

Diversity in Greek schools:

What is at stake?

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Faced with the challenges of ethnic and cultural diversity, **schools may become places of inclusion**, and contribute towards the incorporation of immigrant and native minority children, or they may **propagate – directly or indirectly – prejudice**, stereotypes, and perceptions of cultural confrontation, superiority, or discrimination.

The challenge for European societies and in particular for ‘new’ host countries such as Greece is to **enhance educational, socialization and personal development opportunities** for all students regardless of their majority or minority/immigrant background.

This policy brief is concerned with two main issues concerning school life in Greece. **First, do migrant and Roma children face formal or informal segregation? Second, how is religious diversity accommodated in Greek schools?**

How Many Immigrant Children Are There In Greek Schools?

At present, approximately **10 % of the total school population** in Greece may be categorized as foreign or co-ethnic repatriated. Co-ethnic repatriated are children of co-ethnic returnees either from the former Soviet Republics who have naturalized upon arrival and whose mother tongue is Russian. Immigrant children are children who are of non-Greek citizenship and whose mother tongue is other than Greek. **There is no official register of Roma children.** Data from the Ministry of Education for the Athens metropolitan area show that Roma children presence in primary and secondary education ranges between 0% and 12% with the higher percentages registered in the western suburbs of Athens.

Greece, a 'new host country'

10 % of the total school population of the country is foreign/ co ethnic repatriated

Immigrant School Population in Greece, 2008-2009				
Schooling level	Foreign pupils	Co-ethnic pupils	Total foreign and co-ethnic pupils (percentage)	Total of all students (Greek, foreigner and co-ethnic)
Kindergarten	15,447	1,122	12.91	128,319
Primary	58,332	5,212	11.17	568,797
Gymnasium	28,713	4,327	10.46	315,998
Lyceum	9,229	2,262	5.45	210,701
Technical Schools	8,094	1,824	11.76	84,364
Total	119,815	14,747	10.29	1,308,179

Children Have the Right to Education Regardless of Status of Their Parents

The Greek legislative framework guarantees schooling for all children, citizen or foreign, from the age of 6 to the age of 15 (6-year elementary school and 3-year lower high school). Education is compulsory and is applicable to all children regardless of the residence status (legal or irregular) of their parents. Article 40 of law 2910/2001 stipulates that all children born to third-country nationals living in Greece have the right to public education. In effect, school authorities **enroll foreign students even if they do not have the necessary documents**, such as school certificates or birth certificates that are required for enrollment. The same is true for Roma children who may not have certificates of residence in a given municipality or may be enrolled at different ages than those foreseen by the law.

Article 40/Law 2910/2001: all children born to third country nationals living in Greece have to the right to public education.

Integration and Performance Problems

Available studies show however that Roma children are not well integrated into the Greek school system. They have on average very high levels of school abandonment (77% across Greece although the levels of school abandonment vary depending on the locality). Migrant children are well integrated in school life but they overall perform less well than their Greek peers and that they abandon the school earlier.

But, Roma children are not well integrated/ Migrant children perform less well than their peers

Evidence & Analysis (Key Findings)

Case Study I

On School Selection – Segregation

Do Migrant And Roma Children Face Segregation?

While segregation and discrimination against migrant or minority children are illegal and anti-Constitutional in Greece, there is a certain level of informal segregation or ethnic selection taking place in some schools. But, the relevant challenges in schools with higher numbers of immigrant or Roma pupils is to avoid the risk of becoming a ‘ghetto’ or ‘all migrant’ schools because this is coupled with being a low quality school, where students are troublemakers and know no discipline and discrimination is common practice.

The issue is thus not presented as a question of rejecting, tolerating or accepting minority or migrant children but rather on how to raise the performance of the school and its students.

Why Does This Happen?

Discussion about *school quality*, however, is in reality a **politically correct discourse** that disguises a strong ethnic prejudice according to which migrant children are worse than ‘our’ children and immigrant children lower the standards at a school regardless of whether they speak Greek fluently.

The metaphor of the *troublemaker* indirectly supports the practice of ethnic selection and it is also another politically correct strategy to argue that migrant children are ‘bad’ for the school, not because they are ‘inferior’ but because ‘they create trouble and interrupt the teaching.’

An additional argument (going especially for Roma children and children from sub Saharan Africa) is that since in **Greek society there is ethnic prejudice** and children of different ethnic or racial background are singled out in any case, there is no point in fighting this in schools.

Is Ethnic Diversity Accepted In Greek Schools?

