Can an educational intervention, specifically Theatre in Education, influence students' perceptions of and attitudes to cultural and religious diversity? A socio-educational research

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Can an educational intervention, specifically Theatre in Education, influence students' perceptions of and attitudes to cultural and religious diversity? A socio-educational research

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Contemporary thinking seems to be particularly interested in the investigation of the role of culture in socio-political life. This article presents aspects of a research project, undertaken in Greece, looking into whether a cultural product can foster intercultural communication and influence young people's perceptions of and attitudes to cultural and religious diversity. Such cultural products are the Theatre in Education (TiE) programmes, which focus on the use of the art of theatre as a means of educational intervention. For the purposes of our research a specially designed TiE programme was used as a means of intervention and as a research tool. Our research examines secondary education students' perceptions of and attitudes to cultural and religious diversity prior to and following the intervention in Thessaloniki and in Thrace, Greece. This cultural intervention, which incorporates art and religion, offers new insights into the possibility of the use of TiE for the religious education of young people.

Keywords: diversity; intercultural communication; religious education; theatre in education; action research

Introduction

Issues of diversity, cultural action and social transformation are being particularly debated and researched currently. Our research question, whether a cultural intervention in the classroom could influence students' perceptions of and attitudes to cultural and religious diversity, is the result of our interest in the role of culture in contemporary social and political reality.

Elias points out the association between cultural theory and modern society as well as between social criticism and action ([1936]1982). In this association the individual plays an active role. Namely, one is interactively defining and being defined by culture (Bourdieu 1984; Giddens 1990). Thus, individual as well as collective identities and diversities are produced, which

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define social action. In the postmodern era's multicultural societies, diversity, and specifically religious diversity, acquires the right to exist and to be freely articulated. Likewise, cultural action acquires a strong social function (Bauman 1992, 7; Lash 1990, 145–58). However, diversity is not being regarded as an ideal situation. Individuals can freely define and redefine their own identity throughout their life.

Education plays an important role in every society by being a public good and everyone's right. Education uses the cultural products and the social representations in order to reinforce certain values, and social principles define the dialectical relation between school, culture, politics and religion. The educational model used in every country defines this relation and is defined by it.

What is a TiE programme?

This article recommends the application of Theatre in Education (TiE) programmes in schools, since they foster meaningful communication and understanding between individuals of different socio-cultural backgrounds. The interactive and participative nature of these programmes encourages intercultural exchanges especially in classes with students of different beliefs. A TiE programme constitutes an educational means, which uses performance and drama techniques in order to contribute to the development of solidarity in a community and in a society (Redington 1983). TiE programmes combine certain principles of Brecht's political-epic theatre (1986), Boal's *theatre of the oppressed* (1979), Drama in Education ideas, elements of the pedagogies of Dewey, Bruner, Reid, Piaget, Vygotsky, Wood, Ross, Winnicot and especially Paulo Freire, of psychology (De Bono, Glasser, Caine and Caine) as well as moral education (Kohlberg).

TiE programmes are concerned with posing questions about social issues and allowing for a participatory exploration of them. There is evidence that they have been significantly successful in providing a powerful stimulus for young people and communities to discuss and negotiate sensitive personal and social issues within and outside school (Jackson 1993). A TiE programme usually consists of three parts: (1) a short performance of a devised play, which introduces a specific issue and is presented to a small audience; (2) certain dramatic and artistic activities, which involve the audience; and (3) a follow-up package, which has been prepared by the TiE company and can be used by the class teacher or the facilitator for further exploration of the issue(s) introduced. The package may contain factual information, exercises, games and other material relevant to the issue and appropriate for the age group it is going to be used with.

The research

A TiE programme was designed by a team of theatre pedagogues, especially for this study, in order to support the research, which constituted part of a PhD

thesis submitted to the Department of Theology at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki and was entitled: Theatre in Education programmes (TiE) and religious diversity; educational interventions for an intercultural communication. The main research question was whether and how (if at all) students' perceptions and attitudes towards people with different or no religious beliefs can be affected by their participation in a TiE programme. Sub-questions concerning the possibilities and conditions for the application of TiE programmes in the contemporary Greek classroom, as well as the students' relationship with and opinion about theatre and religion, were also considered.

