



## TEACHING THE DEAF ART AND DESIGN IN THE GREEK HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS: FOCUSING ON THE CLASS UNITY

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### **Abstract**

The Greek educational system in general, does not seem to have taken seriously into account how the education of deaf students should be managed. In the case of art although it can be easily taught, by nature, to people with special difficulties, the unreadiness and sometimes ignorance and embarrassment of art teachers in front of deaf students makes this subject particularly hard to teach. So what are the possibilities Greek art and design teachers have to pass on their knowledge to deaf students? What ways, principles and methods should they adopt in order to contribute to the unification of a polymorphic cultural and social mosaic of personalities such as an art class with many students including some deaf? This paper attempts to illuminate some dark spots of the current Greek art teaching in Higher Education regarding the contradictions and inequalities that can be created in a classroom under the above conditions.

*Key words: Deaf students, Higher Education, Greece, Art and Design, Greek Sign Language*

### **Introduction**

The problems that have occurred in recent years in teaching Art and Design the deaf who are enrolled in Higher Education in Greece, do not have to do only with the inability of the current Greek governments which, from the end of 2009 onwards, began to cut in a harsh manner the cost- funds from education. The problem in teaching the deaf generally starts much earlier and it concerns issues which are much more critical than that of teaching. For example the Greek Sign Language has been scarcely used in the education of deaf children in Greece and is not part of the curriculum of schools today. In the relatively short history of Deaf education in Greece, which is less than 70 years old, the GSL was either forbidden or marginalized and only in recent years has its acceptance and use in the educational system gradually increased. According to Cummins (1984) deaf people, who manage to learn and use the GSL, can get information and decode its



meaning, while after they can conglomerate it into a comprehensive set which can be expanded according to the expression of their own subjectivity.

Deaf parents of past decades who had hearing children, did not know the GLS and thus they were extremely dependent on their children. In research with questionnaires for the 1960's and 1970's, 95% of children surveyed, worked as interpreters for their own parents. Typically, the firstborn child had, almost always, the role of interpreter for the whole family. Today many surveys show recent change in the behavior of deaf parents towards their hearing children mainly because of the development of special technological benefits such as the special telephone, the fax, the e-mail, etc., the knowledge of the GLS and the hiring of professional interpreters. In this case, however, some problems of cultural nature may arise which can have the following contradiction: children inherit from their parents except from the blood bonds, both a skill in the Sign Language and the deaf's social behavior, that is two, according to Markowicz and Woodward (1978), extremely important factors for the credit recognition and acceptance of a person from the deaf community as a culturally deaf person and not as a person with just hearing loss. As natural users they can work easily both in the hearing and deaf communities. They often become professional interpreters, active members of the deaf community and they are capable of channeling not only the language but also the culture of the one community to the other.

On the other hand the majority of deaf children (90-95%) have hearing parents who do not know the GSL. So they can learn the GSL at school age informally from other older students and deaf adults when the latter are still in the school community (Kourbetis, 1982). Rarely do hearing persons have as learning standards the GSL. This practice can be described as the largest educational dysfunction of the system (Hoffmeister, 1994).

The current situation of Deaf education in Greece compared with the implementation of a pilot project can be summarized as follows:



- There is not any Analytical Deaf Education Program in Greece, other than the Analytical Special Education Program, which features general directions and is used at Deaf schools.
- There is not any substantial guidance for the organization, assessment and planning of educational work at Deaf schools.
- The organized and measurable effectiveness of educational work only good results can yield.

### **Special schools of Primary and Secondary Education**

Suppose that the problem of the Greek Sign Language has been solved in a certain way, be it righteous or not. What happens, however, in the teaching of art and design to deaf people before they enter the country's higher education institutions? Under what circumstances have they been taught art and what is the purpose of teaching it in lower levels of education of primary and secondary schools? Attention should be drawn to the substantial absence of individuals with disabilities and, therefore, of the deaf from ordinary schools in the Primary and Higher Education. Notwithstanding that the Greek state enables deaf students to attend mainstream schools, it does not cover the basic conditions for this to happen and, all the more so, with success. More specifically, the new Special Education Act 2817/200 enables deaf students to choose between two types of schools: a) the ordinary school for all with the parallel support of a special education teaching staff, b) the specially organized and properly staffed integration operating departments within schools of general and professional education and c) the special schools for the deaf staffed with experienced instructors. However, we should also state that in the first two cases the special educational personnel is inadequate both in number and in skill (Lampropoulou, Hatzikakou Vlahou, 2003).

