
Modern Greek Education: A New Audience

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IT IS ESTIMATED THAT MORE THAN 81,000 GREEK AMERICAN youths currently live in the United States.¹ Greek American communities across the nation have established afternoon or Saturday schools to serve these students, to help them maintain or develop Greek language skills and to help preserve Greek culture. The work of these communities is not unlike the efforts of other ethnic groups who recognize that their cultural heritage is at risk of being lost if public education is not supplemented by community classes.

Unfortunately, in the past decade, traditional Modern Greek education in the afternoon schools has experienced an enrollment decline. According to the 1990 Archdiocesan Yearbook, 400 Greek American afternoon schools currently exist in the United States. These schools serve approximately 27,000 students, in other words only one-third of the potential audience (Yearbook). Ten years ago, in 1980, 412 Greek-American afternoon schools served approximately 31,000 students. At the time, these statistics represented a significant growth of 23% in the decade of the 1970s.²

Revitalizing Modern Greek Education: A Potential Model

Two major questions are raised by the statistics mentioned above. First, why is enrollment declining? Second, how can the two-thirds portion of the Greek American youth community who do not attend Greek school be reached?

In the study described below, a description of a non-traditional

¹ *Greek Orthodox Archdiocese Year Book, 1990* (New York, 1990).

² N. M. Vapori, "The Church and the Preservation of the Greek Language in America," Anna Pharmakides et als (eds.), *The Teaching of Modern Greek in the English Speaking World* (Brookline, 1984), pp. 71-75.

approach to Modern Greek Education in a non-traditional setting is presented as a potential model for revitalizing Modern Greek Education.

The purpose of this presentation is to discuss the development and implementation of a Modern Greek class in a public school, to examine the learners, the setting and the methodologies used and to consider the impact on and potential contribution of this information to the advancement of the 'traditional' afternoon Greek Schools.

Caveats: Complexity of Issues

The phenomena which bring about educational change are complex, and it is not within the scope of this paper to investigate all of the possible areas that could impact Greek School enrollments. The focus of this particular study is on curriculum and teaching methods, two components which this author believes are among the most significant issues connected with the success or failure of any educational program. In addition, these issues are among the easiest to alter if change is desired.

Structural Differences

Of course, a class taught in a public school on a weekly basis, as that described in this study, is not equivalent to an afternoon Greek school. The time element, the setting, and the student compositions differ, yet there are some areas of this study which can impact the larger Greek school community, namely the issues of curriculum and methodology.

The Study: Background: History of Project

Modern Greek Education was offered for the first time in Worthingway Middle School in October 1989. The program was implemented after several students and their parents expressed a dissatisfaction with other language course offerings, specifically Spanish and French, my teaching area. In response to the parents' requests and what appeared to be significant student interest (43 students came to the introductory lesson), the school principal, Paul Cynkar, invited me to be the course instructor. I agreed knowing that the experience would be different from the one I had when teaching in an afternoon Greek school.

It was decided that the course would be offered once a week during a special thirty-two minute silent reading and/or activities period that the school had. A total of twenty-five class sessions were held.

Class Profile: Student Background

Of the twenty-six students (nine boys and seventeen girls) who participated in the class, twenty-four identified themselves as American

and claimed a melange of European backgrounds. One student classified himself as Thai, and another as Mexican. For twenty-four students, English was the only language spoken in the home, one student spoke Thai and another spoke Spanish.

The majority (22 students) had prior experience in a foreign language classroom. Eighteen were currently studying French and four were studying Spanish. Only four students were not taking a language. No students had previous knowledge of the Greek language. This homogeneity was significant because the needs of the students were similar.

When asked why they chose to stay in Greek class for the duration of the year sixteen students said they returned due to enjoyment. Four students abstained from responding. Three students did not want to spend Discovery time reading. Two did it because of their friends and one student did not know why he returned.

