

Fevronia K. Soumakis and Theodore G. Zervas (eds),
Educating Greek Americans: Historical Perspectives and
Contemporary Pathways.

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Elaine Thomopoulos

Book Review

Educating Greek Americans is a fascinating, well-written book filled with gems of information that were new to me even though I have been immersed in Greek American history for decades. This ground-breaking book focuses on a neglected aspect of the Greek American experience, the establishment of educational institutions so that the second, third, or fourth generations do not lose their Greek identity or abandon their Greek Orthodox religion. Each of the essays could stand alone, but together they build a comprehensive review, with an emphasis on how the community and church, with the assistance of the nation of Greece, strived to teach the Greek language, history, values, and religion. Extensive footnotes and bibliography, as well as graphs, tables, and photos of textbooks, supplement the text.

The first part of the book briefly outlines the history of the Greeks of the United States and explores the development of Greek educational institutions and the texts that were used. One of the essays describes a two-week program in Greece for college students. Three of the essays focus on pedagogical methods, including a dual-language immersive program, the teaching of the Socratic method, and an innovative program for children who did not have a prior knowledge of Greek. The conclusion explores Greek American identity.

Forward

Dan Georgakas sets the stage for the rest of the book in a forward that presents a brief history of Greek immigration, including the first wave of immigrants (1890s to 1924) and the second wave (1965 through the 1980s). He traces the influence of the church in the development of Greek language programs. Among the difficulties now encountered in retaining Greek identity, he mentions the large out-marriage rate, with the subsequent decline in church membership. He also points to the recent “disarray and corruption in the Greek Orthodox Church” and “chaos” at Hellenic College and Holy Cross School of Theology” as another reason for the decline. I posit an additional possible reason, especially among young people – the conservatism of the church, which includes the church’s view of homosexuality or transexuals and not allowing women to become priests. Georgakas regrets that Greek Americans have not supported the arts, although “they have done OK in preserving tradition in the form of regional dancing and music.”

Chapter 1. Introduction by Fevronia Soumakis

Fevronia Soumakis, in the first chapter entitled “[Greek Orthodox Education: Challenges and Adaptation in New York City Schools](#),” introduces the book and outlines what still needs to be addressed, including further research on Modern Greek Studies programs in the universities, the AHEPA, and the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America.

Chapter 2 “[Greek Orthodox Education: Challenges and Adaptation in New York City Schools](#)” by Fevronia K. Soumakis

Although Fevronia Soumakis’s essay in Chapter 3, “[Greek Orthodox Education: Challenges and Adaptation in New York City Schools](#),” concentrates primarily on the Greek schools of New York, which she meticulously researched in this seminal article, she reaches beyond. She outlines the role the Archdiocese had in the development of the Greek schools within the church. It encouraged the churches to lend financial support and produced supplementary material for the schools, including a 50-page monthly bilingual children’s magazine published in 1962. The first edition featured Santa Claus with his reindeer and a large sack overflowing with copies of the magazine. One of the goals of the Archdiocese was to convince public school systems to teach Greek in their high schools.

Soumakis outlines the growth of Greek schools, most of which were held in the afternoon following public school. She reports that attendance at schools nearly doubled from 284 in 1932 to 456 in 1937. The table of parochial schools that were established in New York City from 1912 to 1980 is very helpful. A fitting follow-up would be to survey the schools at present, not only in New York but throughout the nation.

Chapter 3. “The First Schoolbooks for Greek American Children” by Maria Kaliambou

The third chapter, “**The First Schoolbooks for Greek American Children**,” is an excellent and well-researched essay by Maria Kaliambou. It focuses on the Greek books that were printed for use in the United States and the involvement of the Greek American Community, the Greek Orthodox Church in America, and the nation of Greece in the selection and publishing of books. When the immigrants first arrived, the emphasis was on their learning English and books to help them were published. With the advent of the second generation, the interest of the publishers turned to teaching the children Greek.

Although in the early part of the 20th century, Greece published books for the Greeks of the American diaspora, by the 1930s, the immigrants published their own books. They included a collection of poems, songs, and theatre skits for school festivals. Kaliambou focuses on a critical analysis of the first four schoolbooks written and published by Greek Americans in America, geared specifically to Greek American children.

The article includes the controversy about what language to teach, which was being debated in Greece at the time, the demotic or *katharevousa*. The demotic use of the language won out.

Chapter 4. “Considering the Socratic Method When Teaching the *Odyssey* and *Iliad* at the Socrates and Koreas Greek American Schools” by Theodore G. Zervas

Theodore Zervas, in the fourth chapter, “**Considering the Socratic Method When Teaching the *Odyssey* and *Iliad* at the Socrates and Koreas Greek American Schools**,” observed the classes of two parochial schoolteachers in Chicago during the spring of 2000. His objective was to determine if the teachers used the Socratic method, which stresses analysis or interpretation rather than rote learning. Zervas observed each teacher for one teaching session. The teacher at Socrates School, which was affiliated with Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church, discussed the *Odyssey* with a class of eight seventh-grade students. The other, who taught at Koreas, which was affiliated with St. Constantine and Helen Greek Orthodox Church, discussed the *Iliad* with 14 eighth-grade students.

