Tackling conflict between foreign and indigenous pupils in Greek Primary schools through Drama

Hara Lioliou
Birmingham City University


Abstract: A large immigration wave in Greece during 1990s influenced many aspects of Greek life, including education. Although severe conflicts between Greek and immigrant pupils seem to subside, racist incidents in school communities among older students prescribe for scrutiny of pupil’s relations at an early age. Examining the use of Drama in Education as a means to reduce racial conflict, this paper, drawing on data from my ongoing doctoral study, aims to present my proposal for anti-racist drama lessons and communicate the early findings of preliminary research, concerning teachers’ perceptions about their immigrant students.

Background

For many years before 1990, Greece could be characterized as a country mainly sending emigrants who moved to Australia, Canada, US and Germany for political, social but mostly economic reasons until 1970s, when the last large wave of Greek migration ended. Many of these migrants have recently begun to return to Greece and consist of a separated group called repatriated or Diaspora Greeks. Consequently Greek schools have a large amount of Greek ex-immigrants’ children. Until the early 1990s Greece could be characterized as a ‘pure’ ethnic nation (Triantafillou & Ioakimoglou 2007) since it consisted almost exclusively of citizens of Greek nationality. It was one of the most homogenous – with regard to ethnicity – nations of Europe (Mazower 2002). Following the collapse of the communist regimes and general agitation in the Balkan Peninsula, Greece encountered several waves of immigrants, mostly from neighbouring Albania. According to the latest statistics, nearly 10% of the population are immigrants while Albanians reach 60% of the total immigrant population of Greece (Theodoridis 2007). Consequently, there is also a considerable proportion of immigrant students in Greek schools, increasing year by year. Although it was not until 2000 that such data collection officially started, hence surveys are still contradictory, the official proportion of foreign pupils is estimated to be around 10% (Institute for Greek Diaspora Education and Intercultural Studies 2007), when 72% of the immigrant pupils are from Albania (Baldwin-Edwards et al. 2004), including also the children of Greek ex-immigrants returnees (1%).

However, Greek society does not appear ready to accept such a large wave of immigrants. Racial incidents are mentioned in papers everyday, concerning immigrants and immigrants’ children. Recent research (VPRC 2007) displayed latent xenophobia in Greek society. Although 83% state as positive the fact that immigrants’ children attend Greek schools, 65% believes that their presence degrades learning level. Likewise, in contrast to the respondents’ belief that immigrants’ presence in the country is positive, 9 out of 10 state that Greece has reached the limit of immigrants’ reception, and 39% that immigrants should go back to their country of origin...

Regarding school communities, studies also seem to be contradictory. A research conducted for UNICEF reveals that 71.8% of Greek students express positive views about their foreign classmates (UNICEF 2001). On the other hand, high percentages of xenophobic attitudes and beliefs were recorded in Dimakos & Tasiopoulou’s (2003) research where it is stated that Greek students’ writing about immigrants, contained mostly negative or neutral comments and opinions. The same paper refers to statements in the report of the European Commission in 2001 in which it is stated that ‘Greek youths were found to be amongst the most hostile ones towards immigrants’ (p 314); it also refers to similar works which suggests that ‘the current situation in Greek schools is far from ideal, acceptable or even tolerable’ (Dimakos & Tasiopoulou 2003:313).

