

Mapping cultural diversity through children's voices: From confusion to clear understandings

Christina Hajisoteriou, Christiana Karousiou and
Panayiotis Angelides*

University of Nicosia, Cyprus

This research examines children's conceptualisations of cultural diversity. In particular, this project examines the following two research questions: how do children define and understand the concept of cultural diversity; and what do they perceive as the implications of cultural diversity on their daily lives? To this end, interviews were carried out with 40 (immigrant and native) students, aged 11 to 12, at five primary schools in Cyprus, which presented high concentrations of immigrants. On the basis of our analysis of the data, the participant children appeared to perceive cultural diversity in terms of two contrasting perspectives. On the one hand, they viewed cultural diversity in terms of the cultural-deficiency perspective. Such perceptions stemmed from the model of monoculturalism implying the need to assimilate the culturally 'different' in order to counteract the negative consequences of cultural diversity. On the other hand, the same children also perceived cultural diversity in terms of cultural celebration. To this end, some children drew upon the model of multiculturalism to define cultural diversity as a culture-enriching and culture-celebrating process, pointing to folkloristic activities including traditional music, dance and food. Nonetheless, few of the participant children—both Cypriot and immigrant—defined cultural diversity in terms of the model of interculturalism, pointing to the intercultural exchange that stems from 'real' friendship development between natives and immigrants, equality of rights and inclusion. As the participant children appeared to confuse the meanings and languages of cultural diversity, this paper concludes with suggestions on teacher practices to 'crystallise' children's views.

Keywords: children voices; diversity; interculturalism; cyprus education; inclusion

Introduction

In recent years the notion of student voice has emerged as a catalyst for supporting the success of school improvement efforts and as a potential strategy for enhancing both student performance and school restructuring (Rudduck & Flutter, 2000; Mitra, 2004; Robinson & Taylor, 2013). It is regarded as a construct that includes the ways in which young people have the opportunity to meaningfully and actively engage in important school decisions that have a considerable impact upon their lives. More importantly, it encompasses a range of initiatives that support the redefinition of the role of students, situated within a perplex web of power relations, school cultures and structures (Fielding, 2001; Robinson & Taylor, 2013; Sandberg, 2016).

*Corresponding author. University of Nicosia, 46 Makedonitissas Avenue, PO Box 24005, 1700 Nicosia, Cyprus. E-mail: Angelides.p@unic.ac.cy.

Previous research has indicated that student voice is significant in terms of informing developments in policy and practice with respect to interculturalism (e.g. Hajisoteriou & Angelides, 2015; Sandberg, 2016). In this field, Messiou has conducted substantial research on enhancing inclusion in schools by listening to and encompassing student voice (e.g. Messiou, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2012, 2014; see also Messiou & Ainscow, 2015; Messiou & Hope, 2015). What she argues in her research is that students hold unique knowledge and perspectives about social justice, since they are capable of detecting both segregating practices that enhance marginalisation as well as identifying the factors that inhibit inclusion in their schools. In addition, further research has found that children's perspectives with respect to interculturalism were important in efforts to promote equal education opportunities to culturally (and/or ethnically) diverse student populations (Hajisoteriou & Angelides, 2015).

The research study reported in this paper contributes significantly to the enactment of an alternative thinking in terms of supporting school policies and practices for intercultural education. Notably, it does so by showcasing the importance of taking into serious consideration the value of student perceptions as a source of enhancing interculturalism and consequently bringing about meaningful change in schools. This investigation is important because, as Ainscow *et al.* (1999: 39) assert, 'without listening to the often hidden voices of students it is impossible to understand fully the policies and practices of individual schools'. In a similar vein, Mitra and Serriere (2012) add that it is imperative for schools—in terms of social justice—to listen to those who are most at risk and least likely to have their opinions taken into consideration. Consequently, this understanding guided our decision to explore children's voices and give them the opportunity to participate actively within the research process through student consultation.

Despite the increased attention that student voice has received, limited research studies exist that investigate student experiences at the school level, since most of them concentrate on raising student voice at the classroom level and focus predominantly on secondary school students. Nonetheless, what previous research has illustrated about immigrant students is that the silencing of their voices, in their critiques and reflections of their socio-educational experiences, are usually ignored by their schools (e.g. Suarez-Orozco *et al.*, 2009; Messiou, 2012). Moreover, Robinson and Taylor (2013) criticise the often tokenistic character of student voice policies and practices due to adults' expectations about which students are perceived as more knowledgeable, and thus more capable of voicing their opinions. In the Cypriot context, research focusing on children's voices regarding cultural diversity has been rather scarce. Thus, there is little evidence that young people's perspectives have been acknowledged during the development on school policies and practices for supporting interculturalism (e.g. Hajisoteriou & Angelides, 2015). This lack of literature indicates that the notion of student voice regarding cultural diversity requires further empirical documentation and research.

In this context, our research study aims to fill the gap in the literature by offering rich empirical data on how student voice could support intercultural efforts at school level by investigating the ways in which immigrant and Cypriot children perceive and define cultural diversity. In particular, this paper examines the following two research questions: how do children define and understand the concept of cultural diversity;

and what do they perceive as the implications of cultural diversity on their daily lives? In order to better understand children's voices on cultural diversity, in the next sections we first set out to clarify the notion of student voice, and then to conceptualise cultural diversity according to the three models of monoculturalism, multiculturalism and interculturalism.

