

## Early childhood teachers' perceptions of intercultural education in state schools of Thessaloniki and surrounding areas

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### Abstract

This paper is going to argue that while early childhood teachers seem to have positive perceptions about intercultural education, the in-question students seem to be compelled to adopt different cultural habits. Data were gathered through a questionnaire distributed in 9 areas of Thessaloniki, completed by 161 teachers. The results showed that most teachers feel that they have enough knowledge about the curriculum regarding intercultural education, perform activities regarding interculturalism and diversity; they believe that students from different cultures feel welcomed and equally treated and participate in all class activities. Teachers suggest that students from different cultures build good relationships with all their peers and there is positive communication between students from different cultures as well as between their parents and teachers. However, the suggestion of most of the sample that students are compelled to adopt Greek cultural habits constrains this positive picture. It is possible that teachers feel that they are achieving positive results regarding intercultural education. It may be possible to recommend that the approaches that teachers report as part of their current practice should continue or that teachers' own recommendations should be explored further to determine what sort of approach to intercultural education is being adopted.

**Key words:** Intercultural Education, Early Childhood Teachers, Cultural Habits, Immigrants, Thessaloniki.

### 1. Introduction

The population of immigrants has grown during the last twenty years in Greece (Paleologou, 2004; Spinthourakis, Karatzia-Stavlioti and Roussakis, 2009; Tsigilis, Tsioumis and Gregoriadis, 2006), and this has necessitated the need for intercultural approach in education to be adopted by teachers, so that students from immigrant families to be able to participate equally to the educational process. Therefore, schools should be able to offer appropriately trained teachers to teach in culturally diverse classrooms, and they should adopt the intercultural approach by following the principles: equality of civilisations, equality of

educational opportunities and equality of educational backgrounds for children from diverse cultural environments (Dimakos and Tasiopoulou, 2003).

Teachers have to take into account the needs of culturally diverse students, help them to be appropriately developed as well as integrated into the Greek society but without abandoning their own cultures and traditions (Tsigilis, Tsioumis and Gregoriadis, 2006). A number of studies examined how well immigrant and repatriated students cope in the Greek educational system, especially when they first arrive (Dimakos and Tasiopoulou, 2003; Paleologou, 2004; Parthenis, 2010) and they revealed that such students find it difficult to adjust to their new school situation (Paleologou, 2004). According to the literature, when children enter an environment they are not familiar with, they experience difficulties in terms of learning as well as in communication, and accepted social behaviour (Banks, 2007; Cowen et al., 1989; Ladd, 1990; Ladd and Price, 1987). Foreign students, plunged into an unknown environment with a number of challenges, can suffer from relatively low self-esteem as a result (Giavrimis et al., 2003; Hatzichristou and Hopf, 1993) and in many cases Greek students hold some negative opinions about their immigrant peers (Dimakos and Tasiopoulou, 2003).

## **2. Theoretical framework**

### ***2.1 Educational approaches for the education of minority groups***

Different approaches were established and applied through the years, for the education of children from minority groups in Greece (Georgogiannis, 1999; Makri, 2003; Sklavou, 2004).

Assimilation approach: This approach was first developed in the decade of 1960 and it is a totally ethnocentric model. According to this approach children from the minority ethnic group should comply with the dominant culture and abandon their own culture and traditions. Children should learn the language and the culture of the country they live in, while their own language and culture is ignored.

Nowadays, this approach should not be used as it is completely against the democratic model that should be used and it encroaches on the rights of individuals (Georgogiannis, 1999; Makri, 2003).

Integration approach: This approach approves some characteristics of the minority culture which do not contradict to those of the dominant culture. It accepts the idea that minority groups should affect and be affected by the dominant population.

Integration approach is much better than the assimilation approach, as minority groups are allowed to maintain their own culture despite the fact that it is being overshadowed by the dominant culture (Georgogiannis, 1999; Makri, 2003).

Antiracist approach: According to this approach the educational system needs change as it produces racial discriminations. Moreover, foreign students should be treated equally and as a whole and the reasons of the inequalities of the educational system should be changed (Georgiannis, 1999; Makri, 2003).

