

Marios Vryonides

The Effects of the Economic Crisis on Inter-Ethnic Relations in Cypriot Schools

The aim of the paper is to examine the effects of the current economic crisis in the way teenagers experience and report interethnic relations with emphasis on interethnic violence in the school environment in Cyprus. It will report findings from an EU funded project which was recently completed (2012) titled: "Children's voices: Exploring interethnic violence in schools". Through an eclectic analysis on interview transcripts from group interviews with teenagers (16-17 year old) it emerges that in Cyprus there is an environment of growing concern about the presence of migrants in society and this has direct and indirect effects on education. Overall there are mixed perceptions about interethnic tolerance in schools ranging from negative to (politically correct) positive ones. While the prevalent discourse of multiculturalism in Cyprus uses the rhetoric of integration, what appears to be happening in the Cypriot educational system, is assimilation practices focusing on language acquisition. The findings of the empirical investigation point to interesting directions for educational policy regarding the whole gamut of interethnic relations in Cyprus at a period in time when the current economic crisis appears to have largely negative effects on multiculturalism. The paper concludes with a discussion on the way the Ministry of Education and schools in Cyprus respond to the above challenges and the prospects for the near future.

Keywords:

inter-ethnic relation, secondary education, Cyprus, economic crisis

1 Introduction

As a consequence of international migration flows and an unprecedented economic prosperity during the 90's and especially during the first decade of 2000 Cyprus has transformed from a source country of migration to a destination country. One of the consequences of the migration flows to Cyprus in the recent past was a change in the demographics of its student population. An increasing number of students from different ethnic backgrounds and countries are enrolled in primary and secondary Cypriot schools¹. Currently, the percentage of foreign students who are registered in primary and secondary public schools has increased from 5 percent in the academic year of 2006 to almost 15 percent of the total school population in 2011.

The education system at all levels had to adapt in a very short period of time in this new reality and find ways and strategies to cope with a diverse population. Moreover, the indigenous population had to adjust to an environment of inter-ethnic social relations. These relations, as is the case in many European countries, are frequently tested due to recent adverse economic developments. The economic crisis which arrived relatively late in Cyprus currently poses the biggest test for the society and education in particular. The crisis in Cyprus was the consequence of the abrupt collapse of the banking sector in early 2013 which slammed the country's economy into recession and sky-rocketed unemployment rates.

The aim of this paper is to present findings from a research project which attempted to examine the views and experiences of adolescents on issues of inter-ethnic relations in Cypriot schools. Specifically, it looks into some of the qualitative data from an EU funded research project titled "Children's Voices: Exploring Interethnic Violence and Children's Rights in School Environment" which was conducted in Cyprus in 2012. This project explored amongst other issues students' beliefs and experiences about inter-ethnic relations and tensions in schools.

2 Why focus on adolescents?

In the examination of views on inter-ethnic relations we focus on adolescents, students at the last grades of their secondary school education (17-18 year olds), because this group of students have gone through the various stages of the schooling system and are in a position to make assertive assessments on issues of controversy. There are of course other more substantive reasons which connect to the fact that this particular age group is more susceptible to wider societal ideologies and processes and can articulate their views without restraints. The way adolescents experience and report a variety of issues relating to their everyday life is usually the product of the social contexts within which they are socialized and to the developmental stage they are in the formation of their identities. Consequently, this affects the way they develop ideas about themselves and others. Through the process of transition from childhood to adolescence and to adulthood individuals internalize values and norms which become an integral part of their personalities as they try to establish their own social,

*Dr. Marios Vryonides is Associate Professor at the Department of Education, European University Cyprus.
6 Diogenes Str, Nicosia 1516, Cyprus
E-mail: m.vryonides@euc.ac.cy*



cultural and ethnicity identity. These students, in other words, have experienced multi-ethnic coexistence in school environments that foster various forms of inter-ethnic relations. In this process a major issue that merits investigation is the way with which contemporary multicultural structures and rhetoric adopted in most European societies becomes internalized by the youth in these societies.

Quintana (1998) presents various studies that examine and explain the “developmental transformation” on ethnic understanding. According to Quintana, to explain how children’s understanding of ethnicity differs with the passage of time, one must understand how children comprehend their social environment. Influenced by Selman’s theory (1980), Quintana argues that there are four developmental stages that explain the development of children’s attitudes regarding the concept of ethnicity. Selman’s (1980) theory of social perspective-taking ability, models children’s understanding of their social environment in the context of human individuality, parent-child relations, friendship formation, and peer-group dynamics. According to Quintana (1998) even though Selman’s model was developed entirely independent of the ethnic domain, there were salient parallels in the rhythm of development in the social and the ethnic domains reflected in four levels, namely 1) Integration of affective and perceptual understanding of ethnicity, 2) Literal understanding of ethnicity, 3) Social perspective of ethnicity and 4) Ethnic-group consciousness and ethnic identity. Related to our own research are what he describes as Level 2 which is named “Social and Nonliteral Perspective of Ethnicity” (Approximately 10-14 years) and Level 3 which includes “Ethnic Group Consciousness and Ethnic Identity (Adolescence). The above are very important conceptual tools to help us investigate the way adolescents understand and experience interethnic relations in schools. Let us first examine the wider socio-political developments within which adolescents are located.

