, conflicts, people moving across borders and borders moving over people, the culturally pluralistic school is called upon to create new routes of interaction and intercultural dialogue. The implementation and success of

a policy depends on the ability of teachers to utilise intercultural knowledge, values, and skills, resulting from the study of books such as the one presented here, and to act effectively pedagogically, with an intercultural ethos. 'We usually talk about equality, but we talk much more', as C. Xenophonos points out in his paper in the book, 'about access and achievement and much less about identity and power issues'. The concepts of equality and equity, participation, democracy, acceptance, multiple identity, and diversity, are systematically encountered in the book aiming at understanding the Other's cultures and diversities and reducing conflicts in identity negotiations and power. Most of the articles in the book focus on equality and equity, respect for diverse ideas, communication and learning support. Migration is regarded as a route through which, according to A. Solomou, Chr. Hadjisoteriou and M. Antoniou, 'we learn to seek, to choose, and to read critically'.

When focusing on the concepts of school improvement and learning outcomes, the aim is to conceptualise three levels of analysis that interact, and which the book fully covers: the macro-level of the educational system, as characteristics of educational systems are associated with differences in the learning outcomes of children with migrant background; the meso-level of the school, focusing on the way organisations connect individuals with society, since school as an organisation deals with differences between children's performance and feelings. However, we mostly focus on the micro-level of the classroom and the interaction of individuals. More specifically, we focus on their perspectives, the definition of the situation, their choices, goals and needs.

The book is divided in two parts. In the first part, the papers focus on the macro- and meso-level, on educational policy issues, and school development and improvement. In the second part, the focus is on the micro-level of the teacher-student interaction in the school classroom and on teaching issues in particular.

In Part I, in Chapters One (Chr. Hadjisoteriou, Chr. Kousiou and P. Angelidis) and Three (A. Evdokiou and Chr. Hadjisoteriou), the authors focus on the role of leadership and its interaction with the significant Others in the school role-set. They discuss how this interaction contributes to the improvement of the culturally pluralistic school, concluding that intercultural skills are a prerequisite for changes in school culture, and for the vision of mutual respect, autonomy, and the pursuit of high-goal achievements for all. Chapter Two (G. Sorkos and Chr. Hadjisoteriou) compares and contrasts intercultural education and inclusive education to clarify sustainable intercultural inclusion as the unique solution ensuring social cohesion. Chapters Four

(M. Zembylas and E. Papamichael) and Five (P. Maniatis and Chr. Hadjisoteriou) move one step further by focusing on teacher professional learning and continuous professional development. They reflect on teacher training activities that deal with stereotypes, prejudices, and the pedagogy of discomfort and empathy.

In Part II, the five chapters focus on the micro-level of the classroom and deal with materials, approaches, and teaching proposals for different subjects. Readers interact with cultural awareness and diverse issues of everyday school life. In all papers of Part II, the concluding remarks concern teaching tools that function critically and reflectively and contribute to intercultural openness. The concepts of intercultural education and differentiation of teaching and learning in Chapter Six (L. Neophytou, St. Valianti and Chr. Hadjisoteriou), culturally responsible research and innovation in History teaching in Chapter Seven (A.I. Solomou, Chr. Hadjisoteriou and M. Antoniou), refugee literature in Chapter Eight (M. Rodosthenous and C. Magos), intercultural mathematics and equity in Chapter 9 (C. Xenophontos), and culturally sensitive science in Chapter Ten (M. Evagorou and N. Mousoulides) are discussed and elaborated in order to highlight ideas for the enhancement of cultural pluralism in the classroom. Thus, the book serves the dual function of mirror and window, as recorded by Marina Rodosthenous and Costas Magos in their own text in the book: it functions as a window through which readers interact with data, research results, and diverse authors' perspectives. It also functions as a mirror, as readers have the opportunity to explore deeply their own pedagogical theory and their choices and decisions in their daily work in the educational field.

The professional learning of teachers is a process of social participation, interaction, and formation of identities. The motivation to participate in such a learning process can come from typical pedagogical opportunities, such as training seminars. It can arise informally through interaction with colleagues as they converse outside the formal institutional framework or come from the individuals themselves and their desire for success. The topics and the individual texts of the book promote teachers' learning through all three aforementioned paths, both in the context of trainings, as well as in personal study reflection and informal discussions. Teachers can identify elements in the book that enable reflection on whether cultural diversity in society is identified and enhanced in their classrooms, and on whether their pedagogical decisions promote respect and social justice and allow participation and interaction between identities and diversities without 'exoticising' or 'flattening' them. Throughout the book, one can find stimuli to adapt to the context of cultural pluralism and use

the energy, the passion, and the enthusiasm to understand the change and structure of interactions in different learning places: in the school classroom, the university theatre, and the professional learning seminar.

The book, edited by Emilios Solomou and Christina Hadjisoteriou in a volume issued by the UNESCO Chair on Cultural Diversity and Intercultural Dialogue for a Culture of Peace of the University of Nicosia, is at the core of the purpose of this Chair: it promotes the production and dissemination of ideas for dialogue, respect for common values, cultures, and human rights. This book is addressed to the educational world and seeks to bring the authors close to the potential readers and promote social dialogue, discussion, and collaborations on current issues. Reading the book creates feelings of pedagogical discomfort and opportunities for critical empathy, which are concepts dealt with by Michalinos Zembylas and Elena Papamichael in their paper in the volume, and which constitute the purpose of a book focusing on cultural pluralism and education: to create interest, expectations, and personal connections and feelings about its content. A criticism of the book would probably include the absence of a final concluding chapter or an introduction to each part, which would have made the exploration of the concepts easier to follow.

Overall, *Improving School and Teaching in the Context of Cultural Pluralism* will be of interest to those who want to better understand how pedagogical discourse can be based on reconstruction of meanings, pressures for equality and equity, and to confront power dynamics in school leadership and school teaching. Reflection on and adoption of certain terms, ideas, practices, or ideology frameworks presented in the book can be used to address diversity in a social-justice-focused and culturally pluralistic educational context.

**Pavlina Hadjitheodoulou-Loizidou**