Multicultural approach: In the decade of the 1970 the multicultural approach was appeared as the previous approaches were inappropriate. The main principle of this approach is that a society is not a culturally homogeneous society but it consists of different groups. Thus, policies should encourage the cultural, traditional and historical retention of those group and also to focus on the interaction and on the unity of those diverse groups (Tzortzopoulou and Kotzamani, 2008).

In the educational content the importance of students to have knowledge about their tradition and their culture is acknowledged as basic for their schools performance. Thus, curricula should take into account the lingual and cultural differences of minority students. Moreover, education according to this approach should always have as a target the production of the respect for the students' different ethnical, cultural, regional and religious background. Moreover, students need to respect and accept all different cultures and learn to live together (Georgiannis, 1999; Tzortzopoulou and Kotzamani, 2008).

This approach recognises the cultural particularities, and it claims that all people should be able to exist in the same society by keeping their own traditions, habits, cultures and languages.

Intercultural Approach: This approach promotes the dialectical communication between people from different countries. The principles of this approach are the equality of civilisations, the respect for the difference, tolerance, empathy and the elimination of prejudices and stereotypes. This approach is based on democratic values and supports the communication and cooperation between people. Therefore, people need to show respect about different cultures and have some knowledge about the traditions, habits and lifestyles of those cultures.

## **2.2 Intercultural approach in Greek schools**

The adaptation of the intercultural education is strongly supported by Greek policy makers. The Greek legislation which brought intercultural education into the spotlight, was enacted in 1996 (Law 2443/1996), and it recognised the importance of providing equal opportunities to immigrant students, rather than segregate them by providing separate classes, as was in the past (Makri, 2003). This Law exists until today and it encompassed: (1) equal access to educational benefits for all students regardless of background; (2) opportunities for all students to develop intercultural communication skills; (3) strategies to ensure

that all students reach their full learning potential; and (4) promotion of intercultural understanding via the schools (Parthenis, 2010).

However, according to the literature immigrant students do not have the same opportunities in schools (Paleologou, 2004), they face adaptation problems in their schools and they considered as barriers (Dimakos and Tasiopoulou, 2003). The literature has also revealed the Greek schools are far from achieving this approach and they do not produce the critical dialogue or the exchange of different ideas between different cultures (Paleologou, 2004).

Schools also, may not always have the resources or the incentive to implement significant changes (Parthenis, 2010).

However, in this research the majority of the early childhood teachers from Thessaloniki, mentioned that the current situation is improved and it seems that they are close to achieve the intercultural approach. The only exception of this positive situation, is what the majority of the teachers have mentioned regarding the adaptation of Greek cultural habits by the immigrant students. Intercultural approach supports the idea of accepting, appreciating, respecting and embracing the different habits, traditions, lifestyles and values of different cultures (NCCA, 2006). Immigrant students should learn some issues about the culture of the host community but without abandoning their own habits and traditions. Also, mainstream students should learn issues about the culture and the habits, the traditions and lifestyles of other cultures (NCCA, 2006). However, the majority of early childhood teachers in this study have mentioned that immigrant students are compelled to adopt different cultural habits.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Type of research**

The method used in this work is a quantitative, exploratory study involving a sample of early childhood teachers from Thessaloniki, the second largest city in Greece.

#### **3.2 Sampling and access**

In this study simple random sampling was used, for the selection of the early childhood teachers and for the nine areas. There are many different areas where there are differences on the number of ethnic minority citizens. In this study areas with high number and areas with low number of ethnic minority citizens were selected in order to make comparisons among teachers' responses. After selecting the areas, a list of as many as possible kindergarten schools was made, and were conducted by phone kindly asked whether they would like to participate in the research. After accepted, the questionnaires were personally delivered and discussed (if asked) with teachers, they were collected two to five days later. The

areas that were chosen to carry out the research were: Ampelokipoi, Evosmos, Neapoli and Stavroupoli north-west of Thessaloniki, Kalamaria, Pilea, Toumba and Harilaou south-east of Thessaloniki, and the City Centre.