3 Multiculturalism and interethnic relations in education in Europe

During the last quarter of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty first, Europe has witnessed wide sociopolitical and demographic changes as a result of increasing migration and transnationalism which had an impact on interethnic relations and social cohesion. One of the consequences of these demographic changes has been the creation of the notion of multicultural societies and the need of education to respond to this new reality. While this was particularly true for many European societies for much of the past two or three decades, recently, and possibly as an indirect consequence of the global economic crisis, the political goal of cultivating multicultural policies has suffered significant blows by an emerging changing attitude towards multiculturalism exemplified by the realization of many European leaders (such as German Chancellor Merkel) that the multiculturalism project has in fact been unsuccessful in

Europe². This realization could likely point to shifts in national policies in the near future and specifically to changes in the direction of educational policies away from the goal of multiculturalism. The way multiculturalism changed the face of European societies had inevitable effects on the way education systems operate. Below we make a brief reference to several studies that looked into this issue.

In a book edited nearly a decade ago, Smith (2003) brings together a collection of studies that point to the fact that the increase in the number of students from immigrant groups in schools could potentially lead to racial tensions in some countries. When migrant groups are targeted due to unrelated to education reasons (i.e. economic crisis, unemployment or crime) this may produce adverse effects on the well-being of young individuals from migrant or ethnic minority backgrounds. Ethnic minority and immigrant children can experience racial harassment as young people themselves may bring different expectations and experiences of deprivation and frustration into the school.

The problem of inter-ethnic relations in schools was the focus of a 2004 project led by the Italian Centre for Research in Social Affairs with partners in Spain, Germany and Latvia (cited in Smith 2004). The partners aimed to identify and analyse examples of good practice in dealing with inter-ethnic conflict labeled as ‘inter-cultural’ in secondary schools. They found that when young people of migrant background were involved in school violence, it was often assumed that cultural identity was the cause of the conflict. Because the young people concerned had often experienced exclusion and discrimination, they expected and so emphasised cultural differences and attribute the conflict to them. In reality, the analysis found that the reasons for conflict among adolescents in school did not markedly differ when the protagonists included migrant children.

In Greece, as Kontogiannopoulou-Polydorides (2010) reports, despite the fact that Albanian migrants have for at least two decades been part of the Greek society and the majority of them have integrated well in the society, there is still a lot of political resistance and animosity towards them. This hostility which has grown recently as a consequence of the economic crisis in Greece is frequently carried within schools. This attitude, as an expression of symbolic violence towards Albanian youth, is evident when many Greeks refuse to accept high achieving Albanian students in Greek schools to act as flag bearers during national days. This symbolic violence has serious negative effects in the schooling of Albanian youth and acts as a negative example for other ethnic and migrant groups.

Lastly, an issue that currently is a source of difficult interethnic relations in schools is one which relates to religious background and refers to Islamophobia particularly in the UK. Crozier and Davies (2008) and Shain (2011) assert that the increased Islamophobia in schools was a direct consequence of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 in New York. Crozier and Davies (2008)