Research facts

The time line: 1 July 2006–30 May 2007.

The location: Thessaloniki in Northern Greece and a town in Thrace, in the north-east of Greece. Thessaloniki is an area with only recent Muslim immigrants, whereas the area in Thrace has an established substantial Muslim minority, where students include Muslims and non-Muslims and are more likely to know and interact with Muslims.

Approach method: action research, which included four case studies and intervention in 10 schools.

Sample 1. Phase one: interventional research involved two Year 1 classes of lyceum level (15- to 16-year-olds) in Thessaloniki and two in a town in Thrace.

Total number of participants: 90 students and four teachers.

Sample 2. Phase two: interventional research in 10 classes of different types of secondary education schools (general lyceum, musical education school, professional training secondary education school and school for students of the Muslim minority) in a town in Thrace.

Total number of participants: 212 students and 18 teachers.

Research methods used

- Observation of the TiE group during the entire process of their research, creation of the programme, rehearsals, application and evaluation.
- Written questionnaires were filled in anonymously in two stages: seven days prior to the application of the TiE programme and three months after it.
- Recorded interviews with the class teachers, before and after the application of the programme.
- Diaries were kept by the teachers throughout the process.

- A number of interviews with the students in focus groups of five (one prior to the application of the programme and the other two afterwards, one per month, within a period of two months).
- Observation of students' responses during the application of the programme.
- Assessment of two of the written activities suggested in the follow-up package, which were undertaken by the students the first and the second month after the application of the programme.
- The teachers of the second phase delivered a written evaluation of the programme.

The data were analysed using the statistic package for social science (SPSS) method due to the need for simultaneous processing and depiction of both qualitative and quantitative variables. This method constitutes an appropriate choice for educational research and especially action-research with empirical content. The written and oral materials (questionnaires, interviews, drama activities, conversations, diaries, etc.) were analysed by the critical and qualitative content analysis. For the reports of the observations the 'interaction process analysis' of R.F. Bales was used.

Five smudged afternoons

The TiE programme entitled *Five smudged afternoons* was designed by a team of specialists (theatre pedagogues, actors and teachers) after thorough research of the issue of religious and cultural diversity in young people. The programme is appropriate for young people aged 15–20. It consists of two parts: (1) a short performance of a devised play, followed by various interactive drama education activities (compound stimulus, role on the wall, characters in role, forum theatre, still images and group discussions/cards), which last 1 hour and 30 minutes (two consecutive 45-minute periods); and (2) the 'teachers' package', a set of ideas and suggestions for activities, which could be used by the class teacher for further exploration of the questions raised by the programme (Koukounaras-Liagis 2007).

The performing part

The play consists of five scenes. The audience sees snapshots of the life of a 17-year-old student as revealed in his encounters with members of his family and his friends. He does not live a happy life because his beliefs are different from the beliefs of the majority of people in his community. Very soon it becomes clear that he belongs to a family considered as 'the other' in the community. The attempts of his family and friends to help him handle the reality of his being 'different' are not particularly successful.

Five smudged afternoons deals with the issue of religious diversity.[1] The main objectives of the programme were:

- To encourage familiarity with and acceptance of diversity in our society as well as respect for 'the other' and their individuality.
- To contribute to the young people being sensitive towards 'the other', aware of the problems they may face due to their otherness and the psychological and other consequences they are often faced with. To motivate them to question their own perceptions of and attitudes to diversity as encountered in their daily life.
- To help young people realise that every person has the right to choose a religion and to accept it as the one and 'true belief'. However, this right does not qualify anyone to regard people with different or no religious beliefs as unequal members of society.

