

Teaching Greek to the children of our diaspora: Time for action in the face of a changing landscape

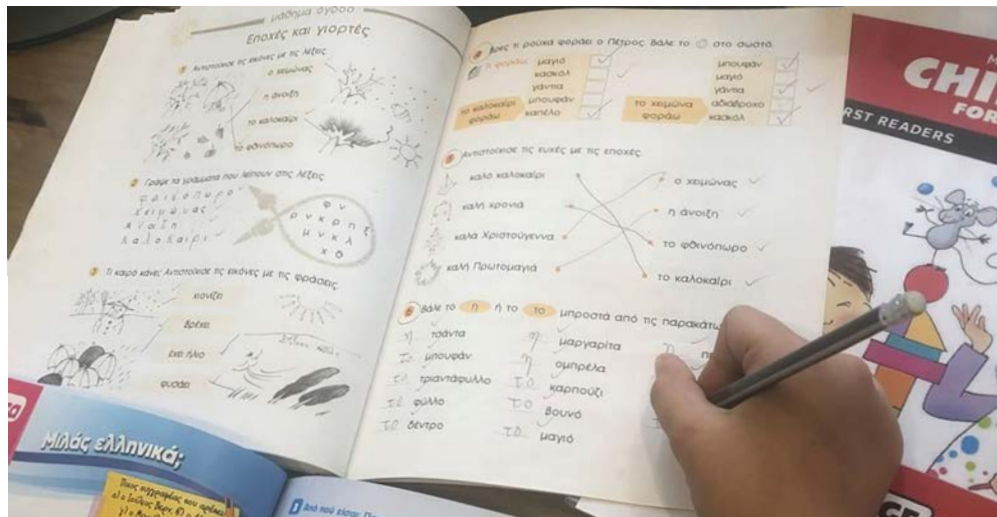


by
**Petros
Karatsareas**
@pkaratsareas

As the UK's Greek-speaking communities are growing and changing, the need for community schools to adapt to the new demographic, pedagogical and linguistic circumstances becomes pressing.

A recent piece of research led by Lois Labrianidis and Manolis Pratsinakis at the London School of Economics showed that, together with Germany, the UK is one of the main destinations for people who migrated from Greece as a result of the government-debt crisis that hit the country in 2009. The most recent Home Office data confirm this finding. From April 2019 up to April 2020, 77,300 Greek citizens applied to the EU Settlement Scheme in order to secure their settled or pre-settled status in the post-Brexit era. It is certain that this number will increase, as the deadline for applying to the scheme is (for the time being) 30 June 2021.

The LSE research also showed that the biggest exodus from Greece took place in 2012 and 2013. While at the earliest stages the majority of migrants belonged to the so-called brain drain (university graduates, scientists, high-skilled workers), later on the migratory flows became more diversified. More people moved to the UK without necessarily being equipped with university degrees and a professional skillset that would help them to earn high wages. Regardless of their educational and professional profiles, new



migrants with families state that the future of their children was the single most important motivation for migrating to the UK. According to Pratsinakis, only 20% of new migrants wish to return to Greece, while only 5% of the people who left after 2010 plan to return within the next three years.

A new state of affairs for community education

The new migrants from Greece join a pre-existing Greek-speaking element in the UK, which before the crisis consisted primarily of the Greek Cypriot community (150,000–300,000 people) and, to a lesser extent, London's Greek shipping families and Greek students (around 12,000 people), some of whom stayed in the UK after completing their studies. Community schools (παροικιακά σχολεία) become one of the first spaces where the old and the new migrant waves come together, as new migrants seek to ensure that their children maintain (or, in the case of children who are born in the UK, establish) their contact with Greek language and

culture, develop their linguistic skills (reading writing, speaking, listening) and altogether socialise with other people in their local communities.

This co-existence shapes a new reality for community schools. On the one hand, the enrolments of the children of new migrants from Greece (some of whom started their migration from other countries including Albania, Romania and Bulgaria) contribute positively to the schools' financial strength and help them to continue fulfilling their mission. This is very important considering that, over the past 15 years, almost half of the schools that operated in the UK closed or merged. The increasing presence of children who were either born in Greece (and possibly also attended school there for some years) or born in the UK to newly arrived migrant parents meant that the Greek language became more present in the school environment. The way in which newly arrived children speak Greek as well as their experiences and memories of Greece offer a new, approachable source of knowledge and

an attainable learning goal for third - or even fourth-generation pupils whose first language is English.

On the other hand, the differences between pupils in terms of their and their parents' histories and experiences of migration, their linguistic repertoires, their exposure to Greek and English, and their skills in the two languages become more prominent and visible. This raises important challenges for community schools.

To mention one example, while some schools have the resources to create separate classes for pupils whose first language is Greek and pupils whose first language is English, other schools do not have the means to do this (appropriate teaching materials, human resources, teaching spaces, timetable slots). Apart from the difficulties it creates for teachers, co-teaching both pupil groups in the same class has a negative impact on children themselves, especially when the teaching and learning process is not personalised and adapted to the needs of all pupils. Children who speak Greek as their first

language are likely to find the lesson too easy and not really demanding or challenging. In contrast, children who speak mostly English may become frustrated as they try to reach the level of their "Greek-speaking" classmates. It is therefore possible for both types of pupils to lose interest, become disengaged and drop out of the community school.

