Teachers' intercultural sensitivity in Greek public schools

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the intercultural sensitivity of primary school teachers and therefore their ability to communicate effectively in multicultural contexts. A survey of 148 Greek school teachers was conducted applying the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale of Chen and Starosta. Participants drawn from four Geographical prefectures. Analysis of research data revealed a very satisfactory degree of intercultural sensitivity, with participants achieving a total score of 98.6 out of 120. All five factors of the scale, namely "Interaction Engagement", "Respect for Cultural Differences", "Interaction Confidence", "Interaction Enjoyment" and "Interaction Attentiveness", revealed high scores but with some mean variations.

KEYWORDS

Intercultural sensitivity, interaction engagement, enjoyment, attentiveness, confidence, cultural differences, respect, Greek teachers

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article explore la sensibilité interculturelle des enseignants du primaire et leur capacité à communiquer efficacement dans des contextes enseignants du primaire multiculturels. Une enquête auprès de 148 enseignants des écoles grecques a été réalisée à l'aide de l'échelle de sensibilité interculturelle de Chen et Starosta. Participants tirés de quatre préfectures géographiques. L'analyse des données de recherche a révélé un degré de sensibilité interculturelle, avec les participants atteindre un score total de 98,6 sur 120. Les cinq facteurs de l'échelle, "Interaction Engagement", "Respect for Cultural Differences", "Interaction Confidence", "Interaction Enjoyment" and "Interaction Attentiveness", ont révélé des scores élevés, mais avec quelques variations moyennes.

MOTS-CLÉS

Sensibilité interculturelle, engagement d'interaction, plaisir, attention, confiance, différences culturelles, enseignants des écoles grecques

INTRODUCTION

Over the past three decades Greece has evolved in a multicultural society, mainly through growing migration and refugee influx. Especially since 2015 Greek teachers have faced major difficulties in accommodating young refugee children at schools. Professional preparedness has emerged as an immense challenge for the schooling system. Teachers' ability to reflect on their own competences and meet multicultural challenges became central in public discourse. Teachers were required to immediately respond to student needs taking into account their cultural background. Socially projected values such as accepting diversity, tolerance and empathy revealed an effort to come to terms with such a great diversity. Traditionally, the Greek teachers' responsiveness to diversity has been intuitive sprang from an ethnocentric and integrationist stance. More recently in the case of refugees humanitarian perspectives have also prevailed.

However, the constant presence of *others* in Greek school life alerts school communities on the importance of intercultural competences that modern knowledge professionals should possess. Effective communication and interaction is a means of inclusive engagement with diversity and can only be achieved through the ability to understand, compare and adopt different cultural elements through constant reflection (Arvanitis, 2014). The question, however, is whether the Greek teachers have developed intercultural competences and sensibilities and whether they are familiar with vivid cultural differences present in schools. Intercultural sensitivity can become an important teacher attitude to secure a meaningful interaction among students of diverse backgrounds. In addition, teacher awareness of own intercultural competence is critical point when engaging with student diversity.

This paper explores the intercultural sensitivity of primary school teachers (Chranioti, 2017). A survey of 148 Greek school teachers was conducted applying the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale of Chen and Starosta (2000). Here we will discuss the main findings.

INTERCULTURAL SENSITIVITY

Intercultural sensitivity seems to be particularly important in a globalized world where cultural flows and interexchange are constantly brought by the mixing of *others* in our everyday lives. Respect for cultural differences, adaptability, openness, and recognition of *others* as equals in the remaking of social fabric emerge as important pillars in educational contexts. Intercultural education, in particular, adopts an inclusive and equitable approach for all students in the learning process aiming at constructing positive self-image and mutual social relations which counteract stereotyping. However, dealing with diverse *others* had never been an easy task. Bennett (1986) has described six different stages of human reaction to cultural diversity, which includes both ethnocentric (denial, defense, minimization) and ethnorelative (acceptance, adaptation, integration) behaviors. Bennet developed the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) which measures human attitudes on a continuum based on these six stages.