### **3.3 Subjects**

The teachers from early childhood state schools who were accepted to take part in this investigation amounted to 220, from 55 schools, 5 – 7 schools and 21 – 28 teachers from each area. Nearly all schools operate all day and therefore four to six early childhood teachers are employed in each one. A total of 161 questionnaires (15 – 21 questionnaires from each area) were collected from the 220 distributed.

### **3.4 Research instrument**

The instrument used in order to collect data was a brief questionnaire. The participants of this research were early childhood teachers from state schools. An anonymous close-ended 5-scale (none, little, moderate, enough, and very) questionnaire was chosen to explore teachers' perceptions concerning intercultural education in early childhood schools in Thessaloniki and surrounding areas (appendix 1).

They were initially asked about the number of students from different cultures, divided into four immigration areas: Albanians, East Europeans (mainly Armenians, Georgians and Russians), Asians (mainly Chinese and Filipinos) and Africans (mainly Nigerians), they have in their class. Thereafter, how many years was their teaching experience, since some years ago Greece was a homogenous culture state and older teachers would probably not have any knowledge about intercultural education.

Before starting the research, a pilot run was carried out so as to detect and avoid ambiguities or "poorly prepared items" (Wiersma and Jurs, 2009) and to find out whether the most appropriate scale was used for the responses and discover items for further discussion (Cohen, Manion and Morisson, 2011).

A feedback regarding the general appearance of the questionnaire, the type and the appropriateness of the questions and the response categories, was obtained. In addition, the readability of the questionnaire was checked and the length and timing that it takes to be completed was provided. On the basis of information gathered from the literature and past studies, an early draft of the questionnaire was distributed to ten ( $N=10$ ) early childhood teachers, from different ages, between 25-52, who did not participate in the main phase of the study. After taking into account their comments and recommendations, the final version of the questionnaire was developed. The teachers were asked to respond to the questionnaire elements and to consider whether this questionnaire was indeed

appropriate for use among their colleagues. The teachers indicated their agreement and satisfaction with the questionnaire, its elements, and its intended purposes, thus providing partial evidence in support of its content and construct validity. The completion of the questionnaire did not require more than 10–15 minutes of the teachers' time. After doing the pilot run all ambiguities and misunderstandings were cleared and the final questionnaire was developed. Moreover, the Likert scale was chosen and single questions were asked, as it is important to include simple response categories and try to ask one thing at a time in a question (Cohen, Manion and Morisson, 2011).

### **3.5 Data analysis**

Descriptive statistics on the questionnaire data were calculated taking into account the different areas, nationality and teaching experience.

One factor analysis of variance was employed on each item per area and the statistically significant results ( $p < 0.05$ ) were depicted in graphs using the 95% confidence intervals of means to detect differences between paired means. Intervals that do not overlap denote significant differences between two means.

Items were subjected to a factor analysis aiming to reveal potential relationships with specific attributes (Sharma, 1996).

Factor analysis on the respondent's data was employed to acquire an overall view of the attitudes.

## **4. Results**

### **4.1 Response rate of questionnaire, distribution of students from different cultures and teacher experience**

Despite the simplicity and brevity of the questionnaire, approximately 3 out of 10 teachers refused to accept it and participate in this work; this is a response rate of 70%. The high response rate might be due to the early childhood teachers' positive attitudes towards intercultural education. However, 161 questionnaires were collected from the 220 distributed, which is a response rate of 73%. It was reported that the average response rate for studies that utilised data collected from individuals is 52.7% with a standard deviation of 20.4, while the average response rate for studies that utilised data collected from organisations is 35.7% with a standard deviation of 18.8 (Baruch and Holton, 2008). Thus, the response rate in this work was relatively high, indicating that the personal communication and distribution of questionnaires was quite effective.

The 55 schools which agreed to receive and answer the questionnaires host 140 Albanians (53.6%), 88 East Europeans (33.7%), 17 Asians (6.5%) and 12 Africans (4.6%) (Figure 1).

