Modern Approaches to Early Childhood Education for Vulnerable Social Groups: The Greek Experience

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Abstract

Early childhood education for vulnerable social groups is crucial, emphasizing equity and justice in learning opportunities. Contemporary research stresses the integration of sociocultural and socio-cognitive learning theories with postmodern pedagogical perspectives, advocating for universal access to education, regardless of children's background. A central aspect of this approach is the integration of informal, non-formal, and formal learning environments, fostering a cohesive learning trajectory that supports children's development. In this context inclusive pedagogy addresses intersectional issues like gender, class, race, and socio-economic barriers hindering educational success. The study of early childhood education in this context examines dynamic factors such as familial, social, and cultural contexts, recognition of diversity, and interdisciplinary approaches. Shifts in intercultural education emphasize civic and critical intercultural education, focusing on social justice, inclusion, and critical skills for a globalized society. Critical intercultural education seeks to dismantle social inequalities, promote citizenship that respects diversity, and encourage active societal participation. By deepening understanding of inclusive pedagogy, teachers can adapt strategies and better support children from diverse backgrounds. Additionally, teachers must be supported in recognizing diverse student needs and developing differentiated strategies, especially in multicultural classrooms. In Greece, where migration and socio-economic challenges create diversity, this study is significant. It advocates for a shift from traditional methods to flexible, responsive approaches sensitive to vulnerable children's experiences. Research suggests that teachers need further support in understanding what knowledge is valuable for preschoolers, posing challenges for professional development.

Keywords: *Early Childhood Education; Intercultural Education; Vulnerable Social Groups; Inclusion; Teacher Professional Development*

1. Introduction

The role of intercultural education is crucial during early childhood and the initial years of primary education, as this is the period during which children construct the foundational dimensions of their identity and begin to recognize differences in relation to the identities of others. Particularly when intercultural education is enriched with a critical dimension, it offers children the opportunity to develop their thinking in ways that allow them to critically engage with stereotypes and prejudices, reflect on issues of otherness, discrimination, and social inequalities, and cultivate a sense of solidarity and cooperation [1]. At this age, children appear to be more open to engaging with difference and cooperating with the "other," which facilitates the work of educators who, as significant others, are called to support children's multidimensional development.

From an early age, children imitate adult behavior, assume and adopt roles, and consequently the habits and behaviors they acquire during this period form what Bourdieu refers to as habitus—a system of dispositions that shapes their way of thinking and acting throughout their lives. Therefore, kindergarten is the appropriate context in which children can be taught that diversity is a social reality and that accepting and engaging with difference generates significant social capital. This, in turn, positively influences children's development toward becoming active and critically thinking citizens [2]. Within this process, the role of the educator is vital, as they contribute decisively to the creation of a learning environment in which every child participates equally in the educational process, especially for individuals belonging to socially vulnerable groups, such as students with a migrant and/or refugee background, students from Roma communities, or other minority groups.

2. From Folkloric to Critical Intercultural Education

Intercultural education has become a widely discussed field within Pedagogy in recent years, as it addresses issues pertinent to contemporary multicultural societies. Initially, it was associated with the education of students with a migratory background, aiming to find solutions to their educational challenges. However, in essence, it targets all students, creating the conditions for multicultural exchange and communication [3]. Although there is no universally accepted definition of intercultural education, there appears to be a convergence around the principles underpinning an interculturally oriented education. Key principles include respect for and recognition of difference, and the equitable valuation of students' cultural and educational capital. These aim at fostering knowledge, skills, and attitudes that promote respect and solidarity, contributing to the dismantling of stereotypes and prejudices and the elimination of racist discourse [4].

The acceptance and understanding of the self through the acceptance and understanding of the "other" highlights a new humanistic theory through the lens of the intercultural approach [5]. More specifically, the focus on interaction and contact between different groups within the framework of intercultural education can be seen as an alternative application of the "contact hypothesis" [6]. However, contact alone is not sufficient condition for overcoming stereotypes and prejudices [7, 8]. There is a need for systematic promotion of the principles of intercultural education and the implementation of intercultural pedagogical and educational practices that permeate all aspects of schooling and its functions [9].

