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Identity Construction among the Albanian Immigrant Students of Pre-primary and Primary Age and the Parents' Strategies of Social Inclusion: An Ethnographic Approach

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Abstract

The paper addresses the issue of identity construction and performative belonging of Albanian immigrant children of pre-primary and primary age. It is based on extensive fieldwork conducted among Albanian families. We are particularly interested in Albanian parents' perceptions of the host country's social and institutional environment and how these have affected the way they deal with matters of education, culture, ethnicity, and identity formation. Our analysis is ethnographic and uses some of the analytical tools offered by Ogbu's cultural-ecological theory of minority status and school performance. Either in support of his theory or challenging it, the paper is an attempt to explain the way Albanian immigrants in Greece view issues of education, language, culture, social mobility and inclusion.

Ethnographic approach to minority education – an Introduction

Ethnographic studies of minority education either focus on how knowledge is transmitted both in school and out of school, or on how socio-economic and political structures in society are transposed into the classroom in the form of conflicts. The first approach is micro-ethnographic. Earlier anthropologists, through their studies on enculturation and knowledge transmission in traditional societies (e.g., Malinowski, 1943; Benedict, 1943; Mead, 1928, 1943; Powdermaker, 1948; Redfield, 1943) had written about school experience and laid the grounds for others later on, who encountered educational problems by non-mainstream, lower-class, minority and immigrant children. The second approach that focuses more on the social stratification system is the macro-ethnographic one. After the late 1960s macro-ethnographies, based on participant observation not only at school but also in other social settings, including homes, public gathering places and work sites among others, examined local politics, economic opportunities and chances for social mobility. Examples of these kinds of macro-ethnography include Singleton's (1967) study of education in a Japanese village, Warren's (1967) work on education in a German village, Ogbu's (1974) study of education in Stockton, California and Kahn's (1992) study on schooling of the Quebecois in Canada. Ogbu's work is the first macro-ethnography of minority education.

Ethnographic studies have been realized among non-immigrant (involuntary) as well as immigrant (voluntary) minorities. In the first case they revealed that "a disproportionate number of children experience social adjustment problems and are not academically successful compared with other children. They have also discovered that these minority children often differ in significant ways from dominant-group children in culture and

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communication and in terms of power relations. From these observations, ethnographers have concluded that the minority student's disproportionate school failure is caused by discontinuities in culture, communication and power" (Gibson and Ogbu, 1991: 4). Concerning the immigrant, voluntary minorities though, research has revealed that discontinuities in culture, language and power relations and disproportionate school failure or success are not applicable to all minority groups. Ogbu suggests that immigrant minorities, although characterized by primary cultural differences, "usually experience initial problems of adjustment in school, but their problems are not characterized by persistent adjustment difficulties or low academic performance" (1990:47).

This paper uses some of the analytical tools offered by Ogbu's cultural-ecological theory of minority status and school performance (1991) either supporting them or challenging them in an attempt to explain the way Albanian immigrants in Greece view issues of education, language, culture, social mobility and inclusion. Briefly, the theory postulates that "minority school performance is an adaptation to socio-economic, cultural, and political subordination. Implicit in the theory, however, is that any significant changes in the subordination or situation of the minorities will result in corresponding changes in their school performance and attainment" (Kahn, 1992:xiii) as well as that emphasis should be given on the history and sociocultural adaptation of the minority group (Ogbu, 1998:156).

Albanian Immigrant Students: Minority Status, Culture and Identity

The paper is based on ethnographic research conducted in Argos Orestiko, a small provincial town of about 7,000 people within the Prefecture of Kastoria, about 30 km from the Greek-Albanian borders. Albanians started settling in the area in the early 90s. Today there are more than 1,000 legalized Albanian immigrants and about 400-500 irregular ones coming during the cropping periods. There are also undocumented Albanians in the area whose number cannot be accurately estimated but is alleged to be between 200-300 people. The Greek administrative areas bordering Albania (Kastoria, Florina, Ioannina) constitute passages for legal and illegal entrance of Albanians into Greece. In total, the above numbers of Albanian immigrants make up over 90% of the local immigrant population in general. As a result, the Albanians in our field area constitute a rather powerful community and in April 2007 they created an Albanian Union.

