

Redefinition of social cohesion in Greek educational practice based on the new element of multiculturalism : The social deficit

Alexandros Dagkas
Université Aristote de Thessalonique, Grèce
Argyro Moumtzidou
Université du Maine, France



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Abstract : *The inevitable influx of migrants in recent decades has threatened Greek cohesion, since Greek society was not prepared for this new multiculturalism. In this light we have tried to study how preschool teachers comprehend and try to promote social cohesion in their newly multicultural classes. Our initial material was gathered in nursery schools in the centre of Thessalonica and in nursery schools elsewhere in Northern Greece. Our sample is composed of nursery teachers quite dissimilar in social origin, conceptions and educative practices.*

Key words : *social cohesion, multiculturalism, Greek society, nursery schools, Northern Greece*

Résumé : *La cohésion sociale admet plus d'une définition selon le sens qu'on attache à cette notion. Les données sociales, économiques (distribution des biens) et culturelles (langue, religion et autres) sont toutes impliquées dans cette définition. Dans l'approche socio-économique, la cohésion sociale semble relever de la sphère de l'imaginaire si l'on considère précisément les différences économiques et sociales. La société grecque, toutefois, inclut dans ses finalités une cohésion sociale fondée sur l'équilibre des différences économiques mais aussi sur l'idée traditionnelle d'une identité commune. Cette idée d'identité sociale commune à tous les Grecs s'est longtemps élaborée sur la foi commune de l'Orthodoxie chrétienne, ainsi que sur la langue grecque, ce qui a permis tout à la fois d'atteindre un certain équilibre social et d'accepter les différences économiques. La dernière décennie du 20ème siècle a engendré - selon des estimations globales concernant le développement de l'ensemble des Balkans - d'énormes inégalités économiques. Par suite, d'inévitables flux de migrants économiques ont menacé et même parfois compromis la cohésion sociale grecque, dès lors que cette société n'était pas du tout préparée aux nouvelles conditions du multiculturalisme que la société grecque a eu beaucoup de mal à accepter. Sur de tels constats et réflexions, nous avons donc tenté d'étudier comment les institutrices de l'éducation préscolaire saisissent et même essaient de promouvoir la cohésion sociale dans leurs classes de statut multiculturel récent. Nos premiers matériaux ont été pris dans des écoles maternelles du centre ville de Thessalonique et dans celles des villes de la Grèce du nord. Notre échantillon de population est composé d'institutrices très différentes quant à leur origine sociale, leurs conceptions et leurs pratiques éducatives.*

Mots-clés : *cohésion sociale, multiculturalisme, société grecque, écoles maternelles, Grèce du Nord*

Greek society has become multicultural. During the last few years, waves of repatriated Greeks and foreign economic migrants have arrived in Greece, following the dramatic developments in Eastern and South Eastern Europe and the collapse of Real Existing Socialism.

The newcomers' difficulties have simply added to the already existing economic and social problems of Greek society. Their economic uncertainty has led to examples of aggressive behaviour and additional social unrest.

The economic measures taken by the state (green card, loans, plots of land) provided a solution to some issues. However, the most serious problem - that of employment and finding work - had not been tackled. The social system did not ensure the foreigners had a job, and a good one at that. Therefore, they found work that did not allow them to effectively deal with their economic problems. And that is a more general problem not only in Greece but also all over the world, which has a particular impact on these disadvantaged social groups.

The state also took into account the immigrant question during the formulation of its educational system, targeting both the children of the indigenous and foreign population, with the aim of smoothing over the points of friction and achieving social cohesion. In relation to this issue, the following critical questions arise for us involved in early childhood education: what are the steps being taken and the recommendations made by the Greek educational system and Greek schools in order to foster social cohesion? Furthermore, what are the teachers' views on social cohesion and the multicultural society, and what perceptions influence their social practice? The teachers' viewpoint does not only affect their educational practice and determine their class attitude, but also defines their contribution to overcoming these problems on a wider social level.

