

Gender Inscription of Ethnic Otherness in a Greek Fourth Grade Primary School Class¹

ABSTRACT

Greek society has been transformed into a defacto multicultural society, following the patterns of the Western countries. Multiculturalism characterises the composition of Greek classrooms. School, as this presentation will explore, is one of the main ways that issues and notions of ethnicity and gender are formed. In this paper, I present the results carried out from a case study in a fourth grade primary school classroom in a Greek school. The research aimed to investigate the formation and contestation of ethnic and gender identities in Albanian immigrant children in a Greek primary school. The two main sources of data came from observation of children and teachers in the classroom and the yard and group activities with Albanian and Greek children. I examine the children's actions and relations in the school environment in terms of immigrants' gender and ethnic identities formation and contestation. Specifically, I explore the construction of Albanian children ethnic and gender identities in the frame of power and interactions and stereotypical reflections within the school. Furthermore, I examine the teachers' influence on the Albanians' identities and interactions. I approach ethnic and gender identities as processes and argue that the fluidity of ethnic and gender identities is constrained by the power exerted through interactions in the school between the gender and ethnic groups' members and stereotypical conceptualisations of gender and ethnic identities.

¹ *This paper is based on the research I conducted for my master degree dissertation at the Institute of Education, University of London in 2005.*

Immigrant's Formation of Identities and Contestation of Solid Identity

Identities, gender and ethnic, is formulated and reformulated in the context that the individual lives and acts. However, immigrant populations present a particular feature. In regard to them, the identities formation process is a path that begins from the country of origin and which goes on to the host country. In terms of gender, the above means that their cultural and social understanding of gender is re-examined trying to include elements from the new country. In terms of ethnic identity the experiences in the new country reshape and reconstruct their perception of ethnicity.

Immigrants change their identities mostly because they are forced to in order for them to become acceptable in the new society. Through the use of “categorical identities” and the stereotypical conceptualisation of immigrants, the host society creates boundaries. Identification with a group and distinction of the self from another is related to the representations of the self by the in-group and out-group members and efforts to form commonalities with the in-group. “The Subject is defined in opposition to and through the exclusion of the Other” and “...the Subject/Other relationship contains so much power” (Paechter 1998:6). Paechter (1998) concludes by saying that this power relation between the Subject and Other is taken for granted in such an extent that neither of the parts perceives its hegemonic context in the sense that they are provided as common sense and therefore not disputable. However, taken into account that the individual cannot be categorised by only one element, it leads to the creation of multiple Subjects and consequently multiple Others.

With regards to immigration the term “hybridity” defines identities shaped in cultural differences. Hybridity, is used by Papastergiadis (2000: 257) in order to provide tools

to conceptualise the “multiple subjectivities” self. Hybrid identities then are processes not just of aggregation or removal of elements but also an area of conflict between the present and the past elements. “Hybridity as a metaphor for identity formation can only function critically when the dual forces of movement and bridging, displacement and connection, are seen as operating together” (Papastergiadis, 2004: 15). In this sense, identities of immigrants can be understood as a process of gradual and power contained formation. ‘Hybrid’ identities’ formation includes issues of representation, intergroup biases and perceptions and social consciousness. Immigrants are grouped and displaced by the out-group, the dominant group members. The reflections of the last on the first illustrate the immigrants as the Other of the society. The hybrid identities performance is constraint by stereotypical conceptualisation of ethnic groups and influenced by dynamics of exclusion from the out-group and the need for inclusion. Moving from essentialist views of gender identities and avoiding the connection of the natural body with being a man or woman, one comes to the cultural determination of gender, to consider the culture instead of nature as “destiny” (Butler, 1999: 12) and barrier.

