

## Educational Policies that Address Social Inequality

# Greece case study report 1 Working Together: A holistic approach to inclusion in an Elementary School

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## **Working Together – A holistic approach to inclusion in an elementary school**

### **Summary - Why is it a good practice?**

The 132<sup>nd</sup> Elementary School of Athens can be considered an example of good practice in undertaking initiatives and carrying out interventions that might assist the socially sensitive groups of students towards their learning. It is deemed a good practice example, because *of the holistic and participatory approach of long duration that is held*, which is characterized by *team spirit, organising way of thinking, strong determination, flexibility and effectiveness of all the school actors* (head-teacher, teaching staff, students, parents) and the local community in general. It espouses a holistically effective framework might be a source of inspiration and support for the teaching community in general.

The analysis of the set of interventions implemented by this particular school is based on:

- Personal conduct and interviews with the head-teacher and other members of the staff.
- Observations of activities of the school, as well as of other products and materials developed by the students and teachers (eg teacher training, films, books, national day celebration, etc.).
- Articles published mainly by the participant teachers presenting and evaluating their work (see relevant references in the Bibliography).

The analysis indicated that:

- A small core number of dynamic teachers can rally their colleagues around a systematic endeavour to improve the school integration and achievement of non-native speaking pupils, as well as their professional development as teachers.
- A set of pedagogical interventions can be more easily realised when they are characterized by a systemic, overall and elaborate approach, and promote flexibility and reflexivity in the institution. The particular team of school teachers was able to get funding for their school-based actions through subsidised programs that might initially seem irrelevant; they have been very effective in managing to adjust the particular needs of the school with the goals of the funded programs and, in this way, to get subsidy that could fulfil their aims more effectively.
- Interventional actions become sustainable and more effective (they have been going on for about 6 years) when they really address students' and parents' problems or needs· in this way they can - step by step - lead towards a democratic school, open to all students, regardless of cultural, ethnic, religious or linguistic background.

### **Background to the need of the project**

The 132 ELEMENTARY SCHOOL of Athens operates under not so easy conditions: It is part of the greatest school building complex of Greece, called Grava, which is composed of 22 school units (from pre-school to vocational training level) with around 6,000 students. The school consists of 10 classes from 1<sup>st</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> grades and has 16 teachers. It shares its premises with another elementary school as well as two pre-school units, and is thus obliged to work in weekly shifts with an alternating time-table (morning-afternoon).

## **The initiation of the process - The issue of the integration for students from linguistic minorities**

When a group of dynamic teachers were appointed to the 132 Elementary School of Athens about eight years ago (Protonotariou and Xarabitsidi, 2006), they faced the following situation<sup>1</sup>: 70 percent of the students were non native speakers (mostly from Albania but also from Egypt, Sudan, Nigeria, Iraq, Syria, China, Poland and former countries from the USSR), that were confronted with many problems: most of them felt ashamed of their ethnicity or language, they often had difficulties to get enrolled in school because they didn't have the official papers required and had already experienced rejection and hardships before coming to Greece· most were economic immigrants with learning and sometimes behaviour problems, some were obliged to work in order to help their families, etc. Moreover most of the immigrant parents had serious communication problems and avoided contact with the school, because of their lack of knowledge of the Greek language. On the other hand, the Greek parents often reacted and behaved negatively to the fact that the school had a high percentage of foreign immigrant students; they expressed their fears that the quality of the education dispensed to their own children would be downgraded.

### **Initial ideas and planning**

At first the teachers believed that the challenge for the integration of all students ought to be addressed through claims concerning better infrastructure and teacher in-service training and development on related pedagogical issues.

They also felt that the school should immediately and systematically broaden its role so as to become the binding tie between teachers, parents and students and so open towards local society. The interventions should have an overall dimension and be addressed to 3 kinds of groups: the students, the parents and the teachers.

The course of action was laborious, met strong distrust and controversy - regarding the innovative propositions and experiments - both from the parents and the Local Education Authorities. However, as time went by, the untiring strive for pedagogical practice improvement gradually convinced the educational community and all interested actors in general. The quality issues that were referred to included the genuine concern for the integration of the non native speaking students and the development of mutual respect and trust between the school and the parents.

### **Lines of action**

#### ***A. At student level***

##### *1. Personal and social skill workshops:*

The teachers turned to the Therapy Centre for Addicted Persons (KETHEA)<sup>2</sup> for support in order to improve the integration of foreign-speaking students; they thought that they could promote the students' harmonious multicultural coexistence through the collaboration in a Programme that would boost their self-esteem and develop their personal and social skills.

Within this framework, from 1999 onward, in a weekly fixed two-hour meeting, students would work on themes that they would themselves choose, in an energetic experiential learning approach that could be the basis for the cultivation of the necessary social skills.

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<sup>1</sup> Among them was Stella Protonotariou, Head of the school unit, which played a crucial part in the launching of innovative initiatives that would progressively shape the new school ethos.

<sup>2</sup> KETHEA are the initial letters for the Therapy Center for Addicted Persons (in Greek).