Conceptualising student voice

Student voice is defined as the unique perspectives, views and experiences of young people on school policies and practices (Mitra, 2004; Messiou, 2011; Hajisoteriou & Angelides, 2015). Providing opportunities to students to raise their voice on this matter is important as: (a) it offers them the opportunity to engage actively in their own education; (b) it 'enable[s] us to reflect upon how future developments may afford greater opportunities to those who have been previously denied' (Rose & Shevlin, 2004: 160); and (c) effective future policies and practices in the field of intercultural education could be developed based on children's conceptualisations of intercultural education. However, in this paper we move a step forward to include more extensive views on student voice that are inclusive of the collaboration between students, their peers and adults (e.g. school personnel and parents) to not only address problems, but also change efforts in schools (Mitra & Serriere, 2012).

Central to our argument is that the meaning children attach to intercultural education is important to 'increase effectiveness, or to change the impact, of schooling' (Hammersley & Woods, 1984: 3). Therefore, all stakeholders should take into serious consideration children's interpretations on this matter before forwarding educational reforms that aim to support the development of successful intercultural practices in schools. As Rudduck *et al.* (1996) argue, if children's understanding is not related to the purposes of the suggested reform, then they will act as inhibitors and resisters to change while aiming to maintain the current status quo.

Consulting students is imperative, since it is considered a means utilised by educators for listening to what students have to say and what they can do regarding school improvement and school reform within a collaborative framework (Mitra & Serriere, 2012; Sandberg, 2016). It is initiated by educators and involves endeavours to engage students in a procedure where the latter have the opportunity to exercise their rights, share their opinions on school issues, have their views collected through questionnaires, interviews or focus groups on issues regarding teaching, learning and evaluation, exercise agency or even assume leadership roles in change efforts.

A number of significant benefits have been identified in cases where students were closely consulted in important school issues and practices. Specifically, schools with high levels of student consultation presented positive outcomes in terms of student performance, teacher–student relationships, student efficacy and self-confidence (Rudduck & Flutter, 2000; Fielding, 2001; Mitra, 2003, 2004). These findings are also reinforced by Manfield *et al.* (2007), who suggest that student voice is considered to be an essential element for effective and efficient schools, since it constructs skills like accountability, self-confidence, self-awareness, responsibility and increases students' relationships within their community. By entailing student participation throughout schooling, students are able to construct and adopt skills that will assist

them in the present and in the future, leading to important benefits for growth (Cook-Sather, 2002; Mitra, 2004, 2006; Mitra & Serriere, 2012).

Through student voice, students are becoming effective members of their community with developed expertise, social and cognitive skills and abilities (Cook-Sather, 2002), and they realise what their responsibilities are, in order to be a citizen in a democratic society (Dewey, 1916). According to Mitra (2004), students who participate in educational processes show remarkable progress in their personal and social growth, and this is essential for students' success in society. In a similar vein, Mitra and Serriere (2012) argue that student voice supports youth development by furthering what they call ABCDE: *agency* (the exertion of influence in specific situations); *belongingness* (the development of meaningful relationships with peers and adults and the sense of ownership and attachment to the school); *competence* (the development of new abilities such as problem-solving skills, critical thinking, peace-making skills, etc.); *discourse* (the sharing of diverse ideas, but also learning to engage with diverse backgrounds, styles and cultures, while working towards shared goals); and *efficacy* (civic efficacy—the social consciousness and responsibility that they can make, and actually will make, a difference in their school and in the broader community).

Nevertheless, despite the benefits of student voice, Messiou and Hope (2015) raise concerns about the tensions that might be experienced by both teachers and students. On the one hand, teachers might feel intimidated by their colleagues' reactions when sharing their students' views. On the other hand, students might feel that their opinions are devalued in school decision-making, and thus underestimate the importance of sharing their views.

To overcome such tensions, Robinson and Taylor (2013) contend that providing students with opportunities to communicate their ideas and opinions is essential, but not enough, in student voice work. They thus emphasise that 'students should have the power to bring about changes which will improve their experiences in school' (p. 33). In this vein, the two researchers name the four core values that should underpin student voice work: 'communication as dialogue'; 'participation and democratic inclusivity'; 'the recognition that power relations are unequal and problematic'; and 'the possibility for change and transformation'.

In addition, Mitra and Serriere (2012), in their research on student voice in elementary school reform, set out the following preconditions of promoting student voice: scaffolding learning; launching inquiry as the framework for teaching and learning; and creating a vision of the school as a place fostering student voice. Accordingly, it is important for teachers to demonstrate real interest in what students have to say, treat their opinions with respect and offer them meaningful and productive feedback (MacBeath *et al.*, 2003; Robinson & Taylor, 2013). Therefore, throughout this consultation procedure, we seek to receive valuable information from students about how they define and understand the concept of cultural diversity, as well as what they perceive as the implications of cultural diversity on their daily lives.

Taking into serious consideration the aforementioned, in the following sections we turn the focus of our investigation to the ways in which children define and understand the concept of cultural diversity, as well as the implications of cultural diversity on their daily lives. Nevertheless, in order to better understand students'

understandings of this concept, it is important first to conceptualise the notion of cultural diversity.

Conceptualising cultural diversity

The literature illustrates an intense debate on the definitions and conceptions of cultural diversity (i.e. Hajisoteriou *et al.*, 2015). In this paper, we develop a typology of cultural diversity that includes three main models: monoculturalism, multiculturalism and interculturalism. Notably, Modood (1997: 10) argues that these different models are usually based on ‘a flawed understanding of culture’. In real-life situations, as these models attempt to respond to the diversity and fragmentation of societies, they are often fluid, overlapping and tentative. Gundara (2000) asserts that critical reflexivity is an urgent need in comparing and contrasting monoculturalism, multiculturalism and interculturalism. Nonetheless, what a brief comparison shows is that different countries adopt different models to address cultural, linguistic and religious diversity that bear adverse consequences for both the majority and the minority (or immigrant) populations, and particularly students (Faas *et al.*, 2014).