Identities are the outcome or the aggregation of the factors that influence us and the factors that urge us to express ourselves. If this definition about identities is to be applied from a cultural perspective then the ‘discursive practice’ of the identity is the point where the two worlds are meeting, the inner self as the individual approaches it and the out self as the individual performs it.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The main aim of this paper is to investigate the formation and contestation of the ethnic and gender identities of immigrant Albanian students in a Greek classroom. Stereotypes and power, hybridity and exclusion are considered to develop a frame for the understanding of ethnic and gender identities' instability. I aimed to reveal and illustrate dynamic processes of gender and ethnic identities in a multicultural classroom. The questions raised is how the immigrant children respond to the dominant-group context and how do they reform their identities in contesting the solid home identity?

I chose to explore Albanian children because Albanians are the majority of the immigrant population in Greece. In some regions of Greece, Albanian children constitute 45% of the school population (Baldwin-Edwards, 2004).

METHODOLOGY

In this research, I tried to “focus on interpretation, rely on researcher’s immersion in social settings and aim for intersubjective understanding between researchers and the person(s) studied” (Reinharz, 1992: 46). Since there is not a universal definition of what constitutes ‘feminist’, my concern was rather “to give insights into gendered social existence” (Ramazanoğlu, 2002: 147) and the power that emerges. Oakley (2000: 42) claims that gender does not only address the two social groups of men and women but it also works as a ‘metaphor’ for the powerful and the powerless. I consider feminist methods to be empowering to socially disempowered categories of people, such as girls and immigrants, during their investigation in the sense that they allow the marginalised “voices” (Bell, 1993: 3) to emerge.

In order to interpret the settings and the power entailed in the “process” (Yin, 1989: 23) of identities’ formation between boys, girls, indigenous and immigrant children in the school life and the gendered and ethnic stereotypical influence on the identities I conducted a case study. Trying to explore in depth and interpret “how” (Yin, 1989: 23) the identities of Albanian immigrant children are formed and how they function through the process of formation in a specific context -the school, I studied a small number of Albanian children.

The participants

I conducted my research in March of 2005 for six days in a primary school in a rural area in Greece. The class was constituted of two Albanian boys, two Albanian girls, two Greek boys and twelve Greek girls. All the children have been in the same class since year one of the primary school, apart from Nikos (an ethnic Greek boy who came to Greece two years ago from Germany). There were significant differences in Albanians’ lives. Ismini, ten years old, had lived in Greece for seven years, Artemis and Dimitris, both ten years old had lived in Greece for six years; and Basil, nine years old had lived in Greece for five years. Both of the Albanian boys left Greece with their families and they went to Albania last summer for vacation. Due to problems with their visas, Dimitris came back after Christmas whereas Basil came back in March. Ismini is baptised orthodox and she also attended church meetings every Saturday along with other Greek children. The Greek children that were interacting with the Albanians the most and therefore included in group activity were ten years old. The three of them (Vana, Tassos, Natassa) have lived in the town where the research was conducted since their birth. Nikos was repatriated two years ago. He

was born in Germany, where his parents were immigrants. The class had a male teacher for most of the lessons and three female teachers -one for the English class, one for the music class and one for the P.E class.

Observation

I chose to observe the children because I wanted to record, describe and interpret their way of acting and interacting with their peer and their teachers inside and outside the class. Many times during the observation children were making gestures and were changing mood in response to an incident, without verbally expressing it (see also Judd, Smith and Kidder, 2001: 286). Their reactions were of great importance for the understanding of situations of power and dominance or alliance and solidarity. Even though participants become easily accustomed to the observer's attendance in order to minimize the influence of my presence, I was first introduced by the headmaster to the class as a student who was interested in the teaching process.

