Engaging with multiculturalism in Greek-Cypriot Primary Schools

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Abstract: This paper explores the way in which students are engaging with multiculturalism in Greek-Cypriot primary schools. The student population has become increasingly diverse during the last few decades, creating a conflict with the monocultural and monolingual character of the education system. Through a narrative inquiry, this paper looks at the way students’ different cultures are perceived and treated by the students themselves –both Cypriot and non-Cypriot– in two primary schools in Nicosia. Findings indicate that they manage to deal with the issues and tensions created by the conflict between multiculturalism and monoculturalism in a positive and constructive way. Children express positively over the multicultural character of their classrooms, acknowledging, however, the fact that minor racist incidents exist.

Introduction

Cyprus presents an interesting example in the study of diversity. The controversy between the inherent diversity of the population on the one hand and the belief over monoculturalism infused by nationalism and ethnocentrism conflict on the other, has created a fascinating context for the study of multiculturalism. Situated in the eastern Mediterranean Sea, at the crossroads of East and West, Cyprus has always had a multicultural population (Akçali, 2007), comprised by Greek Cypriots, Turkish Cypriots, Armenians, Maronites and Latin. Since partition in 1974, when the island was divided into a predominately Greek part in the southern part of the island and a Turkish one in the north, each community has stressed its supposedly homogeneous character (Papadakis, 2005). The myth of a homogeneous, monocultural and monolingual Cypriot society long cultivated by education and the media (Bryant, 2004), has overshadowed recent demographic changes. During the last few decades, Cyprus has experienced some of the consequences of globalization, receiving a significant number of foreign workers and immigrants from Asia, Middle East and the former eastern block, whose number is increasing rapidly.
As diversity grows within Cypriot society, school population is becoming more diverse, especially within the inner-city schools (Rousou & Xatzigianni-Yiangou, 2001). The Greek Cypriot education system – on which this paper focuses – has not been prepared to meet the consequences of population diversity, and has not yet responded with a specific, efficient policy (Panayiotopoulos & Nicolaïdou, 2007; Partasi, 2007). The monocultural and ethnocentric character of the education system, infused with nationalistic elements (Christou, 2006; Papadakis, 2008; Spyrou, 2000) leaves very little space for diversity (Trimikliniotis, 2004). One of the aims of primary education, according to the National Curriculum is, amongst others, the cultivation of the national identity of Greek Cypriots, on the basis of the Greek language and Christian Orthodox religious traditions (MoEC, 1996). The image of Cyprus as homogeneous nation-state is promoted (Mavratsas, 1999), completely ignoring the presence of other cultural and ethnic groups in the society (Philippou, 2007). Even though some attempts have been made during the last few years towards intercultural education, nothing has changed substantially.

Previous research on the experiences and attitudes of students presents contradicting findings. Children appear to be positive over the possibility of having classmates or friends from other countries. Ethnicity does not seem to influence the relations and interaction between children from different groups (Hadjitheodoulou-Loizidou & Symeou, 2007; Partasi, 2009), despite the fact that racist attitudes exist within or between cultural groups (Nicolaou, Nitsiou, & Charalambous, 2007) and some non-Cypriot children are reported to have experienced considerable marginalization (Angelides, Stylianou, & Leigh, 2003, 2004).

This research

Part of a narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) exploring students and teachers’ experience of diversity in primary schools in Cyprus, this paper focuses on the way in which students are engaging with multiculturalism. Narrative inquiry focuses on the individuals’ experiences and the meanings they attribute to them (Trahar, 2009), based on the belief that people construct meaning through stories (Andrews, Squire, & Tamboukou, 2008). Narrative inquiry provides access to silenced narratives of individuals and groups, allowing the development of an informed understanding of the qualities of each individual experience (Philion, 2002, 2008).

The inquiry took place in two inner city primary schools in Cyprus in the school year 2008-2009. The participants were 10 to 11 years old attending the 5th and 6th grade of primary schools. Specifically, two classrooms in two different schools were purposively selected to ensure the diversity of their student population. I visited each classroom for three weeks, observing all the lessons and activities students and their teachers were involved in. The data collected include observation notes, stories written by the students and interviews with students, both Cypriot and non-Cypriot (immigrants, immigrants’ children, mixed marriages and minorities). These data
were analyzed with the use of the Thematic Narrative Analysis (Riessman, 2008), revealing the thematics emerging.

