Cultural identity of different ethno-cultural students: primary school teachers' social representations[1]

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Abstract

This paper aims at exploring the social representations of cultural identities that different ethno-cultural students carry in the classroom. The research is based on the theory of social representations and investigates the representations that primary school teachers may have about students' cultural identity diversities in the classroom. Moreover, it investigates whether teachers feel well informed and ready to handle the cultural diversity in the school classroom or not. We intend to find out stereotypical perceptions that teachers may have, concerning the strength of variant cultural groups. The findings were gleaned from qualitative research data and more specifically 16 semi-structured interviews that primary school education teachers gave to the researcher. The results indicate that teachers' representations about different cultural identities are positive. They acknowledge their value and the need for further cultivation. Teachers, however, seem unaware of how to take advantage of the cultural wealth that exists in a multicultural classroom.

Key Words

Social Representations, Cultural Identity, Cultural Diversity, Intercultural Education.

Migration and cultural identity

Modern multicultural society is not only a symbolic but also an acceptable reality. After decades of coexisting with a variety of different ethno-cultural groups, the society seems to have accepted these facts as reality, eliminating the thought "we have no foreigners living here", which for many years was cultivated in the collective mind, passed on from generation to generation. Post-modern societies

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are characterized by intense cultural exchanges and political, economic, cultural inter-group conflicts that change the perception of diversity (Nikolaou, 2011).

This assumption arises as a result of a basic populations' feature: their perpetual mobility. This mobility and in particular the voluntary or involuntary change of the place of living and the abandonment of one's homeland, is called *migration*. Migration is a complex phenomenon, a complex process that takes place globally at the same time (Papadopoulou & Bagavos, 2006). The main cause of migration is work search, in order to improve one's living conditions. Therefore, it is called economic migration. In addition, migration aims at the reunification with the family, as well as the return to homeland after a long–term stay in another country, called repatriation. However, in cases of involuntary migration the main reasons for violent abandonment of the homeland are persecution, violence or war (Sarris, 2008) and then the migratory population is classified as "refugees".

Migration is not a new phenomenon, as there is data on migrating populations from the depths of history. Consequently, various cultures coexisted and multiculturalism as a state has not been recently shaped. The continuous migration of individuals and population groups results to the formation of "colorful" societies with a common feature, that of diversity. Diversity points to something different. When diversity is referred to individuals we refer to the elements that make them different, such as color, appearance, dressing style, language, religious belief etc. There are also those individual personality traits that make each person unique and different from the others. Therefore, diversity does not concern only cultural groups or groups in general, but also individuals as units. Correspondingly, the way that individuals combine the information provided differentiates their views on diversity, even when they evaluate exactly the same group (Bauman, Trawalter & Unzueta, 2014).

The cultural elements that each individual adopts constitute their cultural identity. Individuals do not only have a cultural identity, but also a personal or a social one. The multi-identity dimension of a person results from his participation in many groups simultaneously and not just in one. Having more than one identity does not necessarily mean that they overlap each other, but rather that identities are linked with each other to a complex network of relationships. Thus, the individual's cultural identity consists of their capability to be a member of many different cultural groups (e.g., ethnic, religious etc.) and at the same time to move among them (Campbell, 2000). In addition, a person's identity includes two axes: the individual, which includes the elements that allow him to define himself, and the social, which includes his collective traits that make his sense of "belonging" to a social group (Germanos, 2000). Therefore, it is understandable how multiple identities coexist in a multicultural society.

Social representations and cultural groups

Studies underline that groups with or without power perceive diversity differently. The first ones would define diversity in a way that would give them more benefits while the second ones would define it in a way that would minimize the facts that make them seem disadvantaged (Unzueta & Binning, 2012). This happens because even though individuals are unique, they adopt knowledge systems that connect them to other people and create groups.

These systems of knowledge known as social representations are necessary for the individual, as they supply them with those "vehicles" that will help him to communicate with other individuals in any collective activity in the society (Moscovici, 1990). This is a permanent and spontaneous process of assessing and evaluating people and events occurring in the social environment (Di Giacomo, 1980). In this way, completely randomly, groups of people or random events in group life may me objects of social representations.

Through social representations individuals share a collective social identity, constitute social groups and differentiate from other groups, perform with a common accepted logic and share a common cognitive base that allows their communication (Moscovici, 2000). It is a fact that people who belong in different social groups also have different social representations or vice versa. Based on the representations they manifest we can understand to which social group they belong and which position they occupy in it. Certainly, social representations can be changed if local and temporal relationships change (Papastamou, 1989).