So inevitably, people being inferior of the rest as far as the hearing is concerned seem to be a minority, and they are therefore often grouped in special schools, where they are trained with the main benchmark being their disability. Suggestively, we mention that the special primary education is provided by special schools for the deaf and hearing impaired children of the National Institute for the Deaf Protection (NIFDP) and its annexes in the cities of Athens, Thessaloniki,



Patras, Serres and Kastelli in Crete. The NIFDP, which was set up according to the law No 726/37, is the first body which deals systematically and exclusively with the special and the vocational education and the general protection of deaf children in our country. Thousands of deaf people have studied and graduated from this type of schools (National Institute for the deaf, Deaf Rights Protection, 2014).

However, under these circumstances, children begin to develop, act and speak in a "known and safe environment" that would certainly be a huge trap for their further development, i.e. when they will eventually be studying at a higher education institution where things are very different. Taking a look at the program for teaching the art to deaf students in these schools, we especially note the following point: The main purpose of teaching the Art in Elementary and Middle School is to help deaf students be familiarized with Fine Arts, to study them in depth and to enjoy them not only through balanced activities of research and creation of works of art, but also through knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon of art to help them emerge as authors and as virtuosi viewers. In any case, in most cases, all of these are in the sphere of theory since the scarcity of art teachers in special schools is particularly evident.

### **Higher Education in Art and Design**

Before the beginning of the financial crisis of 2009-10 things in the enrolment and attendance of deaf people at Schools and Departments of Art and Design of Higher Education seemed to be rather done in a neat way. For example at the Painting Department of the Athens School of Fine Arts the candidates who were admitted were those who fell within the category of special provisions (L. 3794), at a rate of 5% on the actual designated number of enrolments and always on condition that they successfully passed the entrance tests specified every year. Since people suffering from deafness had a large turnout in the category of special provisions, the School had asked and arranged for the transfer of a teacher from Secondary Special Education being an expert in teaching the deaf (Kioussis, 2010). They were perhaps the only appropriate persons to interpret visual art terms like



"horizon", "form", 'texture' etc. many of which were unknown to the students despite the fact that they might have even graduated from special deaf schools. This experimental cooperation which did not fall into specific timetables, was a mental and emotional *give and take* that seemed to modulate both sides. It was a personalized adventure and yet the joy of the group which was able to slowly get out of the ghetto by participating in a host of activities. At a social level it was an honest struggle towards ensuring reform intended to catalyze treatment of deafness as a pathology at least in the field of Arts.