Student Experience and Expectations

An informal questionnaire was given to students once the course was well established and its procedures were thoroughly understood. The purpose of the survey was to ascertain previous experience and expectations of the course. It was my belief that student success and participation would be linked to attitudes students brought to the class. This notion is supported by Dewey's philosophy that effort, which leads to learning, is related to interest.³ Results of the questionnaire are shared below.

Students were asked the following question: "What thoughts did you have about Greece, its people and its customs before this class?" Nine students expressed a historical association when they thought of Greece. They equated Greece with antiquity, togas and mythological gods. Five students shared a "Zorba the Greek" image of Greeks, thinking of them as people who are often intoxicated and throw plates while they dance. Three students considered Greece to be a beautiful country to visit. Two thought Greece was primitive or weird. Seven students admitted to not having much prior knowledge about Greece and its people.

Students were also asked, "What do you hope to learn in this class?" Students expressed their desire to learn not only the Greek language but the culture and history of the Greek people as well. Many students were motivated to learn something new and different.

Worthingway Curriculum: Goals

The curriculum goals in this project were to develop Greek language

³ J. Dewey, *Essays on Philosophy and Psychology* (South. Ill., 1985), p. 174.

skills and to transmit cultural information about Greece, through the use of interactive foreign language methodologies.

Another goal of the program was to encourage students to be open-minded in terms of cultural differences. Worthington is a non-ethnic community and most students have had limited interaction with people of different backgrounds.

Approaches

Many of the materials and methodologies used in the class were modeled after activities that had been used successfully in my French classes. Verbal skills, pronunciation and comprehension were stressed. Although the emphasis was not on written language, the students were always shown the spellings of the words and phrases while they learned them orally. During the first class meeting, students were exposed to the Greek alphabet, its characters and their sounds. In subsequent sessions the alphabet was reviewed and students learned diphthongs and the sounds of consonant combinations. They were not however asked to produce written work. Many students though became quite adept at reading and writing the new language.

The Total Physical Response (TPR) methodology (Asher) was employed, with some modifications. This approach stresses the learning of language through actions which are initially modeled by the teacher. For example, the teacher might say "Stand up" then "Sit down" in the target language, while modeling the action. Two students are chosen to perform the same action, while the teacher says the commands. Soon after, additional actions are incorporated and students are told to run, walk, hop in various orders. Eventually tasks become more complex, more interesting and more humorous as vocabulary builds and the instructor deliberately invents nonsensical situations in order to sharpen student comprehension skills (see Garcia for further explanation). In this method, the need for translation is eliminated because every action is modeled and vocabulary is demonstrated. Grammatical structures are taught indirectly. Learning is reinforced by the physical involvement. Most importantly, students enjoy themselves and learn at the same time.

In other activities, vocabulary is reinforced through the use of visuals and an emphasis on repetition. For example, in more complex activities, students have the opportunity to put vocabulary in context. They begin to use disconnected words to "talk" with one another. This type of meaningful exchange aids in retention.

Students experienced Greek culture by participating in Greek traditions. For example, the New Year was celebrated by sharing the traditional Vasilopita. One class session was spent dancing Greek folk

dances. Other activities included a guest lecturer and slide presentations.

Typing Worthingway Session

A typical, thirty-two minute, class session involves a variety of activities. Class may begin with five minutes of slides focusing on a single aspect of Greece, for example, islands, ruins, or a particular city. This may be followed by a ten to fifteen minute TPR activity, allowing students some movement, and eliminating boredom while focusing on listening comprehension and vocabulary. A visual activity may follow. For example, students might look at pictures of various objects and orally identify, or describe, what they see. Finally students might learn several phrases which would allow them to express their opinions by manipulating the vocabulary. For example, if they were learning about food, they might learn to express preference and elicit this same information from their peers.

Traditional Curriculum

Existing curricula in Modern Greek did not adequately meet the needs of this specific group of learners. The materials used in afternoon Greek schools across the country emphasize reading and writing, and lack an interactive communicative methodology. Such a focus seemed inappropriate for the scope of this project which was to give the students a broad and general exposure to aspects of Greek language and culture.