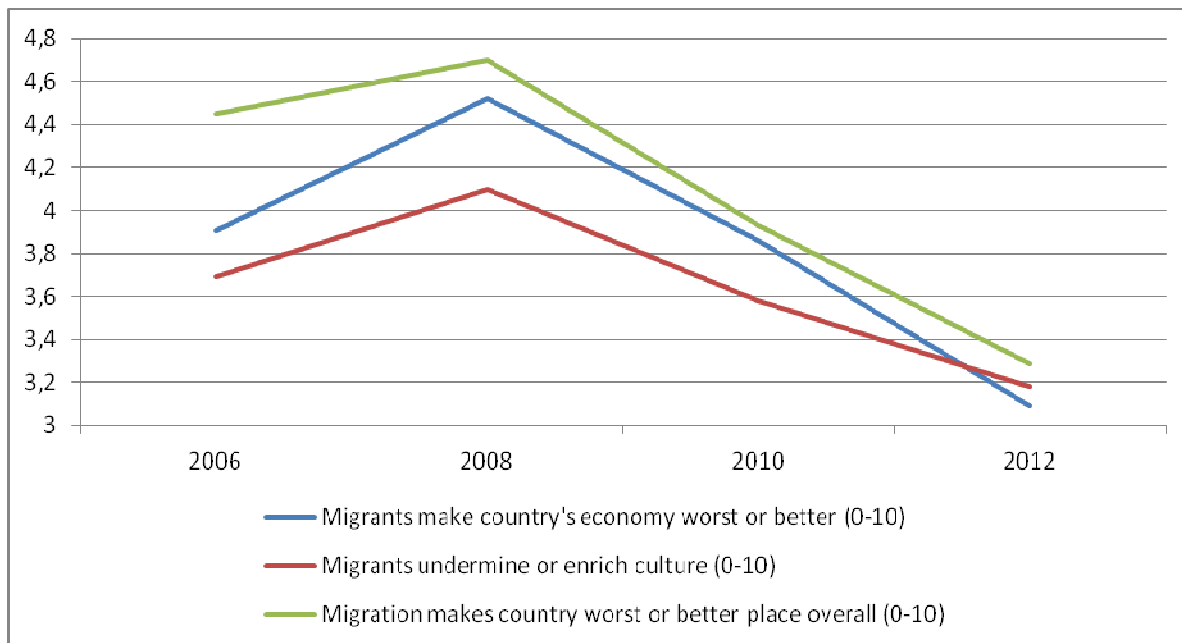


Figure 1

in particular reported evidence from an empirical study in schools in the Northeast of England which found that, for the majority of South Asian young people from a Muslim background, racially motivated abuse, harassment and subsequent violence was a central feature of their school experience.

Despite the fact that the majority of European countries employ policies of multiculturalism as far as education is concerned, interethnic and intercultural violence in the school environment is visible in schools. The conditions of interethnic and interracial relations among children and youth across European Union (EU) states are highly heterogeneous due to the diverse conditions that exist in each country. On the whole, school violence especially in subtle forms of violence (verbal harassment, rudeness) has been recognized as an important problem that is increasing (Kane 2008). Despite a general recognition of the importance of school violence, there is presently no EU legal or policy framework regarding violence in schools. There were, however, at EU level, various recommendations and resolutions concerning interethnic school violence such as Recommendation no. 10 on combating racism and racial discrimination in and through school education, issued by the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance General Policy.

4 The Cypriot context

Data from the Government Statistical Bureau show that migration in Cyprus has gradually increased during the last ten years. Some of the recorded reasons which led people to immigrate to Cyprus were educational or employment opportunities and/or long-term permanent settlement. In 1990s, a large number of people from Asian countries immigrated to Cyprus looking to achieve a better quality of life. These workers worked as child/elderly caretakers, and/or domestic workers. Current data show that in recent years (2008-2011), the

highest number of immigrants was from Greece, Romania and Bulgaria (Statistical Services of Cyprus 2012).

Even though migration has been beneficial for Cyprus' expanding economy throughout the 1990's until the end of 2012, attitudes towards migrants according to the European Social Survey (ESS) have been steadily declining. Cypriots believed that the presence of migrants in the country was having adverse effects in the economy and culture and was making the country a worst place overall (Figure 1).

Moreover, it is very interesting to note that compared with other European countries according to the same survey these attitudes of Cypriots towards migrants were amongst the most negative ones (Figure 2, Data for 2012).

Regarding the ethnicity composition of the school population, up until the 1990's only certain ethnic minorities were visible in the Cypriot student population alongside the Greek Cypriot majority. These were minorities officially recognized in the 1960 constitution of the Republic of Cyprus which were granted privileges in order to protect their historical heritage: Maronites, Turkish Cypriots, Armenians and Latins. Currently, Greek Cypriot students constitute of 86.05 percent of the student population in schools, whereas the 4 constitutionally recognized minority groups make up just 0.54 percent of this population. The rest come from migrant groups which include Bulgarians, Greeks, Greeks of Pontos (ex USSR), Romanians, British, Georgians, Russians and Syrians.

The abovementioned demographics make up a picture of multi-ethnic student population in schools particularly in the schools located in urban areas of the four main cities of Cyprus.



