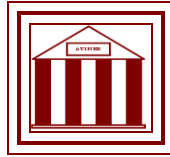


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**Research Design and Methods of a Pilot
Study in a Primary School in Athens:
How do Teachers Experience and
Understand the Current Situation of
Socioeconomic Crisis and Rising
Xenophobia in Greece?**

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Dr. Gregory T. Papanikos
President
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Research Design and Methods of a Pilot Study in a Primary School in Athens: How do Teachers Experience and Understand the Current Situation of Socioeconomic Crisis and Rising Xenophobia in Greece?

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Abstract

Even the most superficial examination of Modern Greek society reveals that, within the context of socioeconomic crisis, there is a change in views with regard to belonging and identities. Greek national identity is increasingly growing more racist and xenophobic, a fact that reflects the impact of the socio-economic crisis on what it means to be Greek lately.

In my Institution Focused Study I focus on the education sector because it is one of the most sensitive and politically charged areas of public policy considering its potential to promote an understanding of identity and diversity, and to enhance or mitigate tensions of citizenship.

Specifically, through the lens of constructivism, as well as through ethnographic research, and particularly using the method of semi-structured interviews, I explore the way Greek teachers rethink the Greek national identity as it has fractured in the wake of the recent Greek socioeconomic crisis. I also examine teacher's perceptions of the wider issues of discrimination, racism and immigration.

Teachers' voices are crucial as they offer an important range of insights into why race and ethnicity may still matter in the Greek education system, and into how schools and teachers should engage with matters related to racism and discrimination.

Keywords:

Corresponding Author:

Introduction

In this paper I will present the research design of a pilot study that I conducted in the winter 2013 in a primary school in Athens. Currently I am analysing the data and I am planning to finish my report and disseminate my findings by the end of May. Through this paper I aim to alert the audience to my forthcoming work, and to receive some comments on my work in progress from postgraduate researchers and doctoral graduates.

I will start by referring to the rationale of the study and my research questions. I will continue with the theoretical framework, the methods of empirical enquiry and with some considerations of ethical issues of this research study. I will finish with the dissemination and a consideration of possible implications of the project for future professional practice and research.

Rationale of the Study and Research Questions

In the last few years, major political and economic changes have swept through Greece. These changes have generated growing complexity of the society, uncertainty in Greek people, unpredictability of the future and changing attitudes towards belonging and identity. The country every day is being driven into deeper and deeper recession, a fact that fuels xenophobic backlash (Amnesty International, 2012; Eurobarometer, 2012; EU-MIDIS, 2011).

Many Greek people have started expressing racism more and more as a result of their unemployment and their bad quality of life (Eurobarometer, 2012; EU-MIDIS, 2011; International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, 2011). Incidents of racial violence targeting indiscriminately aliens, based solely on their skin colour or country of origin have increased the last year, particularly in Athens. Migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers are reportedly attacked nearly every day by far-right groups in certain areas of Athens (Amnesty International, 2012). Apart from the escalation of racially motivated attacks there are many reports about failures by police officers to protect third country nationals from racial violence (Ibid).

Current debates in Greece include discussions about economics, fairness, concepts of national identity and perspectives on 'outsiders'. In the Greek elections of April and June 2012 the political party with fascist and nationalistic ideology not only received enough votes to enter the Parliament but it was also the first party in a number of electoral districts, receiving more votes than any other single party. This situation raises fundamental questions about how the Greeks will treat present and future immigrants and how the immigrants will cope and respond to the already difficult situation in Greece.

Greece, at this present time of financial crisis and accompanying social uncertainty, is a really important context and a fascinating place to study the evolution and nature of the challenges the education system and teachers face,

how certain social ideas are communicated through schooling to young people and the role schools and teachers play in either enhancing or mitigating tensions of citizenship.

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 the idea of being 'Greek' is communicated through the country's education system today and especially by teachers, and to understand how teachers think about the wider issues of discrimination, racism, immigration or reflexively consider their own position in discussions on aspects of modern citizenship. The above issues, although they are pivotal for understanding the role of teachers and schools in tackling or enhancing growing discriminatory attitudes, have not yet been adequately researched in Greece.

