

# Rethinking intercultural learning spaces: The example of Greek Language Schooling in Australia

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper is a reflective narrative of the Greek ethnic schools transformation to intermediate spaces of learning. Based on her doctoral research findings the author (re)constructs the role of Greek ethnic schools in Australia in the light of spatiality. Greek schools can be perceived as heterotopias and/or third spaces where identity formation and intercultural learning take place. Their community and systemic role is influenced by triadic relationships, which interpret their complementary and semi-formal status as language providers. Greek schools' continuity and effectiveness in the new millennium presuppose a new intercultural and spatial learning approach taking into account the national, diasporic and transnational context.*

## KEY WORDS

*Greek ethnic schools, spatiality, heterotopia, third space, intercultural and language learning, diaspora*

## RÉSUMÉ

*Ce document est une narration qui reflète la transformation des écoles ethniques grecques aux espaces intermédiaires de l'apprentissage. Sur la base de ses résultats de recherche de doctorat, l'auteur (re)construit le rôle de l'école d'origine grecque en Australie, à la lumière de la spatialité. Les écoles grecques peuvent être perçus comme des hétérotopies et/ou tiers espaces où la formation de l'identité et de l'apprentissage interculturel ont lieu. Leur communauté et le rôle systémique est influencé par des relations triadiques, qui interprètent leur statut complémentaire et semi-formelle comme fournisseurs de services linguistiques. La continuité et l'efficacité de l'école grecque dans le nouveau millénaire supposent une nouvelle approche de l'apprentissage interculturel et spatial en tenant compte du contexte national, de la diaspora et transnationale.*

## MOTS CLÉS

*Écoles d'origine grecque, spatialité, hétérotopie, troisième espace, apprentissage interculturel et linguistique, diaspora*

## INTRODUCTION

Over the past century, especially since World War II, the strong linguistic and cultural awareness of diaspora Greeks has led to the formation of a self-sustainable network of part-time schools

throughout Australia in the absence of mainstream political interest and formal educational commitment on the part of the wider society. Since 1896, when the first Greek class was established by the Greek Orthodox community in Sydney, these schools have been the key community strategy for language and cultural maintenance alongside to recently developed formal types of schooling (e.g. the establishment of government language programs and full-time Greek schools in the 1970s and 1980s). Greek schools have been an integral part of the Greek paroikia (Tsounis, 1974; Arvanitis, 2000), a socio-cultural marker of ethnicity and an institution of ethnic socialization larger than the family.

The cornerstones of Greek schools' *raison d'être* and their perceived value focus on the Greek language and cultural maintenance, the cultivation of *Greekness* and the support of Greek-Australian identity including multicultural awareness. At the same time, Greek schools have been an alternative and counter-cultural institution to the assimilationist influence of the mainstream school system.

Greek ethnic schools' diverse forms of operation (different providers, different time and dates of operation, different curriculum structures and teaching methodologies) developed over past decades reflect the differing philosophies regarding ethnic education and the struggle of a heterogeneous community to deal with *Greekness*. Intergenerational shift (the progression from one generation to the other), other material (e.g. different types of families and mixed marriages, social mobility, geographical dispersion) and symbolic changes (e.g. attachment to the homeland, language use and diasporic affinities) brought into the fore a great differentiation in perceptions and practices with regard to language and cultural maintenance in Australia (Arvanitis, 2000). Ethnic schools deal with the challenges of *transformative education*<sup>1</sup> (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012) as they form multilayered cultural and systemic spaces through which identities are mediated in national, diasporic and globalised contexts. In particular, ethnic schools in the light of a postmodern theory form *intermediate* spaces of intercultural learning that mediate, negotiate and reflect belongingness.

This paper takes a reflexive stance on major dissertation findings (Arvanitis, 2000) on the role of Greek ethnic schools in Australia. This retrospective reflection refers to different insights, cultural values and political perspectives associated to underlying theory and theoretical assumptions that are vital to reinterpret school narratives (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000). Research data, mainly from Greek school stakeholders (community leaders, parents, teachers and principals), is reinterpreted to (re)construct the living reality of these institutions in community, systemic and global/diasporic contexts.

