

# Steering The Path Of Intercultural Education: The Role Of Teachers In Overcoming Challenges And Embracing Opportunities

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## **Abstract:**

**Background:** The continuous movement of populations is a worldwide phenomenon impacting all host countries and altering social dynamics through the diversity of immigrant communities. As a key receiving nation, Greece is called to accommodate a significant influx of refugees and migrants each year, necessitating policies that prioritize inclusion over marginalization to uphold immigrants' rights according to both national and international laws. Since children make up a considerable portion of this population, it is vital to safeguard their rights, especially their right to education, which is essential for their social, cultural, and linguistic integration into the prevailing society.

**Materials and Methods:** Abiding by that, this research study aims to investigate primary education teachers' perceptions on the challenges they identify and the practices they follow in relation to handling linguistically and culturally diverse students in contemporary school setting in order to promote inclusion. For the needs of the study, the qualitative methodology was followed and semi-structured interviews were applied by following the convenient sampling technique. The sample consisted of eight teachers working in the primary education in the prefecture of Achaia during the academic year 2024-2025.

**Results:** According to the findings, major challenges identified include the language barrier, inadequate infrastructure and technological equipment, lack of sufficient qualified staff and government support, insufficient teacher education and training, among others. However, the above-mentioned barriers may affect the learning and teaching process, but they are not insurmountable. Through the choice of appropriate practices, diversity can be transformed from a challenge into an asset. The use of technology, digital media and artificial intelligence tools, the enrichment of educational material with audiovisual material and a variety of multimodal resources, the use of translanguaging, differentiated teaching and certainly the participation of teachers in appropriate training programmes, learning communities and networks can contribute not only to their empowerment but also to their reflection on their attitudes, beliefs and practices.

**Conclusion:** In conclusion, this study emphasizes the significant challenges faced by primary education teachers in Greece when accommodating linguistically and culturally diverse students. Despite the aforementioned obstacles, the research highlights that these challenges can be transformed into opportunities for enrichment through innovative practices, such as leveraging technology and enhancing teacher training. By prioritizing inclusive policies and supportive practices, teachers can foster a more equitable learning environment that benefits all students.

**Key Word:** Diversity; Intercultural education; Teachers; Challenges; Practices.

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## **I. Introduction**

Globalization and the penetration of technology in all areas of human life redefine the perceptions of the modern citizen, who feels caught between local and global perspectives, while nations are now understood as a global village. Globalization leads to the formation of multicultural societies and creates hyper-diverse environments and new conditions of interaction and interdependence.

Hyper-diversity comes to replace or even complement the anachronistic to some extent concept of diversity and to dominate in most Western urban environments<sup>16,17,23</sup>, given that diversity should not be viewed solely through the lens of ethnicity; it should also encompass various legal frameworks and their associated circumstances, differing experiences in the labor market, unique gender and age dynamics, spatial distribution trends, and the varied reactions from both service providers and community members<sup>41</sup>.

In this context, intercultural education could contribute to the promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies, act as a tool to prevent human rights violations, racial and religious intolerance and ensure stability, social justice and equality for all<sup>40</sup>.

Preparing citizens with intercultural awareness and competence is of major importance in Greece, as the national population census in 2021 shows that immigrant citizens account for 11, 34% of the total population with the majority of ethnic groups being mostly Albanians, Bulgarians, Romanians, Pakistanis, Georgians, Ukrainians, Russians, Syrians and Afghans<sup>13,21,19</sup>. In addition, according to the UNHCR Operational Data Portal, in 2024, approximately 54,417 persons identified as refugees arrived in Greece by land and sea<sup>14</sup>.

Abiding by that, displaced children require equitable treatment from society and the opportunity to exercise their rights, particularly the right to education, as it is fundamental to their growth, social integration, and learning. The right to education should transcend traditional teaching materials, curriculums, and school policies to better meet the needs of immigrant students. Educators are called to adapt to the diverse classroom environment, playing a crucial role in facilitating a comprehensive learning experience that enhances both literacy and psychosocial development<sup>12</sup>.

