Probing into the cultural identity of Roma students: A case study in the Greek EFL context

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It is true that in today's globalized world students represent a wide array of cultural and social identities in any given educational setting. It is also true that since learners' identities are founded on core values related to gender, language, religion and so on, it is more often than not difficult for EFL teachers to weave such characteristics in the culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms. Based on the theory of social location and the concept of a social location map, this paper outlines the rationale for designing activities aiming at crafting students' cultural identities in the EFL classroom. These activities address sixth graders of a primary school in Kato Achaia (a Western area in Greece) which is predominantly inhabited by Roma people. This 'mini' project was carried out in separate sessions. It focused on students' personal social location maps, which in conjunction with their drawings constitute the main tools, which revealed the context in which they put themselves. The findings provide deeper insights into students' cultural identities in an EFL setting and delineate practices on how to best deal with them. Implications of this process for second/ foreign language pedagogy, with respect to linguistic diversity and cultural identity, as well as the role the English language plays (either as a second or a third language), when it comes to forming students' identities, is also discussed.

Introduction

In the globalized and globalizing world of today, there is an urgent need for mutual understanding and the prevention or even eradication of unequal power relations between various social groups. In order to achieve this, not only those in charge but also the educational system of

any given country should be orientated towards establishing and promoting these values- especially nowadays that classrooms are flooded with students from diverse backgrounds. In this light, the ultimate aim of foreign language teachers–in their attempt to meet the demands of the new multicultural and multilingual classroom reality- extends to helping students become intercultural speakers who are able to interact with and accept others from various cultural milieus. It is within this new state of affairs that notions such as *culture* and *identity* come into play to enhance the teaching and learning process. The cultural backgrounds of students and the validation of their identity can play a significant role in the transmission of values. Therefore, teachers should take them into account while endeavoring to be responsive to the educational needs of their students. This could be achieved with the use of social location maps.

This article aims to probe into the cultural identity of Roma primary school students in an EFL setting, by using personal social location maps. Roma students have always had a special status in the Greek society, unlike any other national minority, and they merit special attention because education is largely seen as the most important tool for their integration into the Greek society. More specifically, their personal location maps in conjunction with their drawings will not only reveal the sociocultural context they place themselves in, but also the extent to which they helped them craft their cultural identities in the foreign language classroom. More importantly, the multiple benefits of using social location maps in the foreign language classroom as well as the implications of such process with respect to cultural and linguistic diversity will be delineated.

Social Location Map(s)

Social location constitutes a life-determining factor, since it acknowledges that each person's perception of reality is shaped by myriads of factors and various experiences; thus, signifying each person's unique existence in society. While there is a lot of literature exclusively examining the individual aspects of our social construction (e.g., age, race and so on), research that deals with all factors collectively, is really scarce (Daynes, 2007). Generally, mapping a social location involves using a web-like diagram to represent the complex and potentially contradictory contexts in which individuals may find themselves (Hamilton, 2003).

While the social location applies to various social categories, such as gender, race, religion and so on, it can also be extended to various social roles (e.g., being a brother, daughter, sister) or even include a person's overall experiences and relationships. Therefore, as Bishop (2002) argues, the individual's personal understanding of the world is built partly on their social background as well as their social experiences stemming from their social characteristics. Such characteristics, which are in essence the actual constituents of each person's social location, have been acquired throughout one's lifespan and can be either unchangeable and static (e.g., gender, race) or dynamic (e.g., age, socio-economic status) (Baker, Lynch, Cantillon and Walsh, et al, 2004 in Daynes, 2007). Whatever the category they fall under, this concept posits that individuals view themselves through their own experiences of the ever-changing social circumstances in the present time, while reflecting on previous experiences of the past and at the same time contemplating on future endeavors and aspirations. It is therefore the 'where we stand now, where we come from and the possibilities of where we are going that encompass the whole meaning of a 'social location' (Daynes, 2007).

