# Educational reform in North Cyprus—Towards the making of a nation/state?

Sefika Mertkan-Ozunlu, Pat Thomson *

*School of Education, The University of Nottingham, Jubilee Campus, Wollaton Road, Nottingham NG8 1BB, UK*

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

The Turkish Republic of North Cyprus (TRNC) aspires to take its place in Europe and the global 'knowledge economy'. In order to do so, it needs not only to be politically recognised as legitimate and to develop the kinds of economic and governance structures that signify a functional state, but also to produce a cultural imaginary of itself as a nation. In this paper, we mobilise Appadurai's theorisation of deterritorialisation, flows and context generation in order to examine the ways in which the implementation of educational reforms in TRNC might contribute to this ambition. We show that the ethnoscape and financescape combine to make education reform difficult, with specific challenges arising from the mixed commitment of the workforce, the capacity of the education bureaucracy to align support with policy mandates, and the 'fit' between the policy and local needs. We conclude by suggesting that TRNC faces the dilemma of working with cultural heterogeneity: Appadurai identifies this as a key ideoscape challenge for all nation/states.

© 2008 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Strategically situated in a corner of the Mediterranean lies the island of Cyprus. Its long history of contested ownership and identity continues into the present, with its current partition into Greek and Turkish sectors presenting a political problem for some Cypriot citizens and the European Union. This paper focuses on the part of the island that is a 'non-state', North Cyprus—a de facto republic officially recognised only by Turkey on whom it remains economically dependent. It has nearly a quarter of a million residents, two thirds of whom were born on the island (State Planning Office, 2006b). Recent shifts in North Cypriot politics have resulted in a government keen to become an independent state.

This paper concerns the efforts of the elected North Cypriot government to establish a new education policy agenda which not only capitalises on its flourishing higher education sector but also seeks to raise mass levels of education. Policy makers see school reform as a key aspect of establishing a more balanced 'knowledge economy'[1] less reliant on Turkish financial assistance. Also integral to the schooling agenda is a nation-building approach which is both 'European' and 'North Cypriot'. We mobilise the work of Appadurai (1996) to explore this educational reform agenda. We suggest that the nation-building aspirations of recent educational reforms face risks which may hinder the political and economic realisation of the republic's ambitions.

Data for the paper is drawn from the first author's doctoral study. This is explained before we provide some signposts to North Cypriot history and outline the theoretical resources we bring to our discussion of the data.

## 1. The research project

This paper reports findings from a qualitative doctoral study of educational reform in North Cyprus. The researcher, the first author, is a citizen of the Turkish Republic of North Cyprus (TRNC) living in the UK. She is a fluent Turkish speaker and her professional background as a higher education teacher provides important 'insider knowledge' for the project.

Here we use data from interviews with five educational planners, three school principals and six teachers in the schools most affected by demographic changes and migration from Turkey. All informants were asked for their interpretations of the reasons for educational reform, the model of education that was proposed, the process and the challenges of change and the material conditions which might enable or impede policy implementation. The purpose was not to conduct a rigorous 'policy trajectory' study (e.g. Ball, 1993) but to probe the cultural dimensions of change, namely, the stories, representations and categorisations of change used at the macro-, meso- and micro-scales of the education system.

All the interviews were conducted in Turkish, recorded and then transcribed by the first author (see Mertkan-Ozunlu, 2007). The first author, who had ready access to a range of stakeholders, also had informal conversations with economists, politicians, and

---

[1] We use this term advisedly. It is contested but we use it here in quotations to signify our understanding that it is not to be taken for granted.

other informed Turkish Cypriots to gauge their views of the socio-political context in which reform strategies were initiated. These conversations were recorded in field notes. These, together with interview transcripts, were coded to find recurring themes (Silverman, 1997; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). All data has subsequently been anonymised so as to protect the interviewees: some has been omitted. Confidentiality is particularly an issue in any small education system, but even more important when the political situation is volatile, as it is in North Cyprus.

The data analysis is framed by Appadurai's (1996) writings on globalisation.

## 2. Appadurai's theory of scaled contexts

In the social, economic and political conditions known as globalisation, all nation/states must find new ways to imagine, represent, legitimate and re/make themselves. The anthropologist Appadurai (1996) suggests that the major challenge for contemporary societies is to manage the tension between cultural homogenisation and cultural heterogenisation. They face the task of not only managing but also indigenising global flows of people (ethnoscapes); information and images (mediascapes); high speed technologies (technoscapes); investments and other financial transactions (financescapes); policies, ideas and ways of thinking and narrativising the world (ideoscapes) (pp. 27–37). This article is primarily concerned with the ethnoscapes, financescapes and ideoscapes of North Cyprus.