Greek education system - Educational policies about foreigners

A brief description of the basic elements of the Greek education system is essential for a better understanding of the context in which the research is conducted. The Greek education system is highly centralised. The Ministry of education - assisted by primary and secondary education regional directorates and offices at prefectural regional level - is responsible for the general organization and administration of the education system.
In order for students to complete compulsory education, they spend six years in primary school and three years in lower secondary school. After three more years of upper secondary education one can enter university or vocational schools. Since 2002 a new optional, extended timetable has been introduced in primary school: ‘All-day primary school’ operates parallel to the ordinary one and many pupils opt to follow its enriched curriculum (attending subjects like Drama, Plastic Arts, Computing Skills, Dance, Foreign Languages etc.), spending three or four additional hours in school. Accordingly, Drama has been included as a subject in primary school since 2002, when ‘All-day primary school’ introduced drama in its curriculum. It is taught by drama teachers (university graduates) or professional actors. However, it is still counted a subsidiary subject as it is not part of the main curriculum.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AGE</th>
<th>LEVEL</th>
<th>Compulsory Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Early Years</td>
<td>Primary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td>Lower Secondary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td>Upper Secondary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td>Tertiary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It was not until 1996 that a more comprehensive approach was applied to educational policy regarding incoming students. Initially, the changes were stimulated by the influx of repatriated Greeks and secondly by immigrants from the Balkan Peninsula. Current legislation is mostly concerned with foreign children’s assimilation, without referring at all to their prior culture and cognitive experiences which these students may bring from their former environment.

Inside the Greek school, there are four major minority groups identified:
1. The Muslim minority of Thrace1, which is the only official minority, established by the Greek state
2. Repatriated Greeks, ex-emigrants, mainly from Germany and former USSR
3. Albanians
4. Romani people

There is also a smaller amount of other ethnic groups (Iraqi, Kurdish etc.), with a limited presence in the Greek schools. This study relates mostly to Albanians who were the prevailing group in the schools selected.

Special classes for foreign pupils run in Primary and Secondary schools, called ‘Reception’ and ‘Tutorial’ Classes, in order to provide additional support in Greek language for them to keep up with the pace of the normal class. In 1996 a new type of school was introduced: a regular school can be characterized ‘Intercultural (or ‘Cross-Cultural) School’, when consists of nearly 45% non-Greek students. Potentially, such a school should implement special curricula, alternative lessons and pilot projects. Unfortunately, most of them tend to follow the same curriculum as normal schools. Moreover, according to studies (Skourtou et al. 2004), these schools eventually tend to be attended exclusively by immigrant students. Greek parents dismiss them believing a linguistic difference between students negatively affects their children’s learning. Twenty-seven Intercultural (primary and secondary) schools (about 10% of all schools) exist nowadays throughout the country. Since 2001 compulsory education is applicable to all children regardless of the status of legality or illegality of their parents. Different educational programmes are employed from time to time, in collaboration with Greek Universities and funded by the European Commission, concerning pupils belonging to the Muslim minority, Roma pupils and/or repatriated and foreign students. Racism, though, seems to be a taboo word. No official document names it, or demands an anti-racist, or anti-harassment policy from schools. Similarly, relations between Greek and immigrant students inside schools are only mentioned in conference papers.

Can drama challenge racism?

Witnessing several racial incidents during my years of teaching Drama in the Greek All-day primary school, encouraged me to examine the potential of using drama to tackle issues around such incidents inside and outside of the classroom. There are some important features of drama which could facilitate fulfilling such an aspiration.

Firstly, drama is undertaken in a no-penalty zone. The participants are permitted to test any of their ideas without fear of consequences that a real life situation would include. It provides safety to the participants therefore generates true reactions from them. Additionally, in drama, the notion of ‘fiction’ not only provides

---

1 ‘The minority is composed of three ethnic groups: 50% of the minority are of Turkish origin, 35% are Pomaks (an indigenous population that speaks a Slavic dialect and espoused Islam during Ottoman rule) and 15% are Roma. Each of these groups has its own spoken language and traditions. It was for this reason that the drafters of the Lausanne Treaty defined it as a religious minority’. (Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1999).
the opportunity to empathise with a character or situation, but offers a chance to experience a *deep empathy*, a life-like experience, to be somebody else yet retain your own identity. Putting yourself in someone else’s shoes, sharing one’s feelings and thoughts, is a way to re-live or pre-live situations of importance without having the actual experience (Heathcote, cited in Johnson & O’Neill 1991).