Other scholars have described three major aspects that affect intercultural competence which refer to cognitive or knowledge perspective (self-awareness and intercultural awareness), emotional or attitudes perspective (intercultural sensitivity) and behavioral or skills perspective (intercultural adroitness) (Chen & Starosta, 1997; Deardorff, 2006). Competent communicators have the ability to transform themselves, based on renegotiable new intercultural knowledge, feelings and behaviors and effectively engage with diverse *others* in a reciprocal manner. According to Chen and Starosta (1997), intercultural sensitivity concerns the emotional or affective aspect of intercultural communication and comprises of self-concept, open-mindedness, non-judgmental attitudes and social relaxation (Matveev, 2017). This means that

communicators have the ability to engage and maintain positive attitudes, feelings and personal emotions towards cultural differences throughout intercultural interactions showcasing self and cultural awareness as well as respect of *others*. Overall, an interculturally sensitive individual has the capacity to experience, identify, engage with, respond to and respect cultural differences. Chen and Starosta (2000), drawn from Bennet's theory, developed the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS) to measure sensitivity. Higher ISS scores mean a greater capacity for individuals to interact in intercultural situations, project more positive emotions and be culturally responsive before, during and after their communication act. Intercultural sensitivity is a prerequisite for attaining a holistic intercultural competence, namely obtaining all cognitive, behavioral and affective aspects. However, as Kim (2004, p. 30) has supported that, "it is not enough to have positive emotions and knowledge, but also to be able to carry them in the context of the interaction in a sensible way".

Furthermore, teachers' intercultural sensitivity has been the subject of several international studies, which have adopted different scales and approaches (Lai, 2006; Yeung, 2006; Fretheim, 2007; Westrick & Yuen, 2007; Bayles, 2009; Yuen & Grossman, 2009; Yuen, 2010; Jantawej, 2011; Tabatadze & Gorgadze, 2014; Yurtseven & Altun, 2015). Yuen (2010) has showed that the majority of teachers are in the early DMIS ethnocentric stages (denial / defense) and found no positive correlation between the level of intercultural sensitivity and foreign language competence. The findings of this survey are in agreement with relevant research on intercultural sensitivity of teachers in Hong Kong (Yeung, 2006; Westrick & Yuen, 2007; Yuen & Grossman, 2009). Yuen and Grossmans' survey (2009) showed teachers' difficulty in understanding and accepting cultural differences. Using mixed research methodology, Yurtseven and Altun (2015) found that the level of intercultural sensitivity of prospective teachers is by no means desirable, as they lack cultural sensitivity and appear to receive little or no multicultural education. On the contrary, high levels of intercultural sensitivity in foreign teachers have been recorded by Jantawej (2011), using the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale of Chen and Starosta (2000).

In Greece, Dragona (2008) has argued that the majority of teachers express negative attitudes towards cultural diversity. Specifically, 61% of all 910 primary school teachers expressed opinions that support ethnocentrism and xenophobia. Low levels of intercultural sensitivity are also mentioned in the survey by Dimitrelou (2011), which records the views of secondary school teachers. The study of Karanikola (2015) shows that teachers have overcome their ethnocentric way of thinking and are oriented towards Acceptance (DMIS: score=135.79, st. d=14.56). Yet, the research of Spinthourakis, Karatzia-Stavlioti and Roussakis (2009) shows that the ISS score of 276 prospective teachers is relatively high (92.48, st.d. 9,008). However, 70% of participants stated that they are not properly prepared to handle issues related to interculturality. Finally, measurements performed by Arvanitis and Sakellariou (2014) have shown that early childhood prospective teachers have a satisfactory ISS level attaining a score of 88.70 (st.d. 12.77, n=204). Higher was the score of 350 Greek and Italian preservice teachers whom attained an ISS score of 93.35 (st.d. 8.713) (Arvanitis, Bertozzi & Armaos, 2018).