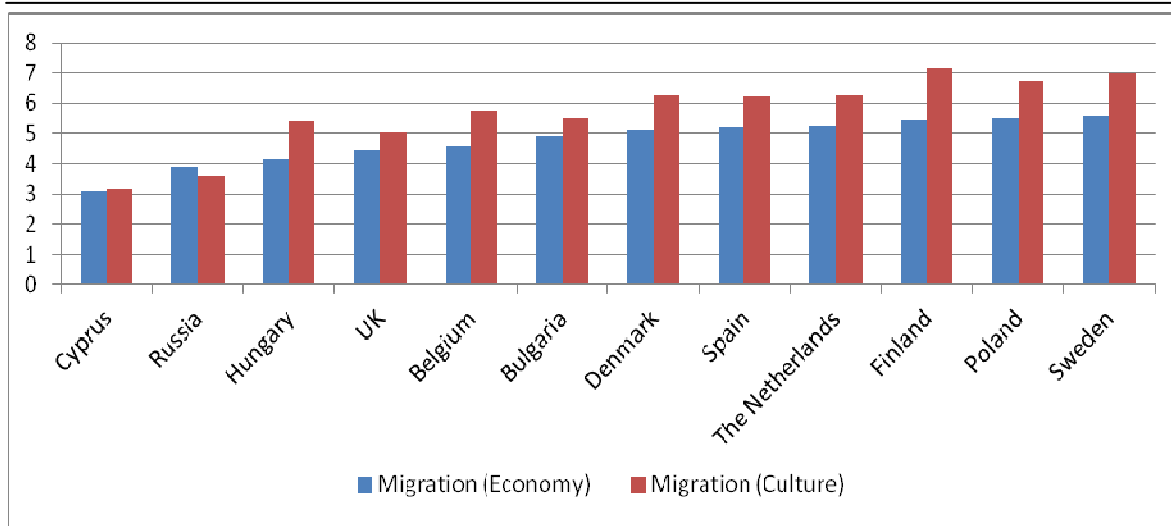


Figure 2

5 Research on interethnic relations in Cypriot schools

Various research studies have been conducted in order to examine issues of interethnic relations in Cypriot schools with mixed results. Only few studies find Greek-Cypriot students' interaction with other students from different ethnic backgrounds to be positive. For instance, in Partasi's (2010) analysis of this phenomenon, it is observed that Greek-Cypriot students gain positive outcomes through their interactions with students from different ethnicities, for example, through an increase in students' knowledge of the historical and social circumstances of others (Partasi 2010). In addition, Partasi explains that students from other ethnic minorities gain positive outcomes from their interaction with Cypriot students, depending on the intensity of their 'social network' and on their preference for forming new relationships with other students (Partasi 2010)

Most studies, however, present the problematic issues that arise from inter-ethnic interactions within Greek-Cypriot schools. A study conducted by Zembylas (2010) examined Cypriot students' attitudes towards other students who come from different ethnic and religious backgrounds. The study explored the ways Greek Cypriot students experienced issues, such as racism and discrimination, when they interact with Turkish Cypriot students in their everyday academic life. It was evident that there were many rivalries among these groups due to stereotypical and racist beliefs and attitudes towards each other. The study showed that the development of definitions of racism and nationalism depended on the age and cognitive development of the students. The younger the students the less knowledge they possessed regarding the meaning of racism and nationalism.

A recent study by Theodorou (2011) focused on foreign students' experiences in Cypriot schools and showed that they lacked useful resources at home compared with other students. Specifically, Theodorou (2011) focused her research study on Pontian students (Greeks from ex-USSR) and explained that the majority of this group identified themselves as belonging to the lower socioeconomic status in the Cyprus and appeared unable to equip themselves with certain academic tools

necessary for their studies, such as electronic devices or access to electronic sites for obtaining academic information. Moreover, these students exposed feelings of embarrassment concerning their socioeconomic status and devised strategies to avoid discrimination.

Angelides, Stylianou and Leigh (2004) examined the ways schools shape students' multicultural awareness. They pointed out that negative attitudes such as 'racism, xenophobia, ethnocentrism' and violent behaviors by Cypriot students toward foreign students was an existing aspect in Cypriot schools. Moreover they argued that the Cypriot educational system does not motivate students to acquire knowledge about other ethnic groups and cultures and even though several reform attempts have been made by the Ministry of Education they were usually met by fierce resistance by nationalist and conservative groups. This reaction was probably reinforcing stereotypical attitudes against minority students according to the authors despite the fact that foreign students were willing to participate in many aspects of the Cypriot culture, such as religious and national celebrations, customs and traditions (Angelides et al 2004).

Research by the Centre for Educational Research and Evaluation (KEEA 2010) examined whether educators in Cyprus were aware and trained on how to promote solidarity and assist the integration of foreign students. The findings showed that more than half of the educators who participated in the research were trained on intercultural issues, by either attending seminars or by taking courses during their graduate and undergraduate studies and appeared well prepared to implement practical methods to enhance intercultural awareness of all students. However, the study showed that even though educators were aware of the institutional instructions set by the Ministry of Education and Culture regarding teaching methods applied to foreign students, few of them were familiar with the existing 'Guide' on welcoming foreign students in the school environment. Also, a large number of teachers were not informed about the seminars offered by the



Ministry of Education regarding teaching methods of Greek as a second language.

Spyrou (2006) demonstrated that Cypriot teachers in an effort to explain the Greek history, they project representations of the Greeks as being the incomparable civilization. Spyrou argues that if students are urged in school to form positive perceptions about other ethnic groups, this can be an ongoing process for the following school years. As the author explains, the current social and political circumstances (e.g., the division of Cyprus, the unresolved political Cypriot problem) and the continuous political struggles in Cyprus, influence negatively the perceptions and attitudes of Greek-Cypriot students towards other ethnicities.

In view of the overall environment presented above, it was probably an expected consequence an incident that took place in February 2011. In fact many political commentators have described the following incident as a product of cultural intolerance. According to Phileleftheros newspaper (2011 February 17) there was a huge clash between Palestinian students (n=25) and Cypriots students (n= more than 100) due to interpersonal disputes. This incident was attributed to the increased feelings of cultural revulsion among these two groups of students and to the difficulty of their coexistence in a particular secondary school. The fighting was so intense that the state suspended all Palestinian students from the school to ensure their safety. Greek-Cypriot students stated that there were many occasions when Palestinians provoked them, which resulted in the brawl (Phileleftheros 2011, February 17). The Minister of Education and Culture in turn announced that these types of actions were not acceptable and that they should be avoided by all students calling at the same time the educational system, the media, and the state to help students overcome such behaviours. Moreover, the Minister attributed this incident to the fact that Cypriot society holds xenophobic and discriminatory attitudes toward other ethnicities. A fact confirmed by findings from national and international surveys (such as the European Social Survey, see above).