To begin with, Zembylas and Iasonos (2010) describe monoculturalism as an attempt at ‘acculturation’ that draws upon the cultural-deficiency model. The underlying assumption of the ‘deficit’ approach is that immigrants (due to their differences, such as cultural capital, traditions and language) face various disadvantages in comparison to their native peers. Monoculturalists attribute immigrants’ ‘problems’ to their cultural deficiency (Banks & McGee Banks, 2009). Thus, the groups perceived as ‘culturally different’ have to reject their ‘inherited’ cultural characteristics and adopt the local culture in order to become part of the local homogeneous community. According to monoculturalism, education should operate 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).

The model of multiculturalism aims to promote awareness about the cultural ‘other’ (Hajisoteriou & Angelides, 2016). Bleich (1998: 83) supports the idea that multiculturalism ‘is an attempt to allow for a measure of cultural diversity by making certain exceptions for minorities while limiting the effect of changes on the majority’. Nevertheless, criticisms of multiculturalism suggest that since the model overemphasises the celebration of diversity, it compels a spurious attention to the cultural differences of minority or migrant groups (Hajisoteriou & Angelides, 2016). The focus on differences enhances multiculturalists’ refusal to question the impact of these differences on individuals’ lives. Thus, multiculturalism fails to establish social emancipation because of its inability to reveal and abolish institutional discrimination. In the field of education, multiculturalism may take the form of contributory and/or additive approaches, meaning that the contributions of minorities or cultural content, respectively, are added to the curriculum, while its purposes and structures remain the same (Banks & McGee Banks, 2009).

Last but not least, interculturalism stresses the dynamic nature of cultures, which are an ‘unstable mixture of sameness and otherness’ (Leclercq, 2002: 6). Cultural boundaries alter and overlap to create a third space, within which natives and

immigrants share a hybrid cultural identity. Interculturalists point out that social justice and equity values should mobilise all people towards social transformation in order to empower those being marginalised or excluded (Zembylas & Iasonos, 2010). Education should challenge power relations and promote social change (Faas *et al.*, 2014). In this model, every individual takes action towards social emancipation by revealing and eliminating the 'hidden' processes that perpetuate discrimination and marginalisation. Interculturalism asserts that cultural diversity should be conceptualised through the notions of empathy and moral consciousness, and by examining discrimination from the victim's perspective (Banks & McGee Banks, 2009).

In this research, we used the aforementioned typology as the framework to examine, analyse and interpret children's understandings of cultural diversity. Allowing children to discuss the issue of cultural diversity can be very informative for the formation of policies, practices and teaching methodologies in culturally diverse schools. Nevertheless, to better understand children's conceptualisations of cultural diversity and its implications on their daily lives, we should set them in the context of Cyprus, within which we carried out this research.

The Cyprus context

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 to 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, this 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. In 2001, the Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC) attempted for the first time to address immigration issues through education (Hajisoteriou, 2010). It thus provided the right for all children to attend their neighbouring school, meaning that immigrant children could enrol in public schools, regardless of their parents' legal or illegal status of immigration. Despite these efforts, the literature contends that public schools still remain ethnocentric and culturally monolithic (Hajisoteriou, 2010; Hajisoteriou & Angelides, 2015).

The MEC has adopted the rhetoric of interculturalism and inclusion to respond to immigration (Papamichael, 2008). Including all students regardless of their origin suggests the creation of democratic schools that provide equal educational opportunities for access, participation and success by respecting diversity and cultural, linguistic and religious pluralism (MEC, 2010). However, research asserts that there is a gap between policy rhetoric and practice (i.e. Hajisoteriou, 2010; Zembylas & Iasonos, 2010). Official state policy includes humanistic manifestations on respect for human rights, justice and peace. Nonetheless, in practice, immigrant students are seen as in need of assimilation in order to overcome their deficiency and disadvantage (Papamichael, 2008).

In this context, little research has examined intercultural education through students' voices. To begin with, in pre-primary education, Angelides and Michaelidou's (2009) research suggested that collaborative art-making is a successful technique to increase the academic and social participation of children who appear to be

marginalised. Secondly, in primary education, Messiou's (2006, 2008, 2011) examination of students' experiences of marginalisation showed that while some children acknowledge their marginalisation and attempt to alter this situation, other children either do not feel it or do not admit it. Moreover, Partasi's (2009, 2011) research on cultural identity formation cautioned about immigrant students' identity conflicts between their family and peer cultures, stemming from racist incidents against them. Partasi suggests that intergroup friendship development may counteract negative stereotypical behaviour.

In addition, Hajisoteriou and Angelides's (2015) study aimed to investigate native and immigrant children's experiences of intercultural pedagogical practices in Cyprus schools. It also examined their suggestions for the improvement of policies and practices for intercultural education. In this study, both immigrant and native children appeared to perceive intercultural education in terms of culturally responsive discussions, collaborative learning and language learning. Last but not least, in secondary education, Nicolaou *et al.* (2007) explored students' stances towards cultural diversity, concluding that the participants held both positive and negative attitudes towards the ethnic 'other'.

Arguably, in the Cypriot context, research focusing on children's voices has not thoroughly examined children's understandings and conceptualisations of cultural diversity. What we argue is that children's individual and societal beliefs on cultural diversity influence their practices, which in turn may promote (or hinder) the successful implementation of interculturalism within school and social settings. Arguably, this study aims to bridge this gap in the literature by voicing children's understandings, meanings and experiences of cultural diversity using the methodology described below.