Research strands

The assumptions and the objectives of our study defined two strands for this research, namely a *socio-educational strand* and a *socio-cultural strand*. As far as the *socio-educational strand* is concerned the sample was categorised on the basis of questionnaires' data. The criteria were impression, opinion, acquaintance and degree of distance from the 'other'. In addition to these, other variables such as family situations, participants' and their families' religious beliefs (or absence of them) and sources of information about religions were also taken into consideration. During the interviews of the focus groups, photos and open questions were used as tools for data collection. Furthermore, the data from the teachers' interviews, the researcher's observation and the written texts shed light on different effects of the intervention.

As far as the *socio-cultural strand* is concerned the current and possible future place of TiE programmes in the Greek educational system as well as the role they may play in local communities were explored. Interviews, questionnaires and written evaluations by students and teachers were used. Relevant data were provided also by the researcher's observations and diary entries as well as the discussions within the TiE team.

Data analysis and evaluation

The four case studies

The students' first impression of 'the others' was measured using images as part of a questionnaire. Neither religious nor any other kind of diversity concerning the images was mentioned by the researcher. The question was 'What is your first impression of these images?', and the answers were classified on the Likert scale, from –3/absolutely negative to +3/absolutely positive. Of the

students asked, 58.8% had positive to extremely positive impressions before the intervention, which rose to 67% after it. Those who had negative to completely negative impressions constituted 52.2% before the application of the TiE. This percentage decreased to 32.2% after the application.

To the question 'Suppose these are Muslims, what is your opinion about them?', where not only the specific religious belief is stated, but the young people's opinion is also being asked for, the answers were also classified on the Likert scale. Before the application of TiE, 28.8% of the students were very to absolutely positive towards Muslims. After the application of the TiE programme this percentage rose to 40.00% (see Table 1), a clear shift to more positive attitudes. However, there was also a small increase in the percentage of those who were completely negative in the schools of Thessaloniki. In Thrace, where we did not have completely negative attitudes before the application of the programme, we did not have a shift towards more negative attitudes after the application. The acquaintance with Muslims seemed to have played a crucial role in that case. Our recording of the opinions about Muslims provided us with evidence that our intervention resulted in a reduction of negative impressions and an increase of positive ones.

As far as attitudes towards Muslims are concerned, data comparison shows that after the application of TiE there is a clear tendency to more positive attitudes in all four cases.

The above-mentioned data were drawn from the relevant question of the questionnaire. This particular question was a combination of sentences describing certain attitudes and Bogardus' scale of social distance (Javeau 1990). Each sentence required a reply according to the Likert scale. The answers led to the creation of a scale of distance towards 'the different' as well as the degree of tolerance. The codification of the questionnaires led to the formation of seven groups, which describe the various degrees of tolerance towards Muslims.

As far as the attitudes of the students are concerned, a high percentage of them did not show tolerance towards the believers of other religions prior to the application of the programme, and the tolerance level was different between those who had met Muslims personally and those who had not. Fifty-seven percent of the students were not tolerant. The non-tolerant percentage in Thessaloniki was higher (Eastern Thessaloniki: 70%; Western Thessaloniki: 73%) than in

Table 1. Statistic control of related answers.

Statistic control	t-test (significant <0.05)
Control questions	
Impression from Muslim images	0.411
Considering that the believers in the image are of Islam. What is your opinion about them?	0.000
Group 1	0.004
Group 7	0.000

Thrace (first lyceum: 27.7%; second lyceum: 47%). Of the respondents 24.4% expressed a very tolerant attitude, which rose to 53.3% after the application of the TiE programme. This is due to the answers of the students of the two schools in Thrace. The young people in Thessaloniki (60%) stated that their opinion about Muslims had been influenced by the image of Muslims offered by the media. The young people in Thrace stated that it was mainly their own personal experience which influenced their opinion about Muslims. It is also significant that while 100% of the students in Thrace stated that they know 'the others', 90% also stated that they are not 'so familiar with them'. Our research provides evidence that an educational programme managed to familiarise the young people with their fellow citizens and to change their negative opinion about them from 42% to 26%. Finally, we need to underline the fact that there was a shift of the negative categories of tolerance (completely intolerant and intolerant) towards more positive attitudes. Some of the intolerant students became almost tolerant and tolerant. This shift is evidence for the effect of the intervention as far as the attitudes and the level of tolerance of specific students are concerned.