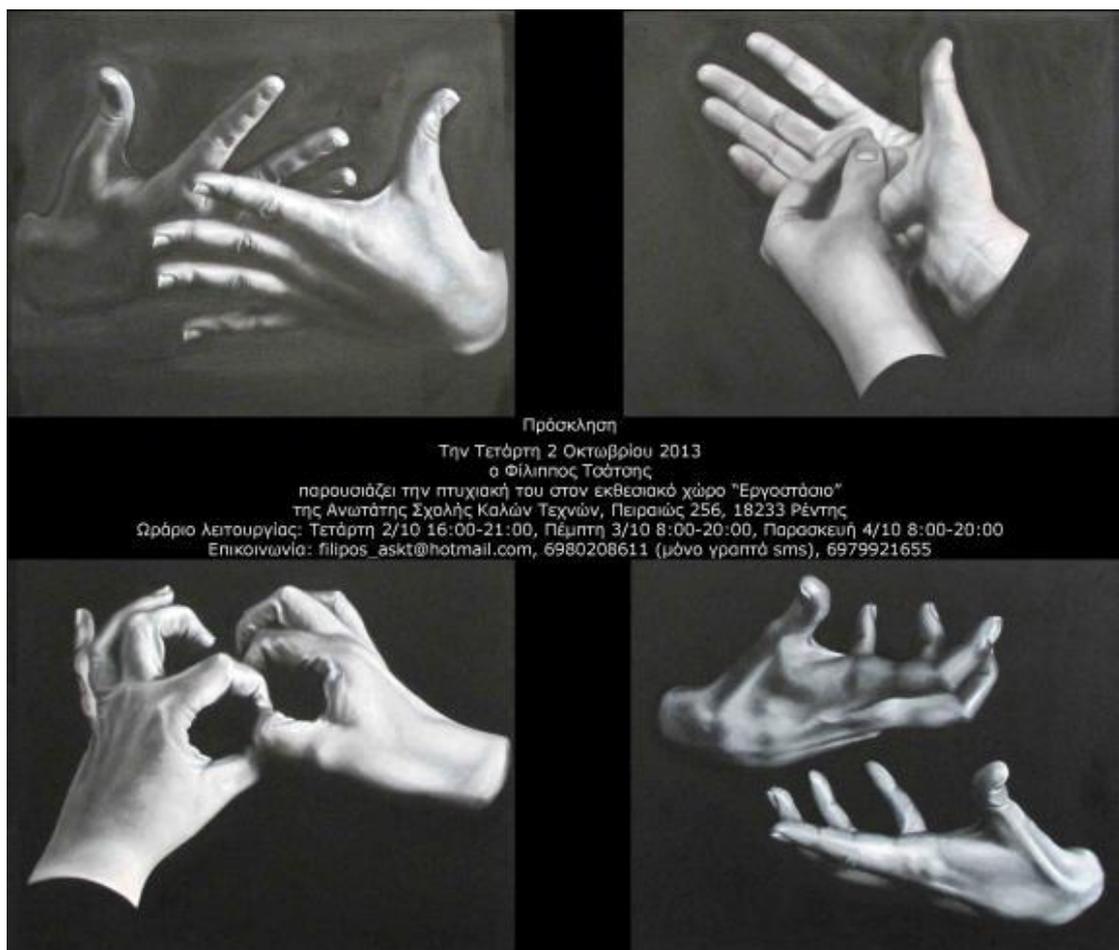


Figure 1. Invitation card for the private view of an Athens School of Art deaf graduate student's work based on the Greek Sign Language.



Another example is the Faculty of Arts of the Technological Institute of Athens and in particular the Department of Interior Architecture, Decoration and Product Design. The enrolment of the deaf students was also subjected to specific criteria, which were though quite favourable for them, and which allowed the participation of a fairly satisfactory number of the deaf in the academic community. In this case, however, the matter was dealt with in a different way. A personalized program was prepared, where appropriate, for every deaf student, under which each individual had the opportunity to work with one or more external interpreters (knowledgeable of GSL) both during the workshops, the examinations and, also, some theoretical courses. Generally speaking sign language interpreters worldwide represent a new group of professionals who have specialized knowledge so they can act as communication intermediaries between deaf and hearing people. Sign language interpreters in particular know with high proficiency both an oral and a sign language and they are aware of the hearing community culture and that of the deaf community in which they work. They are also very knowledgeable about the communication needs of the deaf arising mainly as a result of the visual way they perceive the world (Sofianidou, Bakomitrou, Kalantzi-Azizi, 2005). Thus, this intermediate link that mediated in communication between the actual teacher and the deaf students, was an important and indispensable person for the smooth and seamless transfer of knowledge, mainly at a workshop level.

Nevertheless, in both cases we will observe that, despite these very significant initiatives, the treatment of deaf students still remains 'special'. Deaf students did not seem to be an integral part of the totality of a class, but instead they were either a unit 'detached' from the set, or members of one smaller, specific group which operated autonomously, being "protected" and "fortified". So the unity of class seemed to be inexistent as there were two different teaching speeds in parallel time. It should also be noted that in the case of the Athens School of Fine Arts, deaf students had neither the ability for direct contact and communication with other teachers of their or other workshops, which would help them to develop their learning horizons, while in the case of the Technological Educational Institute of



Athens, they had virtually never a direct communication with their teachers, other than through interpreters, a fact which is unacceptable as far as education is concerned. In both cases obviously there is not even the slightest challenge for participation in common objectives and targets, the development of rivalry or even competition, concepts which not only should they be aware of, but also adopt given that after their graduation they will easily experience them in an entirely non-protective society.

