

Category 5: CULTURAL AND LANGUAGE COMPETENCE

(Participants from Greece, South Africa, Montenegro, Moldova)

I first introduced the topic by pointing out that it refers to the ability to interact effectively with individuals from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. In these terms, cultural and language competence is a critical aspect of inclusive education. In educational settings, it goes beyond mere understanding. It involves understanding, respecting, and valuing the diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds of students. By fostering cultural and language competence, we can create more equitable and inclusive learning environments that empower all students to reach their full potential; all students, regardless of their backgrounds, feel valued, supported, and able to thrive

It was also stressed that it is an important issue as demographic distribution changes and diversity increases. It is significant that Europe is home to over 24 official languages and hundreds of minority languages and dialects. Furthermore, many of our classrooms are enriched by students from migrant backgrounds, creating a tapestry of linguistic and cultural diversity; furthermore, education acts as a gateway to inclusion and without intentional cultural and language competence practices, students from marginalized groups often face barriers in accessing quality education; Finally, it is a given that the graduates will enter a globalized workforce where intercultural collaboration is essential. Universities are not only knowledge providers but also incubators of cultural empathy and communication skills.

At this point Professor Sideras-Haddad (From the University of the Witwatersrand) took the floor referring to the various issues and difficulties they face in their university with the issue of linguistic diversity even at national and university level. This is because in the Republic of South Africa there are two official languages, English and Afrikaans, but also a large number of local languages and dialects spoken by local tribes and communities. A major problem recorded both within the universities, but also in the country in general, is the existence of gangs, which are largely structured or characterized by their linguistic and cultural specificity and diversity.

Professor Sideras-Haddad as well as Professor Annete Van der Merwe (from the North West University – South Africa) referred to two main procedures adopted in their universities: one involves translators as a key strategy in order to adapt particularly young students to the academic requirements with the least possible language problems and a second strategy is the 'mediation' of older students who function to support younger and newly arrived students in order to explain to them the various academic procedures, courses etc.

Approximately similar difficulties, although to a lesser extent, in terms of language problems, were also reported by Professor Zannah Knezevic at the University of Montenegro, noting that there is a minority of students of Albanian origin, who make up about 10-15% of the student population, who have great difficulties in attending classes, especially at the beginning of their university studies, as they come from purely Albanian-speaking regions and schools and therefore cannot easily adapt to the official language of the universities. However, she indicated that there is no official state university mechanism to assist this population group at the university to overcome language difficulties and problems.

During the discussion, practices were mentioned as well as the need to find strategies to enhance trust between students when facing linguistic and cultural differences and special reference was made to the use of the personal experience of academic staff to bridge differences and find solutions to problems through individual approaches to students who face greater adjustment problems precisely because of their different linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

It was mentioned the importance of empathy and patience on the part of the academic staff especially towards the specific groups of students when they enter the university and face various adjustment problems due to the very diversity of their linguistic and cultural background and special mention was also made of the use of technology and its best possible utilization starting already from the school years.

In conclusion it should be noted that challenges remain in ensuring that all students have access to culturally and linguistically responsive education. Factors such as systemic biases, limited resources, and teacher training gaps can hinder progress. To address these challenges, we must work together to develop innovative strategies and policies that promote cultural and language competence in education.

Konstantinos Petrogiannis