Listening to include asylum-seeking students in Cyprus: an action research

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As a result of the increased immigration in foreign countries, major demographic changes have occurred during the last few decades. Thus, the contemporary student population comprises an array of ethnically diverse students. This situation often generates anxiety and frustration for educators, because they have to be effective within a complex school environment, and include foreign students (Banks, 2001). Having to teach Greek as a foreign language to sixteen asylum-seeking Somali students, aged 16-18, in an induction class for unaccompanied minors in Cyprus, we tried to respond to the needs of these students, against the integrationist model, and differentiate our teaching so as to fit to the students' culture and diverse learning styles. Our goal was to create a positive learning environment, assist the students to achieve their full potential and support their right to equal opportunities in education. Thus, we decided to conduct action research in order to improve our professional practice, to effect change in situ and to empower and include our students by involving them in our action research and raising their voice (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000).

At the first stage of the action research cycle we identified as our focus of investigation the increased absenteeism and lack of interest of our students. This area involved teaching and learning, was within our control and concerns, and involved something that could be changed. Hence, at the second stage, we collected data through a questionnaire that was delivered to our students, asking them to describe their needs and their wishes for change. At the third stage we discussed our interpretations of the data with our students through group interviews at school. As the students explained, they needed audiovisual support, connections of the teaching material to their culture, language and country and serious consideration of their religion, since they were Muslims within a Christian Orthodox school. Therefore, at the fourth stage we developed an action plan, with which we implemented the demands of the students, after informing the Ministry of Education and Culture and asking for their assistance. The evaluation of the plan revealed that listening to the learners' voice and adapting teaching to their needs has a positive effect on their attendance, interest, performance and inclusion.

