



Diversity and conflict: Negotiating linguistic, ethnic and emotional boundaries in Greek-Cypriot literacy classrooms[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the interplay between discourses on diversity and the realities of interethnic conflict, through a study in the conflict-affected Greek-Cypriot context. Drawing on ethnographic data from Greek-Cypriot literacy classrooms, and particularly, on lessons about the ethnic conflict in Cyprus, it examines how children from diverse backgrounds, statuses, and experiences are introduced to a conflict Discourse, how they socialise and/or become literate in the conflict narrative, and with what implications. The findings show that although in 'ordinary' lessons diversity was mostly acknowledged and discussed unproblematically, when conflict figured as a topic in classroom interaction, teachers tended to resort to stereotypical representations of 'us' and 'others' which created further complexities for the children. This article points to the potentials and limitations of diversity, serving as a point of departure for the renegotiation of ethnic and emotional boundaries within a troubled context with implications for teachers and students.

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1. Introduction

There are currently many scholarly discussions on the increasing diversity (and recently on 'superdiversity'; see Vertovec, 2001) in most parts of the world. These discussions highlight the fact that linguistic, ethnic and cultural boundaries are now becoming fused due to the rapid demographic changes, changes in migration patterns, social transformations, and the increasing use of new technologies (Arnaut, 2012; Blommaert, 2013; Blommaert & Rampton, 2011). What happens though when these changes take place in a conflict-affected society that struggles to preserve its ethnic and cultural boundaries and especially the boundaries between the national 'self' and the national 'other'? And how do children from diverse backgrounds experience this reality and become socialised into the discourses of conflict that repro-

duce 'us' vs 'them' dichotomies and with what implications? This article focuses on the conflict-affected Greek-Cypriot context and sets out to show how the tension between these two opposing forces, namely the traditional discourses reproducing Greek-Turkish animosity and the new reality of increasing diversity, is played out in classrooms. Looking at classroom interaction during literacy lessons, we analyse the ways in which this tension is handled and we reflect on potential consequences for both teachers and students.

During the last century, Cyprus has suffered an intense conflict between the Greek- and Turkish-Cypriot communities, the two largest ethnolinguistic communities on the island. Interethnic violence culminated in the 1950s, as both communities imagined themselves as ethnically incompatible, and continued also after the establishment of the Cyprus Republic as a bicomunal state in 1960. As early as 1963, there were outbreaks of interethnic violence and in 1974, following a pro-Greek coup, the Turkish military forces invaded the island. Since then, Cyprus has been de-facto divided into the southern part (Cyprus Republic) and the northern part (non-government controlled areas where Turkish-Cypriots and Turkish settlers reside) with the so-called "Cyprus Issue" remaining unresolved. Research shows that over the last half century both Greek-Cypriot and Turkish-Cypriot communities have been dominated by strong nationalist discourses emphasising

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'Greekness' and 'Turkishness' respectively (Bryant, 2004). These discourses have been very visible in Greek-Cypriot society, in public discussions, monuments and national celebrations (Papadakis, 2008), and especially in education (Charalambous, 2013; Christou, 2006; Zembylas, 2008), resulting in the representation of the Turkish Other in opposition to the Greek-Cypriot national self.

On the other hand, the Republic of Cyprus has been recently experiencing rapidly increasing migration – mainly workers from Eastern Europe, East Asia and the Middle East. As a result, classrooms are now becoming less and less ethnically homogenous, whilst the formal educational system struggles to respond to the challenge of effectively accommodating the increasing diversity. This is of course not a new development and there is a vast literature on intercultural/multicultural education and the tensions around it (e.g., Hajisoteriou, 2012; Hajisoteriou & Angelides, 2013; Papamichael, 2009; Theodorou & Symeou, 2013). However, there is not enough said on how children from diverse backgrounds experience, learn and socialise into the discourses of interethnic conflict and with what implications.

In what follows, we firstly look at how a conflict Discourse is constructed in conflict-affected contexts, based on a repertoire of social beliefs, emotions and an underlying narrative that legitimises conflict, pointing at the same time to the importance of language in this process. Then, we introduce the overlooked relationship between education, conflict and diversity, and describe briefly the Greek-Cypriot educational context in which our study was conducted. In order to examine this relationship, we analyse classroom data from a 'mainstream' Greek-Cypriot classroom and show (a) the tensions that arise in efforts to preserve an ethnolinguistic identity in a changing context, as well as, (b) the subtle ways through which children become literate in the conflict narrative. In the last section we discuss the implications for teachers, students and the academic community.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. The D/discourse and narrative of conflict

