Listening to children's voices on intercultural education policy and practice

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Listening to children's voices on intercultural education policy and practice

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The overarching purpose of this research is to investigate native and immigrant children's experiences of intercultural pedagogical practices in Cyprus schools. It also explores their suggestions for the improvement of policies and practices for intercultural education. Last but not least, it examines whether Cypriot and immigrant students share similar or different conceptualisations and understandings regarding the above aspects. To this end, interviews were carried out with 40 pupils, aged 11–12, of five primary schools, which presented high concentrations of immigrant students. On the basis of our analysis of our data, the children appeared to perceive intercultural education in terms of culturally responsive discussions, collaborative learning and language learning.

Keywords: intercultural education; children's voices; Cyprus education

Introduction

In the recent years, listening to children's voices has gradually arisen in the agenda of education research as an important aspect that facilitates school improvement (e.g. Fielding, Fuller, & Loose, 1999; Raymond, 2001; Rudduck, Chaplain, & Wallace, 1996). Beyond education research, listening to children's voices has been also stimulated by international organisations, such as the United Nations (UN) through the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989). Furthermore, previous research has shown that listening to children's voices is a prerequisite in order to develop inclusion (e.g. Messiou, 2011; Tangen, 2008). Messiou (2006) argues that children may better identify the factors that impede or promote inclusion in their schools, while they may challenge segregationist practices that enhance marginalisation. In addition, Stevens (2008, p. 184) argues that research should examine students' understanding of racism in order to make 'inferences about the impact of racism on students' self-esteem and educational outcomes'.

Despite concerns in the international literature, in the Cypriot context, there is little evidence that children's voices have been taken into consideration in the research focusing on school policies and practices for intercultural education. Nevertheless, Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson (1999, p. 39) argue that 'without listening to the often hidden voices of students it is impossible to understand fully the policies and

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practices of individual schools'. Taking a step further, we argue that research should listen to children's voices in order to fully examine the policy trajectory, including policy development and implementation. We argue that the definition of intercultural education as an approach, in which every individual takes action towards social emancipation (Tiedt & Tiedt, 2002), necessitates the involvement of children in both the decision-making and implementation of intercultural education policy.

To this end, the focus of this research is to investigate Cypriot and immigrant children's experiences of intercultural pedagogical practices in Cyprus. We also aim to explore their suggestions for the improvement of policies and practices for intercultural education. In addition, we examine whether Cypriot and immigrant students share similar or different conceptualisations and understandings regarding the above aspects. In a setting that lacks a research culture, this study aims to point out Cypriot and immigrant children's understanding of the disparities, conflicts and dilemmas, but also of the prospects of intercultural education in Cyprus. In order to better understand students' understandings of intercultural education (which we discuss in later parts of this paper), in the next section, we conceptualise intercultural education.

Conceptualising intercultural education

Literature illustrates an intense debate about intercultural education and the arguments for (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997) and against it (Stables, 2005). The acceptance or rejection of intercultural education does not deny the existence of intercultural societies. The different typologies of intercultural education attempt to conceptualise its goals and classifications (Banks & McGee Banks, 2009). However, in real-life situations, these categories overlap and are always tentative. We thus examine the categories of monoculturalism, multiculturalism and interculturalism as the different dimensions that underpin the policy of the Ministry of Education in Cyprus (MEC).

Zembylas and Iasonos (2010) describe monoculturalism as an attempt at 'acculturation' that draws upon the culturally deficient model. The underlying assumption of the 'deficit' approach is that immigrant students have educational disadvantages in comparison with their local peers. Monoculturalists attribute immigrant students' lower achievement to their cultural deficiency (Banks & McGee Banks, 2009). Thus, culturally different groups have to reject their 'inherited' cultural characteristics and adopt the local culture in order to become part of the local homogeneous community. Education operates as an assimilation mechanism, which seeks immigrant children's adjustment to the local culture and the school values and not the change of social and school stances and practices in order to meet their needs (Banks & McGee Banks, 2009).

Multiculturalism promotes awareness about the cultural 'other' (Leclercq, 2002). Literature reports various approaches to multiculturalism, including contributory, additive, transformative or social-action approaches (Banks, 2006). The contributory and additive approaches suggest that the contributions of minorities or cultural content, respectively, are added to the curriculum, while its purposes and structure remain the same. Although the social-action approach represents the highest level of multiculturalism, the transformative approach is the actual level that teachers can reach in the classroom. The celebration of diversity within the model of multiculturalism compels a spurious attention to the cultural differences of minorities (Tiedt &

Tiedt, 2002). The focus on differences enhances multiculturalists' refusal to question the impact of these differences on the individuals' lives (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997). Thus, they fail to establish social emancipation because of their inability to reveal and abolish institutional discrimination.

Interculturalism suggests that social justice and equity values mobilise teachers towards the transformation of their pedagogy and curriculum in order to empower their marginalised students (Zembylas & Iasonos, 2010). Teachers aim to promote an education that challenges power relations and promotes social change (Tiedt & Tiedt, 2002). In this model, every individual takes action towards social emancipation. Intercultural education reveals the 'hidden' educational processes that perpetuate discrimination. It moves beyond the provision of plain understanding to the acquisition of skills that presuppose the transformation of these processes (Leclercq, 2002). Interculturalists stress the dynamic nature of cultures, which are an 'unstable mixture of sameness and otherness' (Leclercq, 2002, p. 6). Cultural boundaries alter and overlap to create a third space, within which locals and immigrants share a hybrid cultural identity. Interculturalism asserts that teachers and students ought to recognise oppression by promoting education for empathy, moral consciousness and examination of discrimination from the victim's perspective (Banks, 2006).