Cultural Identity

Unquestionably, there is no clear-cut approach to define- let alone analyze in depth, such a complicated and multifaceted issue as 'cultural identity'. In today's world, the notion of cultural identity has been approached by various scholars as a key construct mainly in intercultural communication studies (Bardhan & Orbe, 2012; Croucher, Sommier, & Rahmani, 2015, in Yea-Wen Chen and Hengjun Lin, 2016), but also in a wide range of humanities and social studies and has thus been given various definitions. Jenkins (2004) gave a two-fold interpretation by referring to 'individual' and 'collective' identities; the first possibility is to define *cultural identity* on the level of the individual, in the sense that it is unique and fundamental for their existence in society. Robinson (1999:85) defines identity as "both visible and invisible domains of the self that influence self-construction. They include, but are not limited to, ethnicity, skin color, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, and physical and intellectual ability." In the second case, which is the most prevalent one, the notion of *cultural identity* could be defined as "a denominator of belongingness to separate cultural groups or communities" (Petkova, 2005:19). By placing

the emphasis on the group, this definition is indicative of a set of traits that a group or a community might share, ranging from language, religion, cuisine, social habits to typologies of behavior or even a constellation of attitudes towards life -nearly anything that might influence or permeate our daily lives. As Bochner (1982 in Garrett Rucks, 2016:71) states, "the cultural identity of a society is defined by its majority group, and this group is usually quite distinguishable from the minority sub-groups with whom they share the physical environment and the territory that they inhabit." In a nutshell, *cultural identity* constitutes an intricate patchwork of personal and interpersonal situations and whether it is an individual choice or a group right (Yea-Wen Chen and Hengjun Lin, 2016), it is constantly negotiated, enacted and challenged in today's world of multiple intercultural encounters.

The Roma Student Population

Over the years, many scholars, anthropologists and historians have attempted to give answers to Roma's identity and origins. They are not a homogenous group, and in almost any place they live, they suffer multiple stereotypes and discrimination, which inevitably lead to their exclusion from normal life (Zachos, 2012). Many studies have stressed the underachievement of Roma children (Mariano, 2004; Demetriou & Trimikliniotis, 2007 among others) while their educational status is mainly characterized by "low school enrollment percentages, premature termination of compulsory education and unmannerly stance by classmates, parents and teachers" (Markou, 1997:60). In most of the cases, the lack of financial resources, their socio-economic background, the constant wandering for professional reasons or even the difficulty in accessing schools might constitute some of the reasons that hinder their rightful participation in education. Still, Roma students are of high research interest and merit special attention, since their education is inherently linked to intercultural education, which deals with multicultural and multilingual issues arising from students from diverse backgrounds.

According to the intercultural approach, education, in general, should be coherent and unified and include all the collective identities represented in a school. Since there are no scientific criteria for the prioritization of cultures, each group ascribing to one or another culture has the right to be

respected on the basis of cultural criteria such as language, ethnicity and so on (Gotovos, 2002). Schools should therefore, manifest a kind of national identity which apart from the traditional criteria (e.g., religion, origin etc.) should be determined by political (e.g., equal opportunities, participation etc.) and subjective criteria (e.g., self-identification) and act as the vessel for the 'cultural' meeting of the carriers of ethnic identity. Only in such a context could the Roma identity be recognized and respected in school (Calogiannakis, P.; Karras, KG.; Ieronimakis, J.; Babalis, T., 2018). Finally, as Georgiadis & Zisimos (2012), argue that education is considered the key for minority ethnic groups to combat racism and discrimination by developing social justice through critical education and emancipatory processes without prejudices and hierarchies and can lead to full personal, social and cognitive development in the 21st century.