However, significant challenges often arise in teachers' efforts to manage diversity and teach in multicultural and multilingual contexts. These challenges are mostly linked to difficulties in managing students' educational level, to the lack of a common language, to teachers' limited experience<sup>2</sup>, to differences in school cultures<sup>11</sup>, to students' psycho-social status, to governmental support and to dysfunctional school environments<sup>34</sup>, to the absence of organized facilities, suitable teaching material and tools<sup>28</sup>, to the shortage of appropriate and effective training programmes on diversity issues and to the inability of teachers to use the right educational methods and techniques<sup>31,33</sup>. The lack of knowledge, fluency and understanding of the host language leads to difficulties in communicating, whereas the reticence that inevitably arises in children because of language proficiency issues leads to isolation and lack of cooperation with classmates<sup>16,24</sup>.

In this vein, appropriate teaching practices are crucial in the learning process of all students, as they not only influence students' academic success but also shape the relationship developed with both their teachers and peers throughout their education interaction<sup>6</sup>. In particular, as regards appropriate educational methods and practices applied in the classroom, the review of the relevant literature shows as important the following: translanguaging, identity texts, food and music festivals, differentiated teaching, dialogue and discussion, audiovisual digital material for further mobilizing students on current issues, myths, life-stories and role-play<sup>16,39</sup>. Finally, the use of artificial intelligence tools and applications could positively contribute to the differentiation of teaching, the enhancement of inclusion and the creation of learning environments that meet the needs of all students<sup>24,43</sup>. Major practices also include the implementation of projects through an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approach, participation in European mobility programmes and collaboration with neighbouring schools and networks<sup>15</sup>.

## **II. Material And Methods**

The ongoing movement of populations is a global phenomenon that affects every host country, influencing social dynamics shaped by the diverse nature of immigrant communities. As a primary receiving state, Greece is responsible for accommodating substantial numbers of refugees and migrants annually, necessitating policies focused on inclusion rather than marginalization to protect immigrants' rights as dictated by national and international laws. Given that children represent a significant segment of this population, it is essential to protect their rights, particularly the right to education, as it serves as a crucial foundation for their social, cultural, and linguistic integration into a new dominant society.

Abiding by that, this research study aims to investigate primary education teachers' perceptions on the challenges they identify and the practices they follow in relation to handling linguistically and culturally diverse students in contemporary school settings.

This study employs qualitative research as a method for exploring and understanding the significance that individuals or social groups place on a particular human or social issue. It follows a social constructivist perspective, which posits that individuals construct their interpretations based on their experiences<sup>8</sup>. Data were collected by using semi-structured interviews, which allow the researcher to utilize a mix of pre-determined and open/close-ended questions that outline the core framework of the study. This flexible question structure encourages participants to express themselves freely, sharing their thoughts and perspectives without being restricted to rigid pre-defined questions<sup>27</sup>. The purpose of using semi-structured interviews is to establish a loose framework of predetermined questions that guide data collection, while also incorporating spontaneous follow-up questions based on participants' narratives that are relevant to the topic. This approach emphasizes the importance of adaptability in gathering data that can be interpreted in light of understanding the reality of the social phenomenon being studied<sup>8</sup>.

The data collected were analyzed through thematic analysis, which involves systematically identifying, organizing, and interpreting recurring patterns of meaning within the data. This analysis consists of six stages: a) familiarizing oneself with the data by reviewing the questionnaires and common responses, b) categorizing answers for each participant, c) organizing various codes into meaningful concepts, d) assessing meanings to pinpoint the most prominent ones, e) defining and labeling these meanings, and f) presenting the findings<sup>5</sup>.

In terms of ethics, a key focus of this research, efforts were made to integrate ethical considerations throughout every stage of the research process, including the literature review, theoretical framework, research objectives, methodology, and data collection and analysis. The principles of research ethics are designed to safeguard participants and uphold “good scientific practice and publicly accountable research”<sup>36</sup>(p. 49). Key principles such as autonomy, non-maleficence, beneficence, and justice were upheld as well. This meant participants had the right to self-governance and freedom, while the researcher was committed to ensuring well-being, maximizing benefits for both students and society, minimizing risks, protecting confidentiality, treating all individuals fairly, and fostering trust<sup>18</sup>.