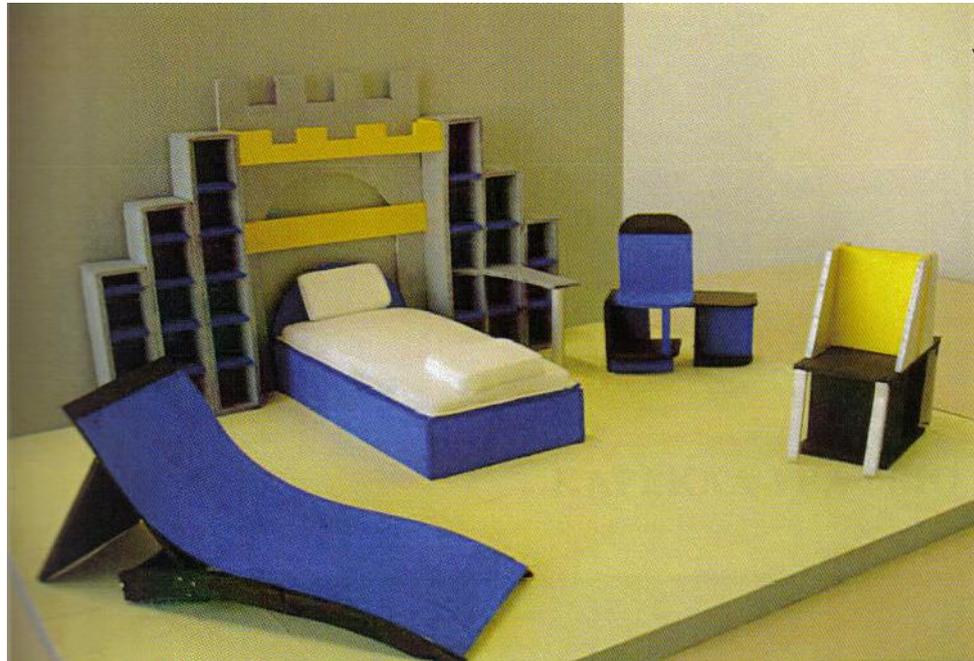
### **The Years Of The Financial Crisis**

But what happened during the years of the financial crisis? Things began to deteriorate both in terms of enrolments and in terms of studying conditions in art educational institutions. Since 2009 under Law 3794, Article 5, the special examinations for these categories of candidates were abolished and so deaf people were in need to take the same exams with the rest. Specifically, it was stated that candidates who suffered from some form of disability or severe medical condition (e.g., blind, deaf, hearing impaired people, sufferers of multiple sclerosis, from myasthenia gravis treated with medication, renal patients on dialysis, etc), could get in universities and Technological Educational Institutes without exams, except from the Athens School of Fine Arts and some Faculties of the School of Fine and Applied Arts of the universities of Thessaloniki and of West Macedonia in excess of the number of students enrolling at a rate of 5% (if title holders were high schools or equivalent domestic or foreign schools graduates).

This resulted not only in the limited success of these individuals at the examinations for entrance at the Schools for obvious reasons of course, but mainly in the removal of transferred special educators from the country's art schools. Therefore, the teaching of the deaf, even in a very small number of students admitted, became even more difficult, as, of course, was also the case with the unity of each workshop of painting, sculpture or engraving. According to Mrs. Ourania Anastasiadou who teaches deaf students at the Athens School of Fine Arts, "...today only six people with deafness attend the School's classes. However, there



is a great deal of interest". She also said: "This year they (deaf people) took entrance examinations, along with the rest, and of course nobody succeeded mostly because they didn't have the ability to exercise daily as the rest did". However she clarified that the special exams carried out in previous years were equally difficult (Fyntanidou, 2013).



*Figure 2.* Children's room furniture mock-up by a deaf student, Technological Educational Institute of Athens, Faculty of Arts, Department of Interior Architecture, Decoration and Product Design.