At the same time, the participants are aware of their ‘acting’; they are able to watch their own activity. Drama can turn the passive spectator into an actor, into a spectator who leaves the privacy of the audience to enter the dramatic world and transform the dramatic action (O’Neill 1995; Boal 1981). Augusto Boal, the Brazilian theatrical director, coined the word *spect-actor* to define this transformation. Likewise, Dorothy Heathcote—distinguished drama teacher, inventor of several methods and approaches of Drama ‘as a learning medium’—calls *self-spectator* the participant who watches her/his own activity, who knows s/he is acting. It is this *awareness of the two realities* that helps children to be prepared to control their emotional involvement in difficult situations which they could actually experience in real life. Role playing situations—that may arise in a child’s future—can help prepare them to tackle difficulties more effectively. Furthermore re-enacting past incidents allows them to evaluate their actions critically (because they have appropriate distance from the emotions they would feel in a real situation). Heathcote employs a technique called ‘Frame Distancing’ which gives children the opportunity to work on a sensitive issue through an oblique angle thus suggesting and examining possible solutions to the situation. Heathcote’s theory has also been compared (Muir 1996) to Bertolt Brecht’s ‘alienation’ and framing theories which aimed to distance the spectators from the players, and prevent emotional involvement. Brecht’s emphasis is on change: he seeks for a theatre form that will stimulate the knowledge which is already inside the spectators and trigger their will for change. It is that change for which I aim: the change in students’ beliefs, a kind of political awareness, the challenging of stereotypes.

By studying the relevant literature, it became clearer that there is indeed evidence of positive results in lessons using drama for conflict management and resolution, bullying and racial incidents among black and white students in British schools. Most of the research using drama to challenge racism is usually defined by the *Multicultural* approach, thus centring upon the examination of the ‘different’ culture, acceptance and generation of positive images. Drama approaches aiming at multiculturalism are focused on introducing elements of different cultures, encouraging respect for them (Thapalyal 2004; Ackroyd & Pilkington 1997) or empathising feelings and analysing the motives of people constrained to leave their homelands (Baldwin 2007). Others are based on a historical perspective, utilising genuine moments of history (such as colonialism) and use of images deprived from earlier emigration from the part of the host countries, (i.e. British pioneers in America) or are just aiming to enhance the self-confidence of ethnic minority groups (Phinn 1982; Chilcoat & Ligon 1998).

There are also some approaches closer to *Antiracism*, which claims that the causes of racism relate to social and political structures within society and that racism is just a part of the system of relations which maintain our society (Gaine 1987). Relevant drama works address factors of influence such as television (Hall 1988) or, based on theories of dramatists such as Bertolt Brecht or Augusto Boal, state that the reasons for racial incidents have deeper roots which we should challenge, such as oppressed individuals or communities (Richardson 2003). A fundamental criticism of multiculturalism by antiracist educators is that the focus of research has been towards the study of minorities’ people rather than racist processes. There is the need to address white people, make them aware of racism around them and render them capable of recognising any discrimination against foreigners.

Considering racism as a social phenomenon that should be faced holistically, I believe that an antiracist approach would actually contribute to the children’s racism awareness. I am therefore proposing an experiential drama model which lends itself towards anti-racism. I seek primarily to emphasise the stance of the ‘perpetrator’; hence challenging Greek students and their attitudes is my main aim. At the same time, I am integrating effective elements from the British multiculturalism model, such as empathy. Therefore, a drama approach for young children containing political elements is designed, acknowledging at the same time that such an approach needs special care as to be used with 7 to 8 year olds. Along with sociopolitical approaches in drama in the work of Augusto Boal, Bertolt Brecht or Dorothy Heathcote, the use of drama techniques such as Analogy, Forum Theatre or Mantle of the Expert approach, could enable students to see things from another angle or another person’s point, and result in challenging their own beliefs and prejudices, define a problem, make connections with real life and develop their own perspective. Furthermore, the students will make small steps in developing symbolic and critical thinking, social morality,

---

2 In Greek terminology, the term *interculturalism* is used instead, since *multiculturalism* comprises a descriptive term, referring to the state of the coexistence of different racial, cultural and ethnic groups within the contemporary world.
and an awareness of the role of power in human relations. Finally, such a project will help them recognize how prejudices are created and acquaint them with some elements of social, political and economic life in order for them to make judicious decisions.