Zervas recorded the sessions, translated them from Greek to English, and then analyzed the interaction between the teacher and students to determine whether the Socratic method was used. This chapter includes a definition of the Socratic method, segments of the transcript, and Zervas’s insightful analysis. Zervas concludes, “The modern-day Greek American language schools have loosely maintained Socrates’s view of education by allowing its students to interpret, analyze, question, discuss, and interpret passages found in both of Homer’s poems. Although these two teachers seem to work toward this goal, we cannot be sure that this is the case in other schools.” No research is cited as to whether the modern-day Greek school have indeed maintained Socrates’s view of education.

This article is applicable to educators in general and not just the Greek community. Missing is how well the Socratic method works compared to other methods and how well it works in different settings and with children of various ages. Zervas mentions the limitations of the study, including the small sample size and the limited time the classes were observed.

Chapter 5. “Breaking the Traditional Greek School Mold: The Case of the Aristotle GSL Program” by Angelyn Balodimas-Bartolomei

In the fifth chapter, “Breaking the Traditional Greek School Mold: The Case of the Aristotle GSL Program,” Angelyn Balodimas-Bartolomei, discusses the innovative Greek as a Second Language (GSL) Program which was developed by Balodimas-Bartolomei and Father Dean Botsis for the Aristotle School of St. Haralambos Church in Niles, Illinois. The GSL program used a new textbook series *Mathaino Ellinika (I Learn Greek)* published by the Pedagogical Institute of Greece.

During the first year of the program, 1988-1989, the class included children who spoke Greek fluently as well as those who knew little or no Greek. Thereafter, the Aristotle program was offered on Saturdays to only those who started school with little or no knowledge of Greek.

The Aristotle Program’s textbooks, which included Greek and Greek American themes, were supplemented with cassettes with songs and dialogue. Greek travel videos, games, toys, flashcards, cooking, singing, dancing, arts and crafts, cartoons, and pen pals added interest and educational opportunities. Later, computers and a computer lab were added. The priest explained the significance of icons, vestments, and other ecclesiastical artifacts, and Presbytera taught the children how to make *prosfero*. The school celebrated Greek Independence Day and graduation, with all the children participating. They recited poems, performed skits, danced, sang, and played musical instruments. The children were graded with a checklist that noted whether the student “frequently demonstrates,” “is now learning,” or “needs improvement” regarding the objectives for each grade level.

The Appendix outlines what was expected to be accomplished from preschool to the upper-level program (age 11 and up). Examples of just a few of the objectives for the upper level include: write letters and compositions, dance various Greek dances, and explain the different types of Greek columns. This essay, which shows step-by-step how the program was designed and carried out, would be helpful to others who might be interested in initiating such a program.

Chapter 6. “An American and Greek Language Integrated Curriculum for a Dual Language Immersion Program: The Case of Odyssey Charter School” By Marina Mattheoudakis

In the sixth chapter, “An American and Greek Language Integrated Curriculum for a Dual Language Immersion Program: The Case of Odyssey Charter School” Marina Mattheoudakis describes two language learning programs used by a K to 12th grade charter school that was founded in 2006 by an AHEPA chapter in Wilmington, Delaware. The program’s aim was for the student to learn the ideals of Hellenism, the adoption of democratic methods, and lifelong enthusiasm for learning and awareness of world citizenship and culture. The school accepted students by lottery. The student body for the school year 2018-2019 was diverse, with 59.26% white students, 26.05% African American, and 13.19 % Asia, with only 1.5% of Greek descent. As of September of 2019, the school has matriculated approximately 2000 students in grades K to 12 and graduated its first senior class in June of 2020.

In 2012, the school began using the Foreign Languages in Elementary Schools (FLES) model, which emphasizes learning the Greek language in the context of other subjects. In K-4, the Greek language is taught for 40 minutes, Greek Math for 40 minutes, English Language Arts for 120 minutes, Math for 60 minutes, and Science/Social Studies for 40 minutes.

In grades 5–11, Greek Language is taught for 40 minutes; additionally, there are electives like Greek Mythology in grade 8, and Greek Studies I, II and III in grades 9–12, which aim to enrich knowledge of Greek history and literature, Greek traditions and culture.

