

The Views of Greek Primary Education Teachers on the Formation of Cultural Identity

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the present paper is to present the Greek Public Primary School teachers' views on the construction of cultural identity as well as the role that the different collectivities play in modern societies. Exploring concepts such as "identity", "diversity" and "cultural identity" and valorizing the theoretical framework of Habermas' "Theory of Communicative Action", the writers of this paper have applied the qualitative research of semi-structured interviews in order to collect their data. The participants were fifteen (15) Greek Public Primary School teachers while the questionnaire was comprised of thirty-two (32) questions. The findings indicate that: a) the teachers tried to define the meaning of "different identity" through the elements of otherness that arise from ethnic, linguistic and religious factors; b) the majority of teachers pointed out the religious aspect as the most important aspect of cultural identity; c) different ethnic groups necessarily have a different way of life, way of thinking or way of speaking; d) all teachers have unanimously stated that cultural differences are social constructs and not inherent in the members of a particular group; e) a person can move between different cultural identities; f) the majority of teachers argued that collective identities different from those of the dominant group should be preserved.

Keywords: Cultural Identity, Diversity, Intercultural Education

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I. INTRODUCTION

In modern times, the displacement of people, either for finding work or for being forced to flee their homeland due to wars or political persecutions, is a common phenomenon, which, in turn, induces conditions of complexity in modern societies, bringing in contact people from different cultural backgrounds, who compose a pluralistic cultural mosaic.

This new reality raises questions, both in terms of how to manage this coexistence of different cultures and of defining concepts such as identity, otherness, and cultural identity. In particular, it has become commonplace to regard the various collectivities as a starting point of cultural diversity or, to put it schematically, the various social identities that exist and coexist in each social context in the form of collectivities, presenting the national, linguistic and religious identity as the main examples. Hence, it follows that identity is not an unambiguous concept, but it also has its social "component", which arises from the fact that the individual "belongs" to various collectives and which, constantly interacting with the personal - individual identity, composes the whole of the individual identity.

In general, the classification of subjects into collectives is a well-established social practice. However, "the study of identity has been ongoing for more than 50 years, ever since

Erikson (1950) published his classic book *Childhood and Society*" (Schwartz, 2007, p. 27). Crafter and de Abreu (2010, p. 105) summarize the three procedures that are followed in order for the individual to structure their identity as follows: i. Identification of the "other": how the individual perceives the social identities of the "others", as these are given by society ii. Identification: how the person perceives the identity given to them by the "others" iii. Self-identification: how the individual internalizes and takes a position in relation to the identities that previously existed in the social field. From this point of view, "Ethnic and cultural diversity and pluralism have become significant factors in contemporary social and political theorizing" (Jayasuriya, 2008, p. 30).

However, the question of the cultural identity of the individual is more complex and does not end in cases when the individual is identified or categorized and integrated into the various collectivities, a priori and against their will (e.g., nationality). In particular, as Campbell's (2000) research has shown, it is possible for some individuals to identify with more than one group, change their cultural identity to a new cultural environment, or develop the ability to move between different cultural reference fields without losing their sense of individual identity. More specifically, he states: "The latest theories of cultural identity address the issue of the complexity of individual cultural identity in different cultural

contexts, proposing the creation of multiple cultural identities, where national identity coexists with more distinct and distinct individual identities” (Ibid., p. 31), and as such an example we can cite religious identity (e.g., Catholic Germans, Protestants Germans).

In addition, Pagani (2014, p. 301) has argued that “the concept and management of diversity are closely linked to issues such as in-group and out-group relations, social cohesion, social and political conflict, and social - educational interventions aimed at strengthening social cohesion”. It becomes clear, then, that the aim should not be to fight, eradicate and deconstruct any collective identity that is different from the majority, since this rejection reflects, as proven in the past, the general social subordination of cultures that are different from that of the dominant group (Cummins, 2001). On the contrary, the objective is the formation of those conditions which, initially, will allow intercultural interaction and lead to successful intercultural communication and harmonious coexistence.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

At this point, it is worth noting that defining the concepts of “identity”, “otherness” and “cultural identity” is not enough to solve all the problems that may arise within a culturally pluralistic environment. In the effort to solve these problems, the catalyst is the application of a clear theoretical framework, which can contribute to the management of diversity. For this reason, we dwell on the contribution of Habermas's theory of “Communicative Action” to this process.