As far as dealing with racial incidents is concerned, the double stance of the participant-observer in drama provides an opportunity for a class to explore both perspectives: the one who harasses and those who experience the harassment. Greek participants can place themselves psychologically at a distance from their actions, and observe their behaviour critically. Immigrant students, obviously familiar with such situations can comment as observers, protected by framing, without being any more emotionally involved. Beyond that, the class can explore institutional racism by examining the causes of prejudiced behaviour of other possible ‘perpetrators’ (e.g. school principals – hidden curriculum, teachers’ behaviour, parents’ opinions) that could be involved in fictional racial incidents.

Research design

The present Action research consists of four applications of drama (a pilot one followed by three more) which are successively taking place in four different Year 2 (i.e. age 7 to 8) classes the following academic year. This process will incorporate intermediate evaluations and possible alterations in between the interventions (i.e. the drama lessons). The emerging feedback could improve the congruence between practical theories and practices and, consequently, contribute in exploring this particular social problem inside school (Cohen et al. 2007; Denscombe 2003).

The first stage will last a week in each school. During this week, interviews with the class teacher and the pupils, a sociometry test and participant observation will result in identification of the problem. The second stage consists of 5 drama lessons applied in one or two weeks. The final stage involves post measurement of another week, employing the same methods as in the pre-measurement of the children’s attitudes (i.e. interviews, sociometry test and observation). Interpretation of the data gathered will follow, counter the final with the primary ones, applying the necessary changes on the project then re-designing the lesson for the next application. Finally, based on the findings of the research, discussion and recommendations upon the methods used to tackle racism will follow. Given the deep hold of xenophobic or racist ideas and the limited implementation of the programme it is not expected by any means to find large or impressive changes. Such changes develop in longitudinal studies and applications. It would be encouraging though, to notice any changes in the children’s attitudes and/or any decrease in frequency of racist incidents. This would indicate the ability of drama in challenging relevant issues and further research could achieve more tangible results.

The preliminary research

As racism is a sensitive issue, most head teachers would not appreciate someone labeling the school s/he is in charge of as having problems of racism. Therefore, a brief contact and discussion with headteachers and teachers of Year 1 (next year’s Year 2) took place, informing them about the project in order to explore their willingness to take part in it. Subsequently, they were asked to complete a brief questionnaire to check the type and the frequency of the conflicts between the students. Particularly, (a) to determine frequencies of racial and non-racial conflicts within schools, (b) to determine frequencies of racial and non-racial conflicts within Year 1, and (c) to gather information about the proportion of immigrants and their countries of origin.

A purposive sample of 4 out of the 55 schools I personally visited (in Northern Greece) was selected, given that they displayed interest in applying the project and members of the staff completed the questionnaire. Specifically, the four school units selected met the following criteria:

- **Eagerness of the school’s staff.** Positive attitude on behalf of the headteacher of the school and the teacher in Year 1 was sought, so as to ensure an adequate level of collaboration. Positive attitudes on the part of the school towards the conducted survey ensure more reliable and accurate results and valuable help from their part.
- **An adequate proportion of immigrants.** In the four selected schools, around 25% of the pupils are immigrants.
- **Adequate number of students.** Two small schools were excluded, because although conflicts were detected inside them, Year 1 pupils were less than five, since the schools operated multigrade classes. Their participation would result in adjusting the lessons for a multi-age class thus having a heterogeneous sample consisting of both multi-age and ordinary classes.
- **Detected conflicts between foreign and Greek pupils in the school or Year 1.** Based on the teachers’ answers and their oral comments, the schools selected describe a considerable extent of aggressive
behaviour between students. The research requires a medium level of aggression thus serious incidents of violence involving pupils attended by psychologists were excluded as they require professional advice.