Problem Areas

Historically the question of teacher qualifications has been problematic for the afternoon Greek schools. In regard to Greek language teaching between 1918-1940 it has been stated that most people teaching the language were not teachers. Even though well-educated individuals often taught in these early schools they were not always enthusiastic in the way which inspires students.⁴ More recently, Spiridakis stated that most of the personnel in afternoon Greek schools were trained in Greece and their experience is limited to teaching Greek to native speakers of the language.⁵ Native speakers of Greek, or students who view Greek as a first language, are but one segment of the whole Greek school audience. The composition of today's Greek school audience is significantly more American than in the past. For many potential Greek school students, Greek is just as foreign a language as it was for the learners at Worthingway Middle School.

Rationale for Curriculum Change

The non-Greek students in the non-traditional setting maintained

⁴ A. Arpazoglou, from "Afternoon Schools to University Halls," *The Teaching of Modern Greek in the English Speaking World* (Brookline, 1984), pp. 13-18.

⁵ J. Spiridakis, "Greek Bilingual Education Policies and Possibilities," *Education and*

interest in the course though they had no specific link to Greece or Greek culture. The content was "made interesting" to them, not because it was disguised by external factors, or "sugar-coated," as Dewey so warns against, but rather because the students experienced a use for the content within the class. Dewey states the need that . . .

. . . subjects be selected in relation to the child's present experience, power and needs; and that (in case he does not perceive or appreciate this relevancy) the new material be presented in such a way as to enable the child to appreciate its bearings, its relationship, its value in connection with what already has significance for him (p. 164).

This idea of empowering knowledge should be incorporated in the afternoon Greek school.

Needs of Greek American Youth

For the Greek American child, Greek school should offer the opportunity to satiate a knowledge of one's background and culture. Despite the growing number of mixed marriages⁶ most every child in the Greek-American community has some awareness of being Greek. Psomiades stated that "only the community can supply the youth with the motivation to learn."⁷ He also says that the community ". . . can give our young a feeling of pride and ethnic awareness and thus provide a hospitable and congenial environment for the learning and use of Greek."⁸ The individuals of the specific community, the attitude of the parents, and the Greek language teachers are vital contributors to the success of a community Greek school program. It is they who must closely examine the needs of their specific group of learners.

The learners in the nation and within communities vary, they, unlike the Worthingway students, do not represent a homogeneous group in Greek language needs. Some are learning Greek as a second language, others as a foreign language with little reinforcement in the home. There are those who have acquired Greek as a native tongue or as a first language. Some attend Greek school seeking improvement of already existent language skills, and for others these skills have never been

Americas (New York, 1987), p. 83.

⁶ *Greek Orthodox Archdiocese Year Book*.

⁷ Harry J. Psomiades, *Greece and Greek Americans, Process and Prospects* (New York, 1987), p. 95.

⁸ *Ibid.*

developed. An effective Greek School tries to meet the needs of all these students, regardless of their prior experience with Greek.

Conclusion: Strategy for Improvement

An appeal must be made to create an attractive classroom atmosphere with interactive and communicative activities which would allow students to view Greek school as a pleasurable experience wherein learning is occurring in an interesting manner. It must be noted that students attend these schools either after daily classes in their American schools or on Saturdays. Greek school must also compete with the vast extracurricular activities which appeal to today's school aged child.

Foreign language teaching methodology must be implemented to meet the needs of the students. Informal observations at a Greek School revealed extremely teacher-centered classrooms and book-centered learning with an emphasis on reading and writing to the exclusion of original written and oral expression. Language teaching requires a holistic approach. The skills of reading, writing, speaking, and listening, must come together so that a student can manipulate the language and adapt it to his/her needs. Language must be taught in context. Students can learn vocabulary lists or grammar yet be unable to use this information appropriately in various situations. A balance must be sought in Greek School classroom activities which incorporates all aspects of language, not only reading and writing. This balance can accommodate the needs and learning styles of the entire class.

