



BEYOND “TOLERANCE”: BELONGING, POWER, AND INTERCULTURAL SAFETY IN GREEK LOWER SECONDARY CLASSROOMS

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Abstract:

This critical and theoretical essay discusses the weakness of the concept of toleration as a normative horizon for addressing cultural and linguistic diversity in Greek lower secondary school and suggests the redefinition of belonging, power and intercultural safety. Based on these debates of contemporary times concerning the relationship between multiculturalism and interculturalism, and on the scholarship that promulgates equity literacy and culturally relevant pedagogy, intercultural education is understood as the project of democratic change as opposed to a collection of technical interventions. The importance of belonging is demonstrated by means of empirical research in the field of school belonging and diversity climate that enables the proposing of belonging as the key factor that connects school structures and classroom practices to the motivational, social-emotional and academic performance of students, especially immigrant, refugee and minoritised learners. The concept of intercultural safety is designed as a relational and institutional state, which is based on affective hospitality and critical consciousness, and opposed to forms of understanding the narrow concept of safety as comfort of one. On a micro level, the classroom practices, teacher identity, as well as the language policy are presented in the essay as frontiers through which the symbolic power is exercised and challenged. Such insights are then applied to the Greek lower secondary situation, including the inclusionary policy, intercultural teacher training, citizenship curriculums and the psychosocial requirements of migrant and refugee young people. It is stated that to go beyond tolerance into intercultural safety and belonging, teacher education, curriculum and school governance should be coordinated and that Greek lower

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secondary schools ought to be structured in a way that all students are made to feel they can be recognised and legitimate members of a democratic community.

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1. Introduction: The problem with “tolerance”

The discourse of tolerance has been advanced for a long time as an adequate ethical horizon for the management of cultural plurality in the school environment, though the term denotes a low-level mode of co-existence that does not fundamentally alter hierarchies. The literature of intercultural competence development has already proposed that tolerance is an early, narrow phase in a continuum of difference toleration and understanding and increasingly reciprocating relationships, especially in multiethnic adolescent settings (Schwarzenthal, Juang, Schachner, van de Vijver, and Handrick, 2017). In the conceptualisation of secondary education as a place where the majority populations tolerate the minorities, intercultural relations are posed as a possible menace to be controlled instead of a versatile aspect of democratic schooling.

This criticism is reinforced by debates on multiculturalism and interculturalism. Arguably, it has been stated that politeness or civility is not the main problem but the very model of social and political organisation that orders the histories, languages and identities to be given legitimacy (Mansouri & Modood, 2021). In schools, this is carried on as a clash between modes of cosmetic recognition of diversity and modes to tackle the distributive and recognitional inequities incurred by school curricula, school assessment and classroom politics. According to the empirical research on school belonging, the given questions are not just symbolic. A meta-analysis conducted by a big sample indicated that sense of belonging among students in secondary school is largely positively correlated with motivational, social-emotional, behavioural and academic performances, meaning that a sense of belonging is a determinant of educational achievement and not a jeezyne extra (Korpershoek, Canrinus, Fokkens-Bruinsma, & de Boer, 2020).

Meanwhile, the research on social inclusion at school has identified the potential offered by inclusive schools as well as the recurrent obstacles that determine and influence efforts to ensure the presence of inclusive learning opportunities in educational institutions (Juvonen, Lessard, Rastogi, Schacter, & Smith, 2019). These obstacles often reside behind the power-filled institutions of education itself. It has been revealed through the analyses of power negotiation in school structures that the relations of power, organisational routine, and accountability regimes may deny the egalitarian aspirations, despite the adoption of inclusive rhetoric (Narayanan, 2021). It is on this ground that the current essay states that the normative horizon of intercultural education within the context of Greek lower secondary schooling should shift from the concept of tolerance to the concept of a sense of belonging, power and what will be described as

intercultural safety. The article presents itself as a theoretical and critical treatise based on both empirical and conceptual research by redefining intercultural education as a relational and institutional project rather than a collection of individual diversity initiatives.