Group Activity

I found the activity in the Oxfam Gender Training Manual (Williams, 1994). I used Activity 33, "The story of Joan and John" (Williams, 1994: 167). The aim of this activity was "to bring out, in discussion, the way that female and male roles are constructed from birth onwards" (Williams, 1994: 168) and to explore and contemplate the power interactions of peers and stereotypical group formations (Francis, 1998). I asked from the participants to form a circle and to create a story about the lives of Joan and John. A ball was given to the participants and they had to pass it one to the other. The one who had the ball had to give an element of the life of the person (John or Joanna). The activity allowed me to research the children's perceptions and stereotypes about the gender and to explore the power interactions of

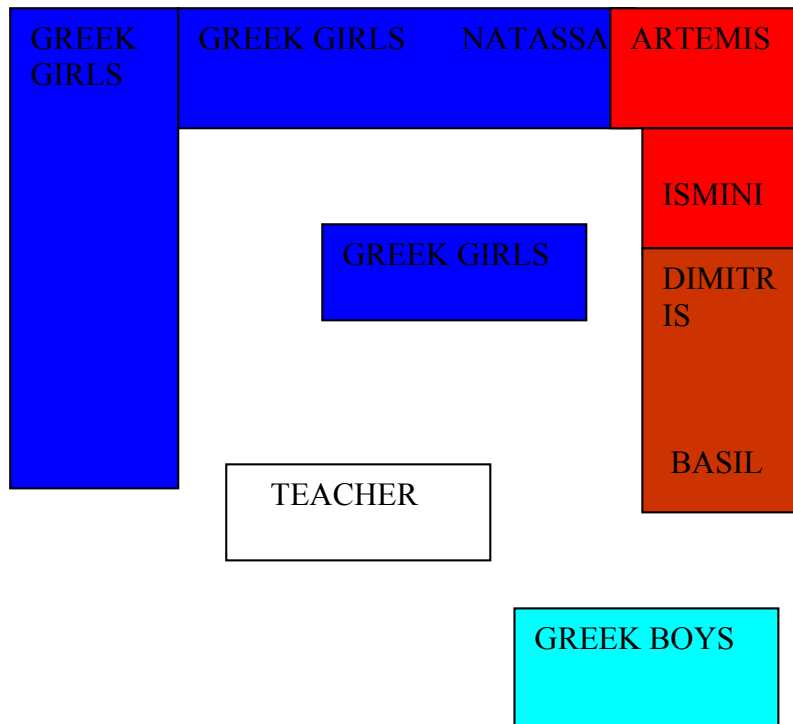
peers and stereotypical group formations (Francis, 1998). In Group Activity, I acted as a “moderator or facilitator” (Punch, 1998).

I grouped the Albanian and Greek children in two gender segregated groups based on the **results** of my observation. Since my aim was to provide a context similar to this of class and not a neutral, laboratorial environment, I chose for the group of girls, the two Albanians, their Greek best friend Natassa² and Vana, the girl who was explicitly discriminatory against the Albanians during the observation. I grouped the only four boys of the class together.

Ethnic Segregation and Gender Dynamics in the Classroom.

Children’s placement in the class was divided in two areas. The girls were sitting together to one side of the class and the boys to the other side. Greek girls were sitting all together having next to them the Greek friend of Albanian girls next to whom the Albanian girls were sitting. The two Albanian boys were sitting next to the Albanian girls and the Greek boys, in a segregated area.

² Due to ethical issues, I changed children’s names.



The children had chosen their places by themselves: *“Miss we chose to sit like that! Because these children over there [...] are Albanians you know, and we don’t like to sit with Albanians”* was Vana’s answer when I asked who decided for the places of the students in the class. The children categorized their peers taking into account the factors of ethnicity and gender.

Interactions between Greek girls and Albanian children revealed rejection of the Albanians. Greek girls would not address to Albanian children. There was a variety in Albanians’ reactions towards this depending on their gender. Albanian boys would try to interact with Greek girls in several ways whereas Albanian girls would avoid any kind of interaction. Greek girls voiced prejudices indirectly. Their indifference was a declaration of superiority because bullying among girls has to do more with social exclusion and less with aggressiveness (Thompson and Sharp 1994).

The gender of the Albanians came out to be a significant factor for the way they were treated from the Greek boys. In the class, Greek boys did not challenge the Albanian girls directly. Taking into account that Albanian girls would not address or challenge the Greek boys, as Albanian boys did, Greeks did not need to establish their dominance which was already accepted by the Albanian girls. However, when Tassos yelled at Albanian boys: *'Because of you and your friends being Albanians, madam [P.E teacher] gives you everything' Ismini noticed it and she smiled at me.*" It is not that the girls were thought to be "less Albanian" but their gender role as more introverted was leading them not to challenge the Greek boys.