In the practical implementation of intercultural education, different approaches appear to prevail depending on how difference is approached and represented within the school environment. The first approach is characterized by a superficial or folkloristic engagement with the "other". According to this approach, familiarity and interaction with the culturally "other" occur at a surface level, which is deemed a sufficient condition for overcoming stereotypes and prejudices against otherness [10]. Practice typically involves the presentation of cultural elements such as traditional foods, music, and customs within a celebratory context of diversity. This approach is common in contemporary multicultural classrooms, as many educators believe it broadens students' cultural horizons [11]. However, the acceptance of otherness and the celebration of diversity do not address the actual educational challenges faced by students with migrant or refugee backgrounds or those belonging to minority groups. Nor do they foster genuine intercultural communication. The second approach is grounded in Taylor's theory of recognition, which posits that the acceptance and recognition of the "other's" difference contributes to the strengthening of their identity and the improvement of their societal standing [12]. The "politics of difference" or "politics of equal recognition" expresses the need for members of minority groups to resist dominant identity politics, leading to social recognition policies aimed at combating social exclusion. In such cases, measures of affirmative action or support programs are implemented to protect and empower these individuals. Within this framework of recognition and empowerment of students from diverse backgrounds in schools, Cummins proposes an intercultural model that emphasizes the need for appropriate measures—particularly in teacher-student relationships—to prevent school failure [13].

Criticism of communitarian positions, as formulated by Taylor and Kymlicka, especially from representatives of liberalism, postmodernism, and post-metaphysical universalism—as expressed through Habermas's discourse ethics—opens the way for linking intercultural education with citizenship. According to Habermas, the individual's ability to participate in dialogue, public discourse, and communicative action is fundamental to the constitution of a society marked by equal participation and mutual recognition of individuals as free and equal [14]. The evolution of intercultural education shifts the emphasis from identities to student performance and learning outcomes. Specifically, it considers how improving student outcomes can become a goal of an empowering and liberating pedagogy through which children acquire knowledge, develop skills, and find their voice in the contemporary world—thus reflecting on their role as citizens in modern societies [15]. Within the framework of critical pedagogy, critically oriented intercultural education values the engagement and interaction with otherness, while simultaneously focusing on the development of students' critical thinking regarding identity formation and issues related to social inequality, discrimination, racism, and power relations. According to Gorski [16], intercultural education must prioritize the creation of conditions for equal educational opportunities and social justice. Without these, intercultural dialogue is reduced to the reproduction of inequalities. In this context, educators must raise students'

awareness of issues related to social discrimination and inequality, exploring the causes and mechanisms of their reproduction—not merely promoting the acceptance of otherness or the celebration of diversity [17].

3. Intercultural Education in Early Childhood: Findings from Greek Research

The term "intercultural education" was officially introduced in Greece in 1996 with the enactment of Law 2413/1996. Although, in theory, the legislative framework for managing cultural diversity provides for the establishment of intercultural schools, reception classes and remedial courses, as well as the enrichment of curricula and textbooks through an intercultural lens and the implementation of various programs targeting groups with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds [18], questions arise as to whether and how these measures have been effectively implemented across all levels of education, including early childhood education. The provisions of this law appear to contain ambiguities and create confusion regarding the implementation of the proposed action plans [19]. Nevertheless, in recent years, programs have been developed to support students with a migrant background and students from Roma communities. These programs place significant emphasis on early intervention and multi-layered support (both educational and psychosocial), aiming to foster the inclusion of these children within the school system and, by extension, within society [20, 21].