Habermas, through his theory of “Communicative Action”, proposes a project that aims to allow mutual understanding through a process of discussion. This process is not predetermined by standards, according to the defined social stratification, but eliminates social discrimination, allowing the Self and the undervalued Other to walk side by side believing that no one can be without the other. This is achieved because of the transcendental power of language and of a commitment to the truth, from which a new interactive and contemplative experience emerges for people (Dasli, 2011, p. 32).

Habermas, moreover, adds and draws attention to the concept of the lifeworld, a transcendental space within which intersubjective consensus can be reached (Habermas, 1989, p. 113). The concept of “lifeworld” refers, according to Habermas (Ibid., p. 126), to the transcendental place where speaker and listener meet, where they can mutually demand that what they say agree with the world (objective, social or subjective), and where they can criticize and confirm these claims for validity, settle their disagreements and reach agreements. Thus, the Self cannot exist without the “Other”, and vice versa. Based on all the above, and with the intention of trying to reconstruct views about the “Other”, in order to eliminate stereotypical behaviors and prejudices by studying and researching the relevant literature on the issue of building cultural identity and the role of collectives in modern society (Campbell, 2000; Nikolaou, 2008), we considered it a major issue to explore the views of Primary School teachers on how the cultural identity of the individual is structured and what

the role of collectives in modern society is. To this end, we address the following research questions:

- a) How is different identity determined?
- b) What is the most important aspect of cultural identity?
- c) Do different ethnic groups necessarily have different lifestyles, ways of thinking or ways of speaking?
- d) Are cultural differences inherent in individuals of a particular group or socially constructed?
- e) Is a person necessarily “stuck” in a cultural identity or can he “move” between different identities?
- f) Should collective identities that differ from those of the dominant group be preserved, deconstructed, or something else?

III. METHODOLOGY

The present work was initiated in the context of the qualitative research method, applying the semi-structured interviews as the most appropriate methodological tool for data collection. We considered the use of interviews as the most effective method for the present work and its research object, as, the research focused, firstly, on the meaning given by the subjects themselves, the teachers, to the concepts of cultural identity, social constructions, etc., and, secondly, on the personal narratives of the subjects, who described how they consider the development of the notion of identity, the terms or characteristics which, in their opinion, define someone as different, the characteristics which define cultural identity, etc. (Robson, 2011). Regarding the choice of the “semi-structured” format, it was selected as it allowed us not only to modify the wording of the questions, in order to receive additional explanations, but also to omit or add - on the flow of the interview - some questions (Robson, 2011).

Using the interview, we were given the opportunity to collect “rich and very enlightening material” (Robson, 2011), in order to make the best possible investigation of research questions. In addition, we had the opportunity to detect to the non-verbal cues, which gave us a more complete and clearer picture of the meaning of the subjects' responses (Robson, 2011).

The participants - subjects of the research were fifteen (15) teachers who work in Primary Education. The selection of the sample of teachers was random, while the questionnaire consisted of thirty-two (32) questions. Given the above, since the data collection tool was semi-structured interviews, there were cases when some questions were either added or others were omitted, depending on the progress of each interview.

IV. FINDINGS

The content analysis investigated how the subject identifies the different identity. The teachers defined its meaning through the elements of otherness that arise from ethnic, linguistic and religious factors, mainly, without missing some additional factors, such as gender, manners and customs and, in general, the culture and civilization of each. More specifically, fourteen (14) out of the fifteen (15) teachers referred to one or some of the above factors to identify the different identity, saying: “I think that the

different identity is determined by... with the national origin of each, with the linguistic origin of each (...) as the mother tongue of the family and the state of origin" (p.9). One (1) teacher did not mention anything about the factors that shape the different identity, but simply said the following: "Look, we, as Greeks are not the best. Okay? Because (...) we now have the immigrants in the mouth, because they came here, they took our jobs, they have stolen from us, they make us... (...) (p.7)". In other words, he was satisfied with a critique of the way in which we, as Greeks, see immigrants, essentially identifying the immigrant as a person with a different identity.