Methodology

Cyprus has six districts, namely Nicosia, Limassol, Larnaca, Famagusta, Paphos and Kyrenia (Kyrenia is not in the area controlled by the Cyprus government). We deliberately selected five schools (one school within each district) as 'information-rich cases, able to illuminate the issues under investigation' (Partasi, 2011: 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 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. 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 0–10 years of residency in Cyprus. In order to carry out this research, we gained formal approval from the MEC in Cyprus. We also obtained informed consent from the head-teachers of the schools, the teachers of the participant classrooms, the students themselves

and their parents. As we do not wish to disclose the students' identities', all names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

The children were interviewed individually and by only one adult interviewer from our research team. Since in our research we examined 'challenging' topics including discrimination, racism and identity, we chose a 'one-to-one' approach instead of a focus-group approach. In this way, we aimed to make children feel safe that the information they were sharing was confidential. We also sought to restrict bias in children's responses by allowing them to freely talk about themselves and their experiences. Last but not least, we wished to engage the less talkative and shy children in our discussions, and not to let them be overshadowed by the more extrovert.

The interviewing phase of our research took place from January to June of the previous school year. All students were interviewed only once and for approximately 20 minutes. All the interviews were carried out in the Greek language, as both immigrant and Cypriot children spoke that 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 to 11 was a real methodological problem, since the process had to take into account not only the power relationships between the children and the researchers, but also many processes, including the children's intentions and their interpretations (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2007). In order to overcome any barriers due to power relations between the children and the researchers, 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. Additionally, we encouraged open-ended talks with children, using as the starting point of our discussions various pictures, drawings or scenarios. We also explained to the children the aim of our interviews and that they should consider the interview process as a friendly talk.

At the beginning of the interviews, we played games with the children like 'hangman' and 'squiggle', or we asked the children to draw themselves in order to help them relax. In these ways, we aimed to make the children feel much more comfortable by the time of the interview in order to express their views more freely (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2007). Our interview guide drew upon issues such as children's conceptualisations of cultural diversity, intercultural education, peer relations between Cypriots and immigrants, and the learning process. Table 1 includes examples of interview questions included in our two interview guides. Moreover, in order to engage the children in the interview process, we used other resources such as drawings, pictures and photographs pertinent to issues such as discrimination, stereotypical behaviour and diversity. The use of these materials initiated further discussion and probing with the participant children.

Furthermore, considering the vulnerability of children, we tried to develop approaches according to the advice of previous researchers who have interviewed children (e.g. Cooper, 1993; Armstrong, 1995; Messiou, 2006, 2011). Cooper (1993: 253) emphasises the importance of the interviewer's role for helping the interviewees 'to express their views as lucidly as possible'. For this purpose, techniques familiar to counsellors, such as active listening, paraphrasing and reflection, can be employed. It

Table 1. Examples of interview questions

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- (1) Do you know any children who come from other countries?
 - (2) How do you feel about being classmates with children from other countries? How do you get on with them?
 - (3) Who do you hang out (or play) with during break-time?
 - (4) Do you have friends who come from other countries?
 - (5) How do you spend your time together? Do you visit their home? Do they visit your home?
 - (6) Did you share the same desk with peers from other countries? How did you feel? What do you remember?
 - (7) Your teacher usually asks you to work in groups. How do you collaborate? How do you feel when you are in a team with children who come from other countries?
 - (8) Have you ever discussed the issue of diversity in your classroom?
 - (9) What do you believe are the difficulties faced by children who come from other countries in your school?
 - (10) How can the school (e.g. head-teacher, teachers, students, etc.) help all children feel welcome and excel regardless of their country of origin?
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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: 67). Two other points are worth commenting on: first, all these interviews were voluntary; second, pupils had the right to conclude the interview at any time or refuse to answer any of our questions.

In the event, a total of 40 interviews were carried out, which were inserted in a thematic analysis cycle. In order to examine the multiple positions and viewpoints addressed by the interviewees, we carried out an inductive analysis of the data in order to identify the thematic priorities of each interview (Creswell, 2013). These priorities were compared and contrasted across the different interviews so that common themes could emerge. This enabled us to identify similarities and differences in the perceptions and experiences of cultural diversity that were proposed by the interviewees. Then, we read our data closely and also kept notes about our thought processes. After that, we began examining our data for groups of meanings, themes and assumptions, and tried to locate how these were connected within a theoretical model (Creswell, 2013). We continued the process of analysis and divided the data into thematic categories: the cultural-deficit perspective, the cultural-celebration perspective and the intercultural-exchange perspective. Finally, we began looking at our data in order to substantiate the emerging thematic 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 (Creswell, 2013). The implications of this approach, in terms of our analysis, were that we developed a richer understanding of the data. The angles and perspectives decided on were based on our efforts to always try not to take anything for granted; we always tried to look for different explanations and alternative interpretations of the data.

Findings

Drawing upon the previously described data collection and analysis, we first identified children's understandings of diversity; we examined how children (C) conceptualise the concept of culture, but also their perceptions regarding the implications of cultural diversity on their everyday life. In response to this question, three overlapping themes emerged: the cultural-deficit perspective, the cultural-celebration perspective and the intercultural-exchange perspective. In the following sections, we analyse the themes that emerged from our analysis and substantiate them with raw data. In reporting the data, we number the schools as follows: School 1 in Nicosia; School 2 in Limassol; School 3 in Larnaca; School 4 in Paphos; School 5 in Famagusta. Letters (a) and (b) next to the school numbers refer to the two classrooms from each school that participated in our research.