More specifically, actions with intercultural orientation are particularly important to be implemented from kindergarten onwards. Children in early childhood education demonstrate a strong curiosity about difference, challenging the notion that young children are culturally "blind," as highlighted by international research in this field [22]. Indeed, from Vygotsky's sociocultural theory to the pedagogical approach of Reggio Emilia, the child's interaction with the surrounding environment in which they grow and learn is directly connected to their cognitive, emotional, and social development, influencing teaching and learning processes [23]. These theories can be meaningfully linked with the theory and practice of intercultural education and contribute to effective teaching and learning in contemporary multicultural classrooms.

Empirical studies conducted in various Greek kindergartens regarding the development of children's linguistic and intercultural awareness, as well as the cultivation of positive attitudes toward linguistic and cultural diversity, have shown promising results. Whether these studies involve structured interventions based on the "language awareness" approach [24, 25], or more generally organized activities aimed at student sensitization [26, 27], they highlight the necessity of systematic and long-term education. The earlier such education begins, the more effective it can be in dismantling children's stereotypes and prejudices, thereby promoting genuine intercultural communication. As Hughes and MacNaughton [28] emphasize, children develop within environments already shaped by adults. However, children themselves are also aware of issues related to ethnocultural background, social class, gender, and other dimensions of identity. As such, they are capable of recognizing which of their comments may be offensive or cause harm to other children [29]. This understanding aligns with contemporary perspectives from the sociology of childhood, which view children as active social agents in all contexts in which they participate, such as the family, school, and the broader community [30].

4. Educating the Educators: Challenges in the Training of Early Childhood Teachers

Within the context of teachers' professional development, the cultivation of intercultural competence emerges as a critical requirement for effectively addressing the complex challenges that arise in multicultural educational settings. Teachers across all educational levels shape their pedagogical practices through their own social and cultural filters, which significantly influence how they perceive and interpret diversity [31]. In this regard, their attitudes toward students from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds vary. On the one hand, some educators adopt a deficit perspective, approaching these students through a lens of perceived lack or inadequacy. On the other hand, certain teachers acknowledge that cultural differences stem from distinct cultural frameworks between the dominant culture and minority communities and actively incorporate this awareness into their pedagogical approaches [32].

However, the literature highlights the persistence of xenophobic attitudes and a prevailing tendency among educators to attribute students' academic underachievement to their cultural and linguistic backgrounds [33]. Similar patterns are evident within the Greek educational context. Research findings indicate that many teachers maintain ethnocentric and xenophobic views, admit to engaging in discriminatory practices, perceive bilingualism as an obstacle to learning, and fail to incorporate students' lived experiences into the learning process. Additionally, there is a noted lack of adequate orientation with regard to teaching Greek as a second or foreign language [34, 35]. Furthermore, an inconsistency is observed between the theoretically positive stance that many teachers express toward multiculturalism and the often-superficial manner in which they address it in practice [36].

Given the gap between rhetoric and practice regarding the integration of students' interests and identities into classroom instruction, there is a pressing need to strengthen the professional training framework for educators [37]. The systematic inclusion of intercultural competence in teacher education programs is essential to ensure that future educators are equipped to critically and reflectively engage with issues concerning the empowerment of students' identities and their role as active citizens in contemporary, diverse societies.

5. Conclusion and further Perspectives

Intercultural education in early childhood is crucial for the development of a society that respects and promotes diversity, laying the foundations for a more just and equitable education for all children. In Greece, given the significant refugee and migrant flows and the resulting cultural diversity, the challenges are heightened due to social and cultural differences, which highlight the importance of strengthening support mechanisms for teachers as well as the development of intercultural skills in their pedagogical approaches. The effective implementation of intercultural education principles depends on the ongoing training of teachers and the continuous adaptation of teaching practices to meet the needs of students, fostering the creation of an educational environment that recognizes and respects diversity in all its forms. Teacher training based on the principles of critical intercultural education will shift the focus from superficial practices of celebrating diversity to practices that enhance the identity of children, enabling them to claim their "voice" and participate equally in the social sphere. Further research exploring these issues from the perspective of all those involved in education (students, teachers, parents) will contribute to the academic dialogue and strengthen an intercultural education that genuinely addresses the educational challenges of children and supports them in the contemporary educational reality.

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