Against such background the investigation of interethnic violence in schools came at a timely period and the findings of such an investigation were expected to have a significant role in shaping relevant educational policy especially at a time of economic uncertainty (end of 2013, beginning of 2014) with rising unemployment and economic stagnation. Young people mostly to be affected in the short to medium term future by this situation were a suitable group to investigate their position at a time when this coincides with recent findings from international surveys (European Social Survey 2012) which depict Cypriots as being more xenophobic compared with other Europeans. Thus, the main research question was the way with which adolescents experience interethnic social relations in the school environment.

6 The research study

In an effort to investigate issues of interethnic relations in schools, five countries (England, Slovenia, Italy, Austria and Cyprus) collaborated in an EU funded project titled “Children’s voices: Exploring interethnic violence in schools”. In this project a mixed method approach was employed, which first involved a survey into selected schools in four regions of each country followed by a qualitative investigation which included personal interviews with teachers, school counsellors and administrators as well as focus groups with school students. For the purposes of this paper we will only present data from the qualitative investigation with focus group discussions with fifteen secondary school students in Cyprus. We will focus on issues that had particular reference to the social setting of Cyprus. The interviews took place in two public secondary schools (Lyceums) in the capital Nicosia during autumn of 2012. Participation was voluntary after the researchers working on the project have visited the school a number of times. After gaining written permission from the Ministry of Education, parents and students themselves all the interviews were recorded. They were subsequently transcribed word for word (verbatim) and translated in English. The transcripts were then coded and analysed in categories that were determined in advance by the researchers and were believed to describe the full range of views and experiences relating to issues of interethnic relations in schools.

6.1 Research questions

The research questions that will be addressed in the subsequent sections are the following:

- How do students perceive the presence of migrants groups in the Cypriot society?
- To what extent does the economic crisis affect the sentiments towards migrant groups?
- Do students feel that their peers from migrant backgrounds are not well treated by ethnic majority students?
- How do they view the school’s reaction towards inter-ethnic violence?

7 Findings

7.1 Perceptions about the presence of migrants groups in the Cypriot society

An issue that merited exploration in the qualitative investigation and related indirectly to the overall school environments that fostered conditions for the development of interethnic relationships was the way students perceived the presence of migrant groups in the country. From the interview data, it emerged that most of them viewed the presence of migrants in a more or less stereotypical manner. Moreover, generally there was a belief by some of the students that overall state migration policies were producing negative outcomes for the society. Lastly, they perceived migrant presence as a



“threat” to the culture of the country and if foreigners were to be integrated in the society they needed to make an effort to assimilate primarily with the acquisition of the Greek language.

There is this neighbourhood [...] that foreigners live from a particular ethnic background and they did not assimilate in our society... they did not familiarize themselves with the country. (SS4, male, 17-18)

Things are a little bit better now, it's not like previously when they lived in truly miserable conditions [...] I never thought that they would actually live with us....(SS1, male, 17-18)

The fact migrant groups appeared not to be integrated in society was believed to be partly their fault by the students as it was thought that they did not make real efforts to learn the local language even though ... *“lessons are offered in the afternoon for free but nobody goes”* (SS4, male, 17-18) opting to communicate in English because as another student from the same focus group remarked *“Greek is a difficult language compared to English which is much easier and an international language”*(SS4, male, 17-18).

Students commented on state policies for migration often without being prompted to do so. There were at least two positions on the issue. While some mentioned that the state needed to be fairer in the provision of social benefits to migrant groups, others indicated that immigrants were already taking too much without equally contributing to the tax system. One of the interviewees, reflecting an attitude that seems to be growing lately in the country, expressed his disdain for what he has branded as “uncontrolled migration flows” in Cyprus. On this issue most secondary schools students that took part in the group interviews appeared to be well informed of the current debates that were taking place at the time regarding migration issues. They believed that Cypriot policies have been generous towards migrants and regarded the politicians as being responsible for this.

They (politicians) provide benefits to immigrants who are unemployed, they basically help them in different ways now, they didn't care in previous years (SS1, female, 17-18).

There are some politicians who try to put forward some lighter policies for better benefits to foreigners because they know that if they get citizenship that would mean more votes for them (SS4, male, 17-18).

Often when reference to foreigners was made the students used the term *political refugees* as well which indicates that for many of them there was no clear distinction or difference between the two groups. This is possibly a reflection of a widespread sentiment shared in the Cypriot society. Again politicians were seen to be making provisions to these groups in order to promote their own interests.

Some politicians are creating problems by promoting their views to the outside world for their own benefit e.g., they say that political refugees get our jobs and have privileges and that this is an economic rather than a social problem (SS4, female, 17-18).

In the same focus group from where the previous two quotes were taken, another female student commented that [this situation] *“is not the political refugee's fault ... it is how the system works”* (SS4, female, 17-18).

A very interesting notion that connects directly with findings from the European Social Survey (presented earlier) about immigrants undermining the culture of the country is echoed in the following quote where a male student said that

Foreigners curry with them invisible languages [our emphasis] which contain their value/ traditions and customs and it is very difficult to abolish them. (SS4, male, 17-18).