The cultural-deficit perspective

The participant children were asked to provide their understanding of diversity, while explaining the implications of diversity on their everyday lives. A considerable number of Cypriot children conceptualised cultural diversity in terms of linguistic pluralism. However, they appeared to perceive linguistic pluralism as a barrier to the smooth operation of their classrooms and their schools. They thus portrayed 'other' languages as a problem that their school had to overcome:

You can tell that our classroom is diverse because we speak different languages. The teacher stops the lessons and talks to my peers in English because they do not speak Greek. I don't feel ok with this situation because when the teacher stops the lesson, the whole class starts the chitchat. Ok they have to learn because they are pupils too, they are part of this class, but they still disturb the lesson. [C2—Cypriot girl from School 1(a) in Nicosia]

C2 asserted that immigrants' language 'difficulties' had a negative impact on her and her classmates' achievement. Similarly, some other Cypriot children, who participated in the study, seemed to be concerned about their immigrant peers' lack of proficiency in the Greek language. They argued that language was not only an impediment to immigrants' participation in the lesson, but also a barrier to the development of friendships with their immigrant peers. It is noteworthy that some children conceptualised language difference as a speech disorder [i.e. C1—Cypriot boy from School 1(b) in Nicosia] and/or as a learning difficulty [i.e. C10—Cypriot boy from School 3 in Limassol; C17—Cypriot boy from School 3(a) in Larnaca; C32—Cypriot girl from School 4(b) in Paphos; C35—Cypriot girl from School 5(a) in Famagusta] that should be 'treated' by their teachers or other specialists (i.e. speech therapist and/or special teacher).

In addition, some Cypriot children appeared to argue that cultural diversity often disturbs peer-group dynamics in their classrooms. For example, C14, a Cypriot girl from School 2(b) in Limassol, discussed her negative feelings at such a situation:

When they come to our country we don't feel well because they might steal your friends. You love your friends and then, someone of them comes and takes them away from you. [C14—Cypriot girl from School 2(b) in Limassol]

It is noteworthy that most of the Cypriot children contended that they related exclusively to their Cypriot peers. When they were asked to justify the absence of immigrants from their friendship groups, they referred either to the immigrants' language difficulties and/or their 'inappropriate' behaviour. However, as we will discuss below, some other Cypriot children argued that immigrants' presence in their schools and classrooms provided them with the opportunity to create more friendships.

Lastly, some of the participant Cypriot children perceived cultural diversity as the reason behind the 'unsmooth' running of their schools. It is noteworthy that they portrayed immigrants, and particularly immigrant boys, as the 'troublemakers' of their schools:

This school has a big disadvantage because it is very diverse. We have a lot of Gypsies and this is not nice. I know the Gypsies, their character. You have to take care of your things because they steal a lot in the school; it runs in their culture. We have to do something for these children, to teach them the right from wrong. [C9—Cypriot girl from School 2(a) in Limassol]

Some Cypriot children appeared to draw an interconnection between cultural diversity in their schools and the rise in delinquency rates. They 'blamed' specific ethnic groups (i.e. Roma) for any 'behaviour' problems occurring in their schools. Moreover, they seemed to generalise inappropriate behaviour as an exclusive characteristic of other ethnic groups. These children seemed to condemn specific immigrant groups because of their (perceived) 'deficit' characteristics that bring polarisation within their schools.

In contrast, immigrant pupils seemed to perceive their Cypriot peers' stances and behaviours towards cultural diversity as 'stereotypical'. Many of the immigrant children described their feelings when such behaviour occurred:

They were mocking me because I didn't know the language. They were swearing at me. I don't know why, I think because I was a foreigner. I wanted to grab my bag and leave the school [...] In the third grade, they came on me, they were hitting me and kicking me. [C8—Romanian boy from School 1(a) in Nicosia]

They were making fun of me because of my colour. They were calling me 'blacky'. I felt sad, but I pretended that I didn't hear them. [C15—Pakistani boy from School 2(b) in Limassol]

Immigrant children's remarks seemed to suggest that, in some cases, Cypriot children perceived diversity in terms of a cultural-deficit approach. Linguistic diversity and appearance characteristics (i.e. colour) appeared to be the most commonly cited reasons (by immigrant students) behind Cypriots' 'inappropriate' and 'rejective' behaviour towards their immigrant classmates. Dusi and Steinbach (2016: 821), in their study of the voices of immigrant children and their parents in the Italian context, caution that for children who do not speak the language of the host country or 'for children with different skin colour it is more difficult to find a friend in the class'. They further explain that immigrant children's experiences of rejection by native peers negatively influence the quality of their educational experience, the process of their social inclusion, and the development of their identity and capacities.

In our study, immigrant children's remarks with regard to rejection and exclusion were triangulated with informal observations made by their Cypriot peers. Almost all Cypriot children who participated in our study claimed that they have witnessed racist incidents against their immigrant peers. In the quote above, C15, a Pakistani boy from School 1(b) in Nicosia, argued that he became the victim of violent behaviour and bullying because of his skin colour. It is noteworthy that one native girl [C13—Cypriot girl from School 2(b) in Limassol] argued that she had even witnessed violent behaviour against one of her immigrant peers: 'they go after him and they punch him because they talk to him and he doesn't understand the language'. It is notable though that none of the participant Cypriot or immigrant students admitted committing racist acts. This is also a corporate finding of Partasi's (2011) research regarding children's experiences of multiculturalism in Cypriot classrooms. Children who participated in Partasi's (2011) research also mentioned racist incidents towards immigrant—especially newcomers—because of their skin colour, linguistic diversity and dress code. Arguably, the need to voice student perceptions about the reasons behind racism is imperative. Stevens (2008: 184) argues that research should examine students' understandings of racism in order to make 'inferences about the impact of racism on students' self-esteem and educational outcomes'.