On a different level, of course, historians who study social history set this issue within a broader framework - economic, social, political, cultural - and consider that the question of social cohesion may be addressed through the school, but still continues to surface, through the specific concerns of our daily life and their negative consequences.

The thought that arises on the level of social education then is this: can the school help in safeguarding this social cohesion? Does teaching children the languages implicated in the process of forming a multicultural society, bringing them into contact with other cultures, helping them learn to accept difference, suffice to eliminate phenomena such as xenophobia amongst the locals, and aggression and unrest on behalf of the newcomers? That is the question.

The present research is an attempt to answer this question at the level of early childhood education. Our aim is to provide data concerning Greece, which document the fact that the propagation and promotion of multiculturalism in education, as an element of social cohesion, does not eliminate the social deficit. The social deficit is maintained and is broadening.

The meaning of social cohesion

This research includes a variety of terms, such as economic cohesion, social cohesion, social gaps, disparities, differences, inequalities, inconsistency, which are susceptible to more than one definition, depending on the angle of interpretation.

The discussion that stems from the definition of social cohesion is dependent on the fact that, since social cohesion can be assigned multiple meanings, each meaning leads to the depiction of a different social reality. Economic and social data (social classes, wealth distribution), along with cultural elements (language, religion, mores) are all involved in providing the definition of social cohesion. In our understanding, it is a term that presupposes a society without major discrepancies, particularly of an economic nature.

If we adopt the socio-economic approach, social cohesion is a fiction, due to the economic and class distinctions that are observed within society.

The historical formulation of social cohesion in Europe

The report of the European Commission “on economic and social cohesion”, published at the beginning of 2004 (Office for Official Publications of the European Communities: 2004) is a technocratic review of the results of an effort that has taken place within the European Union during the last three years. The report states that significant results were achieved, as regards the impact - the “added value”, as it is known - of the European Union’ intervention in the field of economic and social cohesion (reduction of the gap in the income of the rich and poor, creation of new employment opportunities). Still, the same report predicts that we will be called upon to face new challenges in the years to come, which are related to the increase in social and economic disparities following the enlargement of the European Union, and the economic changes that will arise from greater competition due to globalization.

The authors of the report on economic and social cohesion claim that, by promoting employment, education and training during the last ten years, the European institutions (the so-called European Social Fund), (Brine, 2002 : 85-105) have helped the workforce adapt to industrial change through encouraging training and life-long learning, and have contributed to the modernization of education and training systems. In Greece, a schools network project is currently exploiting the latest information and communication technologies and e-learning applications in order to establish a new educational network in the country’s primary and secondary schools.

According to the report, through the strengthening of education and training, the objective is to make the European Union the most dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world.

Nevertheless, although priorities are shifting towards the knowledge economy, the laws put forward by classical economic thought still continue to be valid. The economy is a market economy and everything follows the rules of the market. And it is precisely these rules of an uncontrolled market that are responsible for unemployment, long-term unemployment, exclusion and risk of exclusion, and

inequality. It is simply that the market is now operating under new conditions. In the 19th century, the classic figures of Political Economy talked about poverty, but not much about ignorance; in the previous centuries, even less so.

At the time of Adam Smith, David Ricardo, Karl Marx, the machines caused the shock to the economy and society; the shock of the new era is knowledge, information.

Knowledge and information are recorded in the superstructure; they are recorded as an element of culture. We therefore move from the lack of knowledge to the culture of knowledge, the culture of information.

Before - during the 19th century -, we had the fetishisation of commodities (Marx, 1932 : 76-89); now we fetishise knowledge, information, culture (Henwood, 1995 : 163-172).

These mysterious powers, hidden from the understanding of ordinary people, create the fetish. We occult what we cannot understand. Then we understand it as it becomes normalized; and, in the process of normalization, we end up having others telling us what to do. At present, therefore, we speak of a knowledge economy, a European knowledge that bears no relation to classical European values, and is not linked to true European knowledge as it was formulated and historically recorded in the form of a conquest of European Enlightenment, as a conquest of the bourgeois revolution.

