

“The teachers prefer the “Turks” than “us”- “The teachers are good but they don’t like the Turks”: Interpretation of school reality as experienced by Greek-Cypriot and Turkish-Cypriot (Gypsy) pupils in Limassol.

The study refers to the needs and the problems of the Turkish-speaking Gypsy students of Limassol and took place at the beginning of this year. The methodology chosen for the study included participant observation and interviews with the teachers, the administration of the school, as well as the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot (Gypsy) students and parents. The study was conducted at the elementary school Ayios Antonios, of the Turkish-Cypriot sector of Limassol.

Some of the issues that will be mentioned are the issue of the ethnic identity, as well as the issues of racism and xenophobia expressed by the Greek-Cypriot children. I will also refer to the frequent conflicts that occurred at school, especially among older children.

During the year 2003-4, there were 40 Gypsy enrolments, out of 173 total amount of pupils. However, approximately only 50% of the Gypsy pupils (about 20), followed a systematic education.

It is interesting to report that, within the T/C community, there is a distinction between the TCs and the Gypsies. Nevertheless, Gypsy children prefer to be considered as Turkish-Cypriots, since they feel that being a Gypsy will obstruct them from being accepted.

That is, even though they perfectly acknowledge the fact that being a Turkish Cypriot may cost them trouble, it is preferable than being a Gypsy. Thus, they believe that their ethnic identity, is the most important reason for their marginalization. They feel deeply the Stigma of the Turkish Cypriot and they believe that they are unwanted because they are Turkish-Cypriots. They believe that the Greek-Cypriot pupils are responsible for causing tensions, since their motive for doing so, is the fact that they are Turkish-Cypriots. Additionally, the Gypsy pupils often interpret everything that happens at

school, as a result of the different ethnic identities. Housein a 12-year-old boy while referring to the GCs says:

The guys want to fight all the time

Why?

We are TC

The same boy adds

They make fan of my mum

Why do they?

E...T/C

Another factor that seems to influence the Gypsy 's perception of the school reality, is the fact they are minority. They explain that even though they want to be friends with the GC pupils, this is not easy, since they are a minority and they are excluded from the aggregation of the student population. They often mention that they are not scared of the GC pupils but being a minority constitutes a reason for trouble. When a 12 year-old- Gypsy boy was asked the reason for playing separately, the answer was *because when we play, if we make a foul they will cost conflicts. I'm not scared ...but they are not just one, they are not just two...all of them are Cypriots.*

Even though the Gypsy pupils claim that they do not scared of their schoolmates, they feel that the teachers treat them unfairly and unequally. They believe that the teachers always blame them and they never punish GC pupils when they should. The following three utterances illustrate the feelings of the Gypsy pupils.

"Mr Marios is good, but he does not love Turks"

"All the teachers do not want us. Where ever we go they reject us"

"We are Turks...they don't want us and they beat us".

Once more we realize how the issue of the ethnic identity determines the children's perception of the school reality. Some of the Gypsy children mentioned that, what they mostly dislike in school is the frequent disputes. When a nine-year-old boy was asked what he doesn't like at school, he

responded -: “When the children fight, when they make war”. (Που κάμνει καυκά-μωρά πόλεμος).

The two groups stay mostly apart, as a result of the frequent conflicts, while some of the GC students refuse to play with the TC-Gypsy children. Similarly, the GCs feel uneasy towards Gypsies, because of the disputes prevailing at school, and they blame the TC-Gypsies for the problematic situation existing at school.

The GC children often mention that, since the Gypsies have attended their school, things have changed for the worst. A 12 year-old-boy points: *Since the “Turks” came, the school changed. We are constantly fighting and they don’ t let us play... we were better off before they came.* When the boy was asked what measures he thought should be taken in order to improve the situation at school he responded: *We should kick them out...we don’t want them to attend school.*

Stereotyping and labeling is not an uncommon phenomenon, due to the fact that the GC pupils use the label of “The Turks” (Tourtjioi in the Cypriot dialect) to put down the TC-Gypsy children. They rarely call them by their first names and always refer to the Turkish-speaking children by using the characterization of the “Turk”, since in their imagination the concept of the Turk, has negative connotations.