In order to ensure trustworthiness of the above-mentioned results of the case studies ($n = 90$) a comparison of averages was made using the *t* criterion (*t*, significant <0.05). The statistical significance of the control was 0.00, which shows that the criterion gives us the safe result that the average of both applications is significantly different. Therefore, the application of the programme has clearly had an effect. Wherever the comparison is >0.05, there are no safe results deducted at an experimental level.

The statistic analysis of data shows the importance of the positive influence of the TiE intervention. It gives 100% reliability to the question with the Muslims' photos and to both extreme tolerant groups, namely the completely intolerant and the very tolerant. Consequently the 'dependent' variable (the students' attitudes towards Muslims) seems to be statistically influenced positively by the 'independent' variable (TiE programme). The 'in between' variable (knowing or not knowing Muslims) seems to play an important role in the comparison between schools in Thessaloniki and Thrace.

Assessing the impact of the intervention

The data of our study show that from a *socio-educational* point of view the intervention was successful in introducing issues of diversity and in raising questions about it. The students said that the causes of the problems of the young protagonist of the play were related to the society he lived in. They talked about racism, stereotypes and the ideal of peaceful coexistence of minorities and majorities. At the end of the programme we observed them looking for solutions to the protagonist's problems:

> They should all give way/understand that to be a Muslim doesn't make you different. We should treat others the same way no matter what their religion is.

> We should learn how to coexist with people of other religious beliefs, as we are
> all equal, and we all live on the same planet. We should not place ourselves
> above others. We should respect all traditions.

One student only said 'it's an insolvable situation'. The phrase 'no matter
what everyone's religion or beliefs are, we are all people of one god, whatever
their name is' can summarise the programme's objectives. However, it is
worth mentioning here that we are aware that this objective is appropriate in a
culture where most people are Christians or Muslims (monotheists) but would
not transfer to other cultures where there are more atheists or Buddhists.

More than 90% of the students involved, when asked three months later,
described the objectives of the programme using vocabulary which shows that
they can be placed at the first (and some of them between the first and the
second) stage of Kohlberg's stages of moral development (Kohlberg, Charles,
and Hewer 1983). In order to express their opinion they used words such as
understanding, will, sensitivity, love, right, acquiescence and equality (Devon
County Council, *Moral values and the curriculum*, 1996).

The class teachers recorded their observations, which were used for the
evaluation of the programme as far as its socio-educational aims are
concerned. In interviews with the researchers, a class teacher in Eastern
Thessaloniki commented: 'A student who had showed negative attitude
towards foreigners before her participation in the programme, when asked by
the facilitator to share a thought after the application of the programme, said:
"We are all the same"'; one of the teachers' observations in Western Thessal-
oniki is 'I saw children who normally never take part in anything during
classes, to be involved with enthusiasm'. In Thrace the teacher of the first
school observed: 'They played roles that they wouldn't have chosen to play in
real life, the role of mother for example. They did what they wouldn't like to
go through themselves. In this way their experience was much more intense.'

In addition, written texts, which were produced by groups of students as
part of certain activities during the three-month period, show feelings of empa-
thy towards the protagonist of the play. In one particular activity, where
students in groups are asked to send him a message, they write to him in the
first person plural to express their feelings, their understanding and to offer
him advice. Three out of five groups call him 'friend'. The following extracts
from various texts produced in different schools are revealing:

> Perhaps you were right about us not being able to understand you, but now that
> we are in your shoes we realise how difficult it has been for you. Be courageous,
> patient and don't give up your beliefs. You should know that you are not that
> different, you are our friend and we love you for what you are. In friendship
> there are no you (plural) and us. Your different religion is not an issue.