**Sample size:** The sample for this study included eight teachers (N=8) from primary education, whereas the combination of the convenient sampling process was followed, as the main criteria for sample collection was the accessible population for the researcher and the participants’ characteristics needed for the research.

**Data collection and data analysis:** Semi-structured interviews were adopted, as an informal and conversational research tool, whereas the questions of the interview protocol were created in alignment with the aforementioned research aim, relative theoretical framework and other similar research studies. They were also organized in three distinctive groups: the demographic and professional data (age, gender, training in intercultural education, teaching experience, experience in teaching immigrant students and type of class); identifying challenges (regarding students, school framework and political and legal framing); suggesting practices and teaching methods. All interviews were face-to-face, and each of them lasted twenty minutes approximately. To ensure the clarity of the questions in the interview protocol, three pilot interviews were conducted to confirm that the questions were understandable, clear, precise, and easy for participants to answer. Lastly, it's important to note that the interviews were conducted in Greek, as this was the participants' native language, making it easier for them to articulate their thoughts and ideas.

### **III. Findings**

In this section the research findings will be presented by starting with the participants’ demographic and professional data, and then continuing with the findings per each research question. Concerning their demographic and professional traits, six out of the eight participants were female and two were male; their age ranged from 36-50 years; their years of service at public schools ranged from 6-23 years, and five out of eight had a postgraduate degree. In addition, two participants teach in Zones of Educational Priority (these classes cater to immigrant and refugee students and are provided in mainstream schools, incorporating a combination of intensive Greek language courses alongside participation in regular classes)<sup>4</sup>, and all the other participants work in mainstream classrooms. Finally, all of them had to some extent educational and working experience in multilingual and multicultural formal settings.

At the second part of the interviews, the participants were called to deposit their perceptions regarding the challenges they face, while teaching students who bring different cultural and linguistic capitals. Three sub-themes emerged: a) challenges focused on students, b) challenges focused on school framework and policy, and c) challenges on teachers’ readiness.

In terms of students in particular, respondents to the survey point to the difficulty of communicating with their students due to different language codes as a major challenge. The different language code also affects students' participation in the learning process and inevitably their learning outcomes, and there is often difficulty in recognizing their actual level of knowledge. A further significant challenge is the frequent refusal of pupils to participate actively in learning, which may be due to a sense of non-acceptance and lack of integration in the school environment. This situation is exacerbated by the fact that parents of pupils with a migrant background have little involvement in the learning and teaching of their children, mainly due to their increased work commitments and the lack of communication with school teachers. Another important challenge is the socio-economic background of students which sometimes hinders their ability to access quality inclusive education.

The following are indicative quotes from participating teachers’ answers:

P1: “What worries me most is the level of Greek language learning, which varies from student to student and the way they are assessed.”

P2: “Language is a major barrier to their communication with native students and for that reason they often feel isolated and marginalized.”

P3: “Well, I would focus on the challenge of parental engagement. Due to the fact that they work hard and do not know the Greek language, they communicate very little with their children's teachers and are unable to help their children with their homework.”

P7: "Students' previous negative experiences influence their willingness to participate. They often come unprepared, without having done their homework, citing the difficulty of the assignments. Of course, many times I believe this is not true as the assignments are proportional to their level of knowledge."

Subsequently, as regards the challenges related to the school environment, participants focus on the following points: inadequate teaching materials, lack of qualified support staff, limited equipment, inappropriate infrastructures and the prevailing school climate which is often not supportive towards diversity. They typically mention:

P4: "Most of the time I have to make my own differentiated material and I have to search for relevant resources on the internet. Our school library does not have appropriate materials or what it does have is outdated or in poor condition."