Looking ahead

Community education in the UK has a long history and has played a pivotal role in the protection, maintenance, promotion and fostering of the heritage of the Greek and Greek Cypriot diasporas: their language, traditions, religions, dance, music and song.

Almost a century has passed since the pioneering school of St Sophia was established, many decades since local communities flourished in the 1950s–1970s thanks to the unflagging and self-less efforts of mostly Greek Cypriot parents, and almost 30 years since the Co-ordinating Committee of Greek Educational Bodies in the UK was set up. New migration from Greece as well as other developments such as Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic create a new landscape with novel demographic, pedagogical, linguistic and operational challenges and needs.

Taking for granted their devotion to the shared goal of providing high-quality and appropriate education to the children of our diaspora, now is the time for all the actors and stakeholders who are involved in community education to come together and discuss regardless

of whether they are already established or newly arrived, from Cyprus or Greece, whether they are affiliated with the Church, are independent or private initiatives. Teachers, school managers, parents, school committees, parent associations, educational associations, the governments of Greece and Cyprus through their educational missions must consolidate and renew their collaboration and work together to develop the resources, material and immaterial, that will help them to thrive in an ever-changing present.

In such a plan of action, it is imperative to see a more substantial engagement on behalf of the Greek government on the basis of the increasing educational needs of Greek citizens, which are not supported by the UK's local or national governments. It is also necessary to harness to a greater extent the high skills of the many teachers who settled in the UK from Greece and Cyprus since 2009 as schools seek to continuously improve the quality of the language education they offer to the younger member of our communities.

Petros Karatsareas is a Lecturer in English Language and Linguistics at the University of Westminster.

His research interests include the sociolinguistics of multilingualism and multilingual education, with an emphasis on the UK's immigrant languages and especially Greek among the Greek Cypriot diaspora.

He has published articles on the Cypriot Greek dialect in the UK and its integration into language teaching. You can get in touch with him via email.

Unemployed during the COVID-19 crisis...why you shouldn't lose hope

It is no secret that more than 600,000 workers in the UK have lost their jobs during the COVID-19 crisis. The lockdown hit the labour market and vacancies dived by the most on record, data from the Office of National Statistics (ONS) show. In the meantime, the British government is paying the wages of millions of workers through its furlough scheme.

Bank of England Governor, Andrew Bailey, said last Thursday that the economy appeared to be lessening a bit less harshly in the first half of 2020 than the BoE feared last month. But there was no guarantee of a strong rebound and unemployment would rise.

In the meantime, pubs, restaurants and hairdressers are not expected to open until 4 July. Factories are only gradually restarting their lines, and construction sites are struggling to get back to their normal routine. So, at this point, being unemployed or under furlough is not a pleasant situation, as you are dealing also with financial and emotional stress.

Dr Robert Reiner, Executive Director of Behavioral Associates, an organisation that specialises in cognitive behavioural therapy, advises people to deal with the problem in two ways, practically and psychologically: "Many people become paralysed with fear and anxiety when facing the prospect (or reality) of unemployment. Relief funds like government unemployment benefits, especially during a pandemic, where normalcy has flown out the window, are finite and typically enjoyed by those who act quickly.

"Tragically, the majority of the money ended up going to the companies

that needed it the least; they had people in place to swiftly make sure applications were submitted quickly and correctly, meeting government requirements.

"For an individual facing potentially catastrophic circumstances, you cannot let your anxiety or anger prevent you from acting quickly and decisively. This is referred to as 'acting against the feeling' or 'acting against the belief.' What you do, think, and what you feel - In this situation, to the extent possible, focus on the first part, what you do, your behaviour. Try to ignore the latter two and focus on getting the practical things done as quickly as possible.

"In dealing with the more difficult dread or anxiety, treat it like every other challenge you have faced in your life. Since our brains are wired to only be able to attend to a few things at a time, remind yourself that your goal is to minimize your misery, anger, or anxiety. The prospect of experiencing any pleasure during a time like this is absurd, not close to a possibility, and should be taken off the table.

"It's also dangerous when people link their self esteem to their jobs. You are not a loser when you lose your job any more than you are a king when you are making money and succeeding at work. One of the many predictable irrational traps we fall into is erroneously believing that our emotions are 'here to stay' (I will never be happy again). The truth is the opposite! Human emotions are transitory and always return to baseline, whether the feelings are good OR bad. Lottery winners, a year after winning, consistently report that their moods are no different

than they were before their winning, another human belief that is consistently irrational, in both directions!"

Ifigeneia Vouza, Psychologist and Interpersonal Psychotherapist MSc, on the other hand, offers some practical solutions to deal with the problem. She says: "It is of utmost importance to acknowledge our feelings and allow ourselves to feel what we feel. Once someone recognises that they are going through turbulent times that they cannot control, they can be more compassionate with themselves and take action. Reduce household expenses for some period of time, put some fixes in help, keep a budget, minimise some expenses and be adaptable to changes until the situation turns around. I find it very helpful to keep a journal with thoughts and struggles but mostly affirmations. During these rough times, we should never forget about our health; blood pressure rising due to anxiety and depression can cause reduced immunity. Do not forget to visit your GP for precautionary reasons and for a check-up.

"Mental health is also very important. I would also recommend a local job search support group so people can spend time with others that are undergoing the same or similar situation. Local job centres can also offer their support regarding job opportunities.

"Exercising, being with others and getting involved in activities you enjoy should be done on a weekly basis. Finally, never forget to separate your identity and self-worth from your job!"

Katerina Tiliakou