Teachers' views on whether different cultural groups will necessarily have different lifestyles, different ways of thinking or different ways of speaking were then explored. In this case, the majority of teachers, eight (8) out of fifteen (15), reported that the different groups have different lifestyles, thoughts or speech, while in some cases an attempt was made to separate them, so that not all groups could be grouped so easily, namely, individuals belonging to a national (or ethnic) group. Indicatively, it was reported: "Yes, they have, they have. First of all, they speak Albanian at home. At school, when the children want to talk to each other or say bad words, to find out, they speak Albanian. Yes. And the way they live is different. Very different (p.7)", "Yes, I think they have different (p.14)".

On the other hand, five (5) out of fifteen (15) teachers reported the belief that different ethnic or ethnotic groups do not necessarily have different lifestyles, speech or thinking. Here are some of their views: "Not necessarily. Um, of course, yes, I know this, because it's something known in advance. ...) The way of life... and the views (p.3)". "(...) I consider that they do not necessarily have a different way of life, thought or speech. (...) Have... practically different lifestyles, thoughts and speeches, but this is due to national, historical, different factors, but they do not necessarily have to have different lifestyles. Everyone has the right to live their life as they wish, (...) in whatever place and in whatever way they wish and others should not be bothered by it. As long as, of course, everyone's rights are respected (p.15)". In this case, too, the teachers emphasized the interaction that exists between the dominant and the culturally different group.

Additionally, teachers' views on whether cultural differences are inherent in a particular group or social constructs were then examined. In this case, all the teachers unanimously stated that cultural differences are social constructions and not inherent in the individuals of a particular group. Indicatively, some of the teachers' reports: "Social constructions... (p.2)", "No, I do not consider them innate... the identity is built, uh it is influenced by our environment, by how we grow up, what our parents tell us, how rich our parents are, therefore, I consider that it is a social construction (p.3)", "I believe that it is a social construction and that they are acquired, that is, they are not innate (...) (p.6)", "They are social constructions... Purely (p.9)".

In an attempt to explore teachers' views on cultural identity in depth, teachers were asked if they believed that a person was necessarily "stuck" in a cultural identity or if they could "move" between different cultural identities. In this question, all teachers expressed the view that humans can move between different cultural identities. These views coincide

with the findings of scientific research, as it has been shown that some people are able to identify with more than one groups, can change cultural identity in a new cultural environment and they also develop the ability to move between different cultural fields of reference, without losing their sense of individual identity.

Indicatively, it is worth mentioning: "I believe that it can move... between different... (...) (p.2)", "Yes, I believe that it can move between different depending on the environment in which they live. If one finds himself in an environment of Western civilization that comes from the East, of course they are to be influenced to some extent and to change those habits that his conscience allows him (p.4)", "Definitely changes... to go and come, I see and such... (...) can and do I see. Once they are with... (...) the parents, grandparents, etc., behave differently, as soon as they join the other group they behave differently. I think they do it successfully (p.10)" and "Well, it can certainly move between different identities (...) (p.11)".

The last research question was whether the collective identities that differ from those of the majority group should be preserved, deconstructed or something else. In this case, the majority of teachers argued that collective identities different from those of the dominant group should be preserved. Specifically, ten (10) out of the fifteen (15) teachers expressed the above view, saying: "I believe that they should be maintained... (p.3)", "Yes. I believe that it should be maintained (...) (p.4)", "Yes... (...) Thus. Both for them and for us. That's true of us, isn't it? (...) If we go somewhere else too, we must be... keep the Greek... (p.7)", "Yes, (...) must be preserved (p.14)".

However, two (2) teachers differed somewhat in their views. The first said: "Eee... I do not know, I think they should... not change, just improve (...) (p.9)", while the second stated: "Eee... (...) in more areas (...) I think they should be integrated into the society they live and... in the majority group, eh, in order for their life and development to be smoother. Um, of course, yes, I know this, because it's something known in advance" (p. 11)

Finally, three (3) out of the (15) teachers expressed the view that minority collective identities should be maintained, while at the same time, they need to evolve and be enriched. Indicatively, they said: "Uh... I think they should be preserved, and enriched... somewhat so ...okay, not in its entirety (p.1)", "Neither be maintained as they were nor be deconstructed... they should evolve and these. Seeing what else is better, to try to incorporate it and to improve what we ... believe and do (p.12)".

V. CONCLUSIONS

Having completed the content analysis part, we are able to proceed to the presentation of the conclusions of our research, providing a comprehensive interpretation of the responses to the research questions this paper is addressing.

