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Greek Language Education in Egypt: An Example in the Field of International Education

Abstract

The educational content of the Greek language education in Egypt is drawn from the metropolitan centre (Greece) with the aim of developing a national consciousness based on a single ethno-cultural identity (see Greek). Such a choice is debatable as to its feasibility and results in the sense that it contrasts with the conditions of Greek children socialization in the host country (Egypt), which are bilingual, coming from two different cultures, while their education is ethnocentric or oriented around Greece. In our research we examine the reasons that led to an education cut off from the sociocultural reality of the Greeks of the Diaspora, as well as its consequences, given that the Greek community has lost its past dynamics and it is on a declining path.

Keywords: Egyptian Hellenism, Greek Diaspora/colony, ethno-cultural identity, intercultural education

Introduction

In the present study the Greek language education in Egypt is examined at a diachronic and a synchronic level. Our theoretical tools for this purpose derive from the contents of the ethno-cultural identity and the way of legitimizing Greek language education in the Diaspora. Our analysis, finally, takes into account the historical context in which the specific educational policy was shaped.

Research framework and methodology

Hellenic diaspora has a long history in Egypt and Greek children education is part of this history. In the present paper we will be concerned both with the forms and the content of Greek language education in this particular country. In order for the context of this survey to be understood, it should be borne in mind, first of all, that Egyptian Hellenism fluctuated according to the political and social conditions in this state with extension to education, and secondly, that particular importance was attributed to the Greeks of diaspora in order to cultivate the national consciousness and to preserve the common ethno-cultural elements with the Greeks of the metropolitan center.

Our study covers the period from the 1930s to the first half of 2010s. Methodological reasons require this period to be distinguished in individual periods or segments, knowing in advance that there is a time sequence and a sequence of events among them. A criterion for such a distinction is the established historical conjuncture or, in other words, the spatial-temporal context (political, social and economic developments), linked to the position of the Arabic language in the Greek school and the role of the Greek community in the educational activities of the

diaspora (see indicatively: Dalahanis, 2015; Efstathopoulou, 2015; Soulogiannis, 2000, 1999). Specifically, we refer to three periods, with the following qualitative characteristics:

1930-1970:

- Nationalization of the economy resulting in the limitation/termination of the Greek commercial and economic power.
- Introduction/strengthening of the Arabic language into Greek schools, at the request of the Egyptian authorities, while being undermined by the Greek community under the tolerance of the Egyptian authorities.
- Creation of a migration wave from the Greek community with negative consequences for its dynamics.

1970-2000:

- A part of the Greek community become aware of the importance of the Arabic language for the new generation's educational and professional career while simultaneously undermining it by the majority of the diaspora.
- Continuous weakening of the Greek community due to young people's departure for studies or work in Greece and other countries.

2000-2015:

- Disturbing the balance of the social system from the "Arab Spring" and after.

A total of seventeen (17) subjects were selected for research purposes, distinguished as follows: a) graduates of the Greek school in Egypt or in the Egyptian school in all the above periods except the last one; b) students and teachers of the Averofius Lyceum of Alexandria in the period 2000-2015. The survey took place in the second half of 2017 after a two-month exploratory / pilot phase. A semi-structured interview was used to collect the data.

In this context the following research questions are being discussed: a) what is the content of Greek language education in Egypt and how it evolved over time; b) which factors influences it and how it is legitimized ideologically; c) what are the results of the Greek language education in the new generation and the community as a whole.

The formation of ethnic identity in the diaspora

The term *ethno-cultural identity* means a collective / social identity based on general cultural categories or taxonomic schemes such as origin / ethnicity, language, religion, history and customs (Gotovos, 2002, p. 13). These elements can be directly detected or otherwise can be *synchronous* or documented in a specialization / mythology of the past in a symbolic or imaginative way, so we are talking about *diachronic* elements (Damanakis, 2009, p. 219). Below we will link ethnic-cultural identity to the term *diaspora*, in an attempt to interpret theoretically the tendency of rallying the alien residents around a distinct ethno-cultural identity (Brubaker, 2005, p. 6).

On the one hand, someone who is away from his/her homeland is naturally wishing to speak his/her own language and to maintain his/her cultural roots. On the other hand, its socialization takes place in an intercultural / bilingual environment. In this context, the concept and approach of diaspora involves the ethno-cultural

dimension. Such a definition is given by Damanakis (2007, p. 45), according to which,

the term “diaspora” means the geographical separation of ethnic groups that are detached but not necessarily alienated from their origin / reference group or ethnic group, live as ethnic groups or as ethnic minorities within a culturally diverse society, move between two reference groups and between two cultural systems and therefore their identity is shaped under particular circumstances.

As a result of this definition, the diasporic identity is constituted in a dialectical relation to the place of origin and place of residence. That is, it takes place under bilingual or multicultural conditions. Consequently, the individual’s socialization should draw on this multicultural reality. In our case, an alien resident can participate as an active citizen in the social reality of the host country and at the same time maintain his Greek identity. In other words, it has a complex or multi-level identity that will co-exist with ethnic-cultural elements from both countries.