It is within such a distorted European knowledge, that Greek teachers are being asked to stand up to new challenges, such as multiculturalism.

Social cohesion in Greece

At particular phases in the history of Greek society, mainly during the period that the Social Democrats came to power - after 1981 -, attempts had been made to create a binding fabric based on the idea of leveling out economic discrepancies.

At other times, the objective was a different sort of “social cohesion” that would be supported by the traditional binding fabric of a common cultural identity. In Greece, this traditional fabric in the form of a common cultural identity, whose chief components were the Greek language, the Christian Orthodox faith, and the mores and traditions based on the nation’s values. (Papacosma, 1988 : 6-33) historically facilitated an equilibrium within the traditional social culture and perpetuated the economic gulfs.

Social cohesion in Greece has finally become a sort of feeling, a cultural element, which is projected on to people’s consciousness and is imprinted as an experience.

During the final decade of the 20th century, the events that took place in the Balkans resulted in a widening of the gap in the economic sphere.

At the same time, the waves of repatriated Greeks and foreign economic migrants entering the country were inflicting severe blows upon the traditional binding fabric since Greek society found itself unprepared to deal with this new reality of multiculturalism.

The fabric of “social cohesion” resisted, thus causing tremors to the social setting, and by reacting to change impeded acceptance of multiculturalism.

Multiculturalism is a current issue in Greece, since it is a new problem that concerns both the government and the citizens of this country. In other countries, on the contrary, it has not been the cause of great interest. In France, for example, a country with a rich history of multiculturalism due to its colonialist past, the practice of popular education (*éducation laïque, enseignement laïque*) (Chatreix, 1946 : 107-169) has existed for many years, facing up to related challenges. Popular education, a by-product of the French Enlightenment and the French Revolution, catered for all multicultural concerns, by shedding all cultural values. It functioned as a super-institution, by operating on two levels. On the lower level, that of society, it made allowances for religion and language. On the higher, hyper-cultural level, it removed cultural values and preached multiculturalism in a different way, by transforming the “Other” into the “familiar stranger”.

In the last decade of the 20th century, the Greek state developed a modernizing profile, after adopting the experience and recommendations of the European Union. However, although the more prosperous social classes are following this trend, there is still resistance within society amongst the lower classes. This final issue is related to Euroscepticism (Flood, 2002 : 73-84). The course Greece has followed within the European Union has not been strewn with rose petals. There are many Greek citizens who acknowledge social cohesion through the preservation of their own economic standing, which has however been deteriorating in recent years.

Social cohesion and Greek educational system

Based on the above-mentioned thoughts, we have endeavoured to identify the ways in which social cohesion is pursued through children’s education. In the processing of the primary material that was collected from a field study carried out, during 2004, at day-care centres in Thessaloniki the second largest city in Greece, we focused our attention on early childhood education. Thus, we tried to pinpoint the ways in which teachers in early childhood education perceive and address social cohesion in their newly formulated multicultural classes.

The sample population in the research consisted of 40 nursery school teachers, all female, of approximately the same age - around 40 - (that is of the same generation). These persons were interviewed and asked to fill in a multiple choice questionnaire. The rationale used while compiling the questionnaire was that it would include thematic units on a general and on a specific level:

- on a general level, recording the interviewees’ perceptions about the terms we use (multiculturalism, social cohesion), and at the same time their experience from coming into contact with a multicultural environment, and their thoughts about the existence of social cohesion.
- on a specific level, recording the interviewees’ comments about the way these phenomena are displayed in class.

The collected data was analyzed using context analysis methodology.

