

Aspects of interculturality and inclusion in educational leadership: a small-scale survey in the region of Thessaly

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Abstract

In our era, few would disagree that the school environment is challenging and ever changing, reflecting all changes happening in the society. It is a meeting point for students from different countries who carry different cultures and religions, speak different languages and interpret reality through their own, unique filters. In this new school context, the role of the school leader appears to be more complex and demanding than ever before. School leaders are called to create an inclusive educational environment ensuring that diversity is embraced and fundamental pedagogical principles such as equity, accessibility and personalized learning are adhered to. In order to lead effectively in the contemporary school environment, added traits such as mindfulness, cross-cultural awareness and cultural intelligence are required from leaders so as to deal with cultural challenges.

Keywords: Leadership, Interculturalism, Inclusion, Reception classes, Refugee Education

Introduction

Schools have always been the places where changes of all kinds, be they social, economic or/and cultural, are first felt and recorded. In our era, few would disagree that the school environment is challenging and ever changing, reflecting all changes happening in the society. Greece is among the countries which has been receiving a big number of refugees since 2015 when the migration/refugee crisis reached its peak. Displaced people from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq reached the Greek shores among whom many accompanied minors (almost 25%), according to statistics. All these children, apart from the traumatic experiences they suffered due to wars and conflicts in their countries, had to adjust to a new environment with different culture and values and of course different language. For the children and teenagers who stayed in camps, Greek lessons (along with some other subjects) were offered in the afternoon in order to help them rejoin the learning process and learn the Greek language so as to overcome the linguistic barrier. For those who found accommodation in a city, reception classes were created in nearby schools in order to cater for their diverse cultural and linguistic needs. All these new “entries” altered the class “landscape”; Schools with reception classes became the meeting point of students from different countries who carry different cultures and religions, speak different languages and interpret reality through their own, unique filters.

In this new school context, the role of the school leader appears to be more complex and demanding than ever before. School leaders are called to create an inclusive educational environment ensuring that diversity is embraced and fundamental pedagogical principles such as equity, accessibility and personalized learning are adhered to. The whole school community has to endorse reflective practices and come up with new, more student-oriented practices so as to cater for the needs of every student regardless of ethnicity. In order to lead effectively in the contemporary school environment, added traits such as mindfulness, cross-cultural awareness and cultural intelligence are required from leaders so as to deal with cultural challenges (Northouse, 2016). Recent research findings suggest that leaders who are emotionally intelligent and are aware not only of their feelings but also of others’ emotional state, perform better as leaders (Antonakis, 2009; Antonakis et.al., 2017).

The purpose of the present study therefore is to inquire which should be the characteristics of intercultural leadership in order to meet the needs of both teachers and students in a

multicultural school setting and to what extent educational inclusion is achieved. It is evident that the traditional type of leadership has long been abandoned since school has enriched its identity and broadened its scope and intended outcomes. In order to ultimately draw the profile of the intercultural and inclusive leader, a quantitative research has been conducted with the participation of the principals of schools (primary & secondary education) with reception classes in the region of Thessaly. An online questionnaire was administered to them and data was analyzed with "SPSS Statistics, 26.00".

The research questions posed are as follows:

1. Are school leaders intercultural leaders as well? Namely to what extent do school leaders organize and carry out activities to encourage refugee/migrant students' inclusion in the new school?
2. Which model of handling linguistic and cultural diversity they consider suitable to facilitate the inclusion of refugees/migrants in the educational setting?

In order to answer these research questions, an online questionnaire was created which consisted of 38 questions which were of various types: Some of them were yes/no questions, others gave permission to check more than one answer and some others applied the Likert scale. The bottom-up approach was adopted since the scope of the research was to depict the opinions, attitudes and practices of school leaders with regard to cultural and linguistic diversity in their schools. There were 40 school principals of both primary and secondary education out of 60 in the region of Thessaly, that took part in this research. A prerequisite for their participation was that they should have a reception class at their schools where refugee/migrant students are taught. The research was conducted in the region of Thessaly which on the whole has 60 school units with reception classes, 34 in Primary Education and 26 in Secondary Education.