Starting from the first research question, namely how the subject identifies the different identity, the teachers tried to define the meaning of "different identity" through the elements of otherness that arise from ethnic, linguistic and religious factors mainly, without missing, of course, some additional factors, such as gender, manners and customs and,

in general, the culture and civilization of each. Nevertheless, there were some views with which teachers, in order to identify the different identity, brought to the fore educational, class and income factors, highlighting the Education of the individual.

Secondly, regarding the most important aspect of cultural identity as well as the one that most defines the others, the majority of teachers pointed out the religious aspect as the most important aspect of cultural identity, followed by the language aspect and, finally, the national one. Also, the religious aspect of cultural identity was mentioned by the teachers as determining the other aspects more, while the following view was that no aspect determines the rest, with the linguistic and ethnic being considered in very few cases to determine the others more. We would say, therefore, that teachers have moved in one direction, both in terms of defining the most important aspect and in terms of highlighting the aspect that determines the others the most. To be more specific, they have recognized as stronger the role of the religious aspect while the others follow.

In addition, the majority of teachers were clearly in favor of the view that different ethnic groups necessarily have a different way of life, way of thinking or way of speaking. The teachers answered in the affirmative, though the term “necessarily”, which states an absolute, was used in this question. This is the reason we decided to use it - regardless of the terms and conditions, a particular ethnic group will behave in a certain way “If necessary”. In fact, the findings of this question took us aback, due to the fact that they conflict with the answers given by the teachers themselves to the previous questions, when they did not seem to categorize people based on national criteria, except in few cases. In this case, therefore, the only thing we can find out is that the teachers consider the influence of the (national) group so important that it is able to shape the people who belong to it, so that they necessarily have a different - from the dominant group - way of life, way of thinking or way of speaking.

As regards the “nature” of cultural differences, all teachers have unanimously stated that cultural differences are social constructs and not inherent in the members of a particular group, which is extremely positive and encouraging, as it suggests that nowadays educators are not influenced by anachronistic perceptions of innate biological characteristics in individuals, depending on which ethnic or religious group they belong to.

When asked whether a person is necessarily “stuck” in a cultural identity or whether they can “move” between different identities, all teachers expressed the view that a person can move between different cultural identities. Here, teachers' views are moving in the right direction, which is also confirmed by research, since, as Campbell (2000) has shown, some individuals are able to identify with more than one group, can change cultural identity in a new cultural environment and develop the ability to move between different cultural fields of reference, without losing their sense of individual identity.

Finally, with regard to whether collective identities different from those of the majority group should be maintained, deconstructed, or something else, the majority of teachers argued that collective identities different from those of the dominant group should be preserved. Moreover, some

educators have expressed the view that minority collective identities should be maintained, but, at the same time, need to be developed and enriched. However, it was mentioned, in some cases, that the minority group should be integrated into the dominant group, except for some elements which must be retained. The special cultural elements of foreigners, whether we are talking about students or adults, are their special cultural capital, which should be respected by the host country, as this will ameliorate the foreigners' transition from their society of origin to the society of the host country, which will benefit both the aliens themselves who join the society and the dominant social whole.

In conclusion, what is inferred is that, while, on the one hand, the perceptions expressed by teachers about cultural identity, the way it is structured and the role of collectives in the given social context were in favor of maintaining collective identities that differ from the dominant group, on the other, they did point out the importance of the religious aspect for cultural identity, recognizing, at the same time, that cultural differences are social constructions and not inherent in individuals. Furthermore, teachers have shown some difficulty in “grasping” the social nature of cultural identity. This is the reason why they recognized that cultural differences are social constructions and they seem quite confused regarding the social construction of cultural identity in general.

We are of the opinion that collective identities of minorities should be preserved, while, at the same time, be enriched with the cultural elements of the host country, in order to achieve the smoothest possible integration of the minority group within the dominant social whole, avoiding, though, the coercion by assimilation policies, which lead to the removal of any particular cultural element from minority groups. What has to be taken into account in this case is that through this interaction the dominant group will be able to benefit, as it will also be enriched with the cultural elements of the minority groups. This interaction and cultural enrichment can only positively contribute to the effort to understand the “Other” and to achieve the necessary respect to the different.

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