This reference is made in connection to the fact that Cypriot often look back at their history as being a constant effort to retain their identity against many conquerors that often were seen as trying to alter this identity. Thus, a feeling of cultural threat is always present.

It's our history having gone through so many conquerors that this fear is always at the back of our minds. (SS4, male, 17-18)

At the background of the above sentiments it was very interesting to further investigate how the economic crisis which at the time was looming over the Cypriot society (end of 2012) was affecting these feelings.

7.2 Does the economic crisis affect the sentiments towards migrant groups?

On this issue, students were acknowledging the fact that even at times of economic downturn, foreigners were coming to the country in order to cover for real labour shortages in some areas of employment and that often there was exploitation from the employers. The following quotes are indicative of this position:

I think foreigners are often not fairly treated because they come and do jobs not favoured by Cypriots turning half of our country into migrant land ...and I don't like it because it is my country and I want to see the majority being Cypriots, but okay I shouldn't blame the immigrants who after all come here to make a living because we are giving them the right to do so because we do not do these jobs (SS2, female, 17-18).

We blame them that they get the jobs from Cypriots but in all honesty they are doing the jobs that we do not want to do. (SS2, female, 17-18)

It's the current social fabric of Cyprus... Cypriots are to be found in offices, civil service etc while you will see foreigners in building sites and collecting garbage. (SS4, male, 17-18)

...yes, we learned that manual jobs are for foreigners and we [Cypriots] should all do clerical and light jobs ...but if we wanted to we could do these jobs (SS2, male, 17-18)

All labor-intensive jobs are being allocated to foreigners and Cypriots hold job positions in an office. (SS2, male, 17-18)

... and of course connected to the above, exploitation is an issue that often comes up.

Student: I feel that foreigner youth, because it is young people that mostly come here, and Cypriots as well, nowadays are being exploited especially when you do not have adequate training...

Interviewer: who is exploiting them?

Student: ...employers. They (foreigners) come and they are willing to work for lower wages and that makes us claim lower wages as well... but now (with the crisis) these [level of wages] is a lot for us. (SS1, female, 17-18)

Similarly in another focus group it was commented that

... foreigners are treated more badly because they have more disadvantageous jobs than Cypriots. I do not like it because it is my country and I want to see it with just Cypriots (SS2, female, 17-18)

As an extension to this view, however, most of the secondary school students expressed their frustration in respect to what they perceived as unfairness towards indigenous Cypriot citizens. Specifically, they believed that politicians and society in general provided unwarranted benefits to immigrants compared to Cypriots. The comments below are quite characteristic:

I think that foreigners cannot have more privileges than someone who lives in a country more than 50 years, it's not right (SS1, female, 17-18)

We have 20 percent unemployment rate in Cyprus. Why does a foreigner have certain benefits and that he could easily find a job...to show that Cyprus defend our foreigners? Who is going to help the Cypriots? (SS1, female, 17-18)

The bad thing is that they take our jobs and they gain half the money a Cypriot would get if he/she had this job. (SS1, male, 17-18)

Isn't it a loss for the state if they (migrants) are not paying their social insurance contributions? (SS4, male, 17-18)

The expressed sentiments reflect positions that are frequently put forward by populist or extremist poli-

ticians playing with the fears and economic insecurities of Cypriot people. All in all these views seem to reflect an environment of growing concern about the presence of migrant groups in the country which is connected with the current economic crisis and the downturn of the economy. There are growing sentiments that migrant presence exacerbates an already difficult situation. Interestingly, though, and parallel to these views there were students who recognized that because of the crisis and the fact that Cypriot themselves may find themselves in similar positions they would be forced to adopt more positive attitudes.

Now Cypriots view the issue of immigration more positively because of the economic crisis many Cypriots are forced to migrate to other countries so they understand better how foreigners feel and deal with certain difficulties. (SS1, female, 17-18)

7.3 How are students from migrant backgrounds being treated at school?

At one point during the interviews students were asked how they would feel if they witnessed unfair treatment of students coming from ethnic minority backgrounds. Also they were prompted to comment whether they would be affected witnessing such an incident. Some said the following:

... you get affected.... Why? Because it could be you in their position in another country (SS1, female, 17-18).

I never thought about this.... Because even when I witness such an incident I would not get involved ... these things are unnecessary but it's not something that I would resolve. (SS1, male, 17-18)

The issue of their personal involvement when 'unfair' behaviours occurred produced comments that reflected an attitude of detachment especially when these were not directly affecting the students. For example students appeared to be reluctant to get involved out of fear that such an involvement might lead to negative consequences for them.

You don't have to get involved especially if they are not known to you... what's the point of getting involved and getting in trouble? (SS2, male, 17-18)

So, the next logical question to ask was what their reaction would be if such an incident occurred in school. Students made references to reporting such incidences to teachers or counselors, even though, as they admitted, this might potentially get them into trouble. A case was reported in a group interview as follows:

In my group of friends we have a black boy who frequently experiences discrimination and it took him a while to integrate with us and for others to stop teasing him. We defended him even though we got into



fights for this.... but in the end this thing is over. (SS3, male, 17-18)

The most frequent consequence of what might happen however, especially when an incident was not reported, was to lead to marginalization.