As presented here, there is a number of studies related to teacher attitudes towards cultural diversity. However, the number of studies on intercultural sensitivity in Greece is still limited and almost restricted to preservice teachers pointing that overall ISS or DMIS levels do not statistically correlated with biographical and or cultural variables.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The aim of this research is to investigate the intercultural sensitivity of Greek teachers who work in elementary schools. Teacher emotions and responses to cultural diversity were

measured by the ISS. A time-efficient and cost-efficient *cluster sampling technique* (Jackson, 2011) was used. This is a sampling where the population is not necessarily known and documented. However, there are available lists with population groups, whereupon some groups are selected and then all the members of the selected groups are the sampling frame of the survey (Zafeiropoulos, 2015). Cluster sampling is chosen when researchers wish to create a random sample in a less time-consuming and costly manner and as a method often finds application in the field of education (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). In this study, participant were drawn from four Geographical Prefectures in Greece, (Thessaloniki, Chalkidiki, Larissa and Dodecanese). A total of 71 (out of 217) school units of specific municipalities (Thessaloniki, Larissa, Rhodes, Polygyros, N. Propontida, Kassandra, Sithonia) were selected from the Greek Ministry's school directory. An introductory note sent via e-mail as well as a link to the questionnaire, which was posted on an electronic form (google forms).

One hundred and forty eight primary school teachers (out of 850 - 17.4% response) participated in the survey responding to a structured questionnaire with closed-ended questions consisted of two parts. The first part included the ISS of Chen and Starosta (2000). This scale consists of 24 items in which respondents are asked to state their agreement on a 5-level Likert scale (5 = I agree totally, 4 = I agree, 3 = I do not agree / disagree, 2 = disagree, 1 = absolutely disagree). The 24 questions are grouped into five factors: I) Interaction Engagement (items 1, 11, 13, 21, 22, 23, 24), II) Respect for Cultural Differences (items 2, 7, 8, 16, 18, 20), III) Interaction Confidence (items 3, 4, 5, 6, 10), IV) Interaction Enjoyment (items 9, 12, 15) and V) Interaction Attentiveness (items 14, 17, 19). It is important to note that questions 2, 4, 7, 9, 12, 15, 18, 20 and 22 are reverse-coded items (Chen & Starosta, 2000). The second part of the questionnaire consisted of another 24 questions, related to the individual and demographic characteristics of teachers, such as gender, age, nationality, studies in or outside the country, specific training on intercultural issues, the existence of direct or indirect migration experience, and interaction with various cultural groups. Participant answers to the questionnaire were processed using descriptive statistical analysis via Statistical Package for Social Sciences 23. Mean scores and standard deviations for each of the five factors were calculated.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The majority of participants in this study were women (68.9%). Almost half of participants were between 41-50 years (43.9%) and a quarter of them were between 31-40 years. This group of professionals was highly experienced with half of them having 11 to 20 years at school and 18.9% 26 to 30 years of experience. Interestingly the majority of teachers (67.6%) had only moderate or little experience with culturally diverse students with only almost a quarter of them reporting teaching in highly diverse schooling environments. The vast majority of teachers (78.4%) declared that teaching was their first career choice revealing a commitment to their profession. Teachers in this study had developed a high academic profile with half (52%) of them holding a postgraduate degree and 22.3% claimed to have a second degree. The vast majority (85.8%) also declared certification in a foreign language.

In addition, 55.4% of teachers have attended intercultural education courses during their university education, although 64.9% of them reported little or no training of such kind after their university studies. Only a small percentage (12.2%) of teachers have studied abroad or showed great desire to work abroad at some point (21.6%). The great majority (70%) does not make plans for having any educational or work experience abroad. Finally, this group of teachers had only indirect international experience through the migration of friends or relatives with only 15.5% of them being migrants themselves. Half of them rarely communicate with members of culturally diverse groups, while only 3.4% of the sample had very frequent contact.

Also almost half of participants maintain rare contacts with migrant parents at their schools. Communication with parents is mainly focused on resolving conflicts and students discipline issues. However 52.7% of teachers claimed that the knowledge of family cultural backgrounds, values and traditions is very important for students' performance at school.