- Teachers’ interesting comments from informal conversations. Personal contact with every member of the schools’ staff enabled me to detect positive attitudes towards the research. I also had the opportunity to discuss with both the headteachers and teachers of Year 1, forming a detailed view of the situation in each school. Individual incidents registered, such as a girl telling a joke about ‘Jesus’ crucifixion where Judas was Albanian’, demonstrated examples of existing prejudice. The comments mentioned during these informal conversations were recorded and consist of a further factor in the selection of the sample.

Teachers’ points

During this preliminary research, the teachers’ comments indicate their perceptions and beliefs in regard to their foreign students. The restricted sample prevents me from generalising the findings. However, some points derived from the teachers statements are worth mentioning.

Firstly, an extensive frequency of conflict inside schools was registered. Hostility is an everyday routine for teachers. Every one of them was ready to declare that low level harassment and that of a more severe nature takes place inside and outside class, nearly every day.

‘If I tell you everything about it [the conflicts], you’ll be horrified’. (Year 4 teacher)

Many teachers expressed the opinion that some years ago, during the first wave of immigration, racist incidents were more common inside schools. Their explanation was that in those first days immigrants were at a lower social level and therefore were distinguished among the Greek children, basically as poorly-dressed. Furthermore, almost every teacher raised the point that as they were newly arrived, and had little command of the Greek language, they were ostracized by their classmates. Immigrant children that were born in Greece and have attended Greek nursery school are more easily integrated in primary school. The place of birth for young immigrants is acknowledged as a factor which facilitates or inhibits their integration (Milesi 2006), along with their knowledge of Greek. Bad command of it, is the basic reason for low attainment; and so relevant researches have shown (Milesi 2006; Mitilis 1998). Essentially, unlike many black or Romani pupils for which skin colour is an external feature which differentiates them from their Greek peers, poor command of the Greek language is probably the main, if not the only, distinctive characteristic of Albanian and generally Balkan pupils.

However the extensive presence of conflict, racial incidents are difficult to detect, as many colleagues do not consider every incident important. The sensitivity of the research’s subject render it difficult for teachers to reveal and admit to conflicts inside their school or classroom, since this might reveal deficiencies in their teaching methods or the school’s policies. Thus many teachers displayed reluctance to admit relevant events and adopted a ‘no problem here’ stance. This notion is prevalent among school communities. Chris Gaine (1987) had spotted this belief many years ago in his book ‘No Problem Here’. According to him, the cause is one, or a combination of the four following reasons:

a) Teachers do not realise their own preconceptions about race, resulting to distorted interpretation of their students’ statements. They regard their pupils’ attitudes as ‘simply part of the background noise, they do not register’ (Gaine 1987:11). Some teachers seem to have accepted children’s racial comments as an everyday routine. They do not consider name-calling serious enough to bother with, as long as it is not ‘aggressive’.

‘There is no problem here. Except that, hem, when a child says to another one “you’re an Albanian” and the other starts crying. They don’t have aggressive behaviour; no, they don’t’ (Year 3 teacher).

b) Teachers avoid bringing raising a controversial, difficult and sensitive issue, for fear that to do so would exacerbate class relations. Such claims were registered by a couple of teachers during my visits in schools; they expressed worries that the project would dig out buried beliefs and provoke unwanted behaviour by the pupils.

c) Teachers are indeed not aware of racist incidents -and this may apply mostly to secondary education-, when confine their activities strictly to the classroom and the syllabus. Gaine alleges that ‘The important things happen between lessons in real schools, and we teachers are seldom privy to this world’ (Gaine 1987: 11).

d) Teachers often point to the apparent ‘integration’ of a few minority pupils as indication that there is ‘no problem’. Positive feelings about ‘brilliant foreign children’ were expressed during the conversations, also statements like ‘A. is a very good student, he does not cause any problem’ were abundant. Also present was a co-relation between immigrants’ attainment and inclusion by their peers. Children and
adults, ‘are easily capable of having positive feelings about individuals they know, but simultaneously holding generalized negative attitudes about the group that person belongs to’ (Gaine 1987: 11).