P6: "There are only two interactive whiteboards in the whole school. Therefore, most classrooms still have the traditional blackboards. Therefore, I often use my own mobile phone data when I want to search for appropriate materials for migrant students."

P3: "These children often have problems adjusting, suffer from trauma and have poor learning outcomes. The absence of psychologists, mediators or even social workers makes it even more difficult for them to attend school."

P8: "Unfortunately, due to the delayed recruitment of teachers, the Priority Education Zones are starting late so students are missing out on significant teaching hours. Furthermore, my school lacks extra classrooms and the compensatory classes offered to migrant students take place in different classrooms each time, depending on which one is vacant."

P1: "We could not ignore the negative climate that sometimes evolves against migrant or refugee students. This climate includes stereotypes and prejudices and is at times instigated by some students or their parents. We, of course, spend many hours discussing issues of acceptance and respect."

The research data also point to significant challenges regarding teachers' readiness to manage the linguistic and cultural diversity of their students, especially on a practical level. Although most of them (six out of eight) have attended at least a seminar on intercultural education, they recognize that they still have significant gaps in both knowledge and skills, which they try to fill mainly through individual effort and initiative. They also argue that they need more training in managing the behaviour of native and foreign pupils, in assessing pupils, in communicating with parents and in working with the school administration. The possibility of guidance and support from education counsellors, who are unable to be really close to teachers due to their very heavy responsibilities, is also considered to be inadequate.

P2: "I really feel lonely sometimes... I try to find solutions by talking to colleagues, looking for good practices on the internet.... Furthermore, Education Advisors should support us more and train us properly."

P5: "I have attended two seminars on intercultural education, which were very helpful for me to organize and make useful materials. However, there are still issues I need further guidance on, such as dealing with behavioural problems, stereotypes and prejudices."

P8: "Our school principal takes some relevant initiatives through in-service training programmes, however they are not enough. We need systematic training, since diversity is now a normality".

Continuing with the second research question, the research demonstrates important findings about the practices they follow to integrate all students into the learning process and to assist them to the maximum extent possible. The focus is mainly on the use of technology and translation tools, which greatly assist in at least initially reaching out to students and their parents. In addition, students/parents with an immigrant background who have lived in Greece for more years and have a better knowledge of the Greek language are often involved. These individuals act in a way 'as mediators', as two research participants (P1 and P2) mentioned.

In parallel with technology and the use of interactive whiteboards, participants suggest as a common practice the use of audiovisual material from the internet, which makes the lesson more understandable and attractive (P2, P3, P4, P5). When viewing this material, there is also the possibility of using foreign subtitles. Interestingly, one participant (P8) states that "I now use translanguaging ... a practice I was taught in a seminar I attended. This practice was a surprise because I initially thought that I should discourage children from using their mother tongue...that is, I thought that they should only receive only elements of Greek in order to learn it quickly".

Considerable reference is also made to the use of active educational techniques and teaching methods, such as the use of role-playing, group work, games and the implementation of projects:

P3: "I often give the children the opportunity to work in groups...the groups are usually mixed...they help all the children to unleash their talents and skills. I make sure, of course, that the tasks assigned are of graded difficulty and multimodal, so that they capture the attention and interest of all students."

P8: "The drama is very much enjoyed by students in all grades. I use it mostly for sensitive topics and when I want to cultivate empathy or solve conflicts."

P6: "Role plays help me a lot to involve all children in the learning process... learning becomes more student-centered rather than teacher-centered."

P2: "I use several techniques and encourage the children to pay special attention to the use of non-verbal communication: gaze, gestures, body expression".

#### **IV. Discussion**

The survey revealed some important findings regarding the challenges emerging while teachers are called to work in more and more complicated multilingual and multicultural classes. To begin with, most participants emphasized that language is a serious obstacle, since it could provoke intercultural misunderstandings and communication gaps<sup>2,10</sup>. In addition, the language barrier hinders parents' involvement in their children's learning process and thus affects students' academic achievement. However, research illustrates that immigrant children improve their self-confidence, feel more accepted by the school community, and demonstrate higher academic achievement, more positive attitudes towards learning in school, and higher motivation to progress, when their parents concern themselves with their school progress<sup>4, 26,42</sup>.