This paper presents aspects of a macro-ethnographic research, based on participant observation that lasted almost two years (2005-2007). It was conducted mostly with Albanian families having children at either only pre-primary or both pre-primary and primary school age within schools but also in other social settings, including homes, public gathering places and work sites and examined local politics, economic opportunities and chances for social mobility. I looked at how parents and children view matters of language, culture, identity formation, education and social mobility. What interested me was to look at the ways they express feelings of belonging to either community, how they are committed to their places of origin and the community they have left behind in Albania as well as new practices and strategies of ethnic identity construction. The identity formation processes of the young Albanians born either in Greece or brought to Greece when still very young, follows different patterns than adult

immigrants'. In parallel to participant observation, I conducted unstructured interviews with those Albanians (parents and children) that were accessible. I have also used questionnaires and conducted structured and unstructured interviews with all the teachers of the pre-primary schools and some teachers of the primary schools.

According to Ogbu immigrant minorities do not perceive their cultural frame of reference as in opposition to the frame of reference of the dominant group but rather view the learning of aspects of the mainstream culture as necessary (1991:48). Their cultural and language differences do not serve as a boundary-maintaining mechanism, and thus the difficulties in language and culture students face at school, are seen as barriers to be overcome and not (as it happens with involuntary minorities) as symbols of identity to be maintained. Learning of the dominant language is not seen as threatening to their own minority language and identity. Our research findings support Ogbu's perspective. Albanian immigrants in the field emphasize on the necessity of acquiring good competence of the Greek language as a means of social mobility and culture boundary crossing. They often attribute their exclusion from better jobs to their not being educated in Greece. As a result they encourage their children to Greek language learning from a very early age and they seem particularly interested in their children's good school performance. Albanian parents seem to trust the educational system in Greece more than the Greeks do. Ogbu suggests that immigrant minorities do not distrust members of the dominant group or the institutions controlled by them. Although this seems to be the case for America and its immigrant populations, in Greece, the Albanian immigrants in the field area seem to have little trust to the state and its institutions, with the exception of the schools, due to the lack of migration policy and the existence of exhausting bureaucracy that troubled them especially during the first decade of their surge into Greece. Schooling, as fieldwork results reveal, is seen as the vehicle for upward-mobility for their children and thus schools are probably the only state institutions that are trusted.

During the time of research, the ethnic Albanian children that attended the four pre-primary schools and the pre-primary classes operating within the nursery schools of my fieldwork town were 15 (4-6 years old) and those attending the four primary schools were 57 (6-12 years old). The teachers of the pre-primary schools have all agreed that the Albanian parents systematically register their children to the pre-primary classes so that their children start learning Greek before going to primary school. At the point of entrance, the competence of these children in the Greek language is either extremely low or non-existent. I have observed that Albanian parents with children at that age almost always speak Albanian at home. In course of time, as their children grow up and go to school, they start to gradually increase the use of the Greek language over that of the Albanian.

Albanian immigrant children in the field (almost all of them born in Greece) acquire very quickly good competence of the Greek language and can socialize easily with Greek students. Thus, it is much easier for them to develop relationships with the Greeks than for their parents. Albanian parents consider it a priority for their children to learn the Greek language and they usually encourage them to study. Teachers have often commented very enthusiastically on the Albanian children's efforts at school.

On the other hand, several Albanian parents in the field have complained that their children are not particularly interested in maintaining their mother language and they avoid using it even within the house. These are mostly students who are getting on well at school and want to follow university studies in Greece. These children usually have friends among the Greek children and their language choice is often encouraged by the family's general attitude towards education and language use in general. The families who usually choose to speak Greek at home are also those who do not have elderly people (grandparents) living with them. Since most grandparents do not speak Greek at all and they can hardly follow a simple conversation in Greek, the families with elderly people in the household tend to use the Albanian language at home. Interestingly enough, however, I have recorded cases where young children (6-12 years old) and teenagers in such families still insist on using Greek when addressing their parents and Albanian when addressing their grandparents. Since Albanian is not taught at schools, the Greek language has become hegemonic and seems to be more prestigious among the immigrants.

The Albanian language in the field is a minority language spoken only by the immigrants. Since material advancement depends on mastery of the national language, language shift (and sometimes the 'death' of minority language) is not an uncommon outcome. "The abandonment of the minority language in favour of the dominant language may be the pragmatic choice from an economic perspective" while, on the other hand, its persistence despite the lack of any institutional support "may serve to mark off ethnic differences within multi-ethnic societies" (DeBernardi 1994:872-73).