2. Conceptual foundations of intercultural education

Intercultural education has surfaced in a broader set of arguments on the issues of multiculturalism, citizenship and social justice. The main intellectual issue is the correlation of multiculturalism with interculturalism. Whereas multiculturalism has been tied to the acceptance and tolerance of minority cultures, interculturalism has been suggested as remedial, where relations, dialogue and joint civil works are stressed. Arguably, empirically speaking, the two do not conflict but may be complementary, with interculturalism developing and recalibrating instead of directly competing with multicultural systems (Mansouri & Modood, 2021). The study of comparative education has also placed the issue of intercultural education in light of wider discussion in comparative and international education, as the changing social conditions have necessitated constant updating of the earlier conceptualisations (Cowen et al., 2016).

In this changing discipline, the issue of the meaning of culture has been problematised. Past methods that viewed culture as a fixed group of characteristics that should be mastered by practitioners have been said to reify difference. In reaction to this, the concept of equity literacy has been developed to redirect cultural competence to the identification and restoration of structural inequities that define learning opportunities (Gorski, 2016). This shift displaces culture as a descriptive term and refocusses the identification of power, privilege and marginalisation as the main elements of fair cross-cultural practice.

The teaching perspectives have reflected this change. Balanced on the racially stratified schooling, culturally relevant pedagogy is not confined to affirmation cultural identities but is geared towards nurturing academic achievement, cultural competence and critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 2014). In such pedagogy, the classroom is seen as a location where power and knowledge relations can be restructured by multiplicity of curriculum, educator-student relations as well as assessment procedures. Language policy has also been linked with intercultural education in a multilingual environment. A reform agenda on school-based policies in multilingual schools has emphasised that language-based approaches to legitimisation or marginalisation in classroom contexts play the most significant role regarding academic performance and where a sense of belongingness is constructed in a manner that relies on language (Cummins, 2015).

Another important dimension is citizenship. Transformative civic education has advanced the idea that failed citizenship is a circumstance where educational systems fail to inform young people, especially those whose backgrounds are minoritised, that they have the knowledge, skills and recognition capable of leading them to take part in the life

of democracy (Banks, 2017). In this respect, intercultural education is not an extra-curricular activity; it is a pre-condition of inclusive citizenship in plural societies. Intercultural education can be viewed as a normative project, aimed at equity, recognition and democratic participation when these strands are assembled, as opposed to a neutral range of techniques of pedagogy. The latter move towards tolerance to belonging is based on this conceptualisation in the analysis of Greek lower secondary schooling.

3. From tolerance to belonging: a shift in educational logic

The transition between the attitude of tolerance and belonging involves a complete repositioning of diversity in the educational project. Desirable motivational, behavioural and academic results in secondary education have been demonstrated to be closely related to a sense of belonging to the school community, and meta-analysis evidence shows that students who feel respected and included as members of the school community are more likely to engage and achieve high results (Korpershoek et al., 2020). Being a member is not a diffuse influence, but a multicentric process of the connection between school climate and educational paths.

This mechanism is further expounded recently in work on diversity climate. An examination of school diversity and classmate diversity climate discovered that the emotions of belonging, well-being and intercultural contact depended on the manner in which diversity was validated and conveyed together with peers, which implies that the sense of belonging was collaborative and should not be held by individuals (Vietze, Stuur, and Hofhuis, 2025). Likewise, investigations on classroom cultural diversity climate in secondary schools have also been able to encompass the finesse manners in which norms, expectations and relationships form multi-level climates that can either foster or hinder inclusion (Schachner, Schwarzenenthal, Moffitt, Civitillo, and Juang, 2021). These realities are distressing to any supposition that nominal support of tolerance is necessary; instead, the daily reality of school should communicate to students that they are not outcasts whose identities and voices are to be heard.

This is backed up by research on the experiences of immigrant students at school. The studies that explore the interdependence of inclusive school climate and multicultural education reveal that in situations where both factors coexist, newcomers cite greater amounts of school belonging, which means that formal multicultural provision has to be supported with relational climates that confirm the presence and input of the new generations (Choi, Mao, and Park, 2025). Supplementary evidence provided by the IMMERSE project indicates that the feeling of belonging among children is greatly empowered when intercultural values are rooted at the school level, which shows how critical value systems and institutional ethos are in promoting the development of inclusivity (Ordonez-Carabano, Rodriguez-Ventosa Herrera, Munoz-San Roque, and Horgan, 2025).

