



Social studies: moving from the textbook to the real world. Can you make the jump?

By Katie Quartano

My daughter finishes junior high school this year and yesterday was the big day when parents are invited to discuss their child's progress with the teaching staff and to collect the "be all and end all" marks.

I have always felt that the length of the queue for each teacher reflects the parents' perceived importance of the subject involved, and in turn probably that of society. I was particularly dismayed this time to see that the teacher for social studies had joined the ranks of the art, music and gym teachers, who form the "no queue at all" category. The social studies teacher explained to me that her lesson includes issues such as human rights, racism and discrimination, and because of my recent involvement in the Disability Access Friendly campaign, I was interested to find out whether the curriculum also covers raising awareness about the physically disabled. She assured me that most definitely these issues were touched upon, although they don't warrant the heights of a specially dedicated chapter in the textbook. Still, I was sufficiently encouraged to follow up with further questions:

"What provisions does the Greek Ministry of Education make for the schooling of children whose only disability is physical?"

"Where do these children go to school in Thessaloniki?"

"What is the official position on integration of the physically disabled into regular schools?"

"What are the legal requirements of a school to provide access for the physically disabled?"

The social studies teacher, the person whose lesson aims to raise the level of social conscience of my child, smiled and told me that she had no idea. She even lacked the curiosity to speculate on the matter. I was shocked.

I don't want to end this account on a negative note, as I am truly encouraged that social studies form part of the compulsory school curriculum. At the very least children will be made aware of the fact that bridges need to be built. This is the theoretical side embedded in the textbook. Actually building the bridges, however, is a hands on, practical matter. Having recently spent a lot of time with someone in a wheelchair I have been shocked at myself to find how difficult it is to project oneself into someone else's position and anticipate their needs and difficulties, and I can see how easy it is to be guilty of "passive discrimination" whereby you discriminate unwittingly simply by not doing anything.

A fine initiative by a private school in Thessaloniki has resulted in some of their economically and socially privileged students coming into personal contact with children from the orphanage. This action has done more to sensitize them to the needs of others than any textbook ever could. I would encourage language schools that support the Disabled Access Friendly campaign to find ways of incorporating similar actions into their teaching curriculum so that able-bodied children and children with physical disabilities can forge personal links, a small but important step in bridge building.