Research Methodology

The study is grounded in the constructivist research paradigm and clearly constitutes a case study, since it addresses Roma students who were chosen *purposefully* (Patton, 2002 quoted in Glesne, 2010: 44) and comprise a homogeneous sampling (Clark, 1999 quoted in Glesne, 2010: 45). They all attend the sixth class in a Greek state primary school and are of the same age. In particular, the target population of the project are young language learners who attend the 6th grade of a primary school in a village in Western Greece, which is predominantly inhabited by Roma people. It is a mixed ability class of 16 children aged 11-12 who differ in learning styles, strategies, skills and even nationality. Although this mini project involved all the students, exclusive attention was paid to the Roma population, the creation of their social location maps and the depiction of their identity through their personal drawings. All the activities were organized as part of a larger enrichment project, which aimed to raise students' intercultural awareness, in order to meet the curriculum's aim regarding multilingualism and multiculturalism. According to the Cross Thematic Curriculum Framework, which mainly focuses on the preservation of our national awareness as well as the development of European citizenship, students are expected to develop an awareness of cultural and linguistic diversity, appreciate people from different linguistic or cultural backgrounds, develop intercultural awareness and learn to accept 'otherness' (Papalexatou, 2013). In order to dig deeper

into the content they were covering, the students were asked to do a hands-on project on their identities, the way they are expressed and the way they are weaved through a diverse school setting.

Initially, since the notion of a social location map is still in its infancy, students were asked to contemplate on the distinct parts of what constitutes their identity (e.g., gender, family, religion etc.), as well as their current social roles (e.g., brother, sister, aunt etc.). In order for them to understand this better, I created my own social location map on the board and initiated a discussion about what *culture* and *identity* means to each and every one of us. In order to facilitate them, I had them create a 'mental' timeline of their lives, noting the age at which they learned particular lessons about their identity and by whom. In order to reinforce this idea, I distributed some worksheets: a *social identity wheel* in order to create a visual map of their socialization in some aspect of identity and a *personal identity wheel* in order to understand how they would describe themselves beyond social identifiers. In turn, they were asked to jot down the most important notes about what characterizes them in the form of a diagram. Only two children preferred to present their identity in the form of a human being, whereas the rest preferred the web diagram as their visual tool. As a follow up oral activity, Roma students considered their identities critically in relation to and compared with their non-Roma classmates, in an attempt to sensitize the latter and build together a community open to empathy. Finally, after having considered their multiple identities, they were asked to sketch out their individual thoughts on a paper. Drawing was chosen as a meaning-making activity through which children's thinking could be illustrated through art (Papandreou, 2013). This way, personal identities took on a more holistic nature and could be analyzed in more depth. Besides, "their pictures can be a thousand words if you let them tell their stories" (Soundy, 2012:45).

Data Analysis

As we leaf through the batch of social location maps the students produced, we can delineate specific dominating themes from their drawings. The main tenor that runs throughout their work revolves around the major principles deeply ingrained in the lives of this specific group: *religion*, *family ties*, *tradition* and *money*. Yet the patterns emerging from the data yielded specific facets of their *cultural identity*, which allowed us to group them into the following *identity clusters*:

Keeping it within the family

In this group, we find the family-oriented types whose main goal is to settle down with a significant "other." Their social location maps resemble a human apparition (rather than a web-like diagram) with body limbs in neat proportions, which probably connotes the image of a family unit.