Sample and research tool

The methodological approach of this research is quantitative and the main tool for the collection of the data was the questionnaire. There were 40 school principals of both primary and secondary education that took part in this research which was conducted in the region of Thessaly from October to December 2020. A prerequisite for the contribution to this research was that school leaders should have a reception class at their schools where refugee/migrant students attend. The Regional Directorate of Primary and Secondary Education of Thessaly has 34 primary schools with reception classes (Ministerial Decision 8435/8-9-20) and 26 secondary schools where reception classes operate (Ministerial Decision 11894/3-11-20). On the whole, for both educational grades, there are 60 schools with reception classes. This research was conducted with the participation of 40 of them (67% participation). This percentage is rather high and allows us to shape a clear view with respect to attitudes and practices followed by school principals. There are limitations though, since the sample concerns only the region of Thessaly but, given the fact that educational policy in Greece is central and schools lack autonomy, differentiations in the way diversity is handled and inclusion is realized may not be so evident.

The questionnaire was distributed via email to all school directors whose schools have reception classes, in both primary and secondary education, in the regional directorate of Thessaly. As far as the selection of sample is concerned, non-probability sampling techniques were used and especially purposive sampling was selected. In this research, there was a selection of this limited population of school principals in order to gain specific knowledge in issues of intercultural leadership and inclusion. In terms of gender, most of the participants are men (60%, N=24) whereas women are less (40%, N=16). Most of the participants belong to the age group 51-65 years old (85%, N=34). As far as their education and further studies is concerned, one out of three (35%, N=14) holds a second degree, while the majority has a master's degree (72,5%, N=29). Only one of them holds a PhD (2,5%) while one out of three

school principals (35%, N=14) has received further training on intercultural education. All participants in the research know one or more foreign languages (100%, N=40).

The process of collection started in October 2020 and lasted for two months; During this period, there have been kind reminders to school principals as online education had disrupted school routine and some of them might not have paid proper attention to their mailbox. The questionnaire seemed the best option since it enables the recording of people's beliefs, values, feelings, perceptions, stances etc in an easy and fast way (Dillman, 2007; Osborne, 2008).

The questionnaire (<https://forms.gle/ejBpDjfvAxuCUP57> see Appendix 1), was created with google forms as it is an easy way to answer the questions and submit it online facilitating thus, the collection of data. The e-mails and the phone numbers of schools were found through the schools' websites or Blogspots. The questionnaire contained an introductory part where it was clearly stated that the questionnaire was part of the researcher's M.A thesis and that it addressed school principals. There was also confirmation that anonymity is preserved since there was no field asking for information that could reveal the participant's identity (i.e name, e-mail, etc.). There was reassurance that data collected by the questionnaire would be used solely for the purposes of facilitating research. The researcher provided her name and surname, phone number, e-mail and her current job status so as to be reached in case anyone needed more information or clarification during the completion of the questionnaire.

The questionnaire was constructed after studying other topic-related questionnaires whereby similar questions had been selected (Vlahaki, 2013; Chrysikos, 2020). These questions were then adapted to suit the purposes of the present research. Then, the questionnaire was given to six school principals with reception classes in the area of Karditsa, in order to conduct piloting. They were asked to provide feedback with regard to the clarity of questions, the type of answers, the time needed for its submission etc. The final version of the questionnaire embodied all proper adaptations based on the feedback from the piloting phase. It consisted of 38 questions which were of various types; Some of them were yes/no questions, others gave permission to check more than one answer and some others applied the Likert scale, the first grade being the "not at all" option and the fifth one the "very much" option.

Statistical analysis- issues of credibility and validity

Process and Statistical analysis of the research data was conducted with the use of «IBM SPSS Statistics» edition 26.00, applying the methods of descriptive and inductive statistics. Descriptive statistics describe the main features of the data in a research. They give summaries regarding the sample and the measures and enables comparisons across people or other units involved (Trochim, 2006). More specifically, in this research, descriptive analysis involved frequency distribution of the qualitative variables (in terms of frequency and valid percent) and variance of quantitative variables (mean, standard deviation, minimum and maximum value). The dependent variables of this research are the intercultural style of leadership, inclusive education practices and the model of handling diversity. The independent varieties are gender, educational grade the respondent's school belongs to, age and education/further studies). The first two independent variables can have two values, since the answers are either male/female for the first one and primary/secondary for the second one. The variable of age can take only two values as well because there were only two age groups. In the case of education/further studies, there were four subcategories (second degree, postgraduate degree, PhD and further training in intercultural education). Each one of the four subcategories was checked as an autonomous category which also took two values, (yes/no) with the respondent having the right to check more than one of the subcategories. Inductive analysis is a kind of inferential statistics; it enables the researcher to make comparisons between the effect of independent variables on one or more groups, analyzing at the same time changes in the dependent variable (Cresswell, 2006; Cohen et. al., 2007; Yockey, 2018).