Specifically, I aim to explore teachers' perceptions, attitudes and beliefs towards their national 'selves' and national 'others' (minorities and immigrants), teachers' views of the textbooks/curriculum and their 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 anti-racism, whether teachers see this as important and necessary, and if they do, what challenges they think that the Greek education system is facing in order to promote anti-racism in this era of crisis.

In the context of the current study, I focus on a specific institution, a primary school in Athens with an ethnically diverse intake, and I attempt to look more at 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?

Theoretical Framework

I enter the field of my research adopting Critical Race Theory (CRT) as the framework to inform my study. Critical Race Theory was first introduced into the field of education in the mid 1990s (Gillborn, 2008). 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 (Parker & Lynn, 2009). Even though the vast majority of CRT focuses in USA, its underlying assumptions and insights can be transferred usefully to other societies such as Europe (Gillborn, 2008, p. 26).

The starting point of CRT is a focus on racism; in particular, its central importance in society and its routine (Gillborn, 2008). CRT begins with the notion that racism is ‘normal, not aberrant, in society’, and, because it is so enmeshed in the fabric of our social order it appears both normal and natural to people (Ladson-Billings, 2004, p. 53). CRT theorists view education policy as not designed to remove race inequality but to maintain it at manageable levels and despite occasional ‘good news’ stories about fluctuations in statistics, things are not getting significantly better (Gillborn, 2008).

Racism is so deeply ingrained that it is effectively ‘locked in’ as a permanent feature of the system (Gillborn, 2008). This feature of the system is called ‘Institutional racism’ and it consists of the collective failure of an organization to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people (Ibid, p. 122).

CRT borrows from diverse intellectual traditions, including law, sociology, history, ethnic studies and women’s studies. CRT suggests a strategy to explain the role of race and racism in education and works toward the elimination of racism as part of a larger goal of opposing or eliminating other forms of subordination based on national origin, gender, class, sexual orientation, language (Solorzano & Yosso, 2009).

I draw on this theoretical perspective to explore the often hidden processes that shape the situation and legitimize, race inequality in the 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.

Ontological, Epistemological Assumptions and Research Approach

The core ontological assumption of my work is that social meaning is not fixed, but fluid and it is involved in an ongoing process of creation and

recreation, either to maintain or change it. My epistemological position is that we can only see the world through a specific lens, formed and developed in society. There are no facts about the world, which are not in a way socially produced or dependent on social conventions.

My research project is 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 it. Truth or meaning is constructed in and out of our engagement with the realities in our world (Crotty, 1998).

Theoretically, the hermeneutic/interpretive perspective informs the methodology and the research process of my study. The hermeneutic/interpretive perspective in social and educational research places the focus on social practices, on interpreting the meanings and perspectives of cultural members, and on how these meanings are negotiated (Creswell, 1998). This perspective assumes that all human action is meaningful and hence has to be interpreted and understood within the context of social practices (Charmaz, 2006).

Symbolic interactionism is another theoretical perspective that informs my methodology. As a theoretical perspective, it is an approach to understanding and explaining society and the human world that deals directly with issues such as language, communication, interrelationships and community. Symbolic interactionism is all about those basic social interactions whereby we enter into the perceptions, attitudes and values of a community, becoming persons in the process (Crotty, 1998).

My intention in undertaking my research is not to make generalisations but hopefully to shed light upon the perceptions and beliefs of some teachers in a particular institution, and to produce possible explanations and arguments. I aim to focus on ‘teachers’ voices’ because they offer an important range of insights into the current 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).

Qualitative research usually comes from constructivist epistemological understandings of the world, where knowledge is created using an interpretivist ontological position. Qualitative research is oriented towards ‘analyzing concrete cases in their temporal and local particularity starting from people’s expressions and activities in their local contexts’ (Flick, 2009, p. 21) and covers a variety of styles of social research (Malone, 2003; Silverman, 2001; Bryman, 2001).