Recommendations for Improvement

The inclusion of authentic materials from the target culture to supplement existing materials, is one suggestion worthy of consideration. For example, Greek newspapers can be used to teach reading skills such as scanning or reading for specific information. Newspapers also serve as a model in the writing process. Students see writing in various formats, such as editorials, advertisements or descriptive narratives. A written assignment would be a logical follow-up to this type of activity wherein students would be asked to write in a particular style, or perhaps even write a letter to the editor. Newspapers can also be used as a cultural lesson by examining the biases and political preferences of Greek publications.

Music can be used in the classroom as a listening comprehension activity wherein the teacher supplies the students with a lyric sheet lacking certain words for which the students must listen as the music plays. A song can be used to stress a grammatical point, to examine vocabulary in context, and to spark discussion. Music is also a highly charged cultural vehicle, especially in Greece. Through music students can ex-

amine a variety of themes such as popular culture, political thought or history.

Authentic video from Greece can serve to reinforce anything from language to culture to vocabulary. A short segment of a film or television broadcast can be extremely educational if viewing is focused, if there exists a purpose for viewing which the teacher has made clear. Depending on the language of a segment, the teacher must prepare the class for the difficulties they may encounter. They need not understand every word for the experience to be profitable.

Partner activities can be used to mix students, thus using students with stronger Greek skills as a resource. A typical partner activity may involve a task which requires one student to seek information from his/her partner by asking questions in the target language. This communicative activity allows all students the opportunity to speak and practice the target language. It also allows the teacher to individualize by circulating the classroom.

The Greek community itself offers a wealth of resources, which teachers should incorporate as part of the classroom experience. Making community members accessible to students relates the Greek experience in a personal manner. These people can impart a unique perspective to concepts such as immigration, village life or education in Greece.

Implementation of Strategies

For the recommendations described above to become successful realities in the classroom, a Greek school teacher must be willing to step out of the role of Greek expert, disseminator of knowledge and keeper of discipline and allow students to experiment with and experience Greekness. The concept of teacher control becomes different as students undertake a new responsibility for and interest in their learning. The classroom activities can affect the desire of a student to return to the classroom.

The afternoon Greek school is a powerful tool in the preservation of the Greek language and culture. The decline in enrollment and the lack of majority attendance in the Greek schools are testimony that approaches must be altered and needs must be reassessed if linguistic and cultural survival is to occur. The words of Psomiades are significant and merit mention. Let us remember that . . .

While the loss of language is not the end of our Greek community life, it is certainly the beginning of the end of that life.⁹

⁹ Ibid.

Education as a Means of Empowerment for Minority Cultures: Strategies for the Greek American Community

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IN MODERN SOCIETIES EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS HAVE BEEN invested with the responsibility of shaping a people's cultural identity and to a great extent have either replaced or complemented the role of more traditional institutions, such as the family, as agents of socialization. In culturally diverse societies, such as the United States, schools have become the terrains in which conflicts arise over whose culture and what values should shape curriculum. All ethnic groups have been sensitive to the power of education to either reinforce or weaken allegiance to one's ethnic heritage.

The Greek American community has a long history of attributing great value to education as a means of establishing itself in American society and of transmitting the Hellenic heritage to the new generations of Greek Americans. At the present moment in its history, with immigration from Greece decreasing to a near halt and with the fear that new generations of Greek Americans are increasingly losing touch with their Greek heritage, there is an acute awareness that "community survival depends on education"¹ In this article, I would like to explore how education can be used by the Greek American community as a means of intervening in the cultural practices and institutions of mainstream culture. First, I will examine how the issue of cultural diversity has been addressed within the context of American educational history. Second, I will theorize about minority majority culture relationships and propose a redefinition of the concept of "cultural pluralism." And third, I will focus on specific educational institutions within the Greek American community and outline the educational

¹ Harry J. Psomiades, "Greece and Greek America: The Future of the Greek American Community," Spyros Orfanos, Harry J. Psomiades, and John Spiridakis, eds., *Education and Greek Americans: Process and Prospects* (New York, 1987), p. 95.