Almost all human activity takes place in groups. In a social environment, small (a classroom, an orchestra etc.), medium (students of a school, teachers of a region, a neighborhood etc.) and large groups (culturally diverse groups, religious groups etc.) coexist. At the same time, there may be subgroups within a group, such as the group of ethno-cultural different students within a classroom.

A person can be a member of more than one team at the same time, provided that they are not conflicting. In this way, a network of relationships between the members of the same group, between the members of different groups, and therefore, between the groups is developed. Thus, social groups approach each other, communicate, agree or disagree, merge or break apart by developing a network of relationships between them, or else an inter-group network of relationships. Therefore, social representations are also developed among the groups, they influence the inter-group relations and are also influenced by them (Papastamou, 1989). For example, two groups that support opposing political parties are conflicting. Each one of these groups develops a social representation for the opposing team, which, in this case, is negative.

Negative social representations between cultural groups trigger racism. The basic principle expressed by racism is the belief that some cultures are superior to others and, as a result, there are strong cultural groups and minority groups (Gundara, 2012). As far as migrants and the various minority ethnic and cultural groups in the countries are concerned, racism is the cause of their devaluation

problems, which are mainly found in their inadequate housing and their employment in secondary value jobs, which the locals refuse to undertake (Jacobs & Gundara, 2012). Racism classifies and puts labels such as "minority", "inferior", "foreigners", which presuppose comparison and negative social representations.

In addition, groups are not only formed because of their adaptation to the external environment but also from the inside, which justifies the classification of the members of the societies in classes and the distinction in strong and minority groups (Moscovici, 2011). When 'minority group' refers to people with a different cultural background, due to the cultural differences, the "foreigner" behavior can trouble us, can cause us diffusion and frustration, can disappoint us and create negative thoughts-stereotypes for this group (Smith & Bond, 2005). Moreover, it is possible that the attempt of interaction between different ethnic and cultural groups will provoke frustration on both sides of the communication process. As a result, ambiguous negative stereotypes are created, which aggravate the difficulties in communication and reduce the groups' interaction. So, the members of one group embrace negative social representations for the members of the other and vice versa.

As a consequence, dominating and cooperative relations between the groups are developed (Cummins, 2005). Dominating relationships comprise a dominant and a subordinate group that is called submissive by the dominant group, as well as the exercise of power by the dominant against the subordinate one. On the contrary, cooperative relationships strengthen the groups that participate in it, equally and simultaneously reinforce these groups' identities. Nowadays, we could notice that the dominating relationships between a dominant group and several minority groups are more common, as the representations of the first group for the other groups have, mainly, a negative connotation. This happens because what determines the position of a minority group in the community in fact is how it differs from the dominant patterns (Papastamou & Miouni, 2008).

The relationships between groups and their representations for each other do not leave school unaffected. On the one hand, stereotypical, interracial perceptions are manifested in the school environment and influence the students. On the other hand, teachers were supposed to be prepared to teach heterogeneous student groups and at the same time to create active and responsible future citizens (Spinthourakis, 2009). Through the long- standing multicultural reality, they have formed social representations for different ethno-cultural students and the groups to which they belong. The representations that primary school teachers have are being investigated in this study.

Methodology of the research

The subject's best methodological approach presupposes the qualitative methodology, which requires a study of the place and the people in order to understand the phenomenon in depth without limiting the individuals' expression of their opinion (Creswell, 2011). The interview as a methodological tool allows the in-depth research as it focuses on investigating the thoughts and the feelings of the research's subjects, through discussion and body language at the same time (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Consequently, it seems to be the most popular method of collecting data and identifying the social representations (Abric, 1996). Based on the abovementioned qualities, the interview is the methodological tool chosen to collect data in this research.

In particular, the semi-structured interview requires a predefined questionnaire but also allows the researcher to modify their order, to clarify, to add or to omit questions and to rephrase a question depending on what he considers as most appropriate (Robson, 2007). In addition, it is divided into thematic categories, while in each of them basic and clarifying questions are proposed. In the present study, the recording method was used, so that the transcribed texts and data corresponded exactly to the teachers' sayings. Finally, the data was interpreted with content analysis of the interviews.