Ethnic diversity is **only tolerated** in Greek school life: Greek majority parents, children and teachers argue that migrant children have a negative impact on the quality of education provided at a school. Migrant parents are aware of the stereotype and also sometimes deplore the poor quality of their children’s school, which has too many migrant children and teachers indifferent about their children’s education. Overall they also express a **feeling of being tolerated not accepted** in Greek society.

The challenge is not to reject or accept migrant children, but to avoid becoming a ‘ghetto’- ‘all migrants’ school’, as this means being a low quality school.

Discussion about school quality is a politically correct discourse disguising an ethnic prejudice, ‘migrant children are worse than ‘our’ children’

Ethnic diversity is only tolerated and not accepted in Greek school life

Evidence & Analysis (Key Findings)

Case Study II

On The Accommodation of Religious Diversity in School Life

How Do Greek Schools Accommodate Religious Diversity Now?

- A religion course is taught in all classes of primary and secondary education, which includes a Christian Orthodox religion course and, later on, history of other religions. Parents may ask that their children *are exempted from the religion class*. In this case, children usually are physically in the class room (as there are no alternative activities or other available teacher during that hour), but do not take part in the course.
- The same applies to the **Morning Prayer**, during which the entire student population gathers and prays, apart from minority children, who *may stand in line but not pray*.
- In most classrooms and teachers' offices there are **crucifixes and religious icons**, which, however, *have not been contested so far*, through the media, at courts or in any other way.
- There is **no accommodation of religious festivities or religious needs of minority children** in any form whatsoever.

Uncontested majority religion

✓ *Majority religion classes*

✓ *Morning Prayer*

✓ *Religious Symbols*

✓ *Non accommodation of minority religions*

→ *The presence of the majority religion in Greek school life is visible and has so far not been contested, even if the growing diversity of the student population points to relevant challenges in the near future.*

How Should Religious Diversity Be Accommodated In School Life? Five Different Views

- Diversity seen as a **private matter** that people are free to express in their private life and keep outside the school. They should not raise any claims about their religion being accommodated in school life (basic minimal definition of tolerance)
 - Religion is a private matter but the current policy is actually imposing the majority religion on children of non-Orthodox religious background. They are **forced to assimilate in the dominant religion**, which is bad.
 - **Tolerance is a temporary solution**, suitable for the first period during which schools get acquainted with cultural and ethnic diversity within their school populations, but which should slowly lead to acceptance.
 - The majority and its institutions need not change anything apart from providing the space in which minorities may express individually or collectively their different religion (**neutral acceptance**).
 - educators need to change their way of teaching and thinking with a view to taking into account *the special sensitivities and the special cultural capital* that migrant and minority children have (**respect of religious diversity**)
- *Parents and teachers were divided on the topic of religion and whether it should be taken out of schools altogether.*

Is Religious Diversity Accepted In Greek Schools?

People are free to choose whether to be exempted from the majority religion classes or not, but at the same time the whole school environment is **impregnated with the majority religion to such an extent that migrant children feel forced to assimilate** (and hence not to ask to be exempted from the course).

Tolerating But Not Accepting Ethnic and Religious Diversity

The predominant attitude towards diversity is one of **tolerance** that goes hand in hand with the **unquestioned acceptance of the majority religion, the majority language, the majority ethnicity** in Greek school life.

There is a tacit assumption that **the state belongs to the native majority, and that immigrants are not legitimate political subjects** that could ask for a different policy as regards for instance religious education. This is well in line with the dominant tradition of national identity in Greece, that of accommodating diversity (if at all) at the individual but not at the collective level.

Interestingly however while none questions the primacy of the Greek language in schools and the distinction between Greeks and non Greeks, **religion appears to be a question that is more open to change**. Although the majority religion is taken for granted and seen as a legitimate part of the school life, there is also a *general questioning* of what religion is, whether it should be included in the school curriculum and whether it is a problem if children are of different religions. Indeed, **religious diversity is not yet seen as a problem in Greek schools**.

So, even if the **assimilationist** tendencies of the Greek education system come as no surprise, there are some key messages arising from this study concerning policy making.

Tolerance of diversity goes together with:

- acceptance of majority religion/ language/ ethnicity*
- assumption that the state belongs to the native majority*
- assumption that immigrants are not legitimate political subjects*

Minimal Liberal Tolerance is rarely neutral but rather goes hand in hand with a tacit assumption that **there is a majority culture and religion** that provides for the blueprint as regards cultural and religious matters in schools.

Thus, **the absence of any Acceptance or Respect policies and measures eventually leads not to liberal freedom of choice but rather to pressures for cultural and religious assimilation.**

Key Messages for Policy Makers

1. Minority and immigrant children's continuing negative stereotyping and marginalisation in Greek schools must be addressed.