Here we find Penelope whose name summons the tale of a female Homeric figure known for her marital fidelity to her absented husband despite the incessant wooing of numerous eligible suitors. She has scribbled three words on her social location map, which sum up the essence of her personal goals: *family*, *marriage* and *the wedding table*. She complements her map with a snapshot from a wedding ceremony, which depicts the bride and groom in full gear.
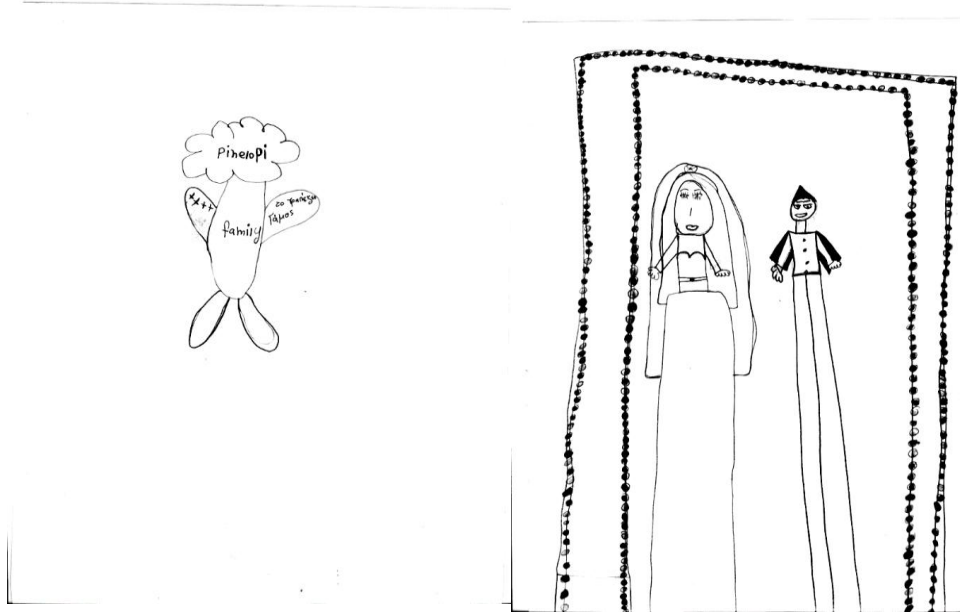
We then proceed to Themis –a young fellow to whom *family* comes in front and center. He views his role as the *groom* (tzamoutro) at the helm of the household while the *wedding ceremony* (sipiab) and his *religious beliefs* (pakiav) bear a significant weight balancing both ends of his life complemented by his offspring (son and daughter). His drawing points to another aspect of the prenuptial process where a dowry is set on the table.

Themis states that according to the Roma tradition, the groom party "buys off" the bride at a very high "bid."
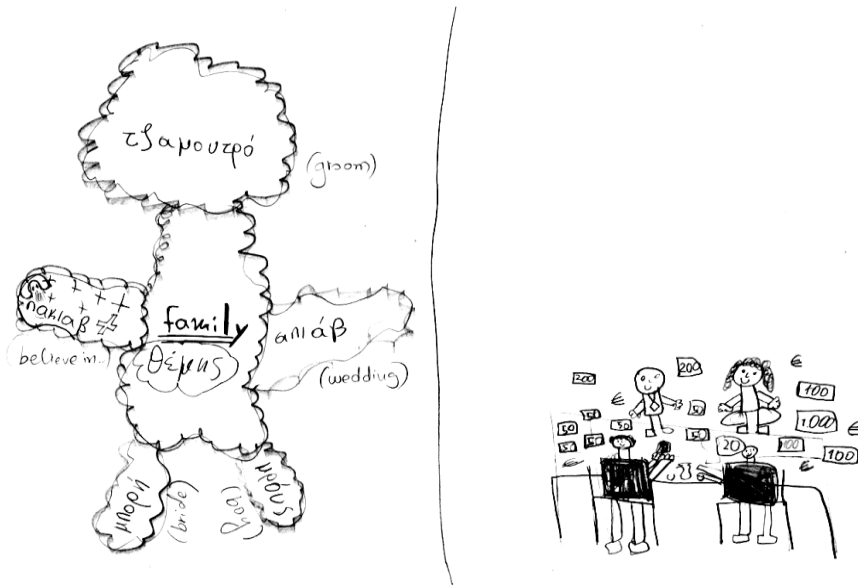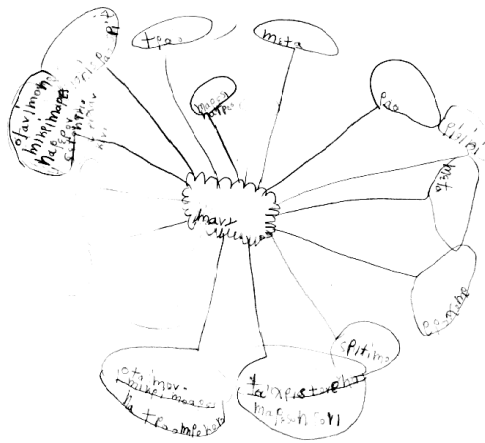