The aforementioned typology provides the framework within which students' understandings of intercultural education were analysed and interpreted for the purposes of this study. Arguably, what students have to say about education policy and schooling, 'is not only worth listening to (children's voices) but provides an important – perhaps the most important – foundation for thinking about ways of improving schools' (Rudduck et al., 1996, p. 1). Allowing children to discuss upon the prospects and barriers in the implementation of intercultural education can be very informative for the formation of intercultural education policy per se, but also of teacher development programmes, which should be tailored to the children's needs. Nevertheless, to better understand children's opinions, we should set them in context.

The Cyprus context: education policy for intercultural education

Cyprus is a young democracy that became an independent republic in 1960. Due to the division of the island in 1974, the Turkish-Cypriots moved in the North, while the Greek-Cypriots were relocated in the South. As the Greek-Cypriot government is recognised as the *de jure* government of the island, the current study focuses only on the Greek-Cypriot context. The growth of the tourist and business industries and the economic boom in the mid-1980s have gradually resulted in the mass influx of immigrant workers. Immigration issues first became intertwined in the educational agenda of the Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC) of Cyprus in 2001 (Hajisoteriou, 2010). As the state provides the right to all children to attend their neighbouring school, immigrant children may enrol in public schools, regardless of their parents' legal or illegal status of immigration to the country. Despite these efforts, literature contends that public schools still remain ethnocentric and culturally monolithic (Angelides, Stylianou, & Leigh, 2004; Hajisoteriou, 2012b).

On that account, the state had to evidence its capacity to design an intercultural policy. To this end, during the school year 2003–2004, the Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC) launched the programmes Zones of Educational Priority (ZEP) on a pilot basis. The policy of the ZEP constitutes a strategic choice of the MEC in

order to fight functional illiteracy, school failure and school marginalisation in schools with high concentrations of immigrant pupils (Giannaka, Spinthourakis, Kratzia-Stavlioti, Lampesi, & Papademetriou, 2007). Additionally, in 2004, the MEC began a campaign to address issues related to intercultural education. The slogan 'Democratic Education in the Euro-Cyprian Society' was adopted to describe the efforts to steer the national education system towards an intercultural orientation (CER, 2004, p. 1).

The Committee of the Educational Reform reinforced the following educational goals (CER, 2004): (a) eliminating the ethnocentric and monocultural elements in the Cypriot education; and (b) promoting an intercultural ideology that connects the Cypriot tradition with the knowledge of other cultures. In order to explain its policy guidelines, the MEC sent various circulars to the schools. Such circulars suggested the following:

- revision of the curriculum in terms of intercultural education;
- teaching of the musical tradition, history, literature and religion of minorities;
- launch of Greek-language programmes that smooth the inclusion of immigrants in the local society (CER, 2004).

In addition, in 2008, the Council of Ministers in Cyprus approved the 'Policy Document of the Ministry of Education and Culture for Intercultural Education' (MEC, 2008, p. 1). The 'new' policy directive aimed at creating an intercultural school that does not exclude but aims to promote immigrants' inclusion in the educational system and society of Cyprus. Instead, intercultural schools should be conducive to the success of all students despite their sociocultural, linguistic or religious diversity. The MEC declared its willingness to promote social justice in education, while eradicating stereotypes and prejudices (MEC, 2008). Research in the Cypriot context has indicated that although the MEC adopted the rhetoric of intercultural education, its documentation still failed to provide a concrete definition of intercultural education (Hajisoteriou, 2012b; Hajisoteriou & Angelides, 2013). Furthermore, the MEC referred to the knowledge of other cultures, instead of the interaction and the interchange between Greek-Cypriot and other cultures. Gregoriou (2010) argues that the MEC still adhered to monocultural notions of education, as it conceptualised cultural difference as an exclusive characteristic of immigrant pupils. Thus, 'the migrant student and not the multicultural class, the cultural difference of the "other" and not ethnicity and ethnic borders became the focus of educational policy' (Gregoriou, 2010, p. 39).

Last but not least, during the school year 2011–2012, a 'new' national curriculum has been put in practice in Cyprus on a pilot basis. Arguably, we can still not examine its impact on educational practice in Cyprus. Yet, we can draw some preliminary observations regarding the dimensions of intercultural education in the 'new' curriculum. Discourses of intercultural education appear to emerge in the 'new' curriculum. Hajisoteriou, Neophytou, and Angelides (2012) argue that intercultural education is mediated through the notions of the 'democratic and humane school', which are set to be the cornerstones of the 'new' curriculum. As defined in the official curriculum, the democratic school is a school that includes and caters for all children, regardless of any differences they may have, and helps them prepare for a common future. It is a school that guarantees equal educational opportunities for all and, most importantly, is held responsible not only for the success but also for the

failure of each and every individual child. On the other hand, the humane school is a school that respects human dignity. It is a school where no child is excluded, censured or scorned. It is a school that celebrates childhood, acknowledging that this should be the most creative and happy period of the human life (MEC, 2010, p. 6).

