

A case study on the tensions and challenges of shared schooling in Cyprus

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Abstract

This case study refers to the findings of a research investigation conducted at a shared secondary school in Cyprus—that is, a school which co-educates children coming from two conflicting ethnic communities on the island (that is, Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots). The study focuses on teachers', students', and parents' perspectives about the struggles to negotiate co-existence in this school. Drawing on a three-month ethnographic research project, the findings provide insights into how teachers, students and parents from the two conflicting communities draw selectively from various discourses and practices on collective identity and ethnic conflict in Cyprus to support the pre-existing values and beliefs adopted from family and schooling. While most teachers choose to avoid contentious issues rather than exploring them in order to prevent possible conflicts, a few others push for clear inclusion and reconciliation pedagogies. Although these efforts are well-intentioned, it is argued that unless systemic structural changes are undertaken at this school the potential is to simply reinforce rather than weaken existing divisions.

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This case study explores some of the tensions and challenges that are created at a shared secondary private school in divided Cyprus. At this particular school, Greek-Cypriot (GC) students (the majority) and Turkish-Cypriot (TC) students (the minority) have been educated together since September of 2003—the year in which there was a partial lift of restrictions in movement and in the checkpoints that still divide Cyprus into its north side (where TCs live) and its south side (where GCs live). Currently, every morning there are approximately 100 TC students (roughly 10 percent of this school's population) who cross the dividing line from the northern part of Cyprus and go to the south side (where the school is located) to attend this secondary school and then return to their homes in the afternoon. An ethnographic study that has been conducted in this school during 2007-2008 highlights teachers', students' and parents' perspectives about the struggles to negotiate co-existence in this school. The following incidents show some of the tensions and challenges arising from stereotyping and prejudice.

Incidents of stereotyping and prejudice

During a discussion in the context of a religious education class (only attended by GCs)¹, Minas (GC) stated that he would never reconcile with his TC classmates due to the fact that his mother was a refugee:

I wake up everyday and I see the Turkish flag on the mountain and you tell me to reconcile with the Turks? How can I abandon these feelings at home when I see them here in my own school? My mother is a refugee. At home, she talks about the home she once had and lost because of them. Living with the Turks is impossible.

Minas's tone of voice was quite intense and he was visibly upset. He referred to his TC classmates indiscriminately as "Turks" despite the subtle interventions from his teacher to make a distinction and refer to them as "Turkish Cypriots."² During recess time, one of the researchers interviewed Minas and some of his classmates. Minas mentioned that his family had frequent discussions at home about their lost home and property on the north side. He referred to a party he had organized in which he invited all his classmates except the two who were Turkish Cypriots. As he explained: "*They [Turkish Cypriots] took my house once, do you think I will simply stand by and let them take this one too?*" Interviewing other students, the research team discovered that some of Minas's classmates had criticised him for his decision not to invite their Turkish-Cypriot classmates to his party, given that they celebrated their team's victory (during school competitions)—a team which included these two TC students who, according to several comments made by students and teachers, had made a significant contribution.

Other observations also confirmed some of the stereotypical perceptions and prejudices that existed amongst GC and TC students at this school. The following two incidents occurred in English Literature classes. The students involved were 15-16 years of age. In the first incident, the teacher assigned a group activity to the students, asking them to work in pairs or groups of three, according to the way they were seated in class. George (GC) and Aylin (TC) sat next to each other. Throughout the duration of the 40-minute group activity the researcher observed that the two students did not exchange a single word or a single glance between them. Each of them took separate notes in their notebooks. On three different occasions, George turned to another GC classmate who was sitting behind him; they talked briefly and then George continued taking notes on his own. When the researcher interviewed the two students (separately) and asked them why they did not cooperate, George mentioned that he did not cooperate "*with Turks*", and Aylin stated that "*the GC pupils usually don't want to cooperate with us.*" This unwillingness to cooperate was also confirmed by the teacher, who admitted that

she faced serious reactions when she had attempted to encourage group work between GC and TC students.

In the second incident, the topic of the day referred to pensions and the existing provisions in Cyprus. When the teacher asked what the provisions were in the north side of Cyprus regarding this issue, Tasos (GC) replied: “*How can we know miss? Those are the occupied territories.*” The teacher repeated the question looking at Ceylan (TC). Ceylan began to mention some of the provisions, however, Tasos and Petros’s (GC) voices overshadowed her, saying: “*This is so pathetic! They don’t even have taxis! They don’t have a culture!*” A short disruption followed and the teacher went on with the lesson, ignoring the students’ comments.

Similar incidents indicating stereotypes and prejudices were narrated by several Turkish-Cypriot students interviewed by the research team.

The first year I was at this school, there was a girl who told me in public that “I don’t want to sit next to you, because you’re a TC”. So, ok it was a bit, you know, it made me feel upset, feel bad. (Ayse, 15-years old)

Last year there was this guy. I used to enter the classroom saying to everyone “good morning”. He would always have this angry look when I said that. One day he swore back to me and I felt very bad. He said things in Greek so I didn’t understand, but my GC friends told me later not to talk to him again because he didn’t like TCs. I can’t tell you what he said. It was very offensive. (Nadire, 14 years-old)

On the other hand, two other TC students pointed out that not all GC students had prejudices against TCs:

Because there are racist Greek people who don’t want to be with TCs, we shouldn’t just say that we are not doing well with GCs. We are not doing well with most of them, but there are good ones too. Ones who are not racist. (Turan, 17 years-old)

I feel very included by the GCs. I am very good at sports and my GC friends communicate with me because I play sports. I don’t have any problems with them. You cannot say that all GCs are racist; this would be a false generalization. (Mbeke, 17 years-old)

The intergroup friendships mentioned did not come about only through participation in sports and other activities where students had common interests; our ethnographic study documented other instances in which students from the two communities came together to organize social events or go out for fun, and became close friends. Cross-community friendships existed, however, they were of a limited scope.

In general, the brief examples of this case study reveal the tensions and challenges

encountered by teachers and students when they are essentially thrown into a situation in which they have to negotiate their co-existence with individuals coming from a conflicted community and with whom they have never had any contact before. As part of the negotiation of their co-existence, these students and teachers have to make certain concessions. These concessions have to do, for example, with tolerating the presence of the other (who is still considered an ‘enemy’), while the political problem in Cyprus remains unresolved. This mixing with the other happens largely without engaging in physical violence (although there have been some instances in which violence has taken place both in this school and in the wider society). A lot more concessions need to be made, however, if students and teachers in this school want to seriously address and overcome existing stereotypes and prejudices. The few examples described here show that there are openings—small, yet important—to build on the friendships created between students who come from the two conflicted communities.

References

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Notes

- 1 The school follows the national curriculum for religious education of the Greek-Cypriot public schools and thus Turkish Cypriots are excluded from attending religious education classes.
- 2 Evidence from historical and ethnological studies as well as analysis of public discourses in Cyprus shows how identity perceptions in the Greek- and Turkish-Cypriot communities have fluctuated throughout the last two hundred years. While there are members of the two groups employing *Greek* and *Turk* as their self-designations, there are others who want to promote a communal sense of *Cypriotness* that is free of Greek and Turkish nationalisms (see Constantinou & Papadakis, 2001; Morag, 2004; Papadakis, 1998; Vural & Rustemli, 2006). Similar self-identifications—i.e. emphasis on their Greekness or their Cypriotness—were found in the discourses of Greek-Cypriot students in this school; on the contrary, the majority of Turkish-Cypriot students with whom we talked to emphasized their ‘Cypriotness’ rather than their Turkishness.