There is a need:

- For targeting not only issues of learning (improving the school attendance and educational achievement levels of migrant and minority children) but also and more urgently of civic education of the entire school population.
- For a renewed emphasis on citizenship and civics education that introduces the concepts of *identity, diversity, citizenship, tolerance, acceptance, respect of ethnic and religious diversity*, ethnic prejudice and racism.
- For acknowledging the role that emigration and immigration has played in the recent history of Greece as well as of Europe within this or contemporary history/ history of European integration course.

e.g. comparing and contrasting the experiences of a child's grandparents or great grandparents who emigrated from Greece and of a child's parents or grandparents who immigrated to Greece can provide a useful common ground for reflecting on what it means to be a citizen/resident of Greece today.

2. Greek citizens and residents are ready to consider small changes in the education curricula that would acknowledge the increasing ethnic and religious diversity of Greek society.

e.g. introducing alternative options for the religion course so that children of other Christian denominations, of Muslim or other religious background can have the option of being taught their own religious tradition/ by enabling parents to justify their children's absence on the days of major religious or ethnic festivities.

- The new Greek citizenship law of 2010 facilitates citizenship acquisition for the second generation and, thus, an increasing number of children labelled as 'immigrant' will be Greek citizens soon. It is important that the national education system recognises their experiences through the making of a new more civically oriented citizenship ethos.
- Children should be better equipped to deal with an increasingly diverse classroom and society at large.

Methodology

This report is based on **desk research** as well as **fieldwork**.

- **Desk research:** collection of **available statistical data, legal texts and policy documents** (e.g. circulars or Ministerial decisions) as well as the relevant **scholarly literature** on the education of immigrant and Roma children.
- **Fieldwork:** since **January to July 2011** comprising **qualitative interviews** and **discussion groups** with the participation of **76 people**.
 - **32 semi-structured qualitative interviews:**
 - 9 with experts, policy makers and local politicians
 - 4 with middle rank Ministry officials
 - 19 with teachers or headmasters, parents of Greek, migrant and Greek Roma children in three schools of Athens:
 - a school with a high concentration of Roma children in a municipality at the outskirts of Athens that has a high percentage of Roma and of co-ethnic returnee (Pontic Greek) families
 - a school with a high concentration of immigrant children in an inner city area of Athens with a high concentration of immigrants;
 - a 'normal' school, i.e. with a small percentage of migrant children in a lower middle class neighborhood of Athens.
 - **8 discussion groups** (with a total of **44 people** participating in these groups):
 - 4 with immigrant parents (Albanian, Albanian Roma, and Eastern European parents)
 - 1 with immigrant parents comprising smaller nationality groups (Pakistani, Egyptian, and Moldovan)
 - 1 with high school teachers at a middle class neighbourhood school in Athens
 - 1 with high school pupils of Greek origin in the same school
 - 1 with lower high school children at a private high school in a working class neighbourhood (both these schools had a 10-20% presence of migrant children from different national backgrounds)
 - 1 with three young people of sub Saharan African origin, 2 second generation and 1 first generation (all had attended Greek schools).

Project Identity

Acronym:	ACCEPT PLURALISM
Title:	Tolerance, Pluralism and Social Cohesion: Responding to the Challenges of the 21st Century in Europe
Short Description:	<p>ACCEPT PLURALISM questions how much cultural diversity can be accommodated within liberal and secular democracies in Europe. The notions of tolerance, acceptance, respect and recognition are central to the project. ACCEPT PLURALISM looks at both native and immigrant minority groups.</p> <p>Through comparative, theoretical and empirical analysis the project studies individuals, groups or practices for whom tolerance is sought but which we should not tolerate; of which we disapprove but which should be tolerated; and for which we ask to go beyond toleration and achieve respect and recognition.</p> <p>In particular, we investigate when, what and who is being not tolerated / tolerated / respected in 15 European countries; why this is happening in each case; the reasons that different social actors put forward for not tolerating / tolerating / respecting specific minority groups/individuals and specific practices.</p> <p>The project analyses practices, policies and institutions, and produces key messages for policy makers with a view to making European societies more respectful towards diversity.</p>
Website:	www.accept-pluralism.eu
Duration:	March 2010-May 2013 (39 months)
Funding Scheme:	Small and medium-scale collaborative project
EU contribution:	2,600,230 Euro, Grant agreement no. 243837
Consortium:	19 partners (15 countries)
Coordinator:	European University Institute (Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies)
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