The different styles of qualitative research have some common elements: a concern with meanings, concepts, characteristics, metaphors, symbols, the way people understand things and a concern with patterns of behaviour (Mason, 2002; Berg, 2001; Denscombe, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). Good qualitative research produces explanations or arguments, rather than merely

descriptions, and findings that do not arise by statistical procedures or means of quantification (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Methods for Data Collection

At the strategic level of my research design, in conformity with my epistemological and ontological perspectives, I chose to conduct individual interviews with a small number of teachers so as to approach my area in an open way and have an in depth conversation. Specifically, I chose 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 selection of the semi-structured interview as a method was made partly because of familiarity and custom (I used this method in my previous research projects) but also because the chosen method seemed particularly appropriate for my project because it offered 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).

Although the method of semi-structured interviews tends to be the one most favoured by educational researchers we should not rely on it exclusively or automatically without criticizing it and thinking carefully about the analytical status given to accounts produced in this way. This method is both enabling and limiting and researchers should keep this in mind in order to take the most from it (Rapley, 2001).

There are two things that are required for an interview to generate useful data. For starters, interviewees have to have insight into what researchers are asking – their own motivations have to be transparent to them. Secondly, they must be willing to give an honest account. But is there an honest account?

Interviews are fundamentally social encounters, determined by the local interactional contingencies in which the speakers deduce, and co-construct, broader social norms (Rapley, 2001). Interviews also involve power relations (Mills, 2001). Gender, race, class and other types of power relations are transferred by the researcher and form an essential backdrop to the answers that respondents provide (Scott, 2012; Ball, 1990).

Interviews may well ‘manufacture’ data (Back, 2010), but as Silverman argues ‘even ‘manufactured’ interview data can be useful if understood as an ‘activity awaiting analysis and not as a picture awaiting commentary’ (Silverman, 2007, p.56). That means that if we let go of the idea, that we can ‘capture’ the real of a person through an interview then we may gain a different kind of possibility for social understanding, and other ways of thinking about what might be precious and valuable in what interviews produce or contain (Back, 2010, Rapley, 2004).

In this research study I was asking the interviewees about some fairly sensitive issues, about which some attitudes may be 'politically correct' whereas others might carry some stigma. Thus, I tried to pay consideration to the many aspects of the interview context and variables concerning location, relationships and the assumptions brought into the process.

Accepting the imperatives of symbolic interactionism, I kept in mind that the data obtained from interviews are determined by the specific local interactional context, which is produced in and through the talk of the interviewee and interviewer (Rapley, 2001). Social actors 'present' themselves differently in different settings (Ball, 1990). The setting in which the interview takes place is like a warehouse full of available meanings from which the interviewees draw in giving their answers (Scott, 2012).

Moreover, I strived to consider that all the participants of an interview, including the interviewer, are engaged in the mutual construction of meaning (Mills, 2001), and work together to produce themselves as certain types of people in relation to the topic of the interview and reflexively the interview itself (Rapley, 2001). That is why I decided to think of the interviewees talk as accounts or versions, rather than as real reports of attitudes, perceptions or as merely a reflection of life outside the interview (Back, 2010).

Sampling- Access and Procedures

In the present study I employed a 'purposeful sample' (Patton, 2002) trying to access a number of interviewees that would allow me to explore my research questions and classify the main issues that I may address in the future in my thesis, and develop some arguments. The method of my sampling apart from 'purposive' could also be described as 'Snowball Sampling' or 'Opportunity Sampling', which is a nonprobability method that relies on referrals from initial subjects to generate additional subjects (Robson, 2002).

I started my fieldwork by approaching some friends of mine who are teachers. With the help of my friends I located a school, which was a suitable venue for my research study because of its ethnic composition. I made a first contact with the head teacher and he identified for me potential participants from the group of his colleagues. He also provided me names and contact details. I purposively sampled teachers in this school on the basis of gender and teaching experience (years of teaching) and I finally chose eight participants (four women and four men) with considerable diversity of experience, that in the space of the present project I could not explore in depth.

Even though my sampling technique gave me easy access to the school and the teachers, this access came at the expense of introducing bias. This technique reduces the possibility that the sample will represent a good cross section from the population (Robson, 2002). Moreover, with this technique we have bias come into play if the initial subjects, recommend additional subjects that are 'like-minded' and thus exclude diverse perspectives. Therefore, there is the possibility that the people to whom I had access through my friends to have

similar points of view with my friends and with me. I tried to keep this in my mind through the whole process of the research and especially in my data analysis and the related presentation of the data. I attempted to address this issue in my work by acknowledging the limits to my claims and the situated nature of my findings.

I proceeded by sending to the potential participants a letter informing them of the study in advance and explaining the method of sampling used, and after that with a follow up call and a meeting in order to gain their informed consent to participate. At the beginning of the interview I presented myself to the participants as a doctorate student and as a teacher myself and I thanked them for agreeing to participate. I continued by putting forward a set of questions that were mapped onto the preceding literature review.

I tried to adopt between me and the interviewees a friendly and relaxed atmosphere predicated on trust and support. At the same time I attempted to be alert and to observe as many things as I could. I made an effort to reinforce signals of rapport, such as increased eye contact, attentive body posture, smiling, nodding in agreement. I also avoided glancing at my watch.

All the interviews were conducted in the school, after the end of the lessons, on the basis of mutual agreement. A small portable tape recorder was used which was fairly unobtrusive, noiseless, easy to place on a desk possessed a relatively sensitive built-in microphone and a tape counter. Each interview lasted between 25 and 35 minutes. There was some extra untranscribed talk before and after, of which written notes were made.

The interviews were conducted in Greek, as it was the native language of the teachers I interviewed. I took great care over the selection and phrasing of the questions so that their meaning was both purposeful and clear and my objectives comprehensible.

I also tried to keep in mind that as a researcher I had brought with me considerable 'conscious and unconscious baggage' (Mills, 2001, p.286). I was the primary research tool and my presence, my bias, and the selections I had made, had serious effects in the research process (Ball, 1990).

Ethical considerations

For the main ethical issues in research my Institution Focused Study was informed by 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.

An ethically sensitive aspect of my research concerned my position and role in it, which was dual (Smyth & Holian, 2008). I was the researcher but also a teacher myself. As researcher my interest was to understand and analyse the way teachers think about the wider issues of discrimination, racism and

immigration as fully as possible, as well as to reflexively consider their own positions in discussions on aspects of modern citizenship. As a teacher my interest was to reflect to my own personal experience, enhance my professional teaching practice and deepen my understanding of the situation.

Having in mind my dual role I tried to build a relationship of trust between the participants and myself. I believe that my insider perspective helped me in this. Being a teacher myself I knew the language of those being studied along with its particular jargon and meanings and the participants were more willing to discuss personal knowledge with me who they probably saw as part of their world (Sikes & Potts, 2008).

I also tried to achieve a reflexive approach to my study, stepping back from time to time, thinking critically about my purpose, intention, stance and claims, and reflecting on what I was doing, what kinds of knowledge were being produced, which concepts were too rigid and which frameworks hid more than they revealed (Delanty, 2005; Bourdieu, 2004; Gray, 2003).

I took all the necessary steps to ensure that all participants understand the purposes and the process of the research study in which they were to be engaged, including why their participation is necessary, how it will be used and how and to whom it will be reported (BERA, 2002). I gained voluntary informed consent from all teachers involved and informed them for their right to withdraw at any stage in the process for any reason, at any time.

Furthermore, I explained to them how I would protect their confidentiality when writing by offering them pseudonyms for their identity and for the location of the school that they are working at. I collected some 'sensitive' data under the definition of the Data Protection Act 1998, such as data about racial/ethnic origin, political opinions, religious (or similar) beliefs but I ensured my participants that only sensitive data which is essential to the research will be used and that they will be anonymised. I also informed them that the interviews would be tape-recorded and I assured them that I would be the only person to hear the recording.

However, I kept in mind that it was difficult to get fully informed consent because I wasn't able to anticipate the events that would emerge in the field and fully inform the participants. For that reason I tried to take a critical look at the processes through which I sought the informed consent of my subjects and the forces that work against their being able to give it (Malone, 2003).

Moreover, in order to be responsible to my participants and enhance the quality of my research account I planned to go back to communicate my findings to them and see if my analysis will be comprehensible to them. This will assist me in illuminating the investigation and provide deeper and richer analyses (Silverman, 2001; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Bloor, 1997).

Possible Uses, 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 improve 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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