Despite efforts for change, Cypriot research asserts that there is a gap between policy rhetoric and practice and between policy intentions and outcomes (Angelides et al., 2004; Panayiotopoulos & Nicolaidou, 2007; Zembylas & Iasonos, 2010). The official state policy draws upon the discourse of interculturalism as it includes humanistic manifestations about respect for human rights, justice and peace. However, in practice, the MEC policy pertains to monoculturalism, as immigrant students are seen as in need of assimilation in order to overcome their deficiency and disadvantage (Papamichael, 2008). In examining the reasons behind this gap, Cypriot research concludes that the development of intercultural education policy was not accompanied with the re-conceptualisation and restructuring of the national educational system and schooling. The state did not adopt a balanced governance model between school autonomy and centralised management (Hajisoteriou, 2010). Consequently, it did not communicate to schools coherent policies that allow for clear understandings of intercultural education, nor did the MEC translate this policy into clear organisational policies or practices for schools. Last but not least, the MEC did not provide teachers and students with the opportunity to bring their experiences into the planning of such policies through the development of intercultural school-based curricula and initiatives. Thus, researching children's understandings of intercultural education policy and its implementation could contribute in bridging the gap between policy and practice through the development of policies and school-based curricula that are tailored to the children's needs.

The Cyprus context: previous research engaging children's voices

In this context, the little research that engages with children's voices and their experiences has been either located in the area of inclusion and/or in intercultural education. Firstly, Messiou's research (2006) has focused on conversations with children in order to explore the students' experiences of marginalisation within primary school settings. Messiou concluded that children conceptualise marginalisation in the school context in adverse ways. Although some children recognise that they are marginalised and make efforts to alter this situation, other children either do not feel it or do not admit it. In addressing marginalisation, Angelides and Michaelidou (2009) in the study 'Deafening silence: Discussing children's drawings for understanding and addressing marginalisation' deployed the collaborative art-making technique in a pre-primary school classroom in order to increase the academic and social participation of children who appeared to be marginalised. Moreover, Nicolaou, Nitsiou, and Charalambous' (2007) research focuses on high-school students' attitudes and experiences of cultural diversity in their school settings. The outcomes of this research showed that the participant students held both positive and negative attitudes towards the ethnic 'other'.

Partasi's (2009) study on identity and belonging in a culturally diverse classroom in Cyprus indicated that immigrant students experience an identity conflict struggling between their family and peer cultures. In addition, the participant children referred to racist incidents against immigrant students because of their skin colour and their dress code. Moreover, Partasi (2011) carried out research on students'

experiences of multiculturalism in Cypriot primary schools. Partasi reports that 'the school life of children in culturally diverse environments had both positive and negative elements' (p. 383). She explains that both Cypriot and immigrant students appreciated the 'new' knowledge they could acquire from interacting with pupils of other cultures, languages and religions. However, immigrant students experienced difficulties of communication and acceptance, including some racist incidents. However, the gradual development of friendships between Cypriot and immigrant children minimised negative stereotypical behaviour.

In addition, some case studies of a single student were completed by Cypriot researchers. Skapoulli (2004) asked an Arabic-speaking immigrant girl in Cyprus to position herself towards the different gender ideologies that she encountered at home and in school. Skapoulli concluded that the 'competing gender codes, meeting at the crossroads of geographic, linguistic, and cultural transition, lead to the emergence of a hybrid cultural identity' (p. 245). Similarly, Angelides et al. (2004) closely examined the case of a girl from Iran, who studied in a primary school in Cyprus. It is noteworthy that the participant girl replaced her Iranian name with a Greek one, while she had forbidden her parents to talk to her in Iranian while they were in school.

Apparently, research encompassing children's voices in the Cyprus context has not thoroughly, if at all, examined children's understandings of education policy regarding intercultural education. However, Fullan (1991) explains that children's meanings of a change that is proposed may become a factor that could prevent (or promote) change. Thus, Rudduck et al. (1996) contend that if these meanings are not connected to the purpose of the proposed change, they will act as barriers or resistance to change, while children will continue to safeguard tradition. To this end, the current research aims to voice children's understandings, meanings and experiences of policy for intercultural education using the methodology described below.

Data collection and analysis

The need to carry out this study emerged out of a larger multi-level research, which examined the Europeanisation of Cypriot intercultural education policy. The bigger project provided *inter alia* the opportunity to EU and Cypriot policy-makers, head teachers and teachers to voice their perceptions regarding intercultural education policy. During the project, the necessity to allow children – the recipients of the policy – to reflect upon intercultural education had become clear. The study was conducted by two researchers; both researchers collaborated to develop the research instruments and to carry out the data analysis. The first researcher is a young female post-doc researcher, who specialises in the field of intercultural education policy. The second researcher is a male academic, who started his career as a primary school teacher. His research interests fall in the field of children's voices and inclusive education. Before the project, the first researcher used to work as a primary school teacher. Being a teacher, she operated as a gatekeeper who negotiated access to the research setting and who carried out all the interviews with the participant children. Because of her teacher status, young age and female gender, establishing good rapport was a relatively straightforward process.