Dependent variables such as Intercultural leadership, Model of handling diversity and Inclusive Education practices were tested against independent variables such as gender, educational grade the school belongs to, age and education/further studies. These variables came out after the grouping of specific questions in the questionnaire and on the basis of their importance in this specific research which aims at creating the profile of the intercultural and inclusive leader.

Significance level (p-value) was two-sided and it was defined as $p < 0,05$ (5%). In research, a two-tailed test is used when the aim is to evaluate whether a variable has an impact on either direction (to check whether scores are higher or lower). In this specific research, the aim was to evaluate whether a variable (i.e gender) affects another one (i.e model of handling diversity). Two- tailed tests are more common in research (Yockey, 2018, p.121).

Internal consistency and validity

In order to check the internal consistency and validity of the variables which are related to the profile of the intercultural school leader, to the model of handling diversity and to the inclusive practices in the school environment, Cronbach’s alpha coefficient was used. It should also be mentioned that question 36 of the questionnaire was coded in a reverse way, because it took different type of answers than the other questions. Moreover, questions which took more than two answers (questions 15, 21,22, 30 & 36) were turned into binary ones (yes/no answer) so that there is a common way to measure variables (table 1.)

Table 1. Description of variables and indicator of internal consistency & validity

Variables	Statements	Cronbach’s alpha
1. Intercultural leadership	15, 16, 17, 20, 22, 23, 24, 25, 29, 30, 35, 36	0,78
2. Model of handling diversity	13, 16, 17, 20, 23, 24, 25, 28, 29, 30, 35, 36	0,68
3. Setting up of inclusive practices	16, 17, 20, 21, 22, 24, 25, 26, 28, 29, 35,36	0,77

Validity and reliability are two crucial elements taken into consideration when a measurement instrument is evaluated. Validity is related to the extent an instrument measures what is intended to measure. Reliability is linked to the ability of the instrument to measure consistency (DeVellis, 2003). Validity of the present research tool is ensured by the selection of homogeneous, suitable and topic-related questions and by the piloting conducted with a sample of 10% of the population who participated in the research. Feedback led to proper adaptations so that questions were of utmost clarity which eliminates the chances of false or accidental responses. Reliability and validity of a test are closely associated; An instrument is valid only if it is reliable. Reliability and internal consistency of a test is measured by Cronbach’s alpha, which is the most widely used index of reliability. As a number it is expressed between 0 and 1. The more correlated the items in a test are, the more increased the value of alpha index is.

In this research, questions were grouped in terms of interrelatedness to the three central dependent variables: Intercultural leadership, Model of handling diversity and organization of inclusive practices. Each group of questions was checked for its internal consistency with Cronbach alpha. The results showed that the Internal consistency of the variables is satisfactory since the value of Cronbach’s alpha coefficient is $p > 0,6$ (Field, 2005; Kline, 1999; Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). The internal validity of the questionnaire overall is $a=0,75$ which is considered to indicate high validity.

Table 2: Variables and index of internal consistency

<i>Subcategory (Group of Answers)</i>	<i>Internal Consistency coefficient (Cronbach's alpha)</i>
Intercultural Leadership	0,78
Model of handling diversity	0,68
Organization of inclusive practices	0,77

Intercultural leadership

One of the main parameters that needed to be inquired in this research is whether school leaders with reception classes in the Region of Thessaly have endorsed the basic intercultural principles. In order to do so, there was a calculation of the median of the questions which denote whether school leaders promote intercultural education at their school (questions 15, 16, 17, 20,2, 23, 24, 25, 29, 30, 35, 36), The content of the questions had to do mainly with promoting cooperative activities among native and non-native students, encourage equal participation, involve refugee/migrant parents in their children’s schooling and organize in-service trainings on intercultural education. The questions also inquired whether they supported differentiated strategies, whether they valued refugee students’ linguistic and cultural resources and whether they organized awareness raising activities in order to eliminate cases of racist or/and violent behaviour.