The Albanian language's future in Greece will sooner or later follow the pattern of other minority languages. Since Greece does not provide the immigrants with public education in their languages, in course of time they will all give way to Greek. On the other hand, the Institution for the Education of the Adults [Institouto Diarkous Ekpaidefsis Enilikon - IDEKE] operates Education Centers all over the country and provides the immigrants with Greek language courses. Quite interestingly, although language has been the most reliable unifying element for the Albanian nationalism and the language question became the basic political demand (Misha 2002:41) the Albanian immigrants do not seem particularly resistant to abandoning their language. What I have recorded in the field is that they have not managed to make their children believe that their language is important enough to be maintained. On the other hand, the immigrants in the field area have not made any claim for the operation of a private Albanian primary school in the prefecture of Kastoria, despite its estimated Albanian immigrant population of about 2,500 people. The majority of my informants argued that they are interested in creating bases for permanent settlement in Greece and almost all of them admitted that, as their children are growing up, they are not willing to leave Greece for Albania. They attributed the young peoples' reluctance to maintain the Albanian language to their aspiration for social mobility within Greece, while Albania is seen by them as very traditional and not yet "westernized enough".

Some parents worry that as time passes their children will "forget" (to use their own words) their mother language. Several among them have argued that their children "want to become like Greeks and not look like Albanians". I have recorded that even children at primary school age who were born in Greece, often manifest a 'Greeknness' vis-à-vis their parents and other members of their families having born in Albania. One day I was watching a soccer game between Greece and Albania with an Albanian family settled in

Greece since 1993. Declaring his favouring of the Greek team the youngest son of the family, at primary school age, said to the others:

“You are all Albanians only I am Greek because I was born here”

His parents did not seem at all annoyed by this statement. This child does not speak Albanian well while his mastery of the Greek language equals that of a native's and is one of the best students at school. His parents do not intent to go back to Albania and encourage their children to follow University studies in Greece. According to Fishman, “every language provides an index of the culture with which it is most intimately associated [or otherwise] every language becomes symbolic of the culture with which it is most intimately associated” (1985: preface). In this particular case, language choice is made symbolically to denote preference in performing one's belonging and it is done in ethnic terms. This practice supports the argument made by Ogbu that “the distinguishing beliefs and practices of the different types of minorities shape the community forces that minority children bring to school [and that these community forces] interact with school factors to jointly influence minority children's social adjustment and academic performance” (1990:50).

Ethnicity is expressed in different ways by young Albanians. Children at pre-primary school age are not expected to express ethnicity but rather reproduce their parents' attitudes and follow their advice concerning how they should behave at school. Parents encourage their children not to use Albanian within school, and so they do. Teachers report that Albanian children never use their mother language within school, not even with each other, and they might only ‘whisper’ in Albanian when their parents come to pick them up. Parents of children at pre-primary school age have told us that they do not want their children to seem different than the others and they do their best to achieve that, including Orthodox baptism and adoption of Greek names.

Although often disillusioned, the Albanians in the field seem very persistent in succeeding to improve their living and educate their children so as to help them enhance their chances for social mobility in Greece. Except for the loose relationship with the Albanian language, their relation with religion is particularly interesting. In the field, the majority of the Albanian immigrants follow the practice of changing their names to Greek ones when passing the borders, and later, when well settled, they baptize their children to Orthodox Christians. These practices are well known also in other parts of Greece. The Moslem Albanians in the country constitute the 15% of the total number of the Moslem immigrants. The majority of them do not declare their religion in Greece and they are characterized by low or non-existent religiosity (Tsitselikis 2004:272- 274). This attitude of theirs is probably explained if we consider that religion has not played any particular role in the Albanian nationalism and “nationalists considered religious divisions not only as a factor of discord but also as a vehicle for foreign influence. This explains the particular secular character of Albanian nationalism which made it resemble West European types of nationalism rather than Balkan types” (Misha 2002:45). Several explanations are given on the minor or not existent relation of religion to Albanian nationalism and according to Duijzings, the basic reason has been that from the start “Albanian national movement was confronted with a situation of strong internal religious divisions, since the Albanians belong to three different faiths: Islam, Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism. If we add the Bektashis as a separate religious community [...] then we have a fourfold confessional divide” (2002: 60).

Albanian immigrant children at primary school age have often expressed their wish to be able to remain in Greece in the future and have opportunities for studies and social mobility. Although most of them are encouraged by their parents not to forget their mother tongue and keep ties with relatives in Albania, none expressed the wish to go and live in Albania in the future. The majority of these children visit Albania only during holidays to see their grandparents and other relatives but they feel as “complete strangers” [entelos xenoi] to use their own expression. The more they grow up the more they express feelings of not belonging to their parents’ places of origin and those whose parents intend to go back to Albania in the future declare that they do not want to follow them.