Cyprus has six districts, namely: Nicosia, Limassol, Larnaca, Famagusta, Paphos and Kyrenia (Kyrenia is not in the area controlled by the Cyprus govern-

ment). We deliberately selected five schools (one school within each district) as 'information-rich cases, able to illuminate the issues under investigation' (Partasi, 2011, p. 375). Within each of the participant schools, we selected two classrooms of the sixth grade, which is the final grade of primary school. Thereafter, we carried out observations in the participant classrooms, which were weekly (a 40-minute period per week) and continued for 5 weeks. Observations referred to occurrences during classroom work, which we considered to be related to intercultural education. In parallel, we kept field notes and reflections regarding classroom practices and dynamics.

In addition, we carried out interviews with four children from each of the selected classrooms; two Cypriot and two immigrant children. The criteria that guided our selection of children were to be willing to participate in the interview process and to have their parents' consent for their participation in the interview. Our classroom observations but also teachers' suggestions guided our selection. The final sample included a total of 40 children: 20 Cypriots (11 female and 9 male) and 20 immigrants (12 female and 8 male). Of the 20 immigrants, 6 were Bulgarian, 5 Romanian, 3 British, 4 from other European countries, while 2 came from Asian countries. The families of these students were legal immigrants in Cyprus. Most of the immigrant students were first generation immigrants with 0–9 years of residency in Cyprus. In order to carry out this research, we gained formal approval from the Ministry of Education and Culture in Cyprus. We also obtained informed consent from the head teachers of the school, the teachers of the participant classrooms, the students themselves and their parents. As we disclosed the students' identities, all the names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

All students were interviewed only once and for approximately 20 minutes. The interview schedule drew upon our observations and referred to issues such as children's conceptualisations of intercultural education, peer relations between Cypriots and immigrants, the learning process and work in the intercultural classroom. All the interviews were carried out in the Greek language as both immigrant and Cypriot children were speaking the language fluently, apart from one interview in which we used a Bulgarian interpreter in order to communicate with the child. The interviews were tape recorded and fully transcribed so that no verbal information would be lost. Interviewing children aged 9–11 was a real methodological problem since the process has to take into account not only the power relationships between children and the researchers, but also many processes, including the children's intentions and their interpretations. In order to overcome any barriers due to power relations between children and the researchers, we encouraged open-ended talks with children, using as the starting point of our discussions pictures, drawings or classroom incidents that had occurred during our observations. During our stay in each school and prior to the interviews, we launched informal chats with the children, usually walking and talking in the school yard. In this way, children felt much more comfortable by the time of the interview, and they expressed their views more freely as they seemed to consider the interview process per se as a friendly talk.

Furthermore, considering the vulnerability of children, we tried to develop approaches according to the advice of previous researchers who have interviewed children (e.g. Armstrong, 1995; Cooper, 1993; Hopkins, 2008; Messiou, 2006; Pollard, 1985, 1996). Cooper (1993) emphasises the importance of the interviewer's role for helping the interviewees 'to express their views as lucidly as possible'

(p. 253). For this purpose, techniques familiar to counsellors, such as active listening, paraphrase and reflection, can be employed. It is noteworthy that, 'gaining access to children's perspectives requires skill in communicating meanings embedded in children's language and behaviour. It also requires an understanding of the nature of interactions between adults and children' (Armstrong, 1995, p. 67). Two other points are worth commenting on. The first is that all these interviews were voluntary; and second, that pupils had the right to conclude the interview at any time or to refuse answering any of our questions.

In the event, a total of 40 interviews and 50 observations were carried out, which were inserted in a thematic analysis cycle. In our analysis of the data, we followed the six stages suggested by Creswell (2013). In the first stage, we organised and then studied the data organised according to the method they were collected (interview and observation). In the second stage, we read our data in order to understand them better and in parallel we kept notes about our thoughts. After that, we began examining our data for groups of meanings, themes, assumptions and behaviours and tried to locate how these were connected within a theoretical model (Creswell, 2013). In the third stage, we continued the process of analysis, and we divided the data into categories. Each part was named. In the fourth stage, we put all the names together in big groups to create areas of analysis. Finally, in the fifth and sixth stages of analysis, given that the categories were set and they seemed to be connected to the research questions, we began looking at our data in order to substantiate these categories with raw data.

In trying to establish the trustworthiness of the data, we examined and triangulated our data from multiple angles and different perspectives, continually looking for alternative possibilities and different explanations, trying to develop a richer understanding of them (Creswell, 2013).

Findings

Drawing upon the previously described data collection and analysis, we firstly identified children's understandings of diversity. We examined how children (C) conceptualise and understand the concept of intercultural education in their culturally diverse classrooms. In response to this question, three overlapping sub-themes emerged as follows: culturally responsive classroom discussions; collaborative learning; and language learning. In the following sections, we analyse the themes that emerged from our analysis, and we substantiate them with data.