Such themes could be:

- Self-image, feelings and recognising one's rights and limits,
- Communication issues to develop relationships and live in harmony with other people,
- The urge for belonging and ways of handling relationships and hierarchies inside and outside the family,
- Ways of recognising, expressing and handling one's feelings,
- Ways of coping with anxiety and fears regarding growing up and facing the changes of one's body.

## 2. *Native language teaching:*

The teachers have taken in consideration research findings indicating that, besides its sentimental and social value, the use of one's native language helps pedagogically the student to adapt to learning procedures in a more direct and effective way than the use of a non familiar language (Tsiakalos, 2004).

However, except for the case of minority schools in Thrace (where most people are either Turkish or Greek native speakers), the Greek education system makes no provision for any form of bilingual education for other minority or non native speaking students.

Moreover, in spite of the increasing multicultural character of the Greek school population in the last years, the school curriculum remains strongly nationally orientated, thus promoting (in a non-explicit way) an assimilative approach in the education of minority and non-native speaking students. This partly explains the contradictory results in the students' affective, social and learning development.

The opportunity for inserting the teaching of native language in the school was given in October 2002, within the frame of the Olympic Education Programme of the Ministry of Education, supporting preventive initiatives regarding social exclusion and race discrimination through actions promoting the multicultural character of the school.

The teacher staff wrote down a proposal on the school intention to support the foreign speaking students' mother tongue and culture. At that time, they informed the parents of their intention to organise – with the parents' agreement - a course of mother tongue lessons, at first for Albanian students (who were the majority of non native speakers).

Parents' reactions to the proposal were very favourable: They referred that many of the children were hardly able to communicate in their language when they returned to their country for holidays, and that they often had difficulties even in everyday communication with their parents.

The Albanian language lessons were launched in March 2003 despite many practical problems due to the lack of premises, the double shift and resistance encountered from the Local Education Authorities (due to legislative vagueness), as well as from a few Greek parents and teachers from the other Grava school complex. Albanian language lessons are still being delivered (for the 5<sup>th</sup> year) after the end of the afternoon time-table by an Albanian teacher (who is a student's mother) to about 60 students each year. After the termination of the Olympic Education Programme, the parents took over the financing of the programme. An Arabic language class was also run for the Egyptian students in school year 2004-2005.

In the last years of the program official authorisation for the teaching of native language was finally accorded by the Local Education Authorities as a subject course of the supportive teaching class program (*φροντιστηριακό τμήμα - frondisteriako tmema*). Unfortunately, the programme was not continued by the newly installed principal/headmaster in 2007.

### 3. *Respect for the personality and particular culture of each student:*

The teachers systematically strived to include elements from all the students' mother languages and cultures in everyday pedagogical practice, by genuine respect for each student's personality and particular culture. In this context the teachers would:

- encourage their students to speak freely of elements from their culture or personal identity,
- moderate (without avoiding) events or lessons with a strong ideological charge that could be appealing for the students' national or religious conscience,
- develop communication bridges between the school and the parents and share with them elements from their culture and religious convictions,
- ask for experts' help and support, when facing especially complex issues.

### **B. *At the parental level***

The school staff's main scope was to build a climate that would be friendly and trustable for the non native speaking parents, in order to understand their needs and start a substantial collaboration together (ie parents and school), aiming to improve their children's integration and academic achievement. The teachers' belief was that communication with parents through language speaking was crucial, and so the school proceeded to the following actions:

#### 1. Notifications and information given in the parents' native languages:

During school meetings, the school would provide simultaneous translation in the parents' mother tongues. Notifications were written in Greek, English and Albanian language and, when necessary, personal contact was made with the parents. This measure still stands today.

#### 2. Parents' workshops:

Parents' workshop sessions on parental support were - and are still - organised on a regular and compulsory basis (with simultaneous translation in Albanian), addressing themes such as "supporting school integration", "child autonomy and safety", etc. The workshops contributed to improve mutual sympathy, trust, solidarity and collaboration between the parents and the school. The teachers also offered further education in the form of special informative meetings when the parents would ask on specific subjects of interest.

#### 3. Collaboration Network of services and other supportive institutions:

In order to prevent and face complex situations, the school developed a network of collaboration with institutions such as the Athens Medico-pedagogical Institute<sup>3</sup>, the Children and Youth Health Association<sup>4</sup>, the Municipal Social Service<sup>5</sup>, etc.

#### 4. Greek language courses for immigrant parents:

The courses started in March 2003 in the frame of the Olympic Education Programme of the Ministry of Education. The delivery of the courses was assumed by teachers from the 132 ELEMENTARY SCHOOL or outside colleagues on a voluntary basis. As the double scope was a) to teach Greek language to immigrant parents and b) to inform and support them overcome real social problems, the teachers would use pedagogical material from sources such as: newspaper articles, official forms for the legalisation of their civil status, their children's school manuals, songs/poems/literature from Greece and their mother countries,

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<sup>3</sup> (or *Iatropaidagogiko Kentro Athinas* in the Greek language)

<sup>4</sup> (or *Etaireia gia tin Psychiki Ygeia Paidion kai Efivon* in Greek)

<sup>5</sup> (*Koinoniki Ypiresia tou Dimou* in Greek)

etc. Greek language courses have not ceased being delivered even after the termination of the Olympic Education Programme.