Albanian boys were acting in terms of solidarity to confront this behaviour. *"When Nikos and Tassos threw papers to the Albanian boys, Dimitris complained to the teacher and when the teacher warned Tassos to stop, Dimitris said: 'smack him". Basil was laughing as he took pleasure from this incident."* Whenever the Albanians were feeling powerful they responded to the Greeks' aggressive and challenging behaviours.

In general, Albanians constituted the ethnic Other of the classroom. However, they presented different types of otherness in respect to their gender group and their individual placement in the classroom. Albanian girls were not expressively contesting the power of Greeks. Albanian boys were challenging and aggressive only when they felt empowered by the teacher's support.

Gender Identity among Albanians.

In the same ethnic group, the interactions of children were mainly based on their gender.

The Albanian boys were interacting aggressively among them through play-fighting rather than real arguments, which was the case in their interactions with the Greeks. Fighting is a kind of honour for the peer group (Swain, 2004). However, the same did not apply for the Greek-Albanian boys' fights. In these cases, they were fighting to win and they would threaten each other.

In the context of the class, Albanian boys were aggressive in trying to establish their superiority within their ethnic group. "*When Ismini was complaining about her grades Dimitris was imitating her: 'I had seven mistakes' changing his voice to girly.* Similar patterns were observed towards Artemis: "*Artemis: 'Sir, can I read?' Dimitris: 'Get lost'.*" In these interactions it was the power coming from the gender roles that influenced the relations. Albanian girls and boys were the ethnic Other in the Greek classroom and therefore at this level, gender was the area that the fight for dominance and subordination was taking place. Subordinated as they might be in the context of the boys group in the class, Albanian boys' identities were performed in terms of dominance in their interactions with Albanian girls. The dominance of the boys and the ironic behaviour of Dimitris disempowered Albanian girls and transformed them to passive recipient of boys' actions.

Albanian girls were calmer in their interactions with other children in the class. During the classes they were whispering and commenting on other children. When

they were teased by Dimitris they usually did not respond. Ismini was the girl that was interacting more with the Albanian and Greek boys. She never seemed to be annoyed by the boys coming and talking to her. She was also a kind of leader for the group of the three girls (Artemis, Natassa and herself). I also observed that the boys, Nikos, Tassos and Dimitris, would stand up from their desk to talk to her during the lessons as they did to each other. Ismini was baptised orthodox and she was a good student, eager to participate in the class. She brought with her significant characteristics of Greek cultural identity, the dominant identity in the context of the classroom. In this situation, the power coming from the dominant Greek context was shaping Ismini's identity in her trying to fit in the dominant context. In the group of subordinated identities she was the leader. Her ethnic identity is formed as a hybrid one and impacts upon the gender group interactions in the way that she is supposed to be better, more acceptable and fitting the characteristics of the dominant Subject of the classroom.

Albanian boys were subordinated masculinities in their relations with the Greeks but when it came to Albanian girls where the ethnic identity is not a factor of discrimination, they gain power from their gender category. On the other hand, girls' interactions in the same group were up to a point directed by their level of integration in the dominant culture. Children did not shape homogenised identities in terms of gender and ethnicity, but they were placed ranging themselves in accordance to their individual characteristics.

Group Activity

During Group Activity, the interactions of the children and the construction of the imaginary persons' lives reveal patterns similar to the ones that came out during the observation.

The boys were not really interested in the game and at first they used the ball only to play football. They sat in a circle in the following order: Tassos, Dimitris, Nikos and Basil. The ball (which was at first used to indicate who talks) was passed from Tassos to Nikos, then was passing it to Basil who was passing it to Dimitris. The way that the boys were passing the ball to each other can reveal their preferences to their peers.