## **IDENTITY FORMATION IN INTERCULTURAL SPACES: THE EXAMPLE OF GREEK SCHOOLS**

Greek ethnic schooling emerges as an important ethnicity marker and a space of socialisation (Arvanitis, 2000). This is because automatic enculturation in the Greek-Australian family or other public domains no longer can be counted upon to ensure ethnic continuity. Mixing with people from Greek background and enhancing friendship networks was essential among all stakeholders

<sup>1</sup> In this context, Greek schools have moral and pedagogical responsibility to educate "kinds of persons" with necessary capacities to understand and transform self and contemporary societal contexts in a pragmatic and emancipatory way. Another challenge is to enable new citizens to participate in a national cosmopolitan/global and diasporic contexts and help them to be balanced personalities willing to take risks and make "choices that, at times, seems overwhelming" (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012, p. 75-76).

that took part in the research almost two decades ago. However, the data revealed that the Greek community or church schools more than the private ones play a central and symbolic role in community life, operating in privately owned premises next to the community centre or church. On the contrary Greek private schools loose this communal significance due to the presence of many second and third generation children, whose attachment to Greek community organisations becomes more symbolic than real.

In addition, Greek schools constitute an *intermediate* space of (bicultural, multicultural and/or ethnic) identity formation, due to the inter-generational change. Maintaining the Greek culture and identity remain central objectives for ethnic schools, although different aspirations with regards to identity formation intersect. Here students reflect and interpret their Greekness in accord with their Australianness through manifold and varied expressions. Bicultural identification, proficiency in the Greek language as well as cultural awareness and the subjective feeling of belonging to the Greek tradition were the genuine expressions of such identity. However, the increasing dominance of English did not affect parents' or students' strong affiliation with their *Greekness*. Particularly the second generation group of parents and students remain committed to both their community/heritage language and also to the Australian nationhood. Ghettoization and ethnocentrism had been strongly rejected. Promoting multicultural awareness and **language and cultural diversity as well as facilitating interethnic harmony** were viewed as core values not only for ethnic schools, but also for mainstream schooling. Despite the rejection of ethnocentrism within the school curriculum, it seems that school practice is limited to simple factual data of historical or cultural importance promoting an Olympian/static<sup>2</sup> and stereotyped view of the culture and/ or superficial multiculturalism (Arvanitis, 2000).

However, accepting students' bicultural identity in its various expressions and embedding interculturality into curriculum remains a challenge for the majority of Greek schools impacting their effectiveness and continuity. Re-conceptualizing culture and identity is also an important process towards enabling students to operate as global learners and citizens in a highly interconnected post-modern world. A reform curriculum agenda for ethnic schools could integrate the notion that cultures and identities are overlapping, interacting and internally negotiated processes (Tully 1997, p. 10). Identity formation remains a dynamic, complex, fluid and ongoing process in diasporic and global contexts. It is transformed by the constant change of social and generational contexts (Cohen, 1997; Vertovec, 1999). It is not a rigid assimilationist process toward 'mainstream' society (Laroche et al., 1996), but a multi-dimensional narrative of ethnic change itself influenced by ethnic boundary erosion, inter-generational shifts and symbolic ethnicity. Greek ethnic schools provide an *intermediate* space where belongingness can be seen as a process of "perpetual transformation", negotiation and merging of cultural differences (Tsolidis, 2011, p.2), which is no longer bounded by a single place. The boundaries of otherness are permeable formed through the lifeworld experiences, cultural boundary erosion, exchange and reflection within ethnic schools. Self-identification in this space is not clear-cut, but a multi-layered process, which potentially can be supported by enriched cultural resources available in them.

Diverse identity formation as well as the dynamic nature of cultures was not apparent to the great majority of the community leaders as only three (out of 21) reflected on how ethnic

<sup>2</sup> Indeed students' level of cultural knowledge was moderate. However, students attending community and church schools had significantly better scores on the cultural test than those in private schools due to the curriculum areas covered (Arvanitis, 2000, p. 312).

identity is not experienced by everybody in the same way for there is no single way of being Greek. For example, the community leaders focused on bicultural identification and Australian citizenship (31%), the Greek language (29%) and the feeling of being Greek (23%) as the main elements of the Greek-Australian identity. On the other hand, parents considered cultural tradition and history (39%), family values and respect towards elderly (28%), religion (18%) and language (14%) as being authentic components of one's Greek identity, although they stressed the difficulty in inculcating such values in a modern society (Arvanitis, 2000, p. 110).