Parents often seem lacking any particular strategy concerning language and religious issues in relation to their children. This lack becomes obvious in the fact that, on the one hand, they encourage them to use the Greek language and even baptize them Orthodox Christians while, on the other, they appear somewhat disappointed when they realize that they do not want to pay frequent visits to relatives in Albania and that they eventually abandon their mother language. It is obvious though that their priority is to achieve social inclusion and they try to overcome cultural, language, religious and other barriers to this purpose. The Albanian immigrants in the field, like the immigrants studied by Ogbu are strongly motivated to cross cultural boundaries since “they strongly believe that there will be a material payoff later” (1992:11)

Identity construction, power relations and social inclusion

Ogbu’s study of education of Stockton, California (1974), in order to address the question of why a disproportionate number of blacks and Chicanos perform poorly at school, looks at the political and economic structures within society. The model suggests that minority school performance reflects the structure of power relations in society and should be seen as socio-economic and cultural responses to these relations. The study of the history of incorporation of the minority group into the wider society, as well as the treatment they received by the dominant group becomes of essential importance to understand the degree to which a minority can cross cultural and linguistic barriers, achieve academic success, and attain economic mobility. The minority’s experiences within society affects its own self-perception as well as the way it views cultural and language differences. These experiences are then used to help the minority formulate a collective identity that would enforce ties among them, and develop survival strategies if necessary.

What we observed in the field area is that identity construction among the Albanian immigrants depends on the conditions under which it is constructed. Along the lines of Ogbu’s theory, we observe that immigrant identities are understood on the level of everyday social interaction and are meaningful only within the particular community and under the particular social juncture. It is interesting though to observe the tensions which develop in this type of collective identity constructed by Albanian immigrants in their everyday interaction. Some ethnic Albanians in the field area are considered less “Albanian” than others, but this distinction is meaningful only to the immigrants because for the Greeks, they are all Albanians in terms of their ethnicity. On the other hand, most of the immigrants straggle to enforce their belonging to the Greek community, building an identity accepted by both themselves and the Greeks.

This process has not been an easy one particularly because the Albanians are seen as the reason for the increase of criminality in the area since the beginning of their settling in Argos Orestiko. This phenomenon, as elsewhere in Greece, has created feelings of mistrust and suspicion and the development of stereotypes against the Albanian immigrants. With time, even the word “Albanian” has come to bear a negative connotation. While telling me a story of how her son had to endure the “racial behaviour” of Greek fellow students during the first years at primary school, a young Albanian mother remarked that the teacher scolded those students and asked them not to call him “Albanian” anymore (!), adding that he has not faced any similar problems ever since and he is now well accepted at school. Teachers of pre-primary and primary schools in the field have often argued that such stereotypical behaviour against the Albanians in the school environment is gradually diminishing.

Concluding remarks

The history of the Albanians’ incorporation and social inclusion into the Greek community has not been an easy one. Negative stereotypical attitudes as well as nationalistic and racist feelings have been developed against them due to the lack of any migration policy during the time of the immigration booming in the 1990s, the extensive illegal entrance of Albanian immigrants into the country, the consequent problems that were created thereafter and the increase of criminality that was documented. On the other hand, the immigrants in the field have been highly motivated to achieve social inclusion and implied strategies to that direction. They often emphasized the fact that they were seeing better opportunities for their children in Greece and this provided them with motivation to work hard to succeed. Like the immigrants studied by Ogbu, they see that discrimination is temporary, due to cultural and language differences and that in course of time they will manage to achieve social inclusion.

Our study of identity construction among Albanian immigrant parents and children of a provincial town of Greece as predominantly connected to issues of education, language and religion, is revealing of the way that immigrants negotiate their belonging according to the political, social and economic environment of the host country. Albanian immigrants in the field have developed practices and strategies of social inclusion that they believe are suitable to the local community’s social and cultural environment. Immigrant identities are understood on the level of everyday social interaction and are meaningful only within a particular community and under the particular social juncture. Parents encourage their children to Greek language learning and take recourse of strategies of construction of ‘otherness’ (orthodox baptism, name changing and mimicry) in order to achieve social inclusion to local community and enhance their children’s future chances for social upward-mobility within Greece.

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- _ According to Ogbu primary cultural differences are differences that existed within a group before their migration and their becoming a minority. On the contrary, he suggests that secondary cultural differences that characterize involuntary minorities arise after a group has become a minority. (1990:47-48)
- _ "Ecology is the 'setting', 'environment', or 'world' of people (minorities), and 'cultural', broadly refers to the way people (in this case the minorities) see their world and behave in it." (J. Ogbu and H.D. Simons, 1998:157)
- _ KEP (Civilians' Service Center) of Argos Orestiko.
- _ See also P Hatziprokopiou 2003:1051.
- _ J.K.Birge 1994, H. T. Norris 1993:168.
- _ On Migration, criminality and stereotypes see also M. Pavlou 2001: 127-162, B. Karidis 2004: 205-232.
- _ See also L. K. Hart 1999.