

Research Note

The age of austerity and rising xenophobia in Greece: How do teachers experience and understand the current situation?

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Abstract: *Today, with the reality of everything changing so quickly in Greece and within the context of financial crisis, multiple political and economic restructurings and uncertainty, the quality and equity in the Greek educational system is being seriously compromised. Schools and universities are closing; there are fewer teachers than needed in schools; there are huge cuts in teachers' salaries; there is less money for schools, fewer materials, thus less things to do with the students inside and outside the classrooms. Linked to the economic changes is a change in views with regard to belonging and identities. Even the most superficial examination of Modern Greek society reveals that Greek national identity is increasingly growing more racist and xenophobic, a fact that reflects the deep identity crisis that has come to underlie Greek society lately. Through my research I aim to explore teachers' perceptions, attitudes and beliefs towards their national 'selves' and the national 'others' (minorities and immigrants), teachers' views of the textbooks/curriculum and the relevance of this to their contemporary lived experiences, especially around Greek national identity, Europe and Immigration. Moreover, I intend to find out if, according to the teachers, the Greek education system promotes antiracism, and what challenges teachers think that Greek education is facing in order to promote antiracism in this era of crisis.*

Introduction

Even the most superficial examination of Modern Greek society reveals that the latest political and economic changes have fuelled a xenophobic backlash in Greece (Eurobarometer, 2008; EU-MIDIS, 2009; International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, 2011; Amnesty International, 2011). Greek national identity is increasingly growing more racist and xenophobic - a fact that reflects the deep identity crisis that has come to underlie Greek society lately.

One of the most important challenge for the Greek government today is how to organise a quality education system that: will address in its policy and curriculum documentation the full implications of the recent political and economic changes; will meet the needs of teachers, learners, parents and the community; will inspire conciliation and peace; will promote an understanding of identity and diversity; will construct a more tolerant conception of Greek national identity (Held, 2005; McKinnon, 2005; Tan, 2005) and will 'transform antagonism into agonism' (Mouffe 1995, p.108).

Rationale for the Study and Research questions

My main area of interest is in education and national identity - and in their connectivity. My research interests focus on Greek teachers and the way they experience and respond to the recent political and economic situation in Greece in relation to the new challenges that stem from it. The purpose of my research project is to explore how Greek teachers rethink Greek national identity as it has fractured in an era of economic and humanitarian crisis and uncertainty, and in the face of the declining authority and legitimacy of the state.

Specifically, I aim to explore teachers' perceptions, attitudes and beliefs towards their national 'selves' and the national 'others' (minorities and immigrants), teachers' views of the textbooks/curriculum and its relevance to their contemporary lived experiences, especially around Greek national identity; Europe; Immigration. Moreover, I intend to find out if according to the teachers the Greek education system promotes antiracism, and what challenges teachers think that the Greek education is facing in order to promote antiracism in this era of crisis.

In the context of the current study, because of its focus on a specific institution, I will attempt to look more at the institutional dynamics by proposing a research project to answer the following questions:

- How do teachers experience the recent political and economical changes in their private lives and their work?
- Has the current social and economic situation in Greek society affected the school, the students, their parents and in what ways?
- Has the current situation in Greek society affected behaviour in the school? Are there incidents of xenophobia among kids/parents?
- Has the crisis led the teachers to think differently about ethnic diversity in Greek society?
- What skills, attitudes and values do teachers think they need to teach to students in order to prepare them for the future? Do they feel equipped to do this?

In order to start exploring the above issues I intend to draw on relevant studies that have been conducted within the last few years, studies about the Greek education system and its role in the formation of the Greek national identity, European identity, immigration, racism, curricula, textbooks, school culture etc, and studies about education systems in eras of social crisis. The understanding of the relevant conceptual and empirical work will help me combine the theory and previous research with my interests and will make me able to plan my empirical research.