### ***C. At the teacher level***

Teachers' internal in-service training was considered as a crucial basic requirement in order to improve everyday pedagogical practice. Relative actions were planned on the following axes:

#### **1. Internal in-service training:**

Each in-service proposal should a) address specific problems and needs encountered by the school, b) have an experiential and workshop approach and c) be scheduled in detail before being submitted to the Teaching Board. If the Teaching Board would agree on the proposal and the trainers, the training programme would then be carried out and evaluated at the end.

In this context the school collaborated with the Prevention Section of the Therapy Centre for Addicted Persons (or KETHEA) <sup>6</sup>.

Generally the teaching staffs were trained by inside or outside trainers on a voluntary basis, on teaching method matters and practices.

#### **2. Alternative teaching models:**

After careful planning, some alternative teaching models were experimented in the classrooms such as a) the implementation of educational projects and other programmes under the joint-responsibility of two teachers, b) simultaneous joint-teaching in two classes, c) the division of teaching lessons between two teachers, d) in-class student support, e) running an introductory class (*τάξη υποδοχής – taxi epodohis*), f) running an integration class (*τμήμα ένταξης – tmema endaksis*), providing supportive teaching (*ενισχυτική διδασκαλία – enishitiki didaskalia*), etc.

The implementation of some innovative teaching models required much dedication and endless negotiations with the Local Education Authorities, because of legislation gaps or vagueness. However the results were encouraging and benefited the teachers with new pedagogical tools.

#### **3. Regular sessions of the Teaching Board:**

The good functioning of the Teaching Board was a crucial factor in the above-stated innovative interventions. The Board would gather at regular or special sessions whenever it was necessary in order to consider the overall organisation matters or a particular problem of the school unit.

In spite of the serious problems sometimes encountered, the Board would finally manage to settle the problems and smooth out antagonism and differences.

## **Evaluation**

As we mentioned above, the 132 ELEMENTARY SCHOOL staff systematically used the three types of evaluation in education (diagnostic, formative, final) for all its pedagogical interventions. Internal, as well as external evaluations have given the following results:

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<sup>6</sup> (KETHEA are the initial letters for the *Therapy Center for Addicted Persons* in greek)

- At student level:

The students' self-confidence and feeling of responsibility developed, they express their opinions more freely and their willingness to study and their school achievement have improved.

The relationships between Greek and non native speaking students are now friendly and based on mutual respect. The students are happy to come to school and there is a serious decrease in the drop-out rate.

- At parent level:

The Greek parents' prejudice and xenophobia have distinctly decreased. The immigrant parents show that they are not afraid or ashamed any more of their ethnicity and, on the contrary, communicate and participate on an equal basis with the Greek parents<sup>7</sup>.

There is a friendly and co-operative climate between the school and the parents, based on mutual respect and acceptance.

- At teacher level:

The teachers gained pedagogical know-how and there was a clear change in the attitude and methodology they adopted in the past. They developed better relations with their colleagues, often collaborate and share - without any hesitation - their feelings of fear and anxiousness, their experience and their problems in the classroom.

### **Concluding comments- points for consideration for the EPASI**

The case of the 132<sup>nd</sup> ELEMENTARY SCHOOL of Athens shows that, despite the lack of support (not to speak of open opposition) of the Local Authorities, and despite the tightness/ or lack of funds, the teaching staff steadily proceeded towards the aims they had clearly set, thus making the best of any occasion presented to them.

The philosophy and determination of the teachers, based on clearly defined ethical and pedagogical principles, played a crucial part in the course of their innovative interventions at all levels (student, parent and professional development).

The fact that all their set of interventions are still in operation after six years is the best proof that struggle against school failure and drop-out is possible, even in the frame of unfavourable social and pedagogical conditions. Yet, there has to be a rallying around very dynamic teachers, with empathy, self-knowledge, self-criticism and tireless will to get into action, to be able to lead the education system step by step towards a democratic, effective school open to all students without discrimination.

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<sup>7</sup> In 2006 school year, 4 immigrant parents were elected at the Parents' Association Board.

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## INDICATIVE PHOTOS AND LOGOS USED IN SCHOOL BASED PROJECTS



πρόδεση **όχι** αφαίρεση  
πολλαπλασιασμός **όχι** διαίρεση

SITES THAT SHOW THE DISSEMINATION AND RECOGNITION OF THE WORK DONE AT THE SCHOOL LEVEL

[http://tear.gr/nea.php?subaction=showfull&id=1181916999&archive=&start\\_from=&ucat=1&](http://tear.gr/nea.php?subaction=showfull&id=1181916999&archive=&start_from=&ucat=1&)

<http://www.unicef.gr/oldpress/2002/dt2602.php>

[http://news.kathimerini.gr/4dcgi/w\\_articles\\_ell\\_0\\_15/06/2007\\_230786](http://news.kathimerini.gr/4dcgi/w_articles_ell_0_15/06/2007_230786)

<http://www.museduc.gr/docs/nipiagogoi.doc>

<http://www.gfc.gr/gr/news/details.asp?id=2950> :