Qualitative research aims at in-depth exploring of a subject rather than generalizing the results in a wider population (Creswell, 2011). For this reason, people who will participate in qualitative research are deliberately chosen on the basis of certain characteristics. The sample surveyed amounted to 16 teachers that worked in Epirus, Greece, and presented a variety of years in service, including permanently appointed and deputy teachers. It should be noted that the sample teachers at that time worked in integration classrooms, all-day schools, small elementary schools (with 3 classrooms) and also classical elementary schools and classrooms. The majority of them were women (14) –a fact that is justified by the female "domination" in the field of primary school education teachers in Greece. At this point, it is worth noting that the research presented in this paper is a part of a larger research that occurred within my postgraduate diploma study at the University of Ioannina, Greece.

Teachers' social representations for different cultural identities

The aim of the research is to find out the representations that teachers have about the cultural identity that different ethno-cultural students carry on from their mother-country. Thus, possible existing stereotypical perceptions about certain cultural groups that affect these representations are investigated. In particular, teachers answered questions about their views on the mother-culture and the students' identity, the existence of powerful and powerless cultural

groups and also on the existence and validity of stereotypical perceptions that affect attitudes towards nationally and culturally different groups.

Mother-culture and identity

Concerning the mother-culture of different ethno-cultural students, the majority of teachers argue that they do not consider its abandonment necessary in order to adapt to the new culture. On the contrary, they argue that in this case students face the danger of losing an important part of their identity, and, as a result, become even more isolated. Therefore, they consider it very important for students to preserve their special culture in order to use it as a foundation of their identity. Simultaneously, they emphasize the importance of students' willingness to integrate into their existing cultural identity elements from the new culture in order to adapt and be part of the group.

> *"It is not necessary to leave behind the part of their culture because this is their story... culture cannot be left behind."* (I8)

> *"Every classroom is also a puzzle. Every students and come into the classroom adds his own piece, so imagine a puzzle without pieces. "* (I11)

However, two teachers point out that even though students should not leave a bit of their culture behind, they sometimes do it to avoid stereotypical perceptions and prejudices. This is usually the family's choice, who prefer to "forget" the native culture in order to protect their children from negative comments and racist attitudes. Specifically, teachers state that this happens to Albanian students and families who tend to adopt elements of Greek culture, such as Christian Orthodox christening and name change, in order to integrate more smoothly and be accepted by the community. This attitude may indicate a self-devaluation of the country of origin and culture triggered by racist attitudes by the host country.

> *"I think that some do so. I think they are forced in order to be accepted. It is no coincidence that Albanians come and become Christians suddenly. They change for some reason. (...) they change their identity in order to be able to exist in this new place. "* (I10)

Regarding the possibility of two or more coexisting cultures in one identity, the overwhelming majority of teachers (15 out of 16) respond that it is possible, necessary and beneficial, especially, if they combine the positive elements of the different cultures and form a stronger identity.

> *"Of course they can coexist and not just two cultures but more."* (I11)

Powerful and powerless cultural groups

It was considered important to explore the teachers' views on the distinction of cultural groups into "powerful" and "powerless". Is this distinction real and if so, do they embrace it?

Regarding the existence of stronger than others cultural groups, teachers argue that this is a reality that does not stem from the culture of the people but from the economic and political power of the states and the disguised profits. However, the majority of respondents do not embrace this separation even though they recognize that it exists in social reality. In addition, some teachers emphasize that cultures are different and unique and this makes them special, necessary and equal.

> "I think that this has arisen because of the dynamics of the countries and depends on how strong a country is. I do not believe that a culture should be considered stronger or weaker than another. It may be convenient to believe that some are culturally inferior to others. All cultures have the same value as they have the opportunity to show it." (I16)

Some of the teachers argue that the discrimination of different cultural groups into more and less powerful ones also occurs in the school environment in the sense of different educational levels and, therefore, behavior. A teacher also points out that this discrimination is in some cases adopted by members of different cultural groups and, as a result, children go to school self-underestimating their mother-country and hiding their national and cultural identity.

> "Yes, of course. At school also… a child from Russia does not feel that bad about his origins as a child from Albania feels. I had a student in my classroom for whom I learned at Christmas that he was an Albanian." (I14)

At the same time, a teacher notes that the distance between individuals causes racist behavior and stereotypical perceptions of this kind. It is the unknown that scares people and creates representations, in order for persons to communicate and attach relationships with individuals belonging to different cultural groups.