Culturally responsive classroom discussions

Most of the Cypriot and immigrant children who participated in this study identified classroom discussions as an important tool in developing not only awareness of diversity, but also intercultural knowledge. These children argued that discussions on cultural matters had been a usual practice in their classrooms:

> Sometimes we discuss about other countries. We talk about their customs and traditions. We learn about their music or about the food they eat there. If we have classmates that come from this country, they bring photos or other things to show us. (C3 – School in Famagusta)

> We discussed about our countries. They asked me how is Romania and I told them that it is beautiful. I told them that I used to live in a village and that I was playing during the day until the night. (C6 – School in Larnaca)

According to the children's quotes, classroom discussions appeared to be based on the concept of *cultural difference*. The presentation of cultural content and the celebration of diversity were the main focus of these talks. However, these discussions seemed to rely upon the additive and contributory approaches, which are rooted in the multiculturalist model (Banks, 2006). As described in the conceptual framework of this research, these approaches are the lowest levels of the multiculturalist model and indicate the addition of topics concerning national celebrations and heroes or multicultural concepts and themes to teaching without changing its structure. The roots of such an approach may stem from the emphasis of MEC's intercultural education policy on folklore, as suggested by Hajisoteriou's (2012a) research. Nevertheless, Milner (2005) is concerned about the inadequacy of such approaches to combat discriminatory behaviour. Therefore, he advocates teachers' and students' engagement in discussions about how diversity functions, while 'teachers should help students think about both differences and similarities […] in complementary ways' (Milner, 2005, p. 417). Such an observation implies that in terms of policy, the MEC should promote the development of curricula that allow children to challenge their taken-for-granted cultural assumptions, instead of the inclusion of immigrant traditional music, dance, cuisines and dress in curricula. In terms of practice, teachers should avoid the teaching of traditional practices and rituals, such as the 'study of strange customs' (Banks, 1988, p. 175) as the focus on immigrant students' unique customs and artefacts may reinforce cultural misconceptions.

Furthermore, some students (both Cypriots and immigrants) argued that classroom discussions were often initiated by their teachers in order to ease the tensions between Cypriot and immigrant children. They asserted that their teachers advised them about the desirable behaviour they should endorse towards their culturally and ethnically diverse classmates:

> We often talk about the children who come from other countries. We said that we should not make fun of them because they are human like us. For example, we talked about Robin. He is so white and the others make fun of him because he blushes. Mrs showed us some videos on the computer about a girl that she does not have hands and she comes from another country. She can do everything, she can sing, she can dance. We realised that we should not mock the others because they are different. (C1 – School in Paphos)

> We discuss many times about our differences. We said that I might be a foreigner but they should not treat me badly and that they should get in my shoes. We also said that every child is different and that we should accept children who have a different colour or speak a different language and that we should play with them. (C7 – School in Paphos)

Most Cypriot and immigrant children argued that classroom discussions aimed to combat prejudice and stereotypical behaviour among the student body. They indicated that their teachers were concerned about the inter-group relationships in their classrooms and for this reason they added moral content to their teaching. The children argued that their teachers wanted to promote the development of friendships between Cypriots and immigrants. Thus, they encouraged discussions that were

intended to establish positive communication among their culturally diverse students. In addition, the children pointed out that classroom discussions often focused on social values and attitudes including respect, tolerance and mutual understanding.

It is interesting that some immigrant children highlighted the necessity to talk about their emotions. Some of them asserted that they often did not feel at ease to express their feelings to their classmates. Thus, they expected their teachers to provide them with this opportunity:

> We should have one period during the week in order to gather together with children who come from other foreign countries. In this lesson, the teacher should let us talk about our emotions. How we feel is very important. (C10 – School in Limassol)

> My classmates don't understand what it means to be in a different country, what it means to be unwanted. I would like my teacher to give me the opportunity to talk about how I feel so that they can really understand. (C9 – School in Nicosia)

These children suggested that discussions about emotions may make immigrant students audible and visible in the classrooms. It is noteworthy that only one Cypriot child (C3 – School in Famagusta) claimed that she would like to discuss about her immigrant peers' emotions. C9, from the participant school in Nicosia, argued that classroom discussions about emotions may help the Cypriot children to recognise and counter oppression by promoting empathy and examining discrimination from the immigrant's perspective. This argument is lent weight by Blackledge's (1992) case study of a Year-5 class in a Birmingham primary school. Blackledge's research reveals that teachers working within the interculturalist tradition reinforce classroom conversations in order to motivate their students to express their emotions and stances. Immigrant children's claim for the projection of and reflection upon their emotions begets further implications for educational policy and teacher practice to promote intercultural education. It may then be argued that intercultural education policy and practice should encompass social emotional teaching. Teacher training programmes should focus on the development of social emotional teaching strategies that aim to enhance emotional literacy in students and to help them develop friendships, identify feelings in self and others, and develop problem-solving skills.