A long-term assessment of personal change has not been included in the
scope of this study. However, we think that the changes to the percentages

during the three-month period are impressive and give ground for optimism as far as the influence of the intervention is concerned. The students' evaluation of the programme through questionnaires and in focus groups justifies Piaget's (1971) ideas on the construction of knowledge:

> We should respect those who believe in something else and to learn that this does not make them different from us. We should all feel equal. We all have the same rights. We should realise that even if there are differences between human beings we can always overcome them and we can find common ground for communication.

Of the students 66.6% said that the programme helped them to be more critical of their own ideas and attitudes towards 'the other'.

As far as the educational aspect of the intervention is concerned, the four teachers thought it was between positive and very positive. A teacher from Eastern Thessaloniki in her interview, as well as in her diary, compares the same students' reactions during the programme and during classes:

> There is a boy who is constantly indifferent in class … he enjoyed the programme greatly and I was astonished to see him watching the performance so attentively …. he was petrified … A girl, who was negative about foreigners in class, was very keen to explore the issue through group work during the programme.

In the first school in Thrace the teacher observed that while the class has normally been flat and indifferent, it changed during the programme as well as during the three-month follow-up activities. This brings to mind Paulo Freire's (1972) notion of the liberating force of education. According to her one can see a clear difference in the class before and after the application of the programme:

> They were changed for the better. They acquired a positive attitude towards school. They said that if lessons were like that, they would come to school with real interest and much more pleasure. I never expected that the programme would succeed in this particular class.

It is worth mentioning here the case of a student with dyslexia: 'He has never been so lively in class before. The programme gave him the opportunity to participate actively, to become the centre of attention and to be listened to by his fellow students'. A teacher in Thrace makes similar observations about a child who never talks in class: 'It's the first time I heard his voice. He usually sleeps during classes'. Such programmes seem to provide the necessary conditions for wholehearted engagement and equality in participation.

The majority of the participating children were enthusiastic, since the programme was an experience which interrupted a monotonous daily school life. In the questionnaires following the application they talk about a 'wonderful/memorable/perfect/enlightening experience'. One hundred percent of the

students remembered thoroughly the story of the devised play three months later. They could also state the programme's main aim, although this had not been either mentioned to or discussed with them. When asked what they think about TiE programmes in general, most of them replied 'they can make the lesson much more pleasant' or 'it's a better way of learning'. Five percent said that they felt they had 'just missed school lessons'. Our observation of the classes along with the comments of the teachers showed that the students were not familiar with TiE and that they all participated with no exception. When asked to evaluate the impact of the programme, they seem to be positive to extremely positive:

> It made me think. It's all about sensitive issues that are rarely confronted at school. Opinions and ideas are questioned through this process and they may be changed and the taboos disappear. It's a way of teaching, which, although it affects us on an emotional level, it also stimulates critical thinking. We get life experiences through such programmes.

The above educational analysis was done by students of the first class of the lyceum three months after the intervention. And this is probably partly due to the fact that for them it was the first time they worked like that in school: 'the lack of desks. There was nothing to do with class work as we know it. We were all in groups. There was no examination. Everything was different'.

The most important element is probably the fact that the students were given the opportunity to become what Boal (1979) calls 'spect–actors'. They enjoyed themselves; they got involved, criticised, argued and made comparisons and choices. Our observation also showed that during the drama activities and the group activities suggested in the teachers' pack, students develop their social skills. They all participated, collaborated, negotiated and undertook responsibility. This provides evidence that the programme contributed to the cultivation of imagination, creativity and flexibility of thought. It especially cultivated emotional intelligence (EQ) and empathy. The students created still images suggesting different scenarios and solutions for the protagonist's problems. Throughout this process we observed their willingness to solve the protagonist's problems with respect to their socio-cultural circumstances. However, they were not flexible with the roles of the father and the mother. It is worth mentioning though that whatever the students said and did was clearly focused on finding some kind of solution.