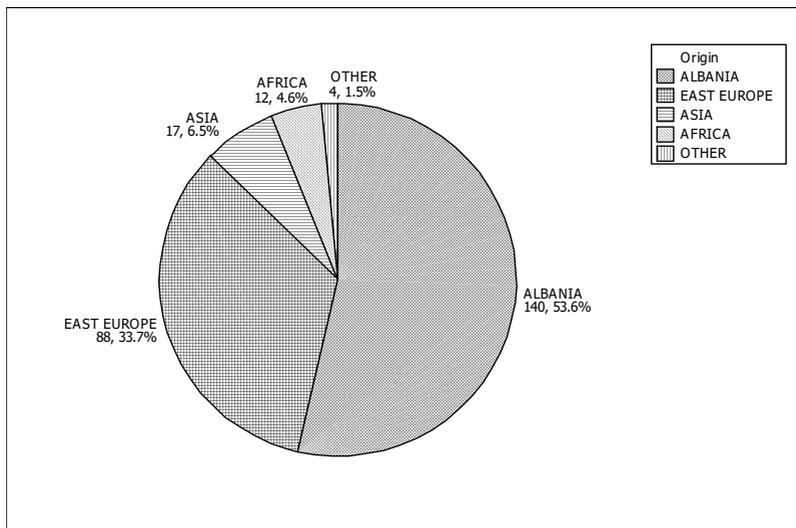


Figure 1: Distribution of pupils from different cultures according to their nationality

It was reported that the distribution of all immigrants by nationality in Greece is Albanians 56%, East Europeans 16.3%, Asians 8.1% and Africans 1% (Baldwin-Edwards, 2004). The majority of students from different cultures were found in the areas of Ampelokipoi, City Centre and Neapoli with a mean occurrence of 4.5–4.9 students and the minority in the areas of Kalamaria (1.6) and Toumba (1.8) (Table 1). The mean teaching experience ranged between 14 years (Pilea) to 19.4 years (Harilaou) (Figure 2).

Table 1. Distribution of Pupils from different cultures regarding the district

District	Mean	Sum	Count
Ampelokipoi	4.875	117	24
City Centre	4.722	85	18
Neapoli	4.476	94	21
Stavroupoli	3.519	95	27
Pilea	3.250	26	8
Evosmos	3.000	69	23
Harilaou	2.571	36	14
Toumba	1.800	18	10
Kalamaria	1.563	25	16

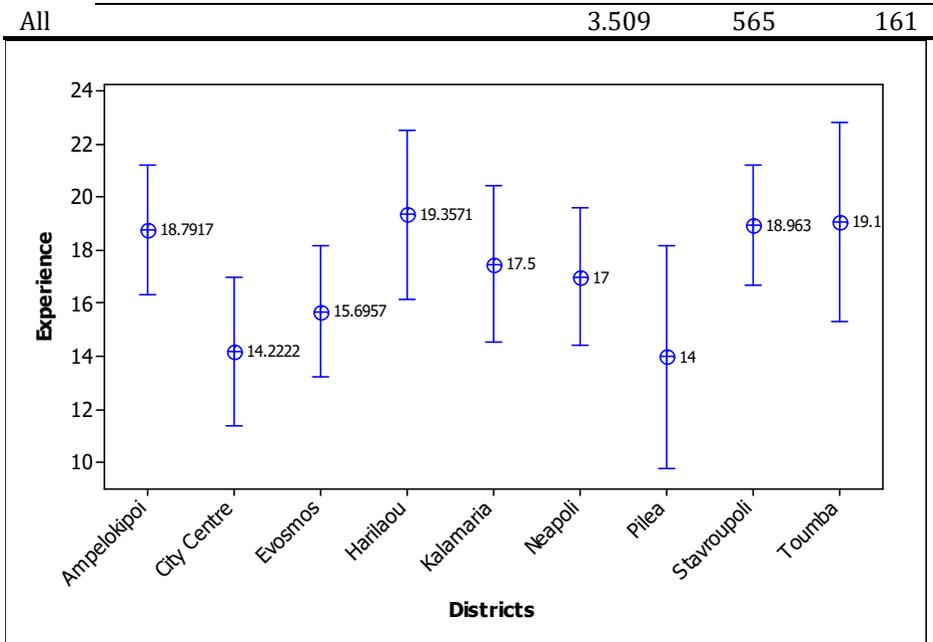


Figure 2. Mean teaching experience (years) per local district. Vertical lines denote the 95% confidence intervals of means based on the pooled error mean square of ANOVA