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By looking both at the stories narrated and enacted during the inquiry and at the way children were behaving and talking about their classmates and their classes, this section presents the children’s engagement with multiculturalism. The analysis of the collected data reveals three main thematics around which the narratives evolved; issues of friendships, difficulties in acceptance and the celebration of cultural diversity.

Generally, children seemed to socialize with the majority of their classmates and everybody was considered to be part of the same group. In both of the classes inquired, Cypriot and non-Cypriot students were accepted by everybody. Non-Cypriot children were integrated in the class and were accepted by their classmates. However, the multicultural character of their schools and classes was constantly acknowledged and students could easily name their non-Cypriot classmates based on their religion, language and their family’s origin. However, they all claimed that these do not influence their choice of friends, since personality is the most important factor determining their choices. They all said that they shared the same interests with their friends and that they had chosen them because they liked them as individuals. Children's ethnicity was not considered to be an obstacle in the development of friendships:

*One’s colour is not important; we should look at the ‘inside’ of the person and not the ‘outside’. (Anna)*

*It doesn’t matter that they are not from Cyprus, they are still nice.*’ (Stavroula)

These statements were consistent with the way students behaved to each other. Even during recess, when they were divided into smaller groups, these groups were also culturally diverse. The instances where children from the same cultural background gathered alone together were extremely rare. Even though there were no incidents of racism or discrimination observed during the fieldwork, some of the children referred to some incidents in the past:

*They were making fun of a child in the school, because... he was totally different, he spoke another language. He was in my class and we all helped him to adjust to the school.*' (Maria)

Discussing this issue further, it became obvious that when students join a new school or class they become an easy target for teasing and bullying. This applies equally to Cypriot and non-Cypriot students. In their narratives students even justified the origins of this. They mainly attributed it to the lack of the necessary social network of friends that would support them. As soon as they socialise and make friends, the bullying and teasing diminish:
‘In the first and second grade someone was making fun of me and he wouldn’t stop. Because I had no friends. But now that I have, he stopped.’ (Orestis)

The classmates’ role seems to be very important in the process of accepting a new student and allowing them to become member of the class group. Children in the same class get the chance to get to know each other better and find out each person’s character, which they consider more important than their cultural and ethnic background. Therefore, non-Cypriot children were accepted by all their classmates, but not necessarily by the students from other classes.

‘My classmates do not have a problem with me, but children from the other class keep teasing me all the time.’ (Martha)

Interestingly, in the children’s narratives all such incidents were in the past and things get better as they get to know each other and the new students are able to communicate with their classmates. The majority of non-Cypriot children said that they made friends relatively easily when they first joined the school and that their classmates helped them learn Greek and adjust to their new environment quickly. In these specific classes, non-Cypriot children did not seem to experience any marginalization, but they were being acknowledged as different, as mentioned before.

Nevertheless, the classes were celebrating cultural diversity. In their conversations, the children constantly repeated that they liked having classmates from different backgrounds because this enriches their knowledge. All the children considered the opportunity to learn new things from their classmates as the main and most important benefit of studying in multicultural environments.

‘It’s nice because you learn about others’ language, their religion and traditions... and they learn about mine.’ (Christina)

And they were not only saying that, but they were also applying it daily. For example, during a group activity in a math’s lesson, one of the Cypriot students was counting in Arabic and was asking his peer who spoke the language to correct him. Through this incident it is clear that not only children were considering cultural diversity useful, but they were actually experiencing it daily. They were taking advantage of their peers’ knowledge and were trying to learn from them. In this way, all children felt valuable, as their knowledge was appreciated and considered important. This exchange of information worked both ways:

‘We learn about other religions and we admire them. And they learn about ours and they admire it too.’ (Orestis)

Non-Cypriot students also expressed positive over the cultural diversity of their classrooms. The fact they were not the only ones to ‘differ’ from the Cypriot majority, offered them a form of security and safety, as they instantly become members of another group; the ‘non-Cypriots’.

‘I don’t mind. It’s mixed and I like it.’ (Martha)
Concluding remarks

The interim findings reported in this paper, complement and enrich the existing literature on the issue of multiculturalism in Cyprus. As discussed above, children participating in this research engaged with multiculturalism in a positive and constructive way. They perceive their differences as sources of knowledge and information, learning from each other. They all seemed and claimed to enjoy the multicultural character of their classes and schools, even though some problems do exist. However, through their actions they have proved that problems can be overcome with time and good intentions.

References