Many of the immigrant children who participated in this study argued that they often felt 'left out' and 'excluded'. For example, C4, who is a Bulgarian girl from School 1(a) in Nicosia, was outspoken about her experience of marginalisation:

I only have friends from Bulgaria, but I don't like that. I would like to have more friends from my classroom. I tried to. The teacher tells me to go and play with them (Cypriots). They tell me: 'we don't want you to play with us'. Will I go to play? For example, they play hide and seek. I hide in a corner, where they can easily find me. No one comes to look for me though. [C4—Bulgarian girl from School 1(a) in Nicosia]

C4 claimed that she actively made efforts to approach her Cypriot peers and to be included in their peer group. Moreover, she expressed her disappointment because, as she said, all her efforts were unsuccessful. However, she emphasised that her peers were not the ones to be 'blamed' for the situation, rather their parents' stance towards immigrants. She explained that 'because of the recession, many Cypriots have lost their jobs' and when an immigrant like her father, who is a builder, gets a job, then 'other parents talk in front of their children and say that the Bulgarians are stealing their jobs'. Past research traces the roots of such a situation to the lack of preparation to live and work in a highly diverse society, and to the ethnic and racial stereotypes and cultural misunderstandings that prevail in Cypriot society (Papamichael, 2008). Additionally, Cypriot students' stances may be linked to the negative connotations drawn by the mass media between the increase in numbers of immigrants, the rise of unemployment and the increase in crime rates (Trimikliniotis & Fuliás-Souroulla, 2006). Trimikliniotis and Fuliás-Souroulla (2006) explain that Cypriot society often seeks a scapegoat in the ethnically diverse communities by stereotyping immigrants as a problem to the social order. In addition, Stevens *et al.* (2016) assert that the current socio-political circumstances—such as the unresolved political problem (and the division of the island)—negatively influence Cypriot students' perceptions of cultural diversity, and thus their stances and attitudes towards students representing other

ethnicities. What we argue is that Cypriot children's perceptions of diversity 'echo' broader socio-political concerns maintained by Cypriot society.

Beyond C4, many other immigrant children recognised their marginalisation by their Cypriot peers [i.e. C7—English girl from School 1(b) in Nicosia; C20—Russian boy from School 3(a) in Larnaca; C28—British boy from School 4(a) in Paphos; C40—Bulgarian girl from School 5(b) in Famagusta]. However, there were also some immigrant children who argued smooth and friendly relations with their Cypriot peers. Nonetheless, when asked to name their friends, none of the names referred to a Cypriot child. Moreover, only three of the immigrant children who participated in our study claimed to have visited a Cypriot peer's house or that one of their Cypriot peers had visited their house in the past.

Drawing upon immigrant children's voices, we may conclude that overt and covert forms of marginalisation exist. It is noteworthy that Messiou (2006: 39), in her research on student voice and inclusion, cautions that marginalisation does not occur only when 'a child is experiencing some kind of marginalisation and this is recognised by almost everybody including himself/herself'. She also refers to other types of covert marginalisation, such as: when 'a child is feeling that he/she is experiencing marginalisation, while most others do not recognise this'; or even when 'a child is found in what appear to be marginalised situations but does not feel it, or it does not view it as marginalisation'; and, lastly, when 'a child is experiencing marginalisation but does not admit it'. According to Dusi and Steinbach (2016), immigrant children's experiences of marginalisation and exclusion may cause them stress and anxiety. In contrast, they suggest that language learning and friendship development may provide immigrant children with an entrée to 'belongingness'.

To sum up, our findings point to a tension between Cypriot students' and immigrant students' voices on cultural diversity. On the one hand, many Cypriot students who participated in this research deployed monocultural definitions of cultural diversity pertaining to a cultural-deficit approach. They appeared to 'blame' immigrant students and their culturally diverse personal traits—such as language and cultural stances—for disturbing the school and classroom dynamics. On the other hand, many of the immigrant students appeared to feel marginalised and excluded by their Cypriot peers. This tension may be linked to negative societal perceptions of diversity prevailing among the Cypriot population. Beyond such concerns, a cultural-celebration perspective simultaneously emerged as a finding from our data.

The cultural-celebration perspective

Despite deficit-oriented beliefs that portrayed immigrants as an obstacle to the school and classroom dynamics, 16 out of 20 immigrant children and 13 out of 20 Cypriot children also conceptualised diversity as a culturally enriching experience. They thus argued that they had the opportunity to celebrate diversity when culturally diverse groups were present in their schools:

I feel excited because our classmates tell us a lot of things for their lifestyles in their countries, their culture, their language, their customs, and traditions. I also tell them about our customs and traditions and different things about our society. We show our cultures to each other. [C24—Romanian girl from School 3(b) in Larnaca]

They can learn what happens in this country, but we can also learn what happens in the other countries of the world. [C25—Cypriot boy from School 4(a) in Paphos]

Many Cypriot and immigrant children asserted that the presence of immigrants provided the opportunity for cultural celebration. They seemed to argue that immigrant children bring their own different characteristics to the local society, and thus project their cultural traits, customs and traditions to their native peers, and vice versa. Moreover, they suggested that being part of culturally diverse classrooms enriched their cultural horizons. Drawing upon our data, we argue that most of the participant children conceptualised cultural diversity as the existence of diverse, fixed and community-bound cultures that should be 'celebrated' by and within the local society. According to our theoretical framework, the participant children relied upon the model of multiculturalism as they focused on cultural differences rather than commonalities.