An interesting point is that identification with the Greek language, commitment to its maintenance and broader self-determination with *Greekness* does not necessarily mean an increase in the Greek language use (Clyne, 1991). English is the children's language in which they communicate, although Greek is still a very special code. The Greek language was also perceived by students as the most important element of their bicultural identity compared to cultural awareness and religious practice. Greek is a symbol of ethnic pride and a primary cohesive element as well as an identity marker. Language, especially for the second and third generation parents and students, is a means of purposeful communication with the first generation parents, grandparents, Greek elders and relatives as well as with the Greek speaking community at large. Language shift across to English was more apparent within the school context and among parents, students and teachers. Greek schools have been transformed into vibrant bilingual contexts with the extensive use of English by the Australian-born teachers and students in all facets of school routine. Private schools experience this trend much more strongly as they cater for second and third generation families. It was clear that the second generation parents were finding it harder to maintain Greek, though, they wanted to implement strategies to maintain the language such as children's exposure to the culture via both the Greek school and broader socialisation (Arvanitis, 2000).

Moreover, Greek language schooling is a prime space in which the so-called *diaspora consciousness* (dual or multiple identifications with more than one nation) and broader understanding of the global/diasporic dimensions of students' diverse subjectivities can be reinforced. In particular, *diaspora consciousness* refers to personal and/or collective attachment with others, "both 'here' and 'there' who share the same 'routes' and 'roots'" (Vertovec 1999, p. 450). This attachment is usually linked to language, religion and cultural customs and practices. For example, the strong linguistic vitality experienced by the Greek community in Australia (despite the natural linguistic attrition) reveals that language speakers and learners have maintained this emotional and sentimental bond with the old country and its diaspora. Learners' concrete language, cultural and communication skills, together with knowledge and positive attributes towards *Greekness*, are the connecting points of the different Greek language speakers around the world. This bond creates an 'imaginary coherence'<sup>3</sup>, a collective representation of the emerging Greek transnational identities.

Greek ethnic schools need to engage with this meaningful and powerful process and expand their curricula enabling students to interpret and negotiate social change and difference. This new learning promotes an unthreatening bilingualism and biculturalism, which adds to the Australian pluralistic identity and secures social cohesion. However, the formation of new collectivities is closely linked to the Greek diaspora and refers to a constantly changing set of cultural interactions that fundamentally challenge the very notions of 'home' and 'host' (Cohen

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<sup>3</sup> Personal and collective representations provide an 'imaginary coherence' (Hall, 1990) for a set of transformable identities, as a diaspora can to some extent, "be held together or re-created through the mind, through cultural artefacts and a shared imagination" (Cohen, 1996, p. 516).

1997, p. 127). *Diaspora*, according to Brubaker, (2005) could be noted as a ‘category of practice’ with ‘multigenerational staying power’ (Brubaker, 2005, p. 12 & 7), which illustrates the ambivalence that surrounds ethnic identification and the continuous erosion of boundaries as well as community’s collective intelligence and practices for cultural maintenance. For example, Greek diasporic context is centred on a) homeland orientation and the sense of remembering, b) the tension between boundary maintenance and boundary erosion and c) the intergenerational transferral of these sentiments (Brubaker, 2005, p.5).

Finally, Greek schools could be seen as authentic cultural and linguistic spaces where diverse resources from both ‘here’ and ‘there’ are available enhancing identity formation as well as ethno-cultural and language learning. In addition, they are places within which broader *intercultural learning* takes place. Intercultural learning (Council of Europe and European Commission, 2000) concerns learning about oneself and about others and their differences. It refers to a process of acquiring knowledge, skills and attitudes that emerged from interaction of different cultural and diasporic settings. And, finally, it refers to peaceful and reciprocal collaboration of learners with different lifeworlds and/or different ethnic or diasporic backgrounds. Intercultural learning results a sound intercultural competence acquired in formal, semi-formal and non-formal situations. Basic principles of intercultural learning such as tolerance of ambiguity, empathy and solidarity can be mediated in Greek ethnic schools though extensive peer to peer learning in diasporic educational networks.

So far, the formation of such networks is restricted to a pilot funded program by the Greek state, which enabled the formation of learning communities around the world in the light of the legislation passed in 2011 (law 4027/11). The activism of Greek diasporic communities in forming transnational networks amongst their schools is almost non-existent. Collaborative ethos and praxis in the Greek diaspora and enhancing intercultural learning in its global dimensions remain largely an unknown practice as Greek schools prefer a one way contact with the Greek state and its affordances (e.g. the provision of seconded teachers and materials or study visits in the summer camps in Greece). This bond with the old country (the homeland) constitutes a kind of emotional attachment and the sense of obligation towards the homeland acknowledged by all diasporic communities (Cohen, 1997).