However, the language barrier is not an insurmountable one given that there is a plethora of translation tools that can be deployed in the learning process. Translation tools can enhance personal and community development, cultural competence, effective communication, mutual empathy and understanding, improve relationships, and increase adaptability through the promotion and facilitation of intercultural dialogue<sup>1,17</sup>.

In this line, an important initiative of the European Commission is the "The European Language Resource Coordination" (ELRC) project (<https://language-tools.ec.europa.eu/>) which has been facilitating the collection and sharing of over 3,306 language resources, including written and spoken corpora, grammars and terminology databases. Under the ELRC initiative, evaluations and assessments were also carried out to support the development of eTranslation, the European Commission's machine translation system available under the Digital Europe language tools. More digital language tools include eBriefing which creates reports from sets of documents in formal or generic style; eReply, which helps individuals prepare responses to correspondence, queries and other requests; eSummary, which quickly discovers the main content of long documents; Multilingual posting, a tool for short translations in multiple languages; Multilingual translations, which helps individuals upload their multimedia and get back full transcripts or subtitles; Natural language editing tools, which contribute to anonymization, classification and named entity recognition.

Some challenges stem from shortcomings within schools and policy framing, which is in alignment with some other studies, according to which, despite the fact that there are legal frameworks and statements supporting the inclusion of immigrant students, the official education system falls short in effectively facilitating their integration. In addition, teachers are deprived of appropriate guidance and resources. Therefore, they have difficulty in integrating inclusive teaching methods and practices<sup>20,29</sup>. Research shows that teachers' attitudes and behaviors significantly influence the classroom environment, their teaching methods, and the cognitive, emotional, and social development of their students. This influence can boost students' confidence, motivation, and satisfaction. However, teachers' perspectives on diversity can sometimes be flawed, highlighting the need for them to have the right resources to examine their beliefs, attitudes, and practices, and to address potential challenges effectively<sup>15</sup>.

The need to strengthen the professional competence of teachers is also highlighted by the 2018 TALIS report, which revealed that more than 50% of the teachers who participated in the survey expressed concern that they do not feel adequately prepared to meet the challenges of modern multicultural school environments<sup>30</sup>. However, the same report shows that overall, teachers trained in multicultural and multilingual environments during their initial training or in-service training report high levels of self-efficacy in teaching<sup>17</sup>.

In this vein, in a study conducted by Sarı and Yüce<sup>37</sup>, it was found that the challenges faced by teachers in multicultural classrooms included their lack of experience, classroom management, communication skills, and their attitudes, all of which need to be addressed. Furthermore, it's essential to identify these teacher-related problems and implement strategies to alleviate them. The authors emphasized the importance of seminars and in-service training focused on teaching students from diverse cultural backgrounds for enhancing teachers' professional development. Consequently, it is recommended that teacher education programs be revamped to increase flexibility and mitigate potential challenges educators may encounter in their careers.

It is also important to note that the findings emphasize the various roles teachers play; they are tasked not only with delivering knowledge and utilizing educational materials but also with offering emotional support, motivating migrant students, and fostering an open, welcoming, and accepting classroom atmosphere. This multifaceted role of teachers has been recognized by other researchers as well. While they strive to include students and provide both learning and emotional assistance, they often feel uncertain about managing their students' diversity<sup>7,31,35</sup>.

In this direction, equipping schools with specialized staff, such as psychologists, social workers and intercultural mediators, can support teachers in their often overwhelming and very demanding task. In recent years there has been an increasing interest in the profile of the mediator<sup>23</sup>. Mediation is a particular social and pedagogical activity where students and teachers acquire the ability of intercultural discourse and the ability to

mediate between their own culture and the cultures of others<sup>38</sup>. Teaching itself is a process of mediation, as teachers seek to mediate the knowledge, experiences and personal development of learners and to shape a psychological and socio-cultural environment that is supportive for all. Therefore, it includes the dimensions of a) mediated learning, b) mediated communication and c) mediation in the socio-political space. In particular, the first dimension lies in adapting the didactic and linguistic complexity of the learning material and developing a system of specific symbols and codes. The mediative communication dimension focuses on cooperation in constructing meaning, managing interaction and facilitating individual and group work. Lastly, as for the dimension of mediation in the socio-cultural space, the facilitation of communication in vulnerable environments, the ability of the teacher to act as an intermediary in multicultural environments and the management of the digital learning space are listed as key individual actions<sup>17,23,25</sup>.