The result of the change in tolerance to belonging is also relevant to the level of school leadership and policy. Within the framework of multicultural education, the implementation of policy in real school life is mediated by the practice of the principals. A study of principals in Israel has revealed that the success of multicultural policies in the advancement of fair outcomes is contingent on the ability of leaders to interpret and implement the policies within multifaceted local power interrelations (Arar & Massry-Herzallah, 2020). These results are attributable to the fact that belonging cannot be prescribed merely by policy statements but rather must be practiced by a leadership that is sensitive to the structural inequalities and able to change the institutional practices.

The study of development also brings a twist to this change. The longitudinal research into the formation of intercultural competence in multiethnic settings has revealed the paths through basic tolerance up to insight and further advanced intercultural orientations during the adolescence stage (Schwarzenthal et al., 2017). It is implied that schooling may support or impede such developmental moves, based on the types of interactions that it endorses, its curricula and discourses. When combined, these strands indicate the fact that belonging is not only a more challenging and institutionally dense objective, but also a superior aim compared to tolerance. It entails not only openness in attitudes but also the redesigning of relationships, structures and practices in lower secondary schools in such a way that diversity becomes not a deviation to be tolerated but a valued aspect of the educational community.

4. Intercultural safety as a relational and institutional condition

Safety as a language has frequently been translated to personal feelings of ease, but intercultural safety is rather perceived as a relational and institutional state. Using the re-theorisation of hospitality using affect theory, it has been argued that it is not possible to limit hospitality to specific acts of welcome but should be thought of as a complex of ethical, political and pedagogical relationships that determine which bodies and voices are made grievable, audible and at home (Zembylas, 2020). Intercultural safety, in this context, transcends the lack of blatant enmity and extends to the affective structures according to which students perceive whether they are truly welcomed to the life of the school.

Beliefs and dispositions of teachers are important in this process. Studies of the readiness of educators to develop safe, ethnically inclusive cultures show that their readiness is conditioned, to the extent that abstract support of inclusive values is supported by professional identity, perceived efficacy, and previous intercultural experience (Khanolainen, Nesterova, Semenova, Fatkhulova, & Trach, 2024). Safety, in turn, is a consequence of in-place professional judgement regarding how to work with a conflict situation, do something with prejudice and redistribute voice in classes. Such judgements are practiced in institutional climates that are either permissive or punitive of such practices.

It is even more evident that the political nature of safety can be observed when we consider the case of minoritised groups. The classroom climate and perceived societal Islamophobia and critical action studies objective among adolescents indicate that classrooms, where the overall societal hostility towards specific groups of people is observed, can serve as the hypothesised areas where the hostility can be replicated or denied (Schwarzenenthal, Juang, Moffitt, and Schachner, 2022). Intercultural safety, in this case, cannot be discussed outside of the space where critical consciousness, dissent and solidarity should be. On the same note, the studies of the role of social inclusion in schools have pointed out that initiatives to enhance inclusion are inevitably characterised by conflicts between protection, responsibility and the continuity of exclusionary relations among peers (Juvonen et al., 2019).

These forces are rooted in schooling power relations. Studies of power within schools' negotiation processes have revealed that formal and informal hierarchies, monitoring processes, and organisational cultures may limit the ability of students and teachers to bring about relations into more egalitarian forms (Narayanan, 2021). Interpersonal goodwill cannot therefore generate intercultural safety. It demands institutional formations that facilitate decentralised power, strong reactions to discrimination and participative types of decision-making. In the Greek lower secondary school system, where centralised government and exam-focused cultures are the norm, the issue is fostering relational and organisational space in which intercultural safety can be an ongoing and collaborative process, as opposed to a brittle side effect of personal goodwill.

5. Micro-level design: classroom practices and symbolic power

To make intercultural safety and belonging a reality, but not a proclaimed one, the focus should be placed on the micro-politics of classroom practice, in which symbolic power is claimed and challenged in day-to-day situations. Empirical studies on the cultures of relevance in ethnically diverse classrooms have revealed that the tangible behaviours of teachers, including the examples that they use, how they address conflict, and how they position the contribution of the students, are louder than any proclamation of the inclusive virtues (Hagenaars, Dizdagic, D'hondt, and Stevens, 2025). These practices give students of knowledge-account whose identities become legitimate a signal of what is eventually rendered as legit regarding their knowledge.

