

## Immigration and Intercultural Education

The increase in immigration in Cyprus raises new integration issues. An intercultural education system would help in establishing social cohesion and peace.

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The island of Cyprus has historically been characterised by diversity and multiculturalism. During the late 1990s, Cyprus rapidly shifted from a state experiencing emigration, to an immigrant recipient country. International developments in the economic and political arena have significantly affected the policies of Cyprus on migration. The collapse of the Soviet Bloc, the escalating globalisation of the neo-liberal model, Cyprus's accession to the EU and domestic economic progress in certain sectors (e.g., tourism and construction) led Cyprus to reconsider its restrictive approach to immigration. The vast majority of immigrants come to the island as low-skilled and service oriented workers, attracted by the needs of the domestic labour market (Trimikliniotis, 2008). Cyprus's sudden shift to an immigrant host country caught the Government of Cyprus and the society unprepared for the socioeconomic challenges and opportunities that immigrants have brought to the island (Mainwaring, 2008). As a result, immigrants are facing racism, xenophobia, political and civic exclusion, and marginalisation.

It is currently estimated that 160,000 third country migrants and 60,000 EU citizens live in Cyprus (Trimikliniotis, 2008). Immigrants are often depicted as a 'burden' on the social and economic sectors of the country. An example is the discourse used by the media and police when identifying undocumented immigrants. They call such processes 'operation broom', implying that the police are 'cleaning' the island. Such perceptions and practices are a reflection of the overall political and legal immigration framework. Immigrants' residence in Cyprus is characterised by transition, uncertainty and, in most cases, temporality. Immigrants are often exploited by employers as they can only stay in the country if they are working or studying at a local university or college. In recent years, policies directed towards immigrants have been established; however, most of these are legalistic and regulatory in nature, ignoring the social issues (Triandafyllidou & Gropas, 2007, pp. 45, 57).

In relation to education, migration leads to an increase in diversity in schools. This transformation has created new challenges for the education system in Cyprus and has had a major impact on the

work of teachers. One of the major fields in which the successful or unsuccessful inclusion of immigrants is tested in Cyprus is the education system.

### Education and immigrants in Cyprus

Following the division of the island in 1974, the process of homogenisation within each of the two major communities in Cyprus (i.e., the Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots) has intensified for political reasons. This has been the basis for the development of a monocultural education system within the education system of the Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots (Zembylas, in press). Of the current inhabitants, 13.7 per cent are non-Cypriots (Statistical Service of the Republic of Cyprus, 2006). The changing profile of the population in Cyprus has affected the schools and the education system. In the 1995/96 school year, the percentage of non-indigenous students was 4.41 per cent; in 2007/08 this percentage rose to 7.7 per cent (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2007a & 2007b). There are now some Cypriot schools where non-indigenous students constitute a significant majority (80 to 90%).

Although Cyprus offers free education to all of its residents, including migrants' children, it has a very poor record for an intercultural approach in its curriculum and education system (Zembylas, in press). Many migrant children also face exclusion and marginalisation due to the status of their parents (Trimikliniotis & Demetriou, 2007). For example, there have been cases where schools have requested to see the parent's 'residence permit' before enrolling a child. Although the issue was resolved by the Attorney General and a circular sent to all teachers, there is still confusion and uncertainty about the rights of migrant children. Therefore, 'equal opportunities for all children' remains an unfulfilled goal in Cyprus. In light of experiences in other European countries that show that second-generation immigrants are more likely to feel alienated within the host country's society (Gregg, 2006), it is important to pay attention to those policies that will make inclusion successful for these vulnerable groups. Research shows that second generation immigrants demonstrate lower performance in school than first generation (EC, 2008). Hence, it is crucial that children of immigrants are given the opportunity to effectively participate in education and society.

Intercultural education is relatively new to Cypriot schools. According to Zembylas and Iasonos (in press), the first serious attempt to address

the issue took place in 2002 when the Ministry of Education and Culture sent a circular to public schools (titled Intercultural Education). This circular attempted to present the Government's policy on intercultural education. The issues on which the policy focused included the provision of measures for language support (e.g., the teaching of Greek as a second language to non-indigenous students) and the provision of measures to facilitate the smooth integration of non-indigenous students into the Greek-Cypriot education system and society. These language provisions – which are still in place – do not seem sufficient to equally serve all students regardless of ethnicity, origin and religion (Zembylas, in press). However, it is important to acknowledge that there are a few 'multicultural' schools that manage to demonstrate remarkable results in terms of the successful inclusion of immigrant students (Demetriou, 2009).