Next in line is Efstathia who seems to be quite a pious individual. Religion (devie pakiav = *I believe in God*) features quite heavily on her map while *marriage* and *money* teeter on both ends of the pendulum in equal proportions. It seems that for Efstathia both the *man* (Rom) and the *woman* (Romi) constitute the pillars of one's adult life. Her drawing portrays a jovial family clustered around a Christmas tree, which, according to her, represents the epitome of a family union.

Lastly, we have Mary who has managed to furnish us with a detailed account of the nuts and bolts of the Roma holiday and nuptial traditions. Her social location map is laid out in a cyclical format (perhaps the circle of life) where she details the most memorable aspects of her upbringing. For instance, she states that when she was young, she enjoyed "go[ing] to church," "spend[ing] Christmas with the family," and "visit[ing] local festivals [=paniyiri]." The accompanied drawing documents certain aspects of the Roma traditions:

Our holiday traditions (Christmas and New Year): *We make a cheese pie (tiropota) and then in the mix we place a coin (which represents wealth), an olive leaf (which represents the household) and a small piece of wood (which represents a car).*

Wedding traditions: *Our wedding traditions are a bit weird and quite demanding: 1) we must marry very young, 2) after the wedding ceremony, we go to the in-laws the second day wearing red, holding red roses and bringing a bottle of ouzo (i.e., a dry anise-flavored aperitif), which we dye in red, and 3) the eve of our wedding, our in-laws bring a bottle of henna which they mix with wine and then both our mother and mother in-law paint our hands, legs and dye our hair, give us their blessings and then share it with other maidens.*

Styling and profiling

It is all about the "image" for the individuals in this group. Everything revolves around the manner with which they look, they socialize with others and entertain themselves.

Our first in line is Steve. He enjoys "going out" with friends and playing and entertaining himself (e.g., he mostly loves dancing). He also enjoys listening to music (*U2* is his favorite band) and aspires to become a gynecologist. Regardless of his well-polished exterior, he continues to clench on to his family's traditional and religious values (he believes in God a lot) while his ultimate goal is to settle down with someone at a certain point. He provides us with snapshots of these values (i.e., church, wedding table, Christmas dinner, members of his extended family) in his drawing.
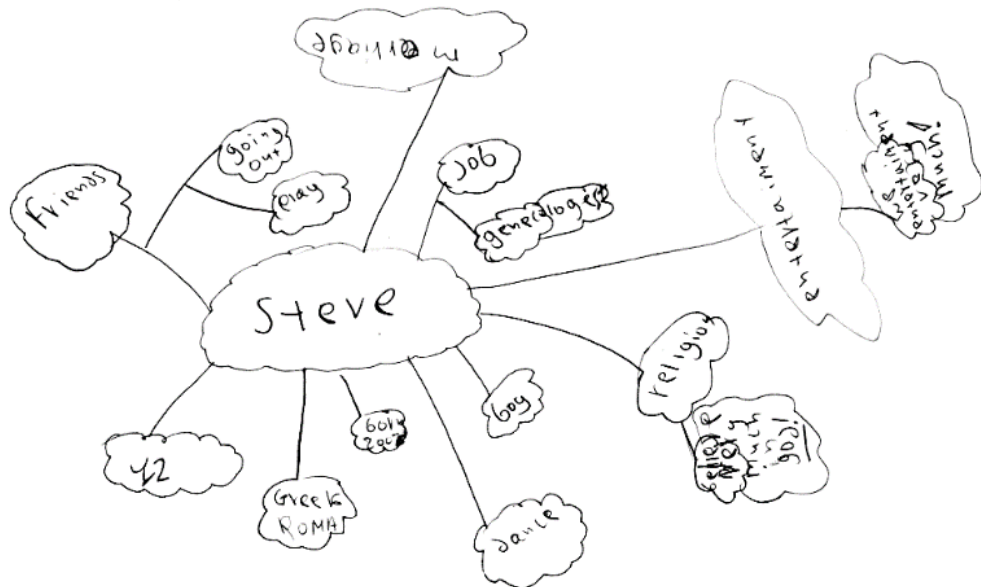
Marianna is our coquette. Her appearance seems to rank first on her list ("people say I am pretty"). This is also evident in her drawing, which appears to be a portrait of herself. She seems to have a lot of friends with