Nation/states do not engage in this global game on an equal footing. While some begin with distinct advantages – size, historical relations of domination, internal structures and capacities, linguistic and cultural resources – others struggle in the uneven global topography (Bauman, 1998; Brah et al., 1999). The two halves of the island of Cyprus are differently positioned on this terrain with Greek Cyprus anchored to a narrative of legitimacy and by stable political, trade and tourism relations and networks. North Cyprus on the other hand has unstable connections with the world beyond Turkey.

Appadurai suggests that the complex interplay of the five flows puts the coupling of nation and state under duress. He points to aspiring nations which operate on the West Bank, Namibia, Eritrea and the like, which enact 'bloody negotiations' across existing state boundaries in order to establish themselves as distinctive new states (p. 38). Appadurai calls this actual and potential separation of the nation from the state deterritorialisation, and suggests that the hyphen that typically links nation/state 'is now less an icon of conjuncture than an index of disjuncture' (p. 39). This deterritorialisation, Appadurai reasons, is constructed by, and also constructs, the growth of transnational markets, institutions, movements and fundamentalisms.

The potential for difference between nation and state (decoupling the hyphen) in a globalising modernity is important for our examination of North Cyprus, since it is not yet a state, but might perhaps be a nation. Appadurai observes that nations (or more properly groups with ideas about nationhood) seek to 'capture or co-opt states and state power' (p. 39). And because, just like existing nation/states, aspiring states are faced with the challenge of capturing and consolidating imaginaries of nationhood (see Anderson, 1983), the nation/state building challenge for North Cyprus is not only economic and political. According to Appadurai, 'the modern nation state . . . grows less out of natural facts – such as language, blood, soil and race – and more out of a quintessential cultural product, a product of the collective imagination' (p. 161). It is here, in the ideoscape, that the role of schooling and the substance of curriculum become both important and contentious. Our paper explores this challenge in the North Cypriot context.

Appadurai notes that deterritorialising processes occur at various scales (Swyngedouw, 1997; for an education application see Thomson, 2008), and that the struggles of the nation state to (re)produce itself – that is, to generate context in the face of deterritorialising flows which create dependency on the global context, a process that Appadurai calls vernacular globalisation (or glocalisation, following Robertson, 1995) – often occur at the expense of localities, which are stripped of their idiosyncratic self-made identities (pp. 183–188).[2]

Following Appadurai then, it is important to investigate if, and if so with what effects, the cultural efforts of North Cyprus to build its national identity and capacity, vital to the strategic game of constructing itself as a state, are imbricated in education policy, and how this connects with local issues, identities, needs and meanings.

## 3. North Cyprus: a nation in waiting?

Parted by the 'green line' in 1964 as a result of inter-communal hostility and violence, Cyprus was physically divided into North and South in 1974. This partition is the most visible scar of the long lasting, widely disputed 'Cyprus Problem', the result of diverse nationalist realities and aspirations (Bryant, 2001; Fisher, 2002; Stavrinides, 1999). These still wait for a solution. The Turkish Republic of North Cyprus was established in 1983 but has not been politically recognised as legitimate and has been subject to a range of international embargoes. This lack of legitimacy has created multiple issues for TRNC citizens: these range from the symbolic (e.g. having no direct international telephone dialing code) to the material (all flights to and from the island operate via Turkey).

### 3.1. Ethnoscape—forming a nation?

The demographic structure of the island has changed over time. The period from 1963 to 1974 inclusive was marked mainly by on-island migration, with Turkish Cypriots moving to the north and Greek Cypriots to the south, to form two mainly culturally 'homogenous' nations. North Cyprus found its cultural imaginary as part of Turkey: this prime affiliation and dependence was its context.

Since 1974 there have been further waves of migration, to and from TRNC, which have disrupted this imaginary. Immediately post 1974, large numbers of Turkish Cypriots went from the island to Turkey, EU and beyond. The fall in numbers on the island was deliberately ameliorated by in-migration of settlers of Turkish origin, as part of a policy initiated by both the Turkish and TRNC authorities (Hatay, 2005). This government promoted migration was followed by a second wave of self-initiated immigration from Turkey, limited and controlled by Turkish Cypriot authorities. Immigrants from the second wave largely acquired TRNC citizenship through naturalisation. Those who remained Turkish nationals became registered workers with a valid work permit. However, they reside in North Cyprus and their number has been stable for many years. It is not unreasonable to assume that many immigrants see their primary national affiliation as TRNC rather than Turkey and that this affiliation was integral to the formation of the republic in 1984.

This second immigration wave was later followed by a third, a new and uncontrolled influx of immigrants of low socio-economic background (Durber, 2004). These are Turkish seasonal workers

---

[2] One example of local context dependency is the practice of turning local places into markers of national heritage, which produce a particular imaginary of the nation and its history by appropriating and reworking meanings and memories at the local level (c.f. Samuels, 1994).