Many teachers referred to the age of the children as a factor for excluding foreign students and displaying a racist attitude. They claimed that during the last years of school, pupils tend to be more provocative towards their immigrant classmates; whereas when still young, do not display such an attitude. There is research showing that primary school pupils are more receptive to their foreign classmates, compared to students of secondary education (UNICEF 2001). Milesi argues that children in the nursery school are more receptive to anti-racist teaching and learning against prejudice because they ‘seem untouched by prejudices and fears; they are engaged in development, learning, and the new pleasures obtained from their first beyond-family interactions’ (Milesi 2006: 212). However, even if it is not expressed overtly, racism can lie like a ‘dormant seed’ (Bolton & Heathcote 1999) equally in children of a younger age, and should be tackled in its primary stage, when the child’s value system is still forming (Troyna & Hatcher 1992; Mitilis 1998; Milesi 2006). Correspondingly, some teachers mentioned pupil’s attainment as an agent for exclusion from their classmates. Immigrant children with low performance are more likely to be marginalized than their compatriots who display a higher level in the classroom.

‘Children accept easily a foreigner if he/she has a high attainment in the classroom’ (Year1 teacher).

This correlation has already been remarked in similar Greek studies. Mitilis states that pupils belonging to a minority group and are spruce, smart or attractive draw more positive comments from their Greek classmates, than aggressive, anti-social or even poorly-dressed foreign pupils. Similarly, Milesi concludes that ‘any of the students that excel at school’s subjects is integrated without effort in the prevalent group’ since the educational level of foreigners ‘is wrongly estimated by indigenous people, judging from the foreigners’ impotence to meet the prevalent cognitive values and disciplines’ (Milesi 2006: 329,330).

A Year 1 teacher suggested that foreign students are prejudiced against their Greek classmates arguing that they ‘go around with a chip on their shoulder’, looking for an argument. This perception is also recorded as a stereotype in the literature: ‘The experience of racial harassment may lead to behaviour that can be perceived as aggressive, insular, self-centred, and ultimately fulfil the stereotype of having a “chip on the shoulder”. This may result in a self-perpetuating cycle reinforcing isolation and the fulfilment of racist stereotypes’ (ARTEN 2002). Finally, the cultural and social parental status, as a factor of inclusion, was mentioned in two schools sited in a high social status neighbourhood, where the parents of the foreign pupils worked mostly as embassy clerks. Studies disclosed a correlation between the educational background of the students’ parents and xenophobic attitudes. ‘Pupils whose parents are highly educated are characteristically more receptive to ‘others’ than children with parents of elementary education’ (UNICEF 2001). Accordingly, comparing the three districts, it was obvious that rural areas displayed a larger proportion of teachers claiming conflicts in their schools. Thessaloniki’s schools (the second largest city of Greece) present the highest proportion of negative answers both among pupils in general (49%) and between foreigners and Greeks (57%). The most frequent incidents occurred in Chalkidiki, - which was chosen to be the area of the actual sample - 37% of the teachers note conflicts on an ‘everyday’ and ‘often’ basis and another 26% claims ‘sometimes’. Similarly, at the second graph these proportions are 33% and 26% respectively.

![Have you noticed any conflicts/aggressive behaviour among pupils in your school?](image-url)
Conclusion
The above data enable us to take a glimpse of the situation inside Greek school touching some issues of the Greek-foreigner pupils’ relations and how these are perceived by the teachers. As this study progresses, these relations will be extensively explored. Facing a new reality, willy-nilly turning into a multi-cultural society, Greece needs to modify several aspects to attain a harmonious life for its inhabitants. Similarly, Greek schools, facing this new era, should adjust fast and capture new methods of coping with issues that emerge from this cultural blend. Racism is a vital hindrance for an even and peaceful coexistence between pupils, and later adults. Hopefully, antiracist teaching creatively linked to Drama in Education strategies and vice versa, will effectively assist in the fulfilment of the above aspirations.

Note:
The first year of the above research (2007-2008) was funded by the Greek association ‘The friends of Music’.

References


This document was added to the Education-line database on 12 September 2008