Collaborative learning

Most of the Cypriot children who participated in this study pointed out that they were part of culturally heterogeneous groups in their classrooms. Having immigrant classmates, these children asserted that they had to operate in more collaborative ways. They argued that their culturally mixed peer groups became forums for discussion and problem-solving:

> The teacher has told us to help other pupils from our group when we complete our work. I always help Rodiga so that she finishes earlier. She doesn't know how to do her work because she doesn't speak Greek very well. (C3 – School in Paphos)

> I have a girl from Holland in my group. I help her, I explain to her what she has to do; I teach her new words in Greek. I remember that when we had a lesson about olive trees, I taught her how to say and how to write olive oil. (C2 – School in Limassol)

Most of the Cypriot children seemed to argue that their collaboration with their immigrant peers was a linear, one-way process; they exclusively provided help and assistance to the immigrant members of their group. They appeared to claim that the immigrant peers were in need of support because of their lack of proficiency in the Greek language. For them, collaborative classroom activity facilitated immigrant children's language acquisition, as they assisted their immigrant peers in learning Greek. Most Cypriot children seemed to argue that Cypriots and immigrants did not participate in such collaborative endeavours on 'equal' terms: Cypriots were in more powerful positions because of the language. They thus suggested that no 'real' collaboration existed between them and their immigrant peers. These findings indicate the potential for redeveloping and reformulating collaborative learning practices whereby teachers provide to their students a wide range of tasks for which they are mutually responsible, while facilitating the interchange of experiences as students are dependent on each other for the achievement of common goals.

On the other hand, most of the immigrant participants indicated that they were not mere receivers of support by their Cypriot peers, but they also helped their Cypriot peers. They explained that they helped their groups 'perform better', while they conceptualised collaborative learning as a 'give-and-take' process:

> We always collaborate in the classroom. We discuss in our groups. I help them to complete some assignments. When I have difficulties in a lesson, they explain it to me. Or when I have another problem in the classroom, they help me solve it. (C8 – School in Nicosia)

> We collaborate by discussing in our groups. We learn things from each other. For example, we have an assignment that I don't understand, but they understand, and vice versa. They explain to me or I explain to them. (C6 – School in Famagusta)

These children seemed to argue for the mutual collaboration between Cypriots and immigrants on shared learning activities. In this study, both Cypriot and immigrant students appeared to conceptualise collaborative learning in terms of academic achievement. However, previous research has shown that teamwork enhances opportunities for communication between culturally diverse students (Morgan, 2005). Stables (2005, p. 195) asserts that students should encounter difference through their work with a wide range of others on 'mutually responsive tasks'. In the context of our research, children's perceptions should be acknowledged in the development of policy. Intercultural policy may promote the adoption of the method of peer training, whereby peer groups entail forums for discussion and problem-solving by the students themselves. This may be accomplished through workshops and games, music and mass media, discussion or storytelling. Peer training not only stimulates academic development but also promotes prejudice reduction.

Beyond collaboration with their Cypriot peers, some of the immigrant children, who were bilinguals, argued that they operated as language mediators between teachers, Cypriot students and non-Greek-speaking children:

> I have a friend, Anna, who also comes from Bulgaria. Sometimes, when she wants to say something to the teacher or to the head-teacher, she doesn't feel well because she doesn't speak Greek very well. I translate for her. (C8 – School in Larnaca)

> She knows how to read and write, but she has difficulties to understand. As we are in the same group, she asks me what the teacher writes on the board and I explain to her what it means. (C6 – School in Paphos)

These bilingual children pointed out that their teachers placed them in the same groups with non-Greek-speaking children, with whom they shared the same mother tongue. We also observed that non-Greek-speaking children were sitting at the same desk with immigrant students, who were speaking both their mother tongue and the Greek language; when the teachers wanted to provide guidelines to non-Greek-speaking students, they were asking these bilingual students to make the translation. In addition, this finding was triangulated by some Cypriot children. For example, C1 from the participant school in Nicosia said that a bilingual boy helped him to communicate with a Romanian girl from his group, who did not speak Greek. Nevertheless, some bilingual children, who were expected to act as language mediators in their groups, felt 'burdened' with such a responsibility:

> I came to Cyprus from Moldavia, like Bobby did. I came first, he came second. I have to be in the same group with him because the others don't know our language. I always have to explain to him what to do. I like helping him, but I lose time when I have to do my work. It is difficult. Sometimes, I have to shout at him so that he hurries up. (C5 – School in Larnaca)

Arguably, bilingual children, who share the same language and origin with newcomers, may help them adjust to the new environment. Nonetheless, drawing on the above quote, we may argue that teachers should be careful about placing too much pressure on these children. Therefore, in terms of policy-making, language mediators should be placed in schools in order to assist teachers and students to implement collaborative learning and other intercultural education initiatives. These mediators should be trained not only to teach the language of instruction, but also to support immigrant students with instruction in basic subjects, such as reading, writing and mathematics. In addition, according to the immigrant children's responses, grouping for collaborative learning seemed to be divided according to the language criterion. Children's suggestions bear implications for teacher practice regarding collaborative learning; teachers should carefully select the criteria for placing immigrant children in groups. They should carefully plan the groups not only according to children's ethnicity and mother tongue, but also according to their different skills and interaction styles (Harry, 2005).

In this study, both Cypriot and immigrant students appeared to conceptualise collaborative learning in terms of academic achievement. However, previous research has shown that teamwork enhances opportunities for communication between culturally diverse students (Morgan, 2005). Stables (2005, p. 195) asserts that students should encounter difference through their work with a wide range of others on 'mutually responsive tasks'. The completion of mutually responsive tasks entails children's collaboration for the achievement of common goals that are set in the context of the task. Thus, children participated in a group of students, with whom they exchange experiences, while working together towards meeting the goals of the task. Therefore, collaboration for the completion of mutually responsive tasks not only stimulates academic development, but may also promote prejudice reduction. It enhances opportunities for communication between

culturally diverse children, allowing them to build understanding of their intercultural differences and commonalities.