## **RETHINKING GREEK SCHOOLS UNDER THE PRISM OF SPATIALITY**

The points raised so far associate ethnic schools to the underlying theory of *spatiality* as they generate diverse sets of social relations both locally and globally. Since the so-called spatial turn (mid-1990s), *space* and *spatiality* have been acknowledged across all disciplines as important forces that shape social relations and personal action. *Spatiality* could be defined as a ‘in between’ and ‘also/and’ place where cultural boundedness is loosened (Arvanitis, 2014, p. 6) and uneven (power) relations intersect creating hybrid spaces of both real and imagined cultural representations/contacts. Soja (1996) elaborated on *spatiality* by introducing the notion of the *thirdspace*<sup>4</sup> (*lived space* in Lefebvre’s words). This notion moves forward the theoretical conversation over the role of diasporic institutions, such as the Greek ethnic schools. The *thirdspace* is shaped by ongoing cultural interactivity and exchanges, collaborations and

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<sup>4</sup> Soja (1996) introduced the concept of *thirdspace* to avoid the binarism of both First space and Second space approaches (to coincide the First space/real measurable or perceived space in Lefebvre’s words and Second space or imagined/ conceived space).

mediations that are simultaneously material and mental or real and imagined. As we have seen utopias (time and space idealisation) can be formed in diasporic institutions to explain identification process (e.g. diasporic consciousness and symbolic attachment to a romanticised homeland). At the same time real world binaries can be met and transformed in the so-called *thirdspace*. Namely, a contact zone which remains open to otherness, to social change as well as to boundaries and identity transformation.

Greek ethnic schools operate within a dynamic diasporic context (both a transnational and intercultural third space) where school stakeholders maintain various attachments with those who are ‘there’ and ‘here’. Tsolidis (2011, p.4) uses the term *heterotopia* to depict the “real and fundamental” place where cultural representation and expression occurs combining simultaneously multiple and “incompatible spaces” and “contested images”. Heterotopia, even if it implies a traditional binary, it is a useful concept in relation to the space in which (intercultural) learning takes place. Tsolidis asserts that Greek ethnic schools “are heterotopias in the sense that they capture social relations linked to an imagined homeland and those associated with it and also relations that demarcate Australian minorities as marginal” (Tsolidis, 2011, p. 4).

For example, the systemic function of Greek ethnic schools explains heterotopia. These schools refer to a private-family space in contrast to the mainstream public sphere where ‘normal’ schooling is situated (Tsolidis, 2011). They are after hours or afternoon or Saturday or complementary schools and thus, closely associated with students’ family and community context. In this space, ethnic identification prevails as an important characteristic, which is celebrated publicly at school level. On the contrary, in the mainstream schooling students realised their minority status as ethnic identification remains private even though is being recognised as a discrete aspect of difference. Tsolidis (2011) explains that Greek language students become aware of their culture’s minority status because of the fact that Greek language classes occur in mainstream schools when ‘real’ students have left their school. Mainstream schools, thus, are transformed into another entity to accommodate ‘home’ or heritage or community language teaching. However, Tsolidis notes (2011, p. 4) that “the absent students’ presence is pronounced” as their working space and desks are occupied by the Greek school students. In this new space of *heterotopia* contrasted images of identification are present. Namely, the interpretations of spatiality and ethnicity can be both illusory/symbolic as well as the real attachment to both *here* and *there*. Being at Greek schools *there* means both the homeland culture, but also the Australian mainstream school context when it operates with its ‘real’ students. From the mainstream perspective *there* is the private, home or community domain and its associated sociocultural space. It is within these spaces that students maintain a multiple perspective (a self-reflexive posture) of their identity and they identify their absence in certain places because they can still picture themselves in these (Tsolidis, 2011, p. 4). In other words, in these spaces, identities are products of boundary breaking and diverse lifeworld experiences.