Some get so disappointed that they chose to be marginalized. (SS3, female, 17-18)

[...] one needs courage and the person who experiences racism should try to integrate in a group. Others, however, just give up from trying integrating. (SS3, female, 17-18)

Basically they get disappointed that's why they may choose to be marginalized because when something is different it draws attention and comments (SS3, male, 17-18)

7.4 Official school reaction towards inter-ethnic violence

Lastly, students were asked to comment on how they saw school's reaction to such behaviours and whether any official policy against such incidences was visible. Overall, from students responses it emerged that a concrete and strong leadership/management in schools regarding the presence of migrant/ or foreign students (as they were often referred to) would create conditions that would allow students to adjust and integrate smoothly into the school environment.

An issue that dominated the focus group discussions was how schools treated incidences of inter-ethnic tensions. Students expressed the view that their impression was that teachers dealt with such incidences on a case by case approach and it usually involved light forms of reprimands when such incidences occurred in class or in school. The following extract from a focus group is very indicative.

Interviewer: Do teachers intervene?

Student: Only when there is physical violence ...only then will they step in (SS3, female, 17-18)

Student: I believe that they will interfere up to a degree ... as much as they can but no more because then everybody might turn against them. (SS3, male, 17-18)

Interviewer: who exactly?

Student: other students, the media, for example if such an incident occurs then the media will show up just for the sake of their ratings not because they are truly interested (SS3, male, 17-18)

.... and if a teacher gets in the middle of this he might be criticized by parents, the perpetrators... (SS3, female, 17-18)

In another focus group the following topic was commented as follows:

Interviewer: Would you say that teachers treat students equally regardless of their nationality?

Student: Most of them yes but some are themselves a bit racist... (SS4, female, 17-18)

Student: ...but also there was a case when a student actually chased the teacher and there were no sanctions for the student... (SS4, male, 17-18)

Student: ...yes some teachers are afraid to intervene. (SS4, female, 17-18)

When asked how the school responded to issues of inter-ethnic relations, students made references to a number of strategies involving organizing discussion on multiculturalism and co-existence in class and helping students who did not master the Greek language to catch up with the rest of the class. There were many references to the issue of language as a basic source of miscommunications and misunderstandings. So much so that there was an overall belief that *"they should first learn the language and then enter regular classes"* (SS3, female, 17-18). Also, students spoke of organized activities in class on the issue of integration.

We dealt with this issue because we had it as a thematic cycle. (SS1, female, 17-18)

We had to write this essay on the various cultures, languages and differences in Europe and on how despite of these we are all equal. (SS1, female, 17-18)

We have a special topic in our syllabus on racism and there are various discussions in class and essay writing. (SS3, male, 17-18)

We have a special day for different languages. (SS3, male, 17-18)

Last year during Christmas celebrations in school, people from different countries appeared on stage and talked about customs and how was of life in their country... but nobody paid much attention to it. (SS3, female, 17-18)

The ideas suggested by students in the focus groups for preventing interethnic tension in schools could be sorted into two main categories, the short term instructive strategies and the long term policy directions. Short term instructive ideas consist of suggestions regarding effective educational processes within school to enhance students and staff understandings of the concept of racism, multiculturalism, ethnicity, prejudice, and racial and ethnic diversity. These ideas include activities such as, role and theatrical plays, organized official debates with students from different ethnic background, religion and language. Long term policy directions require extensive period of time due to the fact that these processes often include changes outside the school environment involving external actors (family, society and the state). A crucial prerequisite, however, for foreign students' successful integration into Cypriot schools is their adequate command of the Greek language. Some of the interviewees suggested that reception classes should have extended time duration, so



that students could achieve maximum fulfillment of their linguistic needs before their inclusion in regular classes. Improved communication competence in the Greek language increases academic attainment and consequently this boosts self-esteem.

8 Discussion

The findings from the interview data presented in the previous section indicate that in Cyprus interethnic relations currently go through a transitional phase and are not always overtly discernible in the educational system. More extensive findings from the overall research on interethnic relations in Cypriot schools from where these data were taken (Vryonides 2014) present a picture that on the whole suggests that prior to the economic downturn the presence of migrant populations was not a major concern for the Cypriot public educational system. Amidst the current economic environment, however, there are potentially factors that might escalate interethnic tensions due to external and unrelated to education conditions. For example, it appears that there is an environment of growing concern about the presence of migrants mostly from Asia and Eastern Europe in the Cypriot society which is perceived to have a negative effect on the economy. This leads to overall mixed perceptions about interethnic tolerance in schools ranging from negative to (politically correct) positive ones. It seems that at a period when the current economic crisis appears to be affecting all aspects of social relations, multiculturalism as a stated policy in education is at risk. There were visible trends in the way students articulated their positions during the interviews. It appeared that teenagers were in a position to understand the social contexts and issues of political correctness of educational and social policies towards multiculturalism and were conscientious of complicated issues of multi-ethnic co-existence.