Girls did not use the ball at all, and they were talking in sitting order. They sat in the following order: Ismini, Vana, Artemis and Natassa. For the girls, imaginary persons' lives were based on stereotypical reflections of their lives.

For instance:

...V- She [Joan] got married at 16 and she delivered the child when she was 18.....

...V- Miss my mother got married at 16 and she delivered the first child when she was 18 and afterwards she delivered the rest of us.

A- Mine, when she was 20 years old.....

.....M- What does the father do?

I- He cooks.

N-Does the father cook?

I- Yes my father does.

A-The father goes to work and the mother cleans.

It came out that girls were stereotypically conceptualising the woman's role as that of their mother. The common feature here is that both Greeks and Albanians drew on their mother's elements to construct Joan's life. The difference is that the Greek women did not work, or they were working at their husbands' shops whereas the Albanian mothers had to work out of the house.

Furthermore, most of the time Basil would agree with what Dimitris would say, acting in a form of ethnic solidarity between the Albanians and a tension to go against the destructive will of the Greeks towards the game. Basil could not express properly himself and therefore he was often victimized during the activity. The rest of the boys teased his way of expressing and the grammar mistakes that he made the few times he tried to express his own ideas. He was teased mostly by the Greeks. For instance:

(They were talking about Joan)

B- He liked to read.

M-Joan liked to read

B- Yes

(The others laugh)

N- HE liked!!!

Basil-I don't want to play.

N- Miss, can I keep the tape?

Disempowering incidents like that very common during the role play, the lessons and the breaks were constitutive of the Albanian boys ethnic identity, since the cause of the teasing was their failure to speak or perform as "Greeks". Basil's retraction from the game was a result of the Greeks' jokes. He was excluded once again. Similarly,

gender does not only constitute ethnic identity performance. Ethnic identity is also influential factor for the male identities of the class. In this situation as in the one in the class when Basil was teased because of his reading skills, Dimitris participated in the group of the Greek boys, laughing at Basil. His ability to talk Greek in a better way than Basil made him able to ally himself to the dominant group and distinguish himself from the ethnic Other's group, only for these incidents.

Ethnicity was reflected through the individual experiences of the children and stereotypical responses to ethnic origins were expressed in order for the children to group their peers.

Me- Where did they live? (Joan and his husband)

Basil- In Albania

It seemed that Basil was influenced by his return to Albania. Although living in Greece for the majority of his life and although he had lived only for eight months in Albania his feelings were significant. Greeks were teasing him and threatened him as if he had to be ashamed about his views.

Ethnic identity consciousness was also obvious during the roles' play of the boys. When I asked them about their origins, during the role play Tassos told me about Nikos who came from Germany: *"(he is...) from Germany but he is a Greek!"* comparing him with the Albanians. Whereas, when Albanians announced that their fathers were builders, Tassos added: *"Yes, miss, Albanians are the best in building houses... I've seen it in the news."* This in addition to the fact that was mentioned in the class (and has already been referred above) that Albanian take the jobs of the Greeks were indicative of the Greeks' perceptions and can help interpret or construe

the dynamics that took place in children's interactions. On the other hand, through these kinds of attacks towards Albanians the latter were obliged to create a defensive model of behavior. They also came to the point where they might accept their inferiority, seen through the perceptions of the people who didn't constitute members of their group.

Crossing Over

The Albanians living in a Greek context for many years were trying to include Greek elements in their identities. Albanian children would try to insert the Greek culture. For instance, when Dimitris came into school the second day, he was wearing a sweat band and he also gave one to Ismini. When I asked them what was depicted on it they told me that it was the Greek flag and that they really liked it. Ismini also emphasised that after school she would buy one for herself. *"They seemed to want attract people's eyes on their sweat band and they were eager to explain"*.

When I asked Basil about Greek orthodox churches he was painting, he answered: *"I don't know how they call them... Miss we don't have things like this in Albania. I've seen it here on the road opposite to the school"* Consciously or unconsciously the Albanian children were trying to integrate to the Greek culture.