Going beyond the notion of *heterotopia*, one could say that Greek ethnic schools operate in a *transnational<sup>5</sup> third space* formed by formidable *triadic relationships* (Vertovec 1999; Arvanitis, 2000). This hybrid space embraces the social and cultural profile of Greek paroikia, its vision and expectations, along with the responses of both the Australian and Greek governments to these institutions (including migrant activism and vested interests) and, finally, the influences of the transnational communities that eventually construct the positioning of these educational institutions. For example, the link between diaspora communities and the ethnic centre was vital

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<sup>5</sup> Transcultural space is a contact zone between spaces, which is being characterized by flexibility and tolerance (Thomas, 1996).

in the construction of the Greek national/ethnic identity in Australia and in other Greek transnational communities. The notion of unbroken continuity of the Greek race from classical times until recent years and the idealization of the glorious past have characterized the maintenance process around the Hellenic diaspora. The Greek State remains the ‘dominant actor’ in the relations with its diaspora and tends to manipulate it in favour of its own interests. It has also maintained a rigid approach regarding its diaspora communities and, consequently, their Greek schools, which were viewed as a medium for the transmission of nationalist ideology (Psomiades, 1993). However, in Australia since the early 1990s generational, demographic and social factors made clear that these institutions do not prepare students for returning to the homeland. The shift towards the maintenance of Greek as heritage language was partly occurring signaling that homeland’s manipulation was no longer seen as being ‘natural’ (Sheffer, 1993).

Finally, Greek ethnic schools are institutional reflections of Australian multiculturalism, namely places where Australian language policies and local community pressures intersect. On the one hand, Greek schools were primarily seen as the defence against cultural and linguistic erosion and ethnic de-culturation (a bulwark against assimilationist forces). They were associated with a strong sense of historicity in the community’s effort to maintain the Greek language and culture in the various parts of the Greek diaspora generating simultaneously group pride and communal solidarity (Arvanitis, 2000). On the other hand, they are ‘wicked problems’, whose resolution lies in the activism of the various vested ethnic or private interests and on the broader directions of language policy and planning in Australia. In recent years, Greek community activism has clearly failed to maintain the prominent role of the Greek language in current policy debates, even though Modern Greek managed to be included in the Australian national language curriculum (ACARA, 2011; Arvanitis, Kalantzis & Cope, 2014).

Greek schooling has been marginalised and became an ‘ethnic issue’ alone, concerning mainly the ethnic community organisations, despite the official recognition and national accreditation processes. It was seen as a mechanism in promoting language education ‘on the cheap’ receiving low funding, although Greek schools only partly depended on government funding as communities and parents, particularly in private schools, covered eighty per cent of the school budget (Arvanitis, 2000). Despite their vitality and growth, ethnic schools have never been considered as a major language provider, because that function was viewed as the responsibility of the mainstream full-time sector. This view imposed an equivocal articulation between the two systems with ethnic schools possessing a complementary role.

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The Greek community in Australia has managed to forge a continuing role for its ethnic schooling alongside Greek language programs in mainstream schools. Greek schools stand at the epicentre of community life as their core role is language, cultural and identity maintenance. However, school stakeholders and especially community leadership fail to exceed the community boundaries in reinforcing students’ enculturation, ethnic self-awareness and diasporic consciousness as well as the sense of a new progressive citizenship in a globalizing context. Greek ethnic schools are on a turning point as sustainable growth lies in the changing demographic and social profile of their communities. In addition, new realizations on the role of Greek schools should be made as the Greek language and culture maintenance constitute a complex process that corresponds to different identification narratives influenced by diversity and globalisation.

An important challenge is for Greek schools to operate as intermediate spaces of language and (inter)cultural learning. In a modern context, Greek schools are semi-formal, accredited and complementary language providers supporting language learning in terms of three strands, namely *communicating*, *understanding* and *reciprocating* (Lo Bianco, 2009, p. 23). In other words, their students not only have to learn how to communicate in Greek, but to be able to understand “the relationship between language and culture in intercultural exchange” and “to develop respect for multiple perspectives on the social, cultural, and linguistic nature of human action and identity” (Lo Bianco, 2009, p. 22). Understanding the dynamic and risky nature of modern world presupposes the ability to (re)entering in new intermediate cultural spaces, undertaking reciprocal roles and reflecting upon and interpreting self in relation to others.

The national, transnational and diasporic contexts set a new intercultural learning space where understanding and practicing *transformation* can be central to modern language learners. The Greek language and culture teaching is no longer limited to an ethnic minority status. It develops an intercultural capability for communication, boundary crossing, understanding and reflective action in the global society. This direction can be effectively supported by a modern transformative curriculum open to collaborative and reflexive learning, new forms of e-learning which encourage lateral and multimodal communication between learners and students’ diversity and agency.

Breaking the boundaries of their isolation Greek ethnic schools can revision themselves in the context of transformative and intercultural education and connect with other diasporic institutions in collaborative learning experiences.

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