whom she "hangs out" and plays. On a more serious note, she clings to her family traditions and religious values, wants to get married and aspires to become a nurse.

Last one in this group is Christina –our moviegoer and beautician. In her free time, Christina will clasp on the opportunity to hit the movie theater. From new releases to old time classics, the sky is the limit on anything projected on the silver screen. When at home, Christina sifts through YouTube video clips, takes care of her dog whom she adores dearly and spends quality time with her family. As evident from her drawing, she is very religious as well and envisions herself getting married.
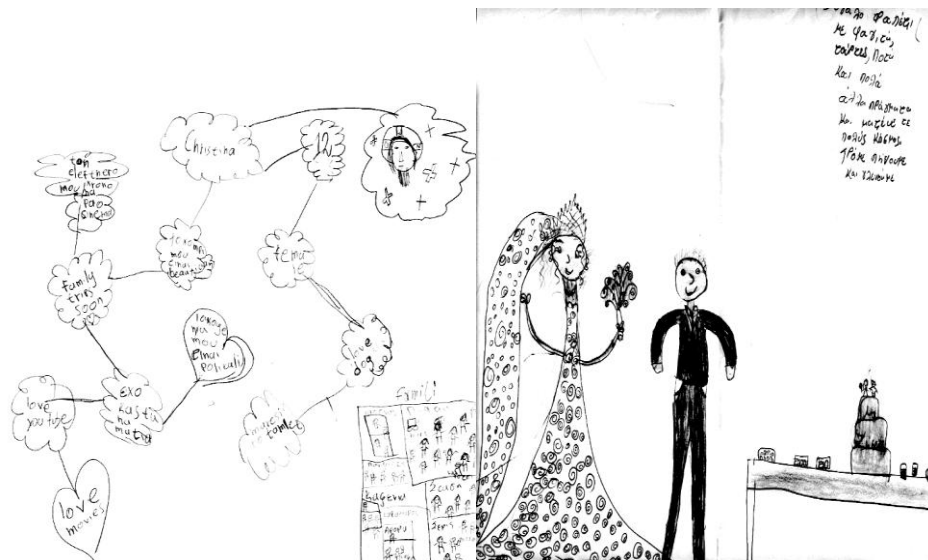
Discussion

Primarily, it was found that social location maps had a positive impact on the students' practices and constituted a powerful tool in creating their reality and fostering a climate of mutual respect and trust. The students involved proved to be sensitive towards and thoughtful of all people, including themselves. Besides, acts of inquiry and novelty always speak volumes to students. What was striking though was the fact that all Roma children ascribed to four principles, which seem to be ingrained in their everyday lives. There was no reference whatsoever to school and their education-as one would expect- possibly because school might be perceived as an unwelcoming place for them and incompatible with their culture. Instead, we were surprised because all 7 children employed arguments related to ethics, customs and traditions that cover every aspect of their life from birth to death, interrelations, family life and so on. In this sense, the Roma children mostly adopted the spiritual or mental culture of the community (Petkova, 2005). Individuals identify with all the customs, traditions, values, symbols or even behavior shared within their community. What can be inferred is that the Roma's concept of society differs from the one of the Western's world. The latter has its foundations in the personal individual rights, whereas the former views the community as a unified whole, and this is where the richness of their culture and civilization lies: through the socialization in their families and the interrelations in the community, the bonds are so strong that no external intervention is allowed (Trevisan, 2014). Whereas this grants more freedom to children, it can be detrimental with respect to the host country, since for every single aspect of their lives, they are compelled to refer to their community.