The social aim of the programme to help students look into issues of diversity in general and not only religious diversity was also achieved. The students said that the issues at stake were not only religious but also cultural difference. To the question 'what do you think the aim of the programme was' nobody said that the Muslims were the only different people. In the questionnaires and the focus groups they mentioned other differences:

> There are no superior or inferior human beings. That's why we have no right at all to deprive people of different origins, colour or belief from their human rights

and social inclusion. All people are equal and they all share the same rights and responsibilities. The difference of a human being doesn't make them inferior. Religion shouldn't divide us, it should unite us.

Their wording includes 'different', 'of a different religion', 'racism', 'the one who differs in terms of clothing', 'with different beliefs', 'of different colour', 'different sexual preference'.

A student from Thrace, who had been indifferent in the classroom but got deeply involved and became the protagonist during the programme, said: 'There are no different people, only different ideas.'

On the 10 applications in the town of Thrace

The programme was warmly accepted by the educational community in Thrace with positive to extremely positive reactions and comments. The results of the study at this stage are based on the researchers' diary, their observation of the students during the application of the programme and on questionnaires answered by the class teachers.

During the application of the programme, which involved Muslim students, both boys and girls, as well as a Muslim teacher, the participants experienced some emotionally highly charged moments. The Muslims worked in groups on an equal base with the Christians. What is also considered by the researcher as important is the general feeling of happiness and expressed gratitude for the experience by the Muslim children. It is also worth mentioning that all the groups showed great respect for the performance and the drama activities, and they cooperated very well with the facilitators. The programme was evaluated by the teachers using educational and social criteria. In their comments the predominant adjective was 'avant-garde'.

Some difficulties

At this point we feel the need to mention some difficulties we faced during the process of our research. We went through a long and painful process in order to obtain permission for research from the Greek Ministry of Education. The difficulties were mainly concerned with the 'sensitivity of the issue'. At a local level, in Thrace, we also came across reservations concerning not only the necessity of opening up issues of diversity but also the efficiency of the use of theatre for tackling sensitive issues. Our permission for research gave us restricted time of access to the students, which we regard as not enough to produce results concerning any long-term changes of attitude.

Conclusion

TiE programmes offer the appropriate 'scaffolding' (Wood, Bruner, and Ross 1976) for the reinforcement of positive changes of attitudes towards religious

diversity and for the development of socio-ethical values and attitudes inspired by respect for diversity. Generally speaking they can contribute to the moral and political education of the youth in sensitive issues, such as religious diversity, within a democratic framework. Critical approaches concerning attitudes and changes are very important because they constitute evidence that the individual can affect the ethics and the culture of their society in a dialectical relation to it. This can take place within a democratic educational framework, which respects students and teachers and allows for participatory learning.

As far as intercultural communication and education are concerned, our research shows that TiE programmes can be successfully used. Our research also led us to the conclusion that religious education needs to be part of the curriculum, since for some students school is the only place where they learn about religions and because respect for 'the other' can only be achieved if one is given the opportunity to get to know this 'other', far from attempts of preaching and indoctrination.

In conclusion, our study provided us with evidence that during the three months of the application of the TiE programme, students' attitudes to and perceptions of diversity were affected and changed. The programme seems to have created the appropriate social framework for a process of transformation (Bourdieu 1977). These changes, however small, are of paramount importance for societies, since big changes on a societal level can be the result of minor changes on a personal level. This constitutes the increasing power of culture as far as social criticism and intervention are concerned (Baudrillard 1998; Bell 1976; Lyotard 1984; Touraine 1997). Education can play a crucial role in fostering such changes, on the condition that it is open to new ideas and methods of intervention. In this case, the different can become familiar and respectable, just as we saw happening within the framework of this study. The personal becomes social, according to Boal, and social consciousness is awakened, as Gramci (1992) hoped. As far as Greek formal education is concerned, equal treatment of diversity in either a social and/or an educational difference is still a wishful thought.