The research on intercultural competence development in classrooms, which is systematic, has demonstrated that the most apparent teaching and learning practices, such as dialogic pedagogies, stereotyping, and perspective-taking, reveal that require critical reflection, and collaborative work have been linked to more robust intercultural outcomes (Al-Afifi, Nygren, Rasmusson, and Tvarana, 2025). These results suggest that the micro-level design does not represent a vague issue of being nice but a field where concrete pedagogical decisions are established to be able to learn interculturally. Culturally relevant pedagogy, with a rebranding as a remix, has pointed at the fact that

instructors have to at once promote academic success, recognise cultural identities and foster critical consciousness, thus breaking the traditional dichotomous divide between cognitive and political objectives (Ladson-Billings, 2014).

The ability of teachers to implement such complicated pedagogies is closely related to their professional identity and power experiences. Teacher transformative analyses based on power have revealed that educators do not merely administer policy, but they continually negotiate their position over the rising expectations of the institution, their students and their own histories (Narayanan, 2022). When teachers identify themselves as agents of social justice or full participants in the curriculum, and not merely neutral applicants of curriculum, there are greater chances of dismantling discourses of deficit and restructuring the classroom dynamics. The previous conclusion that beliefs and characteristics have an influence on the decision to create ethnically inclusive settings is going in the same direction, although it is focused on a smaller scale of granularity (Khanolainen et al., 2024).

The immediate context in which these identities and practises are enacted is the classroom diversity climate. Studies in German secondary schools have provided a reflection of the way learners, within a classroom environment, think of the norms, the behaviour of the teacher and their peers as a lexicon of classroom climate which affects their sense of belonging and their interaction with diversity (Schachner et al., 2021). Related contributions to socialisation in critical consciousness have established that opening classrooms to debate on social injustices, such as Islamophobia, will make adolescents more willing to take critical action (Schwarzenthal et al., 2022). Symbolic power is not merely practiced in one way only, top to bottom, in these kinds of classrooms, but it is renegotiated during dialogue, inquiry and collective reflection.

Language policies and classroom discourses are very vital components of this micro-design. Multilingual school framework plans articulate that choices regarding which languages can be utilised at which points, and how the process of language translation can be approached, send strong signals on the part of whose linguistic resources require appreciation (Cummins, 2015). The linguistic capital of the minoritised students is suppressed by only legitimising the standardised forms of the dominant language, thus weakening their academic performance and their sense of belonging. On the other hand, the classroom is included in the places of re-arranging symbolic hierarchies in the case of treating the languages of the students as learning and expression resources. This creates problematic questions in relation to the extent to which teachers can and are willing to do so in the name of intercultural safety and belonging in an environment where a monolingual standard is strongly instantiated through the control of lower secondary education in Greek.

6. Implications for Greek lower secondary education

The above discussion suggests implications regarding the re-imagining of the lower secondary education of Greece under the conditions of growing cultural and language

diversity. Empirical research on the inclusionary policies toward migrant and refugee students in Greece, grounded in the views of the teachers, has produced some positive narratives as well as gaps in the adoption of inclusionary actions (Giavrimis, 2023). Educators frequently record goodwill and local action but also attribute a lack of structural support, severe curricula and assessment systems to denying the ability to act in response to the complex needs of students. In this case, intercultural safety and belonging cannot be held as an assumption, but instead, these limitations have to be strategically planned and designed.

Intercultural teacher education turns out to be one of the focal levers. Intercultural teacher education Studies of intercultural teacher education in the policies of other countries have also pointed to the gap between the rhetoric of ambitious policy and the shallow nature of most teacher education programmes, including those teaching intercultural issues (Karanikola, Panagiotopoulos, Giaki, & Arvanitis, 2025). To go beyond being tolerant of practices that help people to belong and confront structural inequities, Greek lower secondary teachers need to have a long-term period of creating the repertoires of equity-oriented pedagogical practice, questioning their own positionalities, and combating the structures of policy.