It is of significant importance to mention that, not only is it a reality that many GC children are not able to distinguish between Turks and Turkish Cypriots, but also they are simply not willing to do so. When a teacher tried to explain the difference to a nine-year-old boy, he responded: *whether they are Turks or TCs, I don’t want them (Τούρκοι- Τουρκοκύπριοι εγώ εν τους θέλω).* A 12 year old boy while conversing with the teacher mentions: *there is no way I’m playing with the Turk-you should see the way they play .*

It is worth noting that the GC students have repeatedly express their dissatisfaction for the way the teachers tread the TC - Gypsy students. They

believe that the teachers are lenient towards the TCs and that in some cases are bias against the GCs. A GC student, who was reprimanded by the teacher after a conflict among the two groups, reports: *The teachers prefer the “Turks” than us.*

The GC students have a generalized and degrading impression of the Gypsies which prevents them from realizing what exactly bothers them, concerning the TCs, since the stigma of the Turk does not allow any space for reconsideration. Being a Turk, is by definition a disadvantage that overshadows any other positive trait the Gypsies may have.

As it appears, the conceptualization of what a TC is, is an ambiguous term in the GC students' consciousness, since the TCs are not mentioned or included in the educational system, in contrast to the Turk, who is always mentioned, mainly as the harmful, the evil etc. What is more, the GC students identify the TCs with the Turks, due to the language the two groups share, which constitutes a cultural element that categorizes them into the same ethnic group. This kind of identification of the TCs with the Turks causes the GC students to express an intense and passionate hostility against their TC-Gypsy fellow students.

The GC pupils continuously refer to the 1974 invasion in order to justify their resentfulness against the presence of TC-Gypsies in their school. A ten-year old girl says: *I don't want them- I hate them ... isn't it enough that they have already taken half of Cyprus...we don't want them they cause too much trouble.*

Undoubtedly, children internalize and reproduce the dominant viewpoints of the society and thus express and carry with them, these kinds of believes and behavior in the educational environment.

Nevertheless, there are children that, do want to develop good relations with the Gypsies and admit that they have not welcomed them in the best manner from the beginning. A sixth grade student Alexis notes: We consider them

“Turks” ...we don't consider them to be Cypriots...my father told me that T/Cs and G/Cs use to be friends ...I think that we didn't welcome TCs. Even though Alexis wants to learn how to speak Turkish, he hesitates to do so because the rest of the children will make fun of him since he will probably associate and hang around with the TCs.

The main reason that the GC students refuse to accept the TC-Gypsies is because of the negative and possibly detrimental influence of their surroundings. The GC parents influence their children and they interfere in the teachers' task. Also, many G/C parents threaten that they will transfer their children to another school if the TC-Gypsies don't leave from their school. This kind of attitude directly influences the young students, who in turn marginalize the Gypsy children.

Consequently, the TC-Gypsy students react to this with an aggressive and antisocial behavior, that most of the times leads to serious conflicts among children. Among other factors that influence the Gypsy's attitude, is the ethnocentric educational system, which as we all know, reproduces the ethnic Greek consciousness. I will mention two incidents that prove the validity of the previous statement. The teacher of history in the 6th grade, said that when she is teaching the history of the Greek revolution of 1821 the TC-Gypsies react, when they hear the word “Turk”, by saying: “you should be afraid of the Turks”. When she refers about Athanasio Diako, who was murdered, the TC children state: He deserved it (καλά να του κάμουν). At Makarios' death anniversary, while the GCs were watching a documentary on Makarios, three TC-Gypsy boys, hid and yelled “Denctash-Denctash”.

Taking into consideration the aforementioned, which constitute a really small part of the student body within the school, one comes to realize that it takes a great effort to confront and solve all the problems that have been created. The children's perceptions and actions, both of the TC-Gypsies and of the GCs, are nothing else but a response to the stimuli they receive on a daily basis.

Nonetheless, despite the fact that there are many problems within the school environment and that a smooth coexistence of GCs and TCs can hardly be accomplished, we have to take into consideration that the younger children seem to be much more willing to cooperate, since they have not yet internalized the idea of the "other" as the better or the worse.

This is a promising and optimistic acknowledgement that in the future the school setting may improve and that children might develop better relations.