Language learning

Our discussion of the previous themes has also pointed out that the Cypriot participants were concerned about their immigrant peers' inadequate proficiency in the Greek language. To sum up, they seemed to perceive language differences as a barrier to immigrants' school achievement, but also as an impediment to development of inter-group friendships. They argued that collaborative learning and the presence of bilingual students as language mediators helped these pupils to overcome any language issues. Our findings are similar to the findings reported by Partasi (2011). Her research indicated that, 'some of the Cypriot children appeared to be intimidated by the different language spoken by the newcomers and reacted with hostility towards them' (p. 379). Partasi also concluded that pupils who speak the same language with newcomers often act as interpreters. However, she cautioned that such practice may slow down Greek-language acquisition by newcomers.

According to the official policy, newcomers enrol in mainstream classrooms as soon as they arrive in Cyprus, but without any former preparation. However, because Greek is the language of instruction in schools, they receive support teaching in order to learn Greek, for some hours a week and in parallel to the main curriculum (Elia, Vlami, & Loukaides, 2008). Nevertheless, most of the Cypriot children who participated in our study contended that this arrangement was inadequate. On the other hand, they argued for the creation of reception classes:

> When they come to our school they attend Greek lessons. However, before they come in our classrooms, they should have a teacher at home or at school, who will teach them the Greek language for a year. Because they do not do so, they have difficulties in reading and in the pronunciation of difficult words. They cannot talk to their classmates. (C4 – School in Nicosia)

> We don't have a teacher who speaks their language. Before these little children come to our school, they should have a teacher to teach them our language. They should learn the language very well and then come to school. (C3 – School in Famagusta)

Cypriot children suggested the creation of reception classes for immigrant students' preparation to enter mainstream schools. Their arguments were entirely focused on aiding immigrant students to attain the language standard prior to their enrolment in mainstream schooling. Children's suggestions bear implications for policy development, as the state should contact appropriate field assessments investigating issues such as the operation of reception classes (an under-researched field).

Suggestions for the improvement of support teaching for language learning were also made by some immigrant students who attended the Greek-language lessons themselves:

> We leave from our classroom and we go to another classroom to learn Greek. I believe that this is very good but we do not do it often. Instead of going there twice a week, we should go there for three or four times. We have one lesson and until we go again, we forget everything. (C6 – School in Paphos)

> The language teachers help us learn Greek, but they should make the lesson more amusing so that they make us to like the language. The teachers should become friendlier so that we feel more comfortable to talk. (C8 – School in Larnaca)

These children argued that the language sessions are beneficial for non-Greek-speaking students, including themselves (when they were newcomers). However, they claimed that more teaching periods are necessary for Greek-language instruction to be more successful. In addition, they argued that the development of friendlier teaching environments may enhance the outcomes of support teaching for Greek-language learning. Elia et al. (2008), in their study of Cypriot teachers' perceptions of support teaching for Greek-language instruction, were critical of the implementation of support teaching in practice. They asserted that teachers who are responsible for support teaching are not properly trained, nor do they have the necessary teaching experience. In addition, the teachers who participated in their study argued that the lack of time and the absence of appropriate teaching materials constrain the implementation of the programme. Accordingly, it seems reasonable to argue that children's suggestions for additional teaching time with regard to Greek-language learning and the creation of children-centre learning environments should be further examined by policy-makers in order to be incorporated in the official policy.

To sum up, most of the Cypriot children argued that the primary goal of schooling should be to immerse newcomers in the Greek language. It is notable that none of the Cypriot participants referred to the teaching of the immigrants' languages. On the other hand, most immigrant children appeared to be concerned about the acquisition and the maintenance of their languages of origin:

> I have one sister, who goes to the kindergarten. Sometimes, I get confused and I speak with her in Greek. Usually, I try to talk to her in Bulgarian at home. My father tells me not to get her used to Greek, not because we don't want her to know Greek but because we are afraid that she will forget our language. Most of the time she is at school and she only speaks Greek with the other kids there. (C9 – School in Limassol)

> I'm Romanian-Cypriot, or Cypriot-Romanian, or both. I have to speak Greek, here but I have to know Romanian. How am I going to talk with my grandparents there? (C6 – School in Famagusta)

Most immigrant children were worried that by learning the Greek language, they might 'forget' their languages of origin. They conceptualised their languages of origin as the languages of their families and/or as the languages of their relatives who 'stayed back home' (i.e. C9 – School in Nicosia). They appeared to perceive their languages as the bond with their extended families in their countries of origin. In order to overcome the danger of 'losing' their language, most of the immigrant children recommended the introduction of bilingual education as a beneficial dimension of immigrant students' education. They thus suggested that their school curricula should promote bilingual programmes by teaching in the languages of both the host society and their countries of origin. Chamberlin-Quinlisk and Senyshyn (2012, p. 15), in examining the overlap between language teaching and intercultural education, 'question language practices that exclude or downplay the benefits of developing students' heritage languages while learning additional languages'. Therefore, drawing upon the participant children's suggestions, we may argue that policy-makers should develop education policies that

promote the native speaker identity by avoiding narrow perceptions of language ownership.

