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WHAT DO CHILDREN SAY ABOUT THE HUMANITARIAN CRISIS IN GREECE?

How do Greek children between the ages of 10 and 12 speak about the economic and social “crisis”? How is one to relate their lived experience, representations, attitudes and reactions without speaking in their stead? And, in so doing, how is one to win their trust and give them the possibility and freedom to work on and enrich their relation to the world, themselves, and others? We address these questions in a research project started in 2014 in several elementary schools of the western suburbs of Thessaloniki, the second largest city of a country that has been hard hit by the social consequences of the austerity policies imposed by its European creditors since 2010: the gross domestic product (GDP) has plunged by nearly 25 percent; direct and indirect taxes have increased, representing a 337.7 percent tax burden increase for the underprivileged (1); mass unemployment rates have been soaring (25 percent on average); and drastic budget cuts have been made in social welfare and public services...

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To serve the purpose of our investigation we adopted an approach called intervention research. As its name indicates, it does not only aim to contribute to research – with production of factual (data gathering), theoretical, and methodological knowledge. Its goal is also intervention, based on the classroom use of techniques borrowed mostly from art (drawing and drama). It strives to foster personal and collective development by liberating creativity and providing a safe environment for participants to share opinions and worldviews (2).

We have so far conducted the study in three out of the scheduled five schools. Intervention took place during classes (three two-hour sessions at minimum per level and per school). We present some preliminary results here as well as a description of the setting.

ON THE ART OF SPEAKING IN CHILDREN'S STEAD

Children directly bear the effects of the austerity programs implemented since 2010 at the national and transnational levels. Between 2009 and 2013, the Greek education budget was cut by 33 percent (3). The cuts put considerable strain on all levels of the educational system and led to the shutdown and merger of many primary schools, to a 60 percent drop in the funding of running costs and heating, as well as a marked deterioration in working and learning conditions. What will become of the youth and the “children of the recession,” to borrow the title of a Unicef 2014 report (4)? Out of the 41 countries analyzed in the report, Greece has the highest child poverty level – a level that practically doubled between 2008 and 2012, rising from 23 to 40.5 percent, and has since further increased. In many families, both parents are unemployed; in others, income from work and/or

(1) See Tassos Giannitsis and Stavros Zografakis, *Greece: Solidarity and Adjustment in Times of Crisis*, IMK Studies, vol. 38 (Düsseldorf: IMK-Hans-Böckler Stiftung, 2015), 17.

(2) This setting was suggested by Georgia Soumara, a longtime user of the method, who applied it first as a teacher in elementary school, then with adults in teacher training workshops as a primary school advisor at the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs. During the intervention, she took on the role of teacher, while Noëlle Burgi, that of participating observer. On intervention research methodology, see Corinne Mérini and Pascale Ponté, “La recherche-intervention comme mode d’interrogation des pratiques,” *Savoirs* 16,1 (2008): 77-85; François Tochon and Jean-Marie Miron, eds., *La recherche-intervention éducative: Transition entre famille et CPE* (Québec: Presses universitaires du Québec, 2004).

(3) Daniel Vaughan-Whitehead, “Is Europe Losing Its Soul? The European Social Model in Times of Crisis,” *The European Social Model in Times of Economic Crisis and Austerity Policies* (Geneva: ILO, 2014), 9-60.

(4) <http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/rc12-eng-web.pdf>

retirement benefits does not suffice to meet the most basic expenses – housing, food, heating, medical care, clothing, school outings, vacations... The western suburbs of Thessaloniki, where we conducted the study, were already underprivileged before 2008. Today, they have become an area of concentrated social problems.

What about the children? What do they say about the “crisis”? When it comes to relaying their experiences, nearly all Greek publications do so from the point of view of adults. For their part, European economic and political institutions, to the extent that they show concern for the issue, address the social impact of austerity policies (in Greece and elsewhere) through the prism of “resilience.” This polysemic notion refers here to resistance, particularly mental resistance, in the face of adversity, the ability to adapt to and “bounce back” from the most difficult situations. As it is thought that resilience is unevenly distributed among individuals and groups, sizeable private or public funding has been made available to research and psychology teams to assess differential resilience in European populations or work out “risk prevention” programs.

For instance, the Greek Stavros Niarchos Foundation supports such a program in schools (5). Teams of psychologists