Moreover, participants in this survey attained a high ISS average score of 98.64 out of 120 (st.d= 10,138) suggesting that the majority of them perceived their attitudes to intercultural interaction as positive, maintaining also a positive predisposition for understanding and dealing with cultural differences in intercultural encounters. However, mean score analysis showed some difference between the five factors. Lower means in *Interaction Confidence* and *Interaction Attentiveness* pointed out the difficulty of teachers to come to terms with real and demanding communication circumstances facing subtle cultural differences (Figure 1).

4,5 4,4 4,3 4,2 4,1 3,9 3,8 3,7 3,6 3,5 3,4 Interaction Interaction Interaction Interaction cultural respect confidence attentiveness enjoyment engagement

FIGURE 1

Factor mean comparison

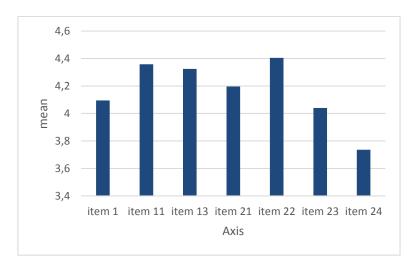
Teachers felt more comfortable to rather generally declare their respect to cultural differences and /or to assume enjoyment during interaction rather to imagine themselves paying attention to hidden communication cues that represent complex cultural differences.

Furthermore, the data for each factor is as follows:

i) Interaction Engagement

Interaction Engagement concerns the feeling of the respondents, their positiveness and open mindness towards cultural differences during intercultural communication. This factor was evaluated through 7 items with participants achieving a high score 29.1 (out of 35). Participants declared their tendency not to avoid being in communicative situations where they will have to deal with culturally-distinct persons (item 22) (mean = 4.165, st. d = 0.843).

FIGURE 2



Interaction Engagement

Also they were usually waiting before making an impression on different cultures (item 11) and generally were *open-minded to people from different cultures* (item 13). A large percentage of teachers say that they give positive responses to their *culturally-different counterparts during interaction* (item 21) as well as they *enjoy interacting with people from different cultures* (item 1). Finally teachers show to a lesser extend their understanding of their culturally-distinct counterparts through verbal or nonverbal cues (items 23) and their enjoyment towards differences (item 24).

ii) Respect for Cultural Differences

Respect for Cultural Differences is assessed through 6 items (items 2, 7, 8, 16, 18, 20). Teacher responses concentrated a score of 26.2 (out of 30) illustrating a highly culturally respectful attitude (mean = 4.380, st. d = 0.939). This factor refers to how people are oriented to or tolerate culture diversity and opinion of *others*. Teachers seem to highly express their *respect on the values of people from different cultures* as well as their strong likeness of culturally different *others* (item 7 & 8).

FIGURE 3



Respect for Cultural Differences

They also felt comfortable towards the *viewpoint of culturally different people* (item 18) by rejecting the claim that they are narrow minded (item 2). Finally, teachers declared their *respect of people's behaviors*, but to a lesser extend (item 16). Even lesser was their support on the claim that their *culture is better than other cultures* (item 20).

iii) Interaction Confidence

The examination of the third factor showed that teachers feel less confident and prepared to engage in intercultural interaction (Figure 4). The score in this factor was 18.9 out of 25 (mean 3.785, st.d. 0.948). The majority of respondents do not find it very hard to speak in front of people from other cultures (item 4).

4,5 4 3,5 3 2,5 2 1,5 1 0,5 0 item 3 item 4 item 5 item 6 item 10

FIGURE 4

Interaction Confidence

In addition, teachers equally felt self-certainty and confidence when interacting with people from different cultures (items 3 and 10). However, they were not so much sociable when interacting with people from different cultures (item 6) and they had some difficulties to express themselves with accuracy sometimes (item 5). This ambiguity is characteristic in intercultural contacts where confidence may be counteracted by the lack of skills to conduct communication (e.g. language skills and lack of cultural contextualization).

iv) Interaction Enjoyment

Interaction Enjoyment is the fourth ISS dimension concentrating a high mean score 4,159 (st.d. 0.923). This factor refers to the positive or negative reaction of people to intercultural communication (Figure 5). In this study, teachers greatly enjoyed interacting with people from other cultures attaining a score 12.4 (out of 15). More specifically, teachers were not anxious or upset (item 9) nor they felt discouraged (item 12) when interacting with people of other cultures.

