

Growing up Greek: A Review of Educating Greek Americans: Historical Perspectives and Contemporary Pathway

Theodore Christou

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Book Review/Recension d'ouvrage

Growing up Greek: A Review of Educating Greek Americans: Historical Perspectives and Contemporary Pathways

Edited by Fevronia K. Soumakis & Theodore G. Zervas

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Reviewed by:

Theodore Christou

Queen's University

Growing up Greek in Toronto should seem easy. In a city that is renowned for its multicultural character, the Toronto District School Board boasts that its community speaks 120 distinct languages. For 25 years, beginning in 1980, growing up Greek meant obligations to my public (English) school and to my Greek school. This was a Janus education – to take an image from Roman mythology – looking at two distinct sets of curricula, classes, teachers, and friends. During the day, typically from 8 am to 4 pm from Monday to Friday, I was in public school. During the evening, typically from 5 pm to 8 pm from Monday to Friday and from 8 am to 2 pm on Saturdays, I was in Greek school.

Growing up Greek in Toronto was difficult for most of my friends and classmates, even if they did not spend nearly as many hours in Greek school as I did. My experience was unique; my parents founded a Greek school in 1980, which remains in operation today as a hearth in their home and in the community. I spent too much time in schools, but one school was literally in my home. Neither in my high school or university studies, nor in my life as a teacher in the Toronto District School Board, was I able to escape education. I taught Greek in the evenings for the Board as part of its Continuing Education programming and on Saturdays as part of my service to family and community.

I no longer teach Greek, but there is at least one community Greek school in every small Canadian city that I have lived in since leaving Toronto. These schools are often associated with the Greek Orthodox church building or with a community, sometimes secular, that values a Janus education, looking back onto heritage and tradition and forward into the haze of the unknowable future. These schools exist in addition to the study of Greek in higher education, particularly in Universities, although they are often the training ground for those institutions and units that look backward and forward.

Greek education matters – not only in Classics and Theology – but across the Humanities and Sciences, where our understanding of what it means to be human requires that we think in modes and through sources that predate the global hegemony of English. Learning Greek was a rite of passage for many Greek North Americans pursuing a University education a century ago in North America. Now, even as it might seem like a fad or frill of certain Arts Departments and a component of heritage education for the Greek diaspora, language education is an open sesame to the world.

When I had a recess from Greek school as a child, we would mingle with the other students learning their heritage language. Down the hall were classes in Hindi and Gaelic. I sometimes wished to escape to these other classes. We were not only learning our language; we were living our language.

Educating Greek Americans: Historical Perspectives and Contemporary Pathways is a rare book that speaks to a particular population and to all of us. This edited collection touches on very human questions: Why do schools exist? What is the relationship between schooling and education? How can we make meaning in our lives and honour our heritage: cultural, racial, linguistic, intellectual, or otherwise?

The book is 188 pages. This sum includes the Index, but not the elegant Foreword composed by Dan Georgakas, who notes: “Ethnic culture is always evolving. What works or doesn’t work at any given time changes as the community changes” (p. vii). It follows that the eight chapters composing this volume tell stories. These stories are woven together nicely, considering both historical and contemporary subjects.

The first two chapters after the Introduction treat historical subjects. Fevriana K. Soumakis examines the role of the Greek Orthodox Church in Greek Education, especially in New York City. Maria Kaliambou considers the textbooks used for instruction, especially those that were developed for Greek American children specifically. Lest I lose the thread, I would like to drill deeper here: *Educating Greek Americans* is very much

about the United States. These textbooks, which were developed for children in the United States serve as an example. They were so ‘American’, that I never adopted them as a Greek educator in Canada. They were inward looking, and we were looking for a way to connect to the Greek diaspora everywhere. Angelyn Balodimas-Bartolomei’s (Chapter 5) contribution is another historical study, considering one program and a larger narrative.

The remaining chapters treat more contemporary subjects. The past is always present, but these, along with the entire project demonstrate ways that Greek education is a living, breathing thing in the world worthy of our attention. Theodore G. Zervas examines the instruction of Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in two schools through the lens of the Socratic Method. Marina Mattheoudakis considers the integration of two curricula for a particular immersion program at a charter school. Lastly, Angelyn Balodimas-Bartolomei and Gregory A. Katsas considers ways that communities in the Greek diaspora have promoted their identity by focussing on Heritage Greece.

Soumakis and Zervas have achieved a nice balance in this book of focussing in on particular programs and places and focussing out on the bigger questions. What does it mean to grow up Greek in America? We have, here, the beginnings of an answer: Education is bigger than schooling and telling these stories is generative.