Following, with regard to the practices applied by the participants in order to handle cultural and linguistic diversity, they emphasized on differentiated teaching, translanguaging, discussion, audiovisual digital material, team-work, and role-play. This finding is mostly in alignment with the ones of other similar studies. In particular, the structured debates allow students to advocate for opposing viewpoints on global issues, encouraging a critical approach while simultaneously enhancing their communication skills. Furthermore, discussions about current events help students grasp the impact of global occurrences on their local communities, while role-playing fosters teamwork, collaboration, and decision-making abilities<sup>2, 19</sup>. The respective literature emphasizes the necessity of using multicultural and multimodal materials that represent the diversity of the student population, help create bonds within and outside the school community and recognize the uniqueness of each individual<sup>3,9,18</sup>.

The foregoing practices could also be enhanced through participation in networks and communities of practice that enhance the effectiveness and attractiveness of the teaching profession, as they provide a forum for discussion, development of ideas and exchange of innovative ideas<sup>32</sup>.

Finally, story circles constitute a particular practice based on two basic assumptions: the fact that we are all connected through human rights and that every individual has inherent dignity and worth. In addition, story circles allow people with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds to meet, explore similarities and differences, and exchange life experiences that are embedded in specific cultural contexts<sup>9</sup>.

## **V. Conclusion**

Europe, in the aftermath of the 2015 humanitarian crisis, experienced an unprecedented number of refugees, which eventually led to the EU-Turkey agreement (2016), the closure of the Balkan route and disproportionate migratory pressures on first asylum states, including Greece<sup>17</sup>. These pressures were further intensified after the Russian military invasion of Ukraine in February 2024, with the result that most Western societies are characterized by strong heterogeneity and contemporary school environments are significantly differentiated in terms of the cultural and linguistic capital their students bring with them.

In this spirit, this research comes to explore the challenges that teachers face in their efforts to manage diversity and the practices they follow to turn diversity into a significant asset for the school and wider community. Major challenges identified include the language barrier, inadequate infrastructure and technological equipment, lack of sufficient qualified staff and government support, inadequate teacher education and training, among others.

However, the above-mentioned barriers may affect the learning and teaching process, but they are not insurmountable. Through the choice of appropriate practices, diversity can be transformed from a challenge into an asset. The use of technology, digital media and artificial intelligence tools, the enrichment of educational material with audiovisual material and a variety of multimodal resources, the use of interlanguage, identity texts, differentiated teaching and certainly the participation of teachers in appropriate professional support and development programmes, learning communities and networks can contribute to the empowerment of teachers but also to their reflection on their attitudes, beliefs and practices.

In addition to improving teacher training, significant and systemic changes are necessary: reception classes need to be expanded, permanent and trained staff should be hired, and the curriculum and materials must be adapted based on intercultural principles. These modifications should align with the ideological framework of the educational system. The shortcomings identified in this research can be linked to broader dysfunctions and disorganized school structures, as well as a prevailing ideological model that leaves little room for the "other" or "different," suggesting they should be assimilated.

Finally, despite the significant efforts to ensure the survey's reliability and validity, we should acknowledge its limitations, primarily related to the geographical scope and the small sample size. For future research, a larger sample encompassing various professions and more extensive experience would enable a deeper and more comprehensive analysis of the topic. Furthermore, supplementing the semi-structured interviews with other methods, such as observations, would strengthen the research tool. Including insights from principals,

parents, or community members would also enrich the data, providing a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities emerging in diversified surroundings.

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