Table 3. Descriptive measures and measures of central tendency and dispersion in relation to intercultural leadership

<i>Item</i>	<i>M.</i>	<i>S.D.</i>
Class size	0,75	0,44
Decoration of reception class with home country- related items	0,95	0,22
Use of mother tongue in the reception class	0,95	0,22
Cooperation of native and non-native students on intercultural projects	0,93	0,27
Differentiated material for refugee/migrant students in mainstream classes	0,44	0,51
Refugees'/migrants' parents invitation at school.	0,70	0,46
Translation of important notices at the refugee/migrant students' mother tongue	0,45	0,50
Books at the school/class library written in the home languages	0,05	0,22
Participation of refugee students in art exhibitions or other creative activities	0,80	0,41
School - based training in intercultural and inclusive education	0,65	0,48
Organization of awareness - raising activities to prevent racist behaviours	0,70	0,46
Whole-school approach in the operation of the reception class	0,97	0,17

Drawing on the findings, school leaders think to a large extent that the operation of the reception class should concern all stakeholders of the school community and all teachers (M.=0,97, S.D.=0,17). They allow refugee students to decorate their classes with posters and items from their countries (M.=0,95, S.D.=0,22), and they are very supportive towards letting them use their mother tongue (M.=0,95, S.D.=0,22). Moreover, they encourage activities that promote cooperation among native and non-native students (M.=0,93, S.D.=0,27). As far as differentiated strategies are concerned, school leaders think that teachers are not in favour

of creating differentiated material for the students with refugee/migrant background in order to meet their needs (M.=0,44, S.D.=0,51). At the same time there are no books written in the home languages of refugee/migrant students either in the school library or in the class libraries (M.=0,05, S.D.=0,22). These findings unveil a semi-hidden disregard of school leaders towards issues that are in close connection with educational accessibility, acceptance and equity. Many a time, school leaders have a superficial understanding of what inclusion and interculturalism is which leads them to confront students as if belonging to the “in-group” (natives) and out-group (non-natives), (LeVine & Campbell, 1972; Hammond & Axelrod, 2006). Lack of books in refugee/migrant students’ home language could be perceived as a manifestation of ethnocentrism and linguistic hegemony which are in the opposite direction from the spirit of inclusion (Reagan, 2018; Gay, 2020).

Overall, the degree to which school leaders in the region of Thessaly function as intercultural leaders as well, is satisfactory (M.=0,70, S.D.=0,19) as shown in table 10.

Table 4. Descriptive measures and measures of central tendency and dispersion in relation to intercultural leadership

<i>Variable</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	<i>M.T.</i>	<i>S.D</i>
Intercultural leadership	40	0,18	1,00	0,70	0,19

These results confirm that the majority of school leaders are in the process of growing intercultural competence but are not yet conscious of the need of change in the paradigm of school leadership in multicultural settings. However, it seems that there is still work to be done mainly with establishing intercultural consciousness in the rest of the teachers and the way they actually respond to the refugees’/migrants’ needs.

Model of handling cultural diversity

Handling culturally and linguistically diverse students is a demanding task which often determines school identity and influences all aspects of school life. The two broad models of handling diversity are the “monocultural” model and the “pluralistic” model. The former aims at the assimilation of “minoritized” groups into the culture, values and language of the host society. The latter supports the interaction among different cultures and considers all cultures and languages to be of equal importance. The pluralistic model encourages linguistic and cultural inclusion, even the design of properly adapted learning activities which facilitate participation in the learning process.

In order to inquire which model of handling cultural diversity is considered suitable by school leaders with regard to the inclusion of refugee/migrant students, the median of questions 13, 16, 17, 20, 23, 24, 25, 28, 29, 30, 35 and 36 has been calculated. The content of the questions was related to: the didactic approaches towards refugee/migrant students (differentiation), awareness-raising activities, encouragement of collaboration between native and non-native students, mother tongue usage, in-service training in intercultural education and the involvement of refugee parents in school life.

Table 5. Descriptive measures and measures of central tendency and dispersion in relation to the model of handling multiculturalism

<i>Variable</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>S.D.</i>
Model of handling multiculturalism	40	0,18	1,00	0,73	0,18

According to the results of the analysis of the data, school leaders tend to follow the pluralistic model of handling cultural diversity aiming at facilitating the inclusion of refugee/migrant students in the school environment (M.=0,73, S.D.=0,18). However, this does

not necessarily mean that inclusion is achieved and intercultural consciousness is established in the school units where research has taken place. The model of handling diversity a school leader adopts is undoubtedly representative of his/her worldview and influences school culture to a very large extent. The goal is however, to have teachers and the whole of the school community influenced and inspired by the principles of the pluralistic model. This would be more evident in the didactic approaches followed (differentiated strategy and culturally responsive teaching) and in applying all necessary amendments in order to make all students-regardless ethnicity- visible and heard.