The rhetoric that sees language as key in the implementation of good interethnic relations, as indicated in the last part of the previous section, is a valid one. The comments that Chancellor Merkel made with reference to these issues (see section above) hold some truth. Language is a key instrument of integration and sometimes it can become an instrument of assimilation as well. On the whole when language issues are resolved, issues of interethnic relations become less complicated. Having said the above, one needs to appreciate that tensions within the school environment will not be eradicated from schools in the near future. However, when tensions tend to be based on ethnicity differences it can become an explosive phenomenon particularly at times when racism and xenophobic behaviours appear to be on the rise throughout Europe.

Reading the existing literature on interethnic relations in schools in Europe one may conclude that this is an issue common to many countries with many possible macro and micro sociological consequences. One such consequence is on the educational experiences of ethnic minority pupils. When such experiences are negative

because of victimization, academic achievement will most definitely suffer and this could lead ethnic minority children to lag behind in terms of their achievement to that of the majority. Poor performance of migrant children at school hampers their employment opportunities too, as the likelihood of improving their living standards. The social marginalization of migrant youth could potentially have explosive social effects such as rioting and overall discontent. There are unfortunately enough examples for the above point. The 2005 civil unrest in France of October and November which involved a series of riots by mainly Arab, North African and Black immigrants in the suburbs of Paris and other French cities illustrates vividly how social discrimination of immigrants together with unemployment and lack of opportunities can alienate some ethnic minority youth.

While the majority of European countries employ policies of multiculturalism as far as education is concerned, inter-ethnic coexistence in schools constitutes the most efficient tool for combating racial and cultural stereotypes and interethnic tensions. According to Kassimeris and Vryonides (2012) multicultural education is designed in such a fashion so as to make good use of concepts pertaining to race and culture, thus engaging pupils in learning processes that will envelop a positive view of diversity. The current economic crisis that ripped through most of Europe and created feelings of growing economic uncertainty has the potential to create explosive situations in interethnic relations unless properly dealt with by effective policies by the state. The recent examples in Greece with rise of the neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn which specifically targets migrant groups and Hungary with over 15 extremist, xenophobic, anti-Semitic, anti-Roma and racist organizations currently active are just two of many cases that may be mentioned. Such developments in the public social sphere can have serious negative effects in the European multicultural schooling system. The seed for these explosive potentials may be seen in the negative attitudes and the growing concern about the presence of migrants and ethnic minorities in Europe as often documented by European comparative social surveys such as the European Social Survey. Thus, as schools are key spaces in which to explore and challenge behaviours and assumptions as well as to foster positive relations they are therefore a key arena in which to analyze interethnic relations. Moreover schools may employ successful programs and strategies to address xenophobia and racism. In today's climate, schools can play a key role in alleviating interethnic tensions and to combat ethnocentrism with the implementation of strong policies with the support of all actors involved in education.

9 Conclusion – policy implications

Policy interventions are essential to diffuse potential conflicts because the combination of factors which are often unrelated to education and multiculturalism can produce conditions for violence in schools. Examples



from such initiatives in Cyprus include the program Strategic Planning (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2007) and the Zones of Educational Priority (2006) which were launched by the Ministry of Education in Cyprus. The 2007 a 'strategic planning' developed by the Ministry of Education and Culture acknowledged the issue of multiculturalism in schools and it aimed to a more effective and positive awareness of students and teachers on this issue. Up until recently, the Zones of Educational Priority were extended and applied in many schools in Cyprus. Their major goal was to assist students from different ethnic backgrounds to be easily integrated in public school environments. Amidst a climate of constant cuts in social policy because of the economic crisis such programmes become susceptible to restrictions and downsizing.

Interethnic relations in Cyprus and in Cypriot schools, and inter-ethnic tensions in particular, had been dormant so far in the sense that they were not overtly discernible in the society nor were they an everyday reality in the educational system. As indicated throughout this paper however, there are potentially factors that might increase interethnic tensions due to external conditions which relate to the economic downfall and the prediction that recession will stay with us for the next few years. Thus, initiatives like the ones described in the preceding paragraph should act as a valuable resource and shield sensitive social relations thus promoting tolerance and peaceful coexistence in a truly multicultural social environment. The crisis, however, which for the time has imposed a strict plan for budgetary cuts (2014) will definitely affect such initiatives as they are often seen as redundant and not of high priority. If such positions prevail in the long term the situation might deteriorate to a degree that might cause irreversible conditions that might not be easily addressed.

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Endnotes

¹ Cyprus and Cypriots in this chapter refer only to the part of the island that is under the control of the Republic of Cyprus. Since the Turkish invasion and occupation of the northern part of the country in 1974 and the de facto partition of the island the two main communities of the island (Greek and Turkish) have been living separately with very little contact. The educational systems of Greek-Cypriots and Turkish-Cypriots have always been separate. Essentially when reference to Cypriots is made it must be interpreted as synonymous only to Greek-Cypriots.

² Merkel says German multicultural society has failed, 17 October 2010 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-11559451>