During the interviews, the participant children were asked to reflect upon their multicultural conceptions of cultural diversity. They thus commented on the ways cultural diversity was celebrated in their classrooms. Both Cypriot and immigrant children presented some examples of 'multicultural activities' that were organised by them and their teachers. For example, C11, a girl from Sudan in School 2(a) in Limassol, argued that at her teacher's request, she had distributed traditional delicacies from Sudan to her classmates. Also, C8, a Romanian boy from School 1(b) in Nicosia, explained that he described various Romanian games to his teacher and peers, while they all played one of the games he described. Other children referred to classroom presentations of songs and stories, in their own language [i.e. C16—Russian boy from School 2(b) in Limassol; C36—Moldavian girl from School 5(a) in Famagusta]. Children appeared to focus on the traditions, customs and national holidays of other ethnic groups. Nevertheless, we are concerned with the folkloristic dimension of such 'multicultural events', as described by some of the children, and more specifically 8 immigrant children and 9 Cypriot children.

Most of the participant children argued that during classes, they focused on the traditions, customs and national holidays of culturally and ethnically diverse groups and individuals. What we argue is that children (and their teachers) approached cultural diversity in terms of festivals, music and food. However, Huerta *et al.* (1998: 329) caution that when knowledge of diversity only forms a part of folklore, the majority may continue to look at diverse cultures 'as something different, inferior, or subordinate'. Instead of adding traditional music, dance, cuisines and dress to the classroom curricula, children should engage in activities that challenge their taken-for-granted cultural assumptions. Arguably, in terms of practice, children should avoid the study of traditional practices, rituals and artefacts as the 'study of strange customs', since this may reinforce cultural misconceptions and thus further stereotypes (Banks, 1988: 175).

Children's focus on cultural differences through the study of folk-life may lead to the conclusion that we can predict individuals' lived experiences or identities on the basis of their group membership (Banks & McGee Banks, 2009). Such an approach disregards other socio-economic, psychological and institutional factors, which influence immigrants' inclusion, while it may inhibit intercultural interaction. It is notable

that Hajisoteriou and Angelides (2015), in their study of immigrant and native children's voices on intercultural education policy and practice in Cyprus, were concerned about suggestions by the participant children with regard to classroom discussions exclusively focused on the concept of cultural 'difference'. They suggest that children's suggestions may stem from their multicultural teachers' practices, which in turn stem from the emphasis of the MEC's intercultural education policy on folklore. In contrast, Hajisoteriou and Angelides suggest that children should rather engage in discussions about how diversity functions rather than about cultural difference itself. Their proposition pertains to an intercultural perspective that we discuss below.

The intercultural-exchange perspective

Beyond the cultural-deficit and cultural-celebration perspectives, it is noteworthy that some Cypriot children (although few in number) argued that intercultural interaction occurred in the context of their 'new' friendships. They thus argued that they gained intercultural knowledge by developing 'new' friendships with children from other countries:

I have many friends, who come from other countries. They often talk to me about their experiences in their country, but also about how they feel in our country. I am sad when other people treated them bad because they are not Cypriots. We should respect and love each other; we are all humans. [C37—Cypriot girl from School 5(b) in Famagusta]

These Cypriot children argued that they often pursued the development of friendships with their immigrant peers. It is notable that the Cypriot children who claimed to maintain friendships with their immigrant peers felt the need to justify their choice (although the researchers did not ask them to do so). For example, C5, a Cypriot girl from School 1(b) in Nicosia, said: 'I don't care about her colour. She is my friend and I love her'. Similarly, C18, a Cypriot girl from School 3(a) in Larnaca, argued that her criterion for selecting her friends was their 'soul and not appearance'. She also explained that 'they have the same rights with us; we should not exclude them just because they have a different colour or a different religion'. Taking into consideration our discussion above, we may argue that these children felt the need to justify their choice, as having immigrant friends was not the 'common' practice among Cypriot children. These Cypriot children seemed to be concerned about the intergroup relationships in their classrooms.

Apart from Cypriot participants, some immigrant children also argued that becoming friends, and thus interacting, with Cypriot children was a learning experience for them:

I have the opportunity to make new friends, to interact with them, and to meet their families and learn a lot of things from them. My friend Martha helped me to become friends with other Cypriot girls, too. [C31—English girl from School 4(b) in Paphos]

They explained that through communication and interaction, they could gain intercultural knowledge and competence. To this end, they pointed out that they pursued the appropriate values (i.e. mutual respect, tolerance and understanding) and

competences that provided the basis for intergroup friendship development. Similar to these children's views, Bennett (2008) defines intercultural knowledge and competence as 'a set of cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills and characteristics that support effective and appropriate interaction in a variety of cultural contexts'. Beyond exposure to 'cultural others', Bennett suggests that intercultural knowledge and competence provide for a way to identify our own cultural patterns, compare them with other cultural patterns, and adapt empathically and flexibly to unfamiliar ways of being.

Dusi *et al.* (2014), in their study of immigrant children's voices in Italian primary schools, point out that friendly relationships with classmates play a pivotal role in immigrants' school and social inclusion. They explain that friendship between peers is an essential dimension of both being and well-being, as through interaction children not only become self-aware, or aware of social prohibitions, appreciations and customs, but also co-construct a shared world. Moreover, friendships develop newcomers' affiliation with their social world, while providing them with emotional support, and helping them to overcome isolation and the anxiety of being excluded.