Reconsideration is also needed in curriculum and citizenship education. The proposal to teach in multicultural classrooms by working with an intercultural approach to citizenship has indicated that citizenship teaching may be restructured to encompass relational, participatory and right-based aspects, which are not confined to national discourse (Kalogerogianni, 2025). Such an approach would entice students in lower secondary school to consider various forms of belonging as well as deliberate on how democratic engagement is informed by cultural and socio-economic inequalities in the Greek context, where national identity has long been a powerful factor in the education system. This is also part of the bigger case that a transformative civic education needs to confront the issue of failed citizenship by ensuring every student is empowered and identified as somebody who can become a civic actor (Banks, 2017).

The psychosocial dimension should not be neglected. The role of multicultural education in nurturing migrant and refugee youth to a state of resilience, given the presence of psychological trauma, has been studied, with the focus lying on the idea that the practices made in schools may either amplify or diminish the impact of displacement and marginalisation (Nantsou, Karanikola, and Palaiologou, 2025). In the case of Greek lower secondary schools, where students who experienced conflict, forced migration, and prolonged precarity are students, intercultural safety means providing structures within which this experience is neither pathologised nor suppressed, but is instead contained in supportive contexts.

The international experience on inclusive climates and multicultural education is likely to help in benchmarking the Greek developments. The observation that the inclusive school climate and multicultural education together lead to assimilation of immigrants in the schools (Choi et al., 2025) indicates that the Greek schools should not only consider the presence of the reception classes or intercultural textbooks, but they

should track the ordinary climate of the teacher-student and peer relationships. Simultaneously, the information provided by the accounts of the Greek teachers about inclusionary policies (Giavrimis, 2023), as well as information about the analyses of intercultural teacher education (Karanikola et al., 2025), suggests that the system needs to be reformed. Taken together, the effect of these strands is an agenda where Greek lower secondary education is viewed as a domain where a sense of belonging, power and intercultural safety are not secondary design considerations, but primary ones.

7. Conclusion: beyond normative interculturalism

The discussion above has placed Greek lower secondary education in broader discussions concerning intercultural education, belonging and power. It was revealed that intercultural education is a dynamic discipline that adopts newly developed assumptions in regard to the changing social and political realities (Cowen & Kim, 2023). The shift to go beyond toleration has not been characterized as a labor of rhetoric but a fundamental repercussion of belonging, equity and institutional change. The analysis of complementarity between multiculturalism and interculturalism has highlighted that it is not either/or but the obligation to incorporate commitment of recognitions and commitments to dialogue and common civic projects into real educational systems (Mansouri & Modood, 2021).

It is the case that both normative and empirical arguments enable us to conclude that tolerance is wanting. Normatively, strategies that emphasise culture only tend to bend their eye to the structural forces that give rise to educational inequity. The idea of the shift toward equity literacy is an effort to preempt these forces and prepare educators to identify and address them (Gorski, 2016). Resting on empirical evidence, studies have established that the sense of belonging is closely correlated with a set of outcomes among secondary learners (Korpershoek et al., 2020), and the existing literature on intercultural competence development practices at the classroom level indicates the existence of particular pedagogies through which the sense of belonging and intercultural competence can be promoted (Al-Afifi et al., 2025).

The existence of partial and uneven reforms can also be noticed in the Greek case, as studies of the inclusionary policies and the intercultural teacher education drew particular attention to it (Giavrimis, 2023; Karanikola et al., 2025). The implications of these findings are that the actualisation of intercultural safety and belonging in lower secondary schools will be more than mere one-off projects or even declarative promises. It will necessitate the concurrent transformation of teacher training, the curriculum, evaluation and administration of schools, which will be informed by the perception of intercultural education as a democratic transition project.

The theoretical analysis in this paper is experimental as opposed to empirical. It has unified disparate links of scholarship to sketch into being a conceptual frame: intercultural safety as relational and institutional, which can inform future research and practice. Follow-ups could, e.g., explore how Greek students themselves share their sense

of belonging, their sense of safety, or could look into the role of particular micro-level practices that transform the classroom climates over time. However, at this stage it has been argued that the horizon must be established beyond a normative interculturalism, which is seen as a decent celebration of difference. The opportunity offered to Greek lower secondary education is to develop an institution and practices where being together is not simply accepted but created with just distribution of power and care.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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