#### 4.2 Variance Analysis

Considerable differentiations exist in the response data of the questionnaire when teachers from the local areas are taken into account (Figures 3 and 4): responses 12 out of 13 questions were found statistically significant (variance analysis,  $p < 0.05$  significance level). Only question 7 on whether early childhood teachers perform activities regarding interculturalism and diversity, was only marginally significant ( $p = 0,067$ ). Question 1 “Knowledge of curriculum regarding intercultural education” obtained its highest score by early childhood teachers from Kalamaria (4.0) and the lowest (less than moderate) by early childhood teachers from Neapoli ( $< 3.0$ ). (Figure 3). Students from different cultures were made to feel more welcome by early childhood teachers from Toumba ( $> 4.5$ ) and less welcome (above moderate) by early childhood teachers from Ampelokipoi ( $> 3.5$ ) (Q2) (Figure 3). Students from different cultures feel more equally treated by early childhood teachers from Toumba ( $> 4.5$ ), confirming the results of the previous question, and less equally treated (above moderate) ( $> 3.5$ ) by early childhood teachers from Neapoli and Pilea (Q3) (Figure 3). Early childhood

teachers from Kalamaria and Stavroupoli claim that they have built a better communication with parents of students from different cultures; however, the communication between early childhood teachers and parents of students from different cultures was generally efficient in all schools ( $> 3.0$ ) (Q4) (Figure 3). Once more, better relationships between students from different cultures and their peers build in the early childhood schools of Toumba according to early childhood teachers ( $> 4.5$ ) and worse relationships (above moderate) in early childhood schools of Pilea ( $> 3.0$ ) (Q5) (Figure 3).

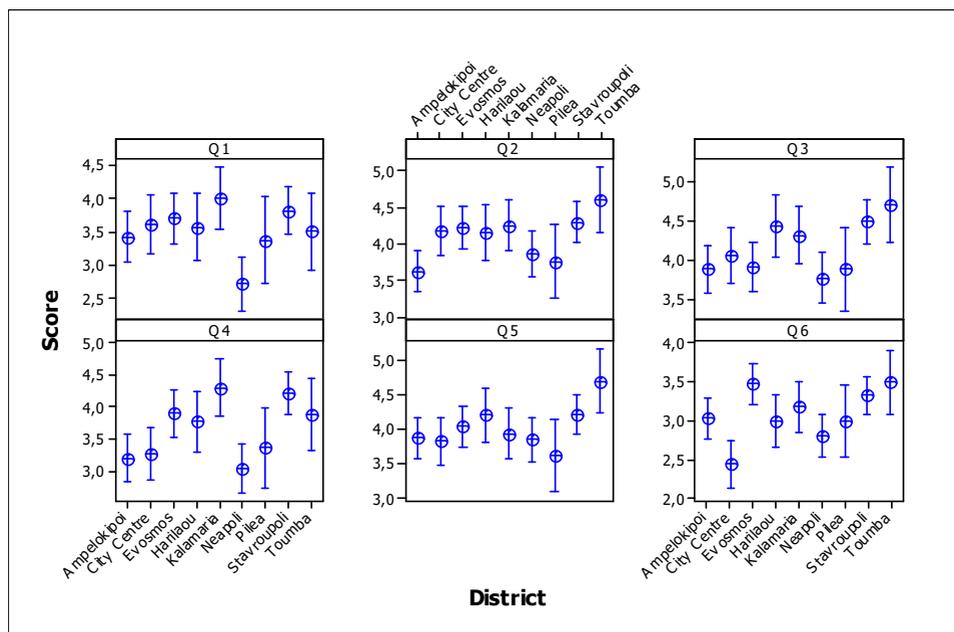


Figure 3. Mean item scores per local district for questions Q1-Q6. Vertical lines denote the 95% confidence intervals of means based on the pooled error mean square of ANOVA.