That law did not apply for the respective School of Technological Educational Institute of Athens, but the aforementioned difficulties in communication of the deaf inside classrooms and workshops, began to look like a blessing: interpreters for the deaf ceased to be a means of intermediate communication between students and teachers as well, since the Ministry of Education could no longer economically justify their employment in Higher Education, a decision that caused their intense reaction (Vassiliou, 2011). So deaf students, with no essential means of communication with their teachers are, even in this case, a small part of a class



which not only does it not advocate its unity, but it risks falling behind any form of not only learning, but also social progress and development.

### **How can this situation be addressed?**

We therefore believe that only through basic education of the art teachers themselves as a least requirement shall it be possible to achieve a fundamental effect not only for a smooth and seamless unity of a class, but mainly for the effective education of deaf students. Tutors are those who will have to agree to be trained in such a way and to easily pass the same message to the other members of the class. So a class whose members will show their profound sensitivity to the deaf, can be strong and healthy cells in a society and therefore they have no room to fail.

More specifically, unless they have not been trained in the Greek Sign Language, tutors must use methods and techniques so that their teaching be more effective, but also the unity of a class or a workshop to be uniform and united. So we can understand that the updating of teachers and students of such an educational institution for the deaf students needs is crucial, and thus it should be continuous and incessant. This could contribute not only to the solution of many problems that might arise but mainly to the provision of social and psychological support to deaf students. This could be achieved in many ways, among which we can mention the following:

- by visiting the deaf community and its unions and clubs where art is taught,
- by inviting deaf artists who would like to share their knowledge and their art with both deaf and hearing students of art or
- by even watching movies related to deafness or theatrical performances of the official *Theatre of the Deaf* or of other theatrical groups created by deaf people (Bozoni, 2014). In this way both teachers and hearing students could understand better, through their broader cognitive subject, the actual needs of the deaf students and behave to them accordingly.

Tutors should also, inter alia:



- Exploit all physical ways of the body to communicate with the deaf students, such as gestures, facial expressions, lip-reading, but also the written word (notes, photocopies, and illustrations).
- Allow the deaf students to see their faces and speak slowly and clearly,
- Repeat something that has not been understood in different words and phrases and integrate them smoothly into the new vocabulary of art (materials, techniques, terminology) with explanations, even with the use of brochures or images,
- Ensure that deaf students actively participate in the lesson or the exercise and fearlessly express their opinion,
- Encourage the deaf to ask questions and that they answer them willingly,
- Expect from the deaf the same work and behaviour as from all other students of the workshop,
- Exhibit, in general, deep understanding of the needs of deaf students, but without being protective, something which would belittle their dignity,
- Show to deaf students the person who speaks each time so that they can follow them,
- Remind other students to look at deaf students when they speak,
- Prevent other students from talking all together, thus allowing deaf students to read what they say with their lips,
- Remind them to speak slowly and clearly using short sentences, rather than mutter and not to speak slowly (Lampropoulou, Hatzikakou, Vlahou, 2003).

The other students should:

- Be willing to answer to the deaf any questions about any exercise or project,
- When they change topic of discussion, to inform at first their deaf classmates,
- Allow deaf students to use objects or devices that are close to their teachers, and generally have a place close to them to better watch what they say, show or manufacture,
- Ensure that there is peace in the workshop and of course to know the essentials of sign language (Kolias, 2010).

### **Conclusion**

As we understand the issue of artistic education of deaf people in Institutions of Higher Education in Greece is complex and difficult to solve. The main reasons



of the dead-end management of this issue are located not only in the cultural profile of the Greek society, but also in the changeable political situation of the country as it appears to affect important matters such as the education subject, in general. But in our view, the way that Art and Design can be taught to the deaf can easily overcome the above two knotty situations. The solution to such a problem can be traced to the high professional level of consciousness of art tutors who seem to have the ability to change this situation for the benefit of deaf students. This means that with their own significant initiative and contribution despite the many great adversity, art tutors can define a new class milieu in which both the deaf and hearing students can comfortably coexist to a satisfactory level of cooperation and creativity. Under these circumstances the coveted unity of a class with students of so different backgrounds, but not skills, can be achieved. Therefore, a class can be an exemplary place of knowledge, communication and experience which could help significantly deaf students to integrate more easily into the wider social / professional fabric after graduation.



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