FIGURE 5



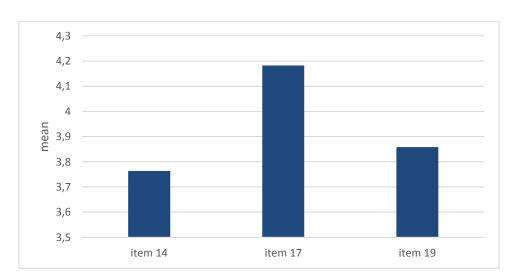
Interaction Enjoyment

In this factor too, they felt at some considerable degree a sense of *uselessness* when interacting with cultural *others* (item 15), indicating an ambivalence when dealing with complex situations.

v) Interaction Attentiveness

Finally, *Interaction Attentiveness* illustrated teachers' reduced dutiful care and attention when engage in intercultural interaction (Figure 6) rated 11.58 out of 15 (mean 3.934, st.d. 0.838). In general, teachers seem to obtain as much information as they can when interacting with people from other cultures (item 17).

FIGURE 6



Interaction Attentiveness

However they are less sensitive to their culturally-distinct counterpart's subtle meanings during interaction (item 19) and even less observant when interacting with people from different cultures (item 14).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This study aimed to examine pre-service teachers' intercultural sensitivity level based on Chen and Starosta scale. Research data in Greece (UNISEF, 2001; Dragona, 2008), has showed that there is a predominantly negative attitude of Greek teachers towards cultural diversity. However, this research, as well as other data (Spinthourakis et al., 2009; Arvanitis & Sakellariou, 2014; Karanikola, 2015; Arvanitis, Bertozzi & Armaos, 2018) provide a more positive picture. In this study, high scores of intercultural sensitivity demonstrate a considerable acceptance of cultural diversity as expressed by Greek teachers in public schools. The total average of 98.64 is the highest average noted in Greece. Interaction Enjoyment, Interaction Engagement and Respect for Cultural Differences concentrated high mean scores between 4,159 and 4,380. In principle, teachers perceived themselves as ones that respect cultural differences and enjoying to interact with cultural others. From teacher profiles however, it became apparent that they do not heavily involved in multicultural interaction within their respective school communities nor have a strong international orientation. Teachers, also, attained lower ISS scores in Interaction Confidence and Interaction Attentiveness indicating some difficulty to engage with complex communicative circumstances and subtle cultural differences. These findings suggest that although teachers had positive attitudes towards diversity, they do not have fully mastered intercultural competence in all its three dimensions, namely intercultural awareness (knowledge) and adroitness (skills) and sensitivity (attitudes).

Although ISS has been standardized for the Greek context, more search data is required to validate Greek teachers' ISS level in public schools. Using mixed data approach and triangulating research findings will provide a useful indication of teacher attitudes towards cultural differences and give an insightful perspective of their profiles and competences. It is fundamentally important for in-service teachers to develop an inclusive and equitable attitude towards all students. Culturally competent teachers are open-minded, have strong self-concept, maintain non-judgmental attitudes and enjoy multicultural sociality, namely taking part in effective communication with culturally distinct *others*. A critical point here, is for teachers to develop an awareness about their own cultural attitudes and assumptions that can lead to a flexible and open perspective about cultural diversity. Equally important and a prerequisite of sensible intercultural orientation is their willingness to interact with diverse *others*. Otherwise, negative attitudes towards cultural differences might lead to intolerance, bias and/or discrimination. Finally, teachers need to be aware of their own intercultural competence necessary for their profession and be willing to obtain new skills. This study aimed to highlight teachers' awareness of their intercultural sensitivity.

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