In 2004, a Commission for Educational Reform (2004) was appointed by the Government to oversee the process of developing and implementing education reform in public schools. This Commission expressed concern about the narrowly ethnocentric and culturally monolithic Cypriot education system, which did not account for intercultural education. According to Zembylas and Iasonos (in press), the measures and policies suggested and implemented by the Ministry were considered inadequate by the Commission because they primarily targeted non-indigenous students and their Greek 'language deficiency', while neglecting wider issues of nationalism, racism and intolerance. The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI, 2006) emphasised the lack of thorough understanding of, and genuine sensitivity to, human rights by many teachers. Research conducted in Cyprus demonstrated that the policies enforced both at the philosophical and practical level are mostly grounded in the notion of assimilation rather than integration, and that the education system views the diversity of non-indigenous children as a deficiency that needs to be treated quickly so that these children can be assimilated (Angelides et al., 2004; Panayiotopoulos & Nicolaidou, 2007; Zembylas, in Press).

The model of intercultural education currently being implemented in Cyprus elementary schools is a mainstreaming programme in which language learners attend classes with indigenous Greek-speaking children. Following the example of the French Zones Educatif Priorité, a number of public schools in Cyprus have become part of a Zone of

Educational Priority (ZEP). ZEP networks have schools with high numbers of non-indigenous students, but not all such schools are included; there are a number of schools in Cyprus with high numbers of non-indigenous students that are not in a ZEP network. ZEP schools receive additional help, such as extra hours for assisting non-indigenous students to learn the language. However, the role of ZEP schools is not just to provide language support; they also promote multiculturalism and foster closer links between schools and the community. In addition, the Pedagogical Institute of Cyprus organises in-service training for teachers in intercultural education, but attendance is voluntary and during teachers' free time.

The successful inclusion of immigrant children in the education system can also empower immigrant parents (NESSE, 2008). In Cyprus, parents associations are vital decision-making and lobbying bodies that influence policies. The participation of immigrant parents in such associations will potentially alter the status of immigrant parents and transform them into active participants in political and civil society.

The majority of immigrants arrive in Cyprus without their families. The education system must adjust to this reality. The Ministry of Education and some NGOs are offering evening courses for adult immigrants. However, these evening courses are not free and mostly focus on learning the Greek language together with some vocational training (Demetriou, 2009). These courses are inadequate to meet the goal of an inclusive multicultural society.

## Conclusion

Increased immigration to a country provides new challenges, and the education system has an important role to play in meeting these challenges. Intercultural education is a vital medium for social cohesion and peace in an era during which Cyprus has become a popular destination for immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers. The Government has to re-evaluate its policies on intercultural education and consider the important implications of changes on the philosophy and practices of the education system. The intercultural education strategy and policies must be holistic and cover all spheres of public life. Only when immigrants are treated as potential citizens of the state with rights will they feel included and invested in, for the common good. Cyprus's unresolved political problem complicates efforts to address the alienation of immigrants in all aspects of public life, including education. Despite the challenges, Cyprus can use intercultural education as a medium to build more inclusion and social cohesion by promoting equal rights and participation for all.

One important aspect that needs to be addressed is teacher preparation programmes. Current programmes fail to prepare teachers to engage in the difficult work with migrant children, which requires a shift in values, attitudes and

practices, and limits their ability to address fundamental social justice issues. To promote intercultural education, teacher preparation programmes need to be designed so that they provide teachers with opportunities to critically reflect on their values and practices, as well as on the impact their work has on the community. Such opportunities may include participation in a field-based inquiry into racism and discrimination, shadowing successful teachers in schools where intercultural education is a primary objective, participating in workshops that analyse empirical data about racism and examine stereotypes, and facilitating the development of inclusive curricula.

The fundamental assumptions and practices of EU education systems need to be critically analysed. Governments and ministries of education need to demonstrate the strong political will needed to deal with difficult and contentious issues, such as intercultural education, and to critically examine those practices that are institutionalised in the education system that marginalise immigrant parents and their children. Convincing governments to reform exclusionary practices into a more inclusive framework is not an easy task. However, it is a task worth pursuing if one believes in social justice and education for all. ■

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