Theoretical Framework

I will enter the field of my research adopting Critical Race Theory (CRT) as the framework to inform my study. CRT in education is a framework of basic insights, perspectives, methods, and pedagogy that attempts to determine, analyze, and transform those structural and cultural aspects of education that preserve subordinate and dominant racial positions in and out of the classroom in contemporary Western societies (Solorzano & Yosso, 2009; Parker & Lynn, 2009). I will draw on this theoretical perspective to explore the often hidden processes that shape the situation and legitimize, race inequality in Greek education (Gillborn & Youdell, 2009), and to assess the different experiences, practices and understandings developed by the teachers in relation to the role of education, migration and belonging in an era of economic and humanitarian crisis. I will also bring to bear on these issues the tools and concepts of "policy sociology" (Ball, 1997). I will attempt to use sociological concepts, ideas and research as tools for making sense of policy. I also intend to be informed by the methods of Michael Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu (Lingard, Rawolle & Taylor, 2005; Karner, 2011).

Methodological Perspective

My research project will be located within a constructivist paradigm, which is an epistemology - a theory of knowledge, embodied in many theoretical perspectives. Constructionism rejects the view of objective human knowledge. There is no truth waiting for us to discover. Truth or meaning is constructed in and out of our engagement with the realities in our world (Crotty, 1998). Theoretically, the interpretive perspective will inform the methodology and the research process of the study. The interpretive perspective places the focus on interpreting the meanings and perspectives of cultural members, and on how these meanings are negotiated (Creswell, 1998); thus it is appropriate for my research questions.

Research Method

My intention in undertaking my research is to shed light upon teachers' perceptions and beliefs at this present time in Greece and to produce explanations and arguments. I aim to focus on 'teachers' voices' because they offer an important range of insights into the new restructuring and reform processes in education (Goodson, 2000). The nature of my research problem and my purpose suggests an emphasis on the investigation of ways in which individuals interpret their social world - a purpose that led me to select the methodology of qualitative research (Gillborn 2010; Scott, 1996).

Methods for Data Collection

My area of study is relatively new; therefore, I am planning to conduct individual interviews with a small number of teachers so as to approach it in an open way and have an in-depth conversation that will produce rich and meaningful data. Specifically, I will use the method of semi-structured interviews with questions open enough to permit amplification and expansion in order to distinguish and classify the main issues that I will investigate more thoroughly in my thesis. The method is suitable because it offers a means of exploring the ways in which teachers interpret the world, and their place within it (Warren, 2002; Dingwall, 1997; Kvale, 1996). These interpretations are often extremely complex and it would be difficult to access them through less open and flexible methods of data collection (Rapley, 2004; Johnson, 2002).

Sampling

In the study I will employ a 'purposeful sample' (Patton, 2002), trying to access a number of interviewees that would allow me to explore my research questions and develop some arguments. I will purposively sample teachers on the basis of gender and teaching experience, choosing eight participants (four women and four men) who work at a primary school in Athens that takes both migrant and local children.

Modes of Data analysis

The data analysis will begin early in the research process and it will be subject to continuing review and revision. I will start the analysis by transcribing the data and by conceptualizing them by coming up with conceptual labels. Then I will try to group the data into categories. I will continue from open coding into selecting by developing the categories by selecting the core category and systematically relating it to other categories validating the relationships in between them. This is my initial plan, which will be adapted as the research process gets underway. Of course as I start to transcribe and code data, it is likely that I will see improved ways of accessing and analyzing my data.

Ethical considerations

For the main ethical issues in research my Institution Focused Study will be informed from BERA – The Revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2004) and The Statement of Ethical Practice of the British Sociological Association (2002). I choose the above ethical guidelines because they are the most appropriate to enable me to weigh up all aspects of the process of conducting educational research and to reach an ethically acceptable position in which my actions will be considered valid and reliable.

Possible Uses and, Dissemination

I plan to provide to my intended audience a summary of the key findings. My intended audience will be teachers, researchers and policy-makers. Although I may not be able to formulate straightforward answers to my questions, I hope that my findings will contribute theoretically and empirically to improving educational policy and practice for future professional development by informing pedagogic, curricular and other educational judgments and decisions, and will serve to indicate that there is need for further research.

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