They also depicted men's superiority, gave a sense of manhood and men's intrinsic sense of justice and financial power and they placed a high value on family as well. Traditionally, Roma people highly value close family ties. According to the Roma Foundation, the Roma never had a country — neither a kingdom nor a republic — that is, never had an administration enforcing laws or regulations. For the Romani people, the basic 'unit' is their family as well as their lineage. A typical Roma family is usually extended and consists of many members living together. Romani people typically marry at a young age and their marriages are most of the times arranged by pacing bids for the 'purchase' of the bride. They are also deeply religious people. The majority of them are Greek

Orthodox according to their papers, whereas some are Catholics, Mormons and Evangelists. However, there are also still many traditions with worshiping spirits and occult rituals mixed into their culture (e.g., the Joshua Project). In any case, they share their religious practices and they are extremely conscious of their "Gypsyness," since the children referred to their home in almost every piece of writing, however vague that may be for others. The presence of God and their strong belief in Him was ubiquitous throughout both their maps and their drawings; thus, showing their devotion to Him: "Savoro pes prejal cha o Del achhel – everything passes, only God lasts" (Religion among the Roma, 2000). Therefore, it is obvious that their maps reflected widely-held and accepted beliefs of the Roma community, and although there were some instances of reference to "Western" lifestyles (e.g., listening to modern music, catering for their appearance and so on), they still displayed a strong sense of sharing their cultural horizons with their community through the use of the Romani language (which is handed down orally) and the interpretation of their local traditions.

As far as cultural diversity is concerned, the individuals gained insights into the experiences of other people, saw similarities and differences with others and tried to define who they are. This, in turn, leads us to the benefits of social location maps when it comes to cultural diversity. Students raised their intercultural awareness by breaking down 'cultural conflicts', brought up issues about other cultures, and considered their own culture as something relative and not absolute. What is more, their language choice revealed that the Romani language (although used exclusively orally) is highly ranked even in its written form. Apart from the fact that each language depends on social interaction and generally takes on a functional role, Wei (1998:207) makes a similar statement appending the 'cultural identity' element to every language: "code-switching, far from being caused by an insufficient competence in one of the two languages, and besides expressing a double cultural identity works as a communicative strategy used for a variety of purposes, related either to the negotiation of the language of interaction or to the organization of conversational activities." It can therefore be inferred that it is also language that plays a vital role in the construction of *identity*. As Bourdieu (1977:652) puts it: "At level of relations between groups, language is worth what those who speak it are worth, so too, at level of interactions between individuals, speech always owes a major part of its value to identity of person who utters it."

Conclusion

"What kind of society do we actually want to live in?" That's a plausible question that will stay with us for considerable time. More often than not, we find ourselves stranded in our own comfort cultural zone, taking people of diverse cultures and races for granted-most of the times to such an extent that we disrespect or even try to annihilate them (Zorbas, V. & Karras, I., 2019). Yet, what can be inferred is the great need for empowering Roma students, embracing diversity and promoting tolerance and respect in schools. What is evident is that education unavoidably brings shifts. Yet teachers are the ones to make use of strategies to develop awareness of cultural identity and value Roma students' language and customs in order to help them experience both enculturation and acculturation in the school environment. One fruitful direction would be to adopt a communicative approach to cultural identities that takes into account all possible differences and clashes. Sparse different traditions and fragmented rich understandings of cultures should be bridged in order to foster intercultural relationships and interactions. This way, a single school cultural code will contain all the elements from various cultures, for the sake of common interest and a more 'welcoming' and 'open' national identity -on the basis of pluralism and diversity, will eventually be a reality (Calogiannakis,P.; Karras,KG.; Ieronimakis,J.; Babalis, T., 2018).

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