Concluding in an edited volume on the role of language in war or post-war situations, Kelly (2012) reminds us that "all conflicts, like all other human activities, are fundamentally conducted in and through language" (p. 242). Indeed, discourse is generally a salient part of social activities through which people negotiate membership in different groups and social networks (Gee, 1996). Gee (1996) suggests a distinction between what he calls big D/Discourses – that can be understood as "ways of being into the world" or "forms of life", inseparable from what we understand as ideology – and small d/discourse which is the linguistic elements and structures of big Discourses, namely the way in which language is organised at the micro-level of linguistic practices. Gee's distinction allows us to conceptualise big-D Discourse as an "identity kit" that extends beyond linguistic forms to also include a range of social practices and "other symbolic expressions, and artefacts of thinking, feeling, behaving, valuing and acting" (Gee, 1996, p. 131). As we explain below, this conceptualization is very useful for the purposes of this article, because it helps us explain the role of a conflict Discourse in divided societies, such as Cyprus, as well as the way it functions in classroom interaction.

Analysing intractable conflicts, Bar-Tal (2004, 2007) and colleagues (Bar-Tal & Teichman, 2005) emphasise the role of a similar constellation of symbolic expressions together with societal beliefs, attitudes, memories, and emotions, which they call a "socio-psychological infrastructure", in creating and sustaining a "conflict ethos". In other words, what Bar-Tal (2007) seems to describe, is

a "conflict Discourse", or a "form of life" (Gee, 1996) that includes particular conflict stances, attitudes and discursive practices that are largely shared in a conflict-affected society.

According to Bar-Tal (2007), at the basis of this socio-psychological infrastructure that cultivates a culture of conflict lies a well-established narrative, which provides the epistemological foundation and justification for the conflict – and which sustains, in other words, the conflict Discourse. Narratives, as forms of discourse, have been widely analysed in literature on nationalism for understanding the ways in which states or ethnic groups order their experiences and 'imagine' (Anderson, 1991) a shared past, present and future, thus creating national meanings and identities (e.g. Hinchman & Hinchman, 1997; White, 1984; see also Wee & Bokhorst-Heng, 2005 on 'statal narratives'). Similarly, in contexts of intractable conflict, the 'conflict narrative' serves as a way of ordering past and future events related to conflict and creating certain interpretations that are essential for the establishment of the conflict Discourse.

In relation to the previous distinction between big D-Discourse and small d-discourse, we can locate the conflict narrative in between the two (narratives are made up of specific linguistic elements, but also have their own internal structure and organisation (cf. Labov, 2007) and promote certain representations, social roles etc.). Using Gutierrez, Rymes, and Larson's words (1995) we would call the conflict narrative a "transcended script", namely "dominant forms of knowledge generally valued as legitimate by both the local culture and the larger society" (p. 448). Indeed, the conflict narrative often draws on sources like history and religion for enduing itself with authority and acquiring a legitimate status (Bar-Tal & Teichman, 2005). The organisation of the conflict events into a seemingly coherent, linear and easily rehearsed script serves as the foundation of the conflict Discourse, as it justifies collective emotions of hatred, fear and animosity (see also Zembylas, Charalambous, & Charalambous, 2014), political decisions and often the use of violence.

Small d-discourse constitutes a fundamental part of this narrative and it is therefore important to pay attention to it. The choice of certain words over others, the omissions (what is not said), the use of specific vocabulary, the use of metaphors and the references to canonical texts are all essential for conveying a particular interpretation of the conflict facts. Furthermore, the adjectives used for characterising the parties involved in the conflict are crucial for portraying certain representations of 'us' – usually the victims – and the perpetrators, the 'evil' Others (see Bar-Tal & Teichman, 2005). As the conflict narrative becomes institutionalised and is stereotypically reproduced by media, press and other governmental or non-governmental bodies (Bar-Tal, 2007; Linde, 2001), certain words often become emotionally loaded as they are associated with a specific set of social beliefs and index certain stances or ideologies towards the conflict, and they, thus, become constitutive elements to the larger conflict Discourse.³

Of course alternative Discourses, and alternative scripts or narratives always exist – e.g. via people with different political ideologies – as there is never an absolute consensus; even in situations of prolonged conflict, there will be some groups supporting a pro-peace culture. Nevertheless, in the cases of intractable conflicts, these alternatives tend to remain subordinate. In fact, as Bar-Tal (2007) argues, the nature of the conflict (whether it will remain intractable or not) depends to a large extent on whether the conflict narrative with its associated embodied dispositions, symbols, etc. – that is, the conflict Discourse – are indeed embraced by the popula-

³ For example, the word "rapprochement" in Cyprus has been ideologically loaded and is usually seen as indexing a leftist political agenda (for more details see Charalambous et al., 2013)

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