Inclusive activities

Another dimension to be inquired was whether school principals set up activities that encourage and promote refugee/migrant students' inclusion in the new school environment. Inclusion at schools is achieved when teachers apply inclusive practices and cater for everyone's needs. Inclusive practices involve setting up activities that remove linguistic and cultural barriers and promote intercultural dialogue among learners of all linguistic and ethnic backgrounds. Learning activities are based on peer-learning and team-work so as to promote interaction among native and non-native students (Ainscow & Messiou, 2018). School principals with an inclusive mindset set up activities that establish intercultural awareness and encourage inclusive pedagogy. In an inclusive school environment, refugee/migrants students' cultural and linguistic resources are cherished and taken into consideration in order to design culturally responsive learning activities (Booth & Ainscow, 2011). To inquire whether this approach is adopted by school principals with reception classes at their schools, there was calculation of the median of questions 16, 17, 20, 21, 22, 24, 25, 26, 28, 29, 35 and 36.

Table 6. Descriptive measures and measures of central tendency and dispersion in relation to the setting up of activities that facilitate refuge/migrant students' inclusion.

<i>Variable</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>S.D.</i>
Organization and setting up of activities that facilitate refuge/migrant students' inclusion.	40	0,09	0,92	0,67	0,19

According to the results drawn from relevant data, school leaders set up and carry out activities that facilitate inclusion of refugee/migrant students to a relatively satisfactory level (M=0,67, S.D.=0,19).

Conclusion

Concluding this research, the overall impression is that the presence of multiethnic children in schools nowadays has greatly influenced the way leadership is practiced. The findings of this research reveal that school leaders are in the process of embracing the principles of interculturalism to a satisfactory level and that they have started integrating them in the way they lead their schools. They seem to have developed cultural responsiveness and inclusive spirit since they are eager to support activities that encourage refugee/migrant students' participation (i.e art exhibitions, contests etc.). Moreover, students who attend reception classes are encouraged to decorate their class with posters and other objects from their countries. All these, contribute to the intercultural exchange of traditions and values, confronting all cultures as equal. Research findings also designate that school leaders value the importance of letting non- native students use their mother tongue in the school environment. Some of them are reported to translate official announcements in the languages spoken by students with refugee/migrant background in order to keep them aware of important events. However, their schools' libraries do not have books in the home languages of the refugee/migrant students.

As far as inclusion of refugee/migrant students is concerned, school leaders answer that they are not sure whether mainstream teachers adapt the learning material in order to meet refugee/migrant students' needs. Some of them organize in-service trainings so as to help teachers enrich their knowledge on differentiated practices and inclusion. It should be stressed however, that in some cases school leaders report that there is unwillingness on behalf of the teachers to participate. The majority of school leaders who took part in the research adopt the pluralistic model of handling diversity which treats diversity not as a difficulty or "added burden" but as a chance of personal and professional development.

Overall, it could be maintained that even though intercultural and inclusive leadership is in a satisfactory level at the schools with reception classes, there are fields that need further support. Online education brought refugee/migrant students' plight on the surface again since the majority of them was not able to attend. Apart from the lack of equipment, important factors that led to the exclusion of these students' participation in online education was lack of guidance and absence of relevant information in their mother tongue. Another issue that needs to be confronted and further inquired is the unwillingness on behalf of some teachers to adopt differentiated strategies in order to meet the non-native students' needs. This goes hand in hand with their unwillingness to participate in in-service trainings and with the opinion that the existence of the reception classes should not be of interest to the rest of the school community. This is in line with another finding of this research which shows that there is a small percentage of teachers who wish reception classes did not exist because they are causing problems.

All in all, school principals who lead schools with reception classes need to bridge the achievement gap which is a major shortfall. They need to influence and inspire their fellow teachers to approach diversity through different lenses. They need to set a new paradigm in leadership and create a new methodology influencing staff development, curriculum enrichment and the stakeholders of the school community.

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