In 2018-2019, a Dual Language Immersion (DLI) program was initiated. The program includes a half day in the English classroom and a half day in the Greek classroom. The Greek teacher instructs math, science, some social studies, and Greek language arts, and the English teacher teaches some social studies and English. The specific DLI curricula is presented, including how it was designed, the language content, and the performance indicators. Specifics about the Kindergarten program are presented in table format.

The author explains that this program aims to create a “curricula that will be available to all American students wishing to learn Greek in an immersion setting in the US.” More information about the curricula and the success of the program as it progresses will be valuable. It is a worthy effort that has been supported by past research on these types of programs. Mattheoudakis has presented research that has been done on dual-language programs and the advantage of learning another language when young.

Chapter 7. “Promoting Heritage Ethnicity and Cultural Identity in Diasporic Communities: The Case of the Heritage Greek Program” by Angelyn Balodimas-Bartolomei and Gregory A. Katsas

Angelyn Balodimas-Bertolami and Gregory A. Katsas describe the two-week Heritage Greece program in the seventh chapter, “Promoting Heritage Ethnicity and Cultural Identity in Diasporic Communities: The Case of the Heritage Greek Program.” The program was initiated by the National Hellenic Society in 2010 in collaboration with American University in Greece. A total of 350 students participated in the program from 2010 to 2018. Starting with 15 college students, by 2018, it had 65 students. The authors identified 12 similar programs. Most critical was Birthright Israel, which served as a model for the Heritage Greek Program.

The impact Heritage Greece had on the students was measured by exit surveys. To measure cultural identity, on a scale of 1 to 5, students were asked how much their learning had increased regarding each of the following:

- knowledge of Greek language
- knowledge of ancient Greece
- knowledge of modern Greece
- experiential language classes
- Greek society & culture seminars.

To measure the sustainability of the program. students were asked to rate the following:

- I have grown closer to my Greek heritage
- I would plan another trip to Greece
- I intend to explore my ancestry further
- I plan to engage with the Greek American community
- I would support a strong connection among all Greek American students.

Throughout the years, the students gave high ratings regarding both cultural identity and sustainability, as illustrated by the tables and charts that are presented. Of interest is how the ratings changed throughout the years and the possible reasons the authors give regarding the variations. The authors report that “the students themselves have described this shared experience as life-changing and transformative.”

The program and the analysis of the exit surveys have been clearly presented. However, there are limitations of this type of data collection. Did the students feel compelled to rate the program positively? How much did two weeks in Greece increase their knowledge of Greek? Were questions asked to find out what parts of the program were more helpful and why? Do we know whether, in fact, the students continued to be involved in the Greek community? Perhaps a before or after survey would have added to the analysis. A follow-up survey several years later might also be helpful.

Chapter 8. “When We Were Greek Americans” by Theodore G. Zervas

As a fun, fitting, and formidable conclusion, Theodore G. Zervas in the eighth chapter, “When We Were Greek Americans,” discusses identity in the context of his experiences as a child of immigrants. The following observation was especially relevant: “Because we were so Greek, America did not seem like home to us. At the same time when we were in Greece, we did not quite fit in there either. Greeks in Greece thought we were frozen in time, a blast from a long-ago past, when the first Greeks emigrated to America.”

Zervas’s personal experiences were relevant. Including interviews with others would have also been helpful. For example, I learned about the use of corporal punishment, which was only addressed in this book in a footnote, by talking to those who had attended Greek school from the 1930s to the 1970s. Punishment included twisting of the ear or pounding on the hand with a ruler or switch. A friend of mine, when he received a blow, left Greek lessons and never returned.

Zervas spent childhood summers in Greece. Many children of the second wave of immigrants perfected their Greek in this way. The children of the first wave did not have the same opportunity to travel to Greece.

The Greek that Zervas learned has transferred to his English. He says, “close the light.” I too have always said “close the light,” even when I did not know Greek. My children also say this. At times, I put the verb first and subject last, making an awkward sentence structure in English. I would like to see research on this linguistic phenomenon.

Zervas writes about his more traditional Greek school experience and that the schools have now revised their curricula with less emphasis placed on Greek language and more on Greek culture and Greek history. More information about what schools these are and what they teach would be enlightening. Zervas laments that the community has not developed a high school system or a secular college. I am not sure this is the path to take. Will a child fare better if his classmates are of different races and ethnicities? In order for a child to be proud of his Greek heritage, does he need to attend an all-day Greek high school?

Not written about in this book is how Greece helped by sending teachers. How widespread was this? Does Greece continue this practice today? Another question not addressed is how the American view of Greeks has affected pride in being Greek or the push to retain identity. Also missing is the role of the many private schools, tutors, and adult education classes. Tutors were especially important to those, like me, who did not live near a Greek school.

Although many topics still need to be explored, this book is a significant step forward. *Educating Greek Americans* has made a groundbreaking contribution. I highly recommend it to those interested in foreign language education or the history of Greeks in the United States.