Additionally, Ismisni was baptised orthodox. However, the teacher was calling her Ismina (whereas the Greek orthodox name is Ismini)³. When I called her Ismina she corrected me: *"It's Ismini."* She was proud of being orthodox, since this was from the first thing that she announced the first day I visited the class. Also during the

³ Her real name could be transformed from a foreign one to a Greek changing only the last letter. However, I changed the names for ethical reasons and here the transformation might be not so obvious.

Religion classes, Albanian children were trying to sing hymns although they were not orthodox. Children thought that once they use or express Greek elements of culture they would be more acceptable in the context of the class. In these cases, hybridity of identities formation is observed. Their religious culture is an amalgam of what they were (non orthodox) to what they have become (non orthodox singing orthodox hymns). There is a need of the Albanian children to insert the Greek culture and to contest their solid Albanian identity, trying to erase the prejudices that they confront on account of their ethnic origins.

During the group activity, Artemis said about Joan: “She was baptized and her name was Paraskevi.” This is a Greek orthodox name and she proposed it for Joan. Furthermore, the Albanian boys after the games in sports were celebrating and they were referring to their win as equal to this of the Greek national team. They preferred the Greek teams and they were supporting the Greece in the game with Albania. Furthermore, Basil was painting the names of Greek teams during the classes.

Natassa, Artemis’ best friend, constitutes the opposite example of the above. She was always interacting with the Albanian and she had the same confrontation from the Greeks as the Albanians. Despite being Greek she was sitting at the same desk with Artemis. During the breaks, she was also playing with Albanian girls. The Albanian boys teased her as they did with the Albanian girls. For instance “*‘Stupid Natassa’ Dimitiris said to her who was looking at him when he was pretending to use a computer during the lesson.*” Natassa was included in the Albanian group of interactions and therefore Dimitris was trying to assert his stereotypical ascendancy as male on her since ethnicity was not an obstacle in their interactions.

Albanian children approached assimilation in the dominant context as a way to perform as Greeks. This can result in them being considered as part of the dominant culture. Their identities consequently do not adopt the one or the other ethnicity and culture; they construct a new hybrid form (Papastergiadis, 2004).

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Observation and group activity in the fourth grade class in a rural primary school revealed multiple patterns of immigrant children's identity formation and contestation in respect to their ethnicity and gender. Albanian children were influenced by their interaction with the teachers and their peers. Stereotypical and essentialist segregation by the Greeks led to subordination and exclusion of the Albanian children in the classroom. Albanians tried to cross over ethnic boundaries and fit in the Greek context of the classroom. Although children were categorised in terms of ethnicity and gender, by the out-group members their formation and contestation of identities were observed to follow different patterns and the dynamics they were placed in, to range according to their gender and their individual assimilation in the Greek culture. Albanian children had to deal with the two different contexts and to embody different discourses of gender and ethnicity in their identities. Furthermore, their identities were performed differently not only between the ethnic and gender groups but also within the same ethnic and gender group. The result is a new, hybrid identity formed through power relations and contesting the core ethnic and gender identities.

Both, gender and ethnic identities are bounded by stereotypes and shaped through relations of power and conditions of exclusion as well as effort of the ethnic Other to

integrate the dominant culture. In this way the fluidity of identities is difficult to perform. However, the categorisation of identities leads to homogenisation and ignores individual experiences.

Albanians tried to bridge the gap between the two ethnicities and to place themselves in the dominant society. Living in Greece more years than in Albania, attending Greek classes and interacting with Greeks had influenced the way they shape their ethnic identity. In these terms, one could claim that their identities do not resist hybridisation, but rather that the power and the stereotypical reflections constrain the identities to be performed as hybrids.

In conclusion, the study of this specific Greek primary classroom, although not generalisable, due to the small number of the participants, has revealed power relations and oppression of the Albanians based on their “ethnic category”. Albanians’ gender also influences their way of addressing their ethnic identities which are ultimately hybrids of the Greek and the Albanian ones.

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