From the research questions related to the way in which nursery school teachers come into contact with “foreigners” (and we are referring to the specific word that the interviewees used) and multiculturalism in their daily life, it became apparent that, although their paths meet in various locations, they move in parallel and do not cross. While it is obvious to the indigenous population that they now live in a multicultural society (no research was required to ascertain this, since we meet foreigners outside our homes, on the street, at all walks of life), these levels represented by the locals and foreigners exist in parallel, they do not intersect. Locals meet foreigners only in a professional context, and their relation to foreigners is purely associated to work (their general points of contact are the school, neighbourhood, marketplace, on route - in the bus -). They have not developed friendships with the foreign population, do not go out with them, do not invite them into their homes, do not have intimate relations with them, etc. (the analysis of the interviewees’ answers to non-directed questions with reference to this issue has shown that 67.5% of the sample population do not intersect with “foreigners”). This essentially means that there is a gap between people’s perceptions and their daily practices. In a broader sense, we could say that although the Greek society theoretically considers itself progressive, it remains conservative in practical terms. And although two types of nursery school teacher emerge, one that is more open-minded and one that is conservative (as we shall mention in a moment), in actual fact both lead a conservative life.

That could be our first conclusion therefore that, despite the fact that two different types are identified, they both live conservatively. This means that the social fabric and social cohesion are under attack. It becomes evident, that this conservative attitude, shown at the various points of contact, comes into conflict with the position the nursery school teacher should adopt in class. And it is only logical to assume, that this conservatism also influences educational practice.

From the questions related to the teachers’ perceptions about the multicultural society and social cohesion, and the combination of the above, two different types of nursery school teacher emerge. The first type (97.5% of the sample population in our research) is open to change, displays a positive attitude towards multicultural society and multicultural enlargement, shows tolerance to what is different, and identifies the negative elements in the economic status of the foreigners, which is the source of their inadmissible behaviour, aggression, criminality, unrest. The second type (2.5% of the sample population) is conservative, only accepts cultural assimilation, promotes a solution for the problem of multiculturalism through the elimination of cultural differences, and supports cohesion by underlining the existing common characteristics.

A second, impressive conclusion also surfaces in relation to the parameters of social cohesion. Almost everyone (97.5% of the sample population in our research) agrees that social cohesion will be attained in time, by means of culture (through the exchange of cultural experiences), proper education, etc., which means that they transfer the problem to the level of superstructure. This viewpoint contradicts the above-mentioned opinions of the open-minded group concerning the positive and negative aspects of multicultural society. This

occurs because they cannot see the connection between social cohesion and economic uncertainty, in spite of the fact that they do recognize the foreigners' economic concerns. Only one person mentioned the work environment (thus representing only 2.5% of the total). Therefore, while the open-minded group says that money is a substantial problem, it does not fully comprehend the implications and retains the impression that it is all a matter of culture and not economy.

The research questions on what nursery school teachers practice in class bring forward a third major conclusion, i.e. that an advanced model of teaching is used. They invite parents to the school, work with them, make use of a great variety of techniques in order to overcome the problems of difference, and generally do intensive work on the superstructure level.

Conclusions

The conclusion we have reached to date from an analysis of the data, is that this impressive outcome is truly predominant, the contradiction arising from the teachers' inability to distinguish between the economic basis and the superstructure. The nursery school teachers do not possess a social consciousness. Although they identify social inequality as the root of the problem, they make a decision to fight for the issue of social cohesion on a cultural level. Nursery school teachers overlook economic matters in class and refuse to accept that, in order to address cultural concerns, one first has to tackle the problem of work. This is a highly significant point, since such awareness could lead teachers to battle with these issues on a different level also, from a socio-political perspective, in their daily life, and transfer the problem to society; otherwise, they will continue to fruitlessly struggle in the classroom, on the level of language and expression.

They may be working very hard, but their efforts are to no avail. In the classroom, they create a little piece of heaven, where everything seems to work in harmony, and an intelligent, keen nursery school teacher invents ways of promoting integration and inclusion. However, the state and society function on a higher level, regulating employment issues (wealth) and maintaining inequalities that create the social deficit. However much ingenuity is displayed by the nursery school teacher on the superstructure level, it does not suffice to push aside the obstacles hindering the creation of a real social environment, that will be based on material-economic elements and not only elements of an intellectual, cultural kind.

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