> "I think the Albanians are in better state now in Greece than the Pakistanis, for example. I think that they have set up better in the society and that they are not experiencing such racism because it is the new one that is the scariest for us." (I10)

Representations for the cultural groups

We also investigated whether the stereotypical images that accompany the different ethno-cultural groups remain stable and unchanged over time. Most teachers here argue that the negative images that accompany certain cultural

groups are stable, but that does not mean they cannot change. Stability is due either to unpleasant personal and social experiences or to the inheriting the negative views from generation to generation or to the school textbooks and the educational system that perpetuates xenophobic feelings. On the contrary, the change of these images is due to social and political data that change from time to time recreating the public opinion on a cultural group.

> *"Stable yes, unchanged no. Nations choose which profile will attribute to other nations through education and more specifically through school textbooks. If the political line of a country is to highlight events that create feelings of hate and fear, then it is stable. But this, of course, is not unchanged."* (I11)

On the other hand, some teachers claim that these images are neither stable nor unchanged. This happens because social reality is changing and constantly evolving and the same happens to the images that people carry. They also emphasize the necessity of removing individuals from such stereotypical thoughts and generalizations that are created by unpredictable, unpleasant events. For example, the fact that a person belonging to a cultural and ethnic group once committed deception or robbery does not mean that all members of the group employ the same tactics for their survival. Instead, some teachers state that positive and acceptable behaviors from members of different cultural groups also bring positive feedback from the social environment, as well as a change in the initial negative attitude that some may have.

> *"No no. Like all people, some are thieves some are very good, some are so some are otherwise. I do not think this is a sign for everyone."* (I8)

At the same time the importance of educational intervention, in order to stay away from prejudices, and the importance of the cultivation of critical thinking among students and tomorrow's citizens is emphasized, emerging the crucial role of the educator.

Conclusions-Discussion

Teachers' social representations about the special cultural identity of their students were investigated through their thoughts about the cultural origin, the identity, the existence of powerful and powerless cultural groups and the images that accompany these groups. Teachers acknowledge the value of the cultural identity that different ethno-cultural students have and they support its preservation. They recognize it as a mistake that some families underestimate and cut off from their mother culture in order to achieve integration. Even though this is not desirable, their term is students' willingness to adopt elements from the new culture in order to successfully integrate in the society.

Moreover, they argue that there are powerful and powerless groups, but this is a matter of state policy and economic power rather than culture. Therefore, the

fact that some national groups are considered more powerful because they possess wealth does not mean that this applies to their culture, as all groups' cultural capitals are equal. This is a distinction that, on the one hand, is ingrained in children's minds and, on the other hand, it creates feelings of inferiority or low self-esteem. The key for such feelings is the contact and the mutual appreciation between culturally different children.

Negative images that accompany certain cultural groups are, to a certain extent, stable, according to the teachers. This happens either because they are reproduced from generation to generation or because the educational system perpetuates xenophobic feelings through schoolbooks. On the contrary, these images do not mean that they are so deeply rooted that they are unchanged, as they can be altered during social change. A typical example is the negative images that accompanied the German national team, which became positive with the intense immigration of the Greeks into it and now tends to become negative again with the long-term economic crisis that the country is experiencing. Teachers do not embrace such images and they try to succeed with all their students.

From the data presented, we can see the teachers' positive social representation towards the special cultural identity of their different ethno-cultural students. They respect it, acknowledge its value and the child's need to maintain and cultivate it, while they are strongly opposed to negative stereotypes and prejudices. However, they fail to talk about the exploitation of the cultural capital that nationally and culturally diverse students carry in the multicultural class. At this point, we can see the anxieties that arise from the presence of these students in their classroom and their self-estimation, the fact that they may not be sufficiently trained to achieve maximum results in the multicultural class.

It is now understood that multicultural society is built on the basis of separation. However, the school is fighting for the opposite, while teachers are expressing a positive social representation for the different cultural identities that students may have. Kymlicka (2003) notes that the essence of multiculturalism in not the strengthening of nationalist feelings but the equitable strengthening of all national identities that coexist in a particular place. However, interculturalism is the ideal policy as it extends multiculturalism and proposes the development of high quality communication relationships between different groups, mutual understanding, respect and above all their interaction.

Genuine interculturalism requires facing the minority groups' problems raised by dominant groups, as well as equating marginalized and silent groups with the dominants in a context of democratic social unity. In this way, it aims at the development of pluralistic consciousness (Gundara, 2001/2002), which education must firstly establish.

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