A privileged space for developing a collective identity is education. The creation of a national identity is linked to the above function as a consequence of the conditions created and consolidated by the national state, as through school there may be the necessary homogeneity based on common origin, language, religion, history or, otherwise, the common cultural content. By the same recipe, the national consciousness for foreigners abroad would be ensured as a prerequisite for achieving the unity of all Hellenism (Damanakis, 2001, p. 7).

However, the desirability of an ethnocentrically oriented education in the diaspora is debatable. While the purpose of the school is to transmit the socio-cultural standards of society and the culture in which the individual is developed, ethnocentrically oriented Greek language education seems to ignore the overall socio-cultural influence of the student. The result is that the latter’s identity is not synthetic but partial, and therefore non-functional in multilingual diaspora.

Greek language education of Egyptian Greeks

1930-1970 Period

The Greek element has been benefited from its long-standing privileged position in the Egyptian economy, but in the course of time, from the inter-war period onwards and especially after Nasser’s assumption of power, domestic capital has been strengthened and the Egyptian state “*protected and supported its citizens through the Egyptian labor market*” (Dalahanis, 2015, p. 180). Under these circumstances the education of Greek children was a major issue for the Greek communities in the sense that through it “*the contact points of the community with the formation, labor, and cultural environment of Egypt*” (Dalahanis, 2015, p. 178) could be strengthened. However, since such a strategy would not have immediate effects and required time to reward, a more short-term solution was chosen to link education to the labor market by providing technical knowledge from vocational schools, as well as by teaching the Arabic language to students who attended Greek schools (Markantonatos, 1957, p. 30).

At the same time the Egyptian school attracted students from Greek families who wanted greater contact with the society of the host country or did not have the financial comfort to attend another foreign private school. At the end of the 1940s,

the percentage of Greek students in Egyptian schools reached 6.5% (Dalahanis, 2015, p. 180). By far the first choice of the colony was the Greek school, the second was the French, followed by the Egyptian, Italian, British and American schools.

An indicative of the distance that the Greek community wanted from the Egyptian element was the exemption of Egyptian ethnicity students from Greek schools at least until 1960. The question that arises is how such practice is legitimized since the status of the Greek schools in Egypt (privately) allowed for the study of pupils of different nationality from the Greek. The causes of this “closeness” should be sought in the ethnocentric ideology of Greek language education, according to which any interference with different ethno-cultural elements is considered harmful to language, culture and national identity.

The same ethnocentric concept was followed as far as the Arabic language was concerned. How else the marginalization / degradation of Arabic language in Greek language education could be explained, when by Law 40/1935 students of foreign schools (see Greek) had to learn the Arabic language (the Arabic language had been included in the curriculum since 1926) (Cochran, 1986, p. 29, in Dalahanis, 2015, p. 209). Greek students were relieved of this obligation in various ways with the tolerance of the Egyptian authorities – these are the so-called “loopholes” as reported in the interviews, such as facilities for students who did not start their first-class studies in Egypt (attended classes in Greece) or pupils whose parents were transferred to a public service in Egypt from Greece, and this also justified their exclusion from being taught the Arabic language.

It was only in the early 1960s that the need to learn the Arabic language had become entrenched by part of the colony. The change of attitude occurred as a consequence of the disadvantage of the Greek element at socio-economic level since the nationalization period, and the wave of immigration that hit the Greek colony. In the late 1950s, three out of four candidates in public sector or business companies were excluded due to language deficiency (Dalahanis, 2015, pp. 209-215).

The residents of the colony should now have adequate proficiency in the Arabic language as it was the only way to have access to jobs and to be able to compete with the domestic workforce. However, the project faced many problems and was led to failure for two main reasons. The first was about the difference between the classical Arabic (Fusha), which is the written form of the language officially used in the institutions, etc., and the Egyptian dialect used in everyday communication. The problem of the students was that they had become familiar with the oral dialect and when they started learning the official language they felt confused. The second reason was that the teachers of the Arabic language in Greek schools were not properly trained.

To sum up, we can see that the more extrovert the Greek communities were in terms of trade and economic activity, the more introverted they were in relation to the education of young people, which meant that they did not perceive the socio-political changes that had begun to emerge in Egypt since the late 1920s and peaked in the early 1950s. Since then, two basic views have been formulated within the community on the learning of Arabic language and the education of Greek children in general. The one side was directed towards studies that helped graduates seek employment and integrate into the host society, so their education had to be bilingual and emphasized in foreign languages. The other side believed that the

purpose of Greek language education abroad was the transmission of Greek language and culture and the development of national consciousness as a defense against assimilation. As it is known, the second view prevailed with the results we described above and we will see how they evolved over the coming decades.

1970-2000 Period

The introversion, educational and cultural, of the Greek colony in Egypt has undermined the viability of the diaspora since the 1960s. In the early 1970s Egyptian Hellenism had shrunk considerably. Those who continued to reside in the country had maintained their companies or were working in the public sector.