Although very few in number, some Cypriot and immigrant children who participated in our study—during their interviews—appeared to initiate discussions about the consequences of diversity on their lives. They also seemed to pay particular attention to the concepts of stereotype and prejudice, while empathising with their immigrant peers' feelings. Additionally, these children critically reflected on decision-making and action-taking to help combat some social ills, prejudices and injustices. What we argue is that these Cypriot children conceptualised cultural diversity in terms of the model interculturalism (as explained in our theoretical framework above). Milner (2005) indicates that students' critical thinking about prejudices is a substantial step towards challenging stereotyping in contrast to monocultural and multicultural approaches, derived from previous themes that we have already discussed above.

Conclusions

In the drive to support the experiences of young people in schools, children's voices have been used in this research study to explore and unveil their conceptualisations of cultural diversity, aiming at the development of intercultural practices in schools. On the basis of our analysis of the data, the participant children appeared to perceive cultural diversity in terms of three different, if not contrasting, perspectives. On the one hand, they viewed cultural diversity in terms of the cultural-deficiency perspective. Such perceptions stemmed from the model of monoculturalism, implying the need to assimilate the culturally 'different' in order to counteract the negative consequences of cultural diversity on the supposed-to-be 'smooth' operation of both schools and society. On the other hand, the same children also perceived cultural diversity in terms of the cultural-celebration perspective.

To this end, both immigrant and native children who participated in this study drew upon the model of multiculturalism to define cultural diversity as a culture-enriching and culture-celebrating process, pointing to folkloric activities including traditional music, dance and food. Nonetheless, a few of the participant children

(both Cypriot and immigrant) adopted an intercultural-exchange perspective that could be set in the context of interculturalism. Intercultural perceptions pointed to 'real' friendship development between natives and immigrants, equality of rights and inclusion.

It may be proposed that the children who participated in our study held ambiguous rather than clear understandings of cultural diversity. Most of the participant children were unable to differentiate between the different models of cultural diversity, but they considered as important 'everything that fits into the concept' of diversity (Lee-man & Ledoux, 2005: 586). We may then argue that these children held 'container' concepts of cultural diversity. They simultaneously argued for and against cultural diversity. That is, they suggested the need to project cultural diversity through various activities, whilst also arguing for immigrants' adjustment to the Cypriot culture. Most of the participant children seemed to be far from interculturalist perceptions of diversity. Cypriot and immigrant children who claimed to critically interpret the influence of cultural diversity on people's lives by seeking 'real' interaction and intercultural exchange with their culturally diverse peers seemed to be an exception in our sample of participants.

What we argue is that the participant children's monocultural conceptions of diversity (stemming from the perspective of cultural deficiency) or multicultural stances (pertaining to folkloristic approaches) might lend support to stereotypical stances against immigrants, which could potentially lead to their exclusion within school and social settings. Our findings are similar to the findings reported by Partasi (2011) in her research on children's experiences of cultural diversity in Greek-Cypriot primary schools. 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). However, at the same time, both Cypriot and immigrant students who participated in Partasi's research seemed to appreciate the 'new' knowledge they could acquire from interacting with pupils of other cultures, languages and religions.

Arguably, a change in children's understanding of cultural diversity is an imperative need, as a change in their daily routines can only be 'actual' and 'substantial' if it encompasses a shift in their beliefs, preferences and values regarding diversity. Changes in children's understanding of cultural diversity may be the outcome of learning processes that should be facilitated by teachers. Drawing upon the findings of this research, we suggest that teachers should play a critical role in reorganising and reorienting teaching in order to help children 'crystallise' their understanding of cultural diversity. Therefore, to counteract the negative effects of both monoculturalism and multiculturalism, such as marginalisation, exclusion and inequality, teachers should sustain flexibility in schooling by promoting creativity, social interaction and risk-taking in their classrooms as part of their daily routines. Additionally, they should adopt teaching ethics that build on the concept of 'cosmopolitan identities', implying 'learning the principles of democracy', real-life commitment to group and community life rather than just short-term school teamwork, and 'genuine interest in and understanding of other cultures, humanitarian responsibility of self and others and caring for excluded groups within and beyond one's own society' (Sahlberg, 2004: 78).

Children's learning of cultural diversity may occur within collaborative networks. Collaborative networks may take the form of collective units, which establish forums for discussion and problem-solving (i.e. regarding issues such as marginalisation, racism, etc.) by the children themselves (Hajisoteriou & Angelides, 2016). Arguably, the use of collaborative learning appears to provide a creative, dialogic and reciprocal method that may democratise schooling by raising student voice, providing authentic opportunities for student leadership and broadening the cultural horizons of students (Hajisoteriou & Angelides, 2015, 2016). Collaborative learning provides the opportunity for children to master interpersonal skills—such as effectively interacting with their peers and/or avoiding responses that are socially unacceptable—'by copying others, via trial and error and by using instructions from more experienced people' (Frostd & Pijl, 2007: 16).

Last but not least, our study has been implemented in the specific context of Cyprus. Nonetheless, it bears wider implications for inclusion and intercultural education in other school contexts. The findings of this research underline the importance of friendship development between immigrant and native children. Friendship development may counteract barriers to the social and school inclusion of immigrant children, such as lack of knowledge of the host language and culture, isolation and non-belongingness, and feelings of nostalgia and fear (Dusi *et al.*, 2014; Dusi & Steinbach, 2016). Moreover, friendship development challenges cultural representations of the other that may prevail in the host society and school system. In conclusion, our study calls for further research focusing on examining, launching and evaluating education policies and practices that aim to promote intercultural friendship development.

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