Early childhood teachers from Evosmos and Toumba consider that students from different cultures have a greater than moderate understanding of the vocabulary ( $> 3.0$ ); on the contrary, early childhood teachers from City Centre assess that students from different cultures have a less than moderate understanding of the vocabulary ( $< 2.5$ ) (Q6) (Figure 3). According to early childhood teachers, students from different cultures participate in all activities at a level above moderate ( $> 3.0$ ), with early childhood teachers of Toumba being

more efficient ( $> 4.5$ ) (Q8) (Figure 4). Regarding bullying behaviour either during teaching (Q9) or during the breaks the early childhood teachers observed no manifestation in nearly all schools, apart from schools in City Centre where a little bullying behaviour was indicated both during class activities and during the breaks (Q9 and Q10) (Figure 4). Early childhood teachers believe that students from different cultures have little problem conforming to Greek habits, with students of Kalamaria and Neapoli being less able (higher values between 2 and 2.5) (Q11) (Figure 4). Early childhood teachers believe that students from different cultures are compelled to adopt Greek cultural habits, particularly at schools in Kalamaria and Toumba ( $> 4.0$ ), and to a lesser extent at schools in Evosmos ( $> 3.0$ ) (Q12) (Figure 4). Teachers should be particularly careful in this area; students from different cultures must not be compelled to adopt things that they probably do not understand. Regarding communication between students from different cultures both during their class activities and during free play, early childhood teachers from Harilaou think that it is between enough and very good ( $> 4.5$ ), while early childhood teachers from Pilea think that this communication is above moderate ( $> 3.5$ ) (Q13) (Figure 4).

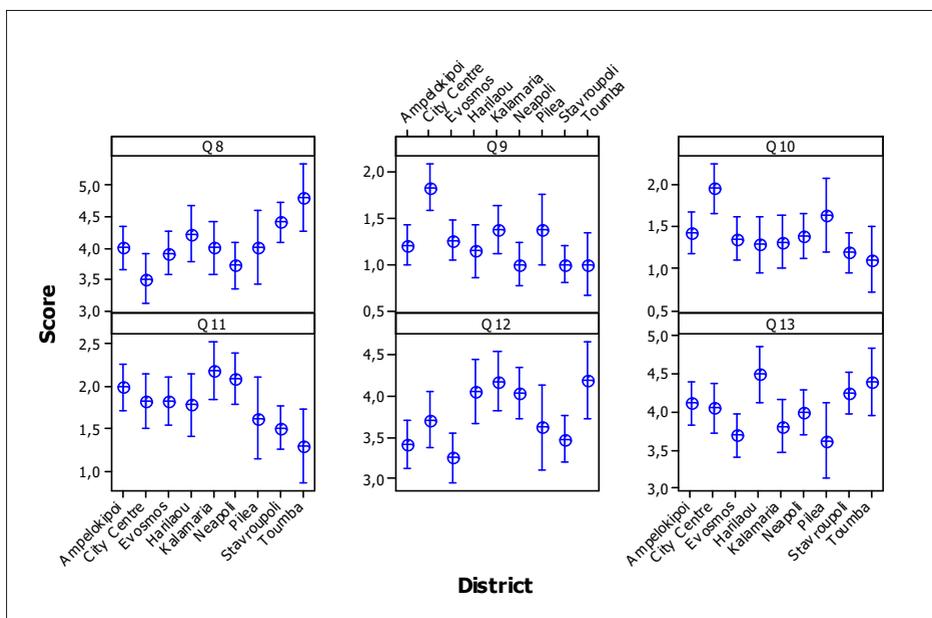


Figure 4: Mean item scores per local district for questions Q8-Q13. Vertical lines denote the 95% confidence intervals of means based on the pooled error mean square of ANOVA.

### 4.3 Factor analysis

Factor analysis on the respondent's data was employed to acquire an overall view of the attitudes among early childhood teachers' perceptions in Thessaloniki and its surroundings.

The first factor explains 34% of the total variation (Table 2) and is formed by the Q2, Q3, Q10, Q8, Q5, Q6 and Q4 which correlate quite strongly with that axis (range between 0.671 and 0.786 in absolute values). Question 1 is the most responsible for the formation of axis 2 ( $r = -0.809$  and 11.5% variation explained). Figure 5 vividly illustrates the relationships formed among the responding questions. A bundle of five items occupies the right part of the graph (Q2, Q3, Q4, Q6 and Q8) showing an internal strong positive correlation and also a strong negative correlation with Q11. Interpreting the situation, it appears that potential problems of students from different cultures due to their different habits are unlikely to be encountered when students from different cultures are involved in an environment of welcome, delicate and equal treatment, good communication between parents and early childhood teachers, comprehension of the vocabulary used by early childhood teachers and participation in all activities occurring in the class.

Table 2: Correlation coefficients between the first two factors and the questions under study. Both axes explain 45.5% of the total variation. Coefficients in bold denote higher significance of relationship ( $r > |0.600|$ ).

Variable	Factor 1	Factor 2
Q3	<b>0.786</b>	-0.098
Q2	<b>0.734</b>	-0.159
Q10	<b>-0.731</b>	-0.313
Q8	<b>0.726</b>	-0.128
Q5	<b>0.701</b>	0.165
Q6	<b>0.672</b>	-0.170
Q4	<b>0.671</b>	-0.155
Q11	-0.571	0.067
Q9	-0.547	-0.392
Q13	0.413	0.195
Q1	0.110	<b>-0.809</b>
Q7	-0.006	-0.547
Q12	-0.033	0.345

Variance	4.4191	1.4972
% Variance	34.0	11.5

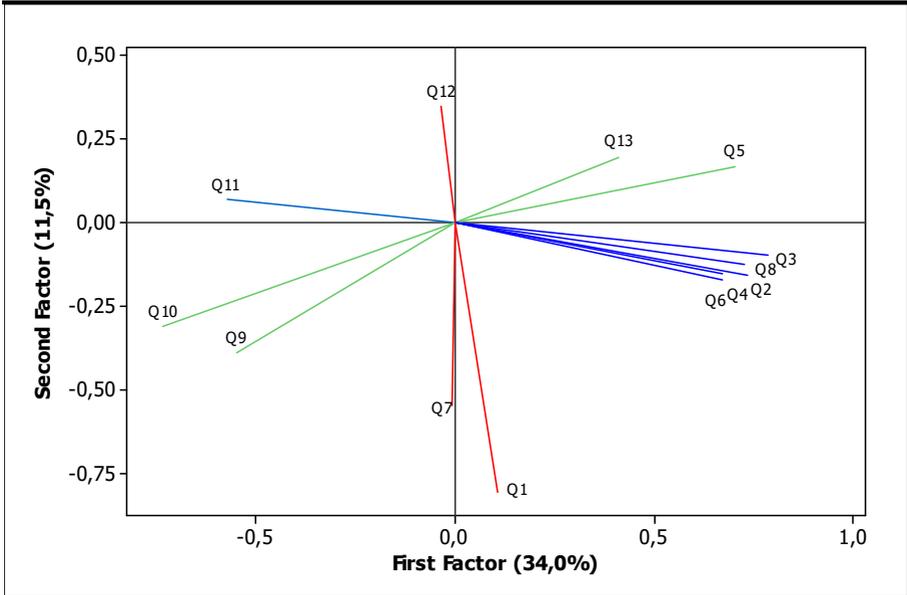


Figure 5: Correlations plot of items with the first two factors. Longer lines produce higher correlation effect, lines forming oblique angle show strong positive correlation and obtuse angle a strong negative effect

Bullying behaviour (Q9 and Q10) does not discriminate between class time and breaks (high positive correlation) and cannot arise when students from different cultures build good relationships with their peers (Q5) and communication is good between students from different cultures both during their class activities and during free play (Q13) (both Q5 and Q13 show within positive correlation and strong negative with Q9 and Q10).

Question 7 and Q1 correlate strongly positively with each other and strongly negatively with Q12. This can be explained by the fact that compulsion to adopt Greek habits (Q12) is moderated or even attenuates when early childhood teachers are well informed of the curriculum regarding intercultural education and also perform activities in relation to interculturalism and diversity.

## 5. Discussion

This study tried to find out early childhood teachers' perceptions about intercultural education in Thessaloniki. Overall through this study the opinion that was prevailed until some years ago, that teachers do not see intercultural education positively, is changing. Despite the fact that studies have revealed that Greek schools do not follow the appropriate curriculum in order to be characterised as intercultural (Dimitrakopoulos, 2004), or that schools are not willing to adapt intercultural education (Parthenis, 2010), according to the early childhood teachers' responses in this study, it seems that some attempts to the intercultural approach are trying to be developed in Thessaloniki.

The majority of the early childhood teachers, mentioned that they have knowledge of the curriculum regarding intercultural education, they perform activities regarding interculturalism and diversity and they communicate with the parents of culturally diverse students. Additionally, culturally diverse students feel welcomed and equally treated, they participate in all class activities, they build good relationships with their peers and bullying behaviours do not occur.

The most interesting point is that while early childhood teachers responded that there are no problems with the different habits that culturally diverse students might have, they also mentioned that minority students are compelled to adopt Greek cultural habits. Therefore, it seems that early childhood teachers, might try to assimilate the culturally diverse students into the Greek culture. They might also not have enough knowledge about different cultures and their traditions, habits and values. Teachers should respect the different habits and traditions that students from different cultures might have and do not compel them to adapt the Greek cultural habits. The aforementioned issue regarding the compulsion of immigrant students to adopt different habits, negatively correlates with the questions about whether early childhood teachers: a) have knowledge of the curriculum regarding intercultural education and b) perform activities regarding interculturalism and diversity. Which means the more knowledge they have and the more activities they prepare, the less they feel that immigrant students are compelled to adopt different cultural habits. Thus, it is very important for teachers to have a good knowledge of issues like intercultural education, diversity and equality in education, as well as to have knowledge of the curriculum regarding those issues. Moreover, teachers should always perform activities about interculturalism and diversity, regardless the number of immigrant students they have in their classrooms.

All students should be prepared to live in a multicultural country as Greece is, where all people will live with the traditions and habits of their own culture. Thus, schools should prepare students who will respect the different cultures.

## 6. Recommendations

The situation in Thessaloniki regarding intercultural education, through this study is encouraging and actions towards intercultural education seem to have been taken. Greek schools have not yet achieved to adopt an intercultural approach, but according to early childhood teachers' responses in Thessaloniki the situation is improving and some positive steps have been taken. However, teachers' in all parts of Greece should have knowledge about issues of intercultural education and the willingness to adopt this approach. Thessaloniki is the second largest city in Greece and a quite high ethnically diverse area. In other parts of Greece, which are low ethnically diverse, the perceptions might differ. Therefore, a research about early childhood teachers' perceptions towards intercultural education, using data from different places in Greece would provide a better understanding about the current situation in Greek schools regarding intercultural education.

It is also possible that the teachers' own recommendations should be explored further in order to determine what sort of approach to intercultural education is being adopted. If their preference is for immigrants to demonstrate a greater level of assimilative practice, then the teachers' meaning of and commitment to intercultural education may need to be further explored.

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**Appendix 1: The questionnaire**

Number of students from different cultures in the class:	Albanians: East Europeans: Asians: Africans:
Years of teaching experience:	
Gender:	

a/a	Questions	None	Little	Moderate	Enough	Very
1	Do teachers have knowledge of the curriculum regarding intercultural education					
2	Do students from different cultures feel welcomed					
3	Do students from different cultures feel equally treated					
4	Is there communication between parents of students from different cultures with kindergarten teachers					
5	Do students from different cultures build good relationships with their peers					
6	Do students from different cultures understand the vocabulary used by kindergarten teachers					
7	Do kindergarten teachers perform activities regarding interculturalism and diversity					
8	Can students from different cultures participate in all activities occurred in the class					

9	Are there any bullying actions during teaching against students from different cultures					
10	Are there any bullying actions during the breaks against students from different cultures					
11	Are there any problems with the different habits that students from different cultures have					
12	Are students from different cultures compelled to adopt Greek cultural habits					
13	Is there communication between students from different cultures both during their class activities and during the free play					