Recommendations

A realistic and viable recommendation concerning the use of TiE programmes in schools would be their use as a learning tool connected with the aims and objectives of the curriculum and specifically with the mandatory subject religious education. Since religious education is regarded as necessary and obligatory for every European citizen (according to Recommendations of the European Council 1720/2005 (Council of Europe 2005) and of the Committee of Ministers of Education 12/2008 [Committee of Ministers 2008]), TiE programmes can deal with religion as a cultural phenomenon as well as with intercultural communication. They could contribute to the accomplishment of the general aims of education including cross-subject cultural, religious and

political education (Jackson 1997, 2003). In this education of communication there is no room for preaching or initiation to any religion.

When, therefore, we recommend the application of TiE programmes in religious education, we need to make it clear that their use will have strong learning and cultural characteristics, which exclude indoctrination or fostering religious divisions. This is mostly important within the current Greek educational context, where religious education is a compulsory subject taught in a confessional way in primary and secondary schools. Despite the fact that various attempts have been made since 2007 to avoid catechism, this does not seem to be the case in practice. The Greek Orthodox Church's principles and practices permeate school culture. Religion in Greece is a state affair and according to the Greek constitution the 'dominant religion in Greece is that of the Eastern Orthodox Church of Christ' (article 3.1). Similarly the law for education (1566/85) associates the development of religious consciousness of students with Greek Orthodox faith and tradition. As a result, students who have another or no religion are given the option to opt out of the subject at school. Consequently, these students are being excluded from any kind of formal religious education and deprived of their right to know about religion. Ironically, they are 'the other' and their otherness is reinforced by the educational system (Koukounaras-Liagis 2009).

Changes concerning religious education in Greece are necessary in today's multicultural reality. We recommend that religious education be compulsory. This education will be intercultural, it will not aim at the indoctrination or the initiation of the students to any religion and its content will not be confessional. It will respect the cultural and religious identities of the students, it will provide every student with the cultural and religious knowledge necessary for them to achieve active and full participation in their society, as well as with cultural knowledge, attitudes and skills, that enable them to contribute to respect, understanding and solidarity among individuals, cultural and religious groups and nations.

As far as primary education (7–12 years) and lower secondary education (12–15 years) are concerned, religious education could put emphasis on cultural and historical aspects of religion. It could provide experiential knowledge about the religious culture of the country and it will adapt content, methods and materials to the needs of groups whose cultures vary from the majority religious group. As far as upper secondary education (15–18 years) is concerned, we recommend that religious education be thematic and that it focuses on moral and social issues. Its main aim is to promote creative dialogue with the 'other' through the exploration of various religious beliefs and values. Students could even be given the option to choose between two strands. The first strand could focus on the sociology and the ethics of Christian religion in relation to the other world great religions, whereas the second strand could deal with religion as a phenomenon as well as with the various religions from a social and cultural point of view (Weisse 2003).

The data of this study, as well as future studies within an interdisciplinary framework, could be used to open up discussions concerning the dialectical relation between school, culture, religion and society. They provided us with evidence that social change can be achieved by the individual – producer of culture, who can turn thought into action and criticism into realistic suggestions and change.

Note

1. In the questionnaires diversity was identified as Muslim. In the rest of the programme and in the 'teacher's package' was indefinable so that everyone could define it depending on their social and cultural identity. Native Muslims who live in Thrace are recognised as a minority according to the Lausanne Convention (1923). They constitute 50% of the population, and according to the Convention they are entitled to their own religion and educational system. Their formal education is both in Turkish and in Greek language. Muslims in Thessaloniki and the rest of Greece are economic immigrants. We do not posses data about their religious beliefs. Immigrants in Greek schools are 9–10% nowadays. They can receive an intercultural education. If Greek repatriates and/or foreign students account for at least 45% of the total student population in a school, the school can be regarded as 'cross-cultural', according to the Greek Ministry of National Education and Religious Affairs. A total of 26 cross-cultural schools have been set up throughout Greece since 1996.

Notes on contributor

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