As far as Greek schools are concerned, the content of education continued to be the same with the exception of changes in the teaching of the Arabic language, which was compulsory for 8-10 hours a week, while French and English were also taught.

In other words, in the given period, the Greek school provided the opportunity to the students to learn the Arabic language and, by extension, the possibility for its graduates to have an academical / professional career in the host country. This, of course, was theoretical, as only a small number of Greeks continued their studies at an Egyptian university. Most of them, as reported in an interview, “*were afraid of engaging with the Arabic element, considered it to be a kind of hindrance, harassment, and insult to their culture*”.

It is worthwhile to clarify the reasons that led to such an attitude / choice for the Greek community. The first reason is that the socio-economic context may have made it necessary to learn the Arabic language, but this was not accompanied by a similar culture within the colony and school. Its Greek language curriculum did not differ in anything from that of Greece, and on the other hand, the Arabic language was being taught instrumentally, isolated from its cultural (and inter-cultural) elements.

All the above are not independent of the powerful role of communities in educational matters and this is the second reason for ethnocentric oriented education.

Thirdly, a strong incentive for students to stay in the Greek school was their easy access to Greek universities or Technological Educational Institutes. More specifically, the Law 1351/1983, *Admission of Students in Higher Education and Other Dimensions* (Government Gazette 56A), introduced special measures for the admission to higher education of the children of Greek civil servants working abroad and of Greeks who live abroad. The pupils from abroad were taking special examinations, generally speaking, easier than the state examinations that Greek students had to take, with a special rate (4%) of posts covered by them.

And thus, for the second time, the position of a minority part of the Greek colony, has been undermined, although in the given phase it was acknowledged as practically useful, that education could “*create and strengthen the contact points of the community with the working and cultural environment in Egypt, which was still being developed*”. And even if at the first time this position was first put forward, it was obvious that there was justification that “*it takes time to bear fruit*”, the second time after three decades there was no excuse (Dalahanis, 2015, p. 178). To sum up, we can see that a strong legitimizing basis for Greek language education other than

ideology, which is always present, provided the utilitarian criterion of easy entry of pupils into higher education in Greece.

2000-2015 Period

In the 2000s Greek schools had shrunk to such an extent that the number of pupils in some of them did not exceed 10-15. As far as the orientation of graduates is concerned, the trend towards returning to Greece has been strengthened. The result was that since the early 2000s a tendency for young people to be autonomous has emerged from Egyptian social and cultural standards.

At this stage, the predominant view of the Greek community for Greek language education is almost identical to that of previous decades, with the exception of a pragmatic view of the Arabic language. In 1970-1990 the young people were leaving mainly due to (financial) need, and in such a case *“everyone is trying to save what they can and the collective spirit weakens”*. On the contrary, young people in the 2000s were, at first, more conscious as *“they could not stand the pressure that existed in the Egyptian everyday life”*.

The 2011 events constituted an overturning of what the Greeks in Egypt had taken for granted (the 25 January 2011 revolution, also known as the “Arabic Spring”, began from Tahrir Square as a follow-up to the Revolution launched by Tunisia and continued in other Arabic countries). The Egyptian society has gone through revolutions and internal conflicts, which have gradually shaped a new social and political context. The main feature of the new era, at least at its beginning, was the prolonged insecurity.

The choice of pupils attending the Averofio Lyceum to continue their studies after high school by 50% in Greece and 50% in Egypt should be taken into account at this point. Egypt’s high percentage should not surprise us as it is due to the increase of mixed marriages. Children of Greek origin could acquire Egyptian citizenship and this changes the data we have been discussing so far.

As far as the Arabic language is concerned, not all students seem to have a satisfactory level of knowledge. The above view is also supported by the fact that there has been no change in the attitude of the Greek community on how it addresses the education of Greek children. The teachers we have talked to had the same opinion about the nature of education: *“It is purely Greek-centered”*, they pointed out.

Conclusion

The development of national consciousness was the driving force for the Hellenocentric nature of the education of Greek-Egyptian children in Egypt. This choice was strongly supported by the colony and its institutions through years, and the Greek state, in the name of the unity and continuity of Hellenism. Its results however can be evaluated and they are negative, since the new generation of Greeks in Egypt was unable to be integrated in the host society in a creative way. The students of the Greek schools, deeply absorbed in an educational system with a strictly Hellenocentric orientation, did not have the opportunity to come into contact with the culture of the host country and mainly with the Arabic language, which deprived them of professional chances and alienated them from the society and the country which later they would abandon.

In other words, Greek language education has led the community to an economic and social weakening. The number of a formerly thriving community is now shrinking. The pursuit of the creation of an artificial collective identity in greenhouse conditions, ignoring the conditions of socialization of the individual and the wider social reality (in this case the country of residence), has produced the opposite of the expected results and proved to be meaningless.

The answer to the question of what education ought to be in diasporic/multicultural environments, therefore, cannot be other than the inclusion of all ethno-cultural elements in the school, bearers of which are the students of different ethnic groups, with the full awareness that the school must take into account the conditions of people's socialization and develop synthetic identities (Arvaniti, 2013).

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