Conclusion

This study examined how Cypriot and immigrant primary-education students understand education policy for intercultural education. Our research offered students a unique opportunity to 'voice' their concerns, but also their suggestions regarding intercultural education. If children's 'interpretations of school processes' are important in our efforts to 'increase effectiveness, or to change the impact, of schooling' (Hammersley & Woods, 1984, p. 3), policy-makers and researchers should understand the definitions students attach to intercultural education before launching educational reforms that aim to promote equal education opportunities to culturally (and/or ethnically) diverse groupings. Cypriot children's conceptualisations of intercultural education were largely consistent with the literature and pointed towards collaboration within the learning community (i.e. Stables, 2005); classroom discussions about (inter)cultural issues (i.e. Hajisoteriou, 2012b); and language learning (i.e. Chamberlin-Quinlisk & Senyshyn, 2012).

On the basis of students' suggestions, teachers should acknowledge that teamwork enhances opportunities for collaboration between culturally diverse students. To this end, students may gain a better understanding of not only their differences, but also their commonalities. Additionally, the students who participated in this research argued for classroom discussions regarding diversity and other intercultural issues. Similarly, Partasi (2011, p. 383), in her research of children's experiences of multiculturalism, concluded that 'non-Cypriot pupils were proud of being able to share knowledge about their parents' home countries and mother tongues with their peers'. Last but not least, the need for Greek-language learning was suggested by several Cypriot students. In particular, the Cypriot participants experienced significant concerns about their immigrant peers' linguistic skills. Although they overemphasised the importance of Greek-language learning, they underestimated the importance of other cultural characteristics of their immigrant peers, such as the cultural situation of the family, cultural norms and expectations (Abbas, 2002) and sexual orientation and disability (Partasi, 2011). In addition, they did not refer to concepts related to equality and social justice (Zembylas & Iasonos, 2010). On the other hand, the findings that emerged from our interviews with the immigrant participants raise concerns regarding the current language policy. Most immigrant students pointed out that Greek-language instruction is necessary, yet not efficient. They criticised its current form in terms of teaching and pedagogy, time management and focus.

Implications for policy-making and implementation

Given the small-scale nature of this research, generalisations to the whole education system of Cyprus are inappropriate. However, the research presented here could potentially be seen as having wider implications not only for future research, but also for education policy (both policy-making and implementation). Policy-makers may and should *inter alia* look for the 'components' of future intercultural education policies in children's voices and suggestions. Arguably, children's suggestions may inform developments in the field of intercultural education.

First and foremost, children's suggestions imply that policy discourse for intercultural education should encourage the development of collaborative cultures within and across the learning communities. In terms of teaching practices, the participant children's claims imply that teachers should restructure peer groups. Accordingly, teachers should include Greek-Cypriot and immigrant students in peer groups on 'equal' terms. To this end, peer groups should operate as collective units, which establish forums for discussion and problem-solving (i.e. regarding issues such as marginalisation, racism, etc.) by the students themselves (Roncoroni, 2002). This may be accomplished through workshops and games, music and mass media and discussion or storytelling.

Classroom discussions about diversity and other intercultural issues are a common teaching practice. However, according to the participant children's suggestions, such practices should be reformulated to include discussions upon children's socio-emotional thinking. Accordingly, classroom discussions should not solely be based on cultural differences, which rely upon additive and contributory approaches of intercultural education (Banks & McGee Banks, 2009). On the other hand, teachers and students should attempt to confront prejudice by engaging in discussions about children's emotions regarding diversity per se, but also marginalisation and exclusion. Discussions allowing children's socio-emotional thinking may provide to them the opportunity, 'to express their emotions appropriately, regulate their emotions, solve common problems, build positive relationships with their peers and adults in their environment, and engage and persist in challenging tasks' (Hemmeter, Otrosky, & Fox, 2006, p. 585). Children's socio-emotional development may be pursued through socio-emotional teaching, which refers to teaching social emotional skills, such as skills allowing children to identify feelings in self and others, friendship skills and problem-solving skills. Socio-emotional teaching includes four stages, namely (a) acquisition: learn to use a new set of skills; (b) fluency: use this set of skills proficiently; (c) maintenance: use the skills (or 'maintain' the skills) without support or prompting from an adult; and (d) generalisation: apply the new skills to new situations, people, activities and settings (Gail, Strain, Yates, & Hemmeteret, 2004). As amendments at the grassroots should also be reflected at the level of policy-making, the MEC and its officials should promote the development of curricula of socio-emotional teaching to be implemented in practice.

With regard to language learning, the Ministry should examine students' suggestions for the creation of not only reception (preparation) classes, but also (other) language classes. Such language classes may offer not only instruction of Greek as a second language, but also the instruction of immigrants' languages of origin. According to immigrant students' accounts, monolingual practices should be replaced by bi(multi)lingual ones. Similar to children's suggestions is Nicolaou's (2000) claim that bi(multi)lingual classes are beneficial for *all* students, as they help them develop positive attitudes towards linguistic and cultural diversity, and language learning.

In conclusion, we invite further research to examine how children's conceptualisations of intercultural education are constructed by students of schools that differ in terms of the enrolment rates of immigrant students and in terms of the socio-economic and gender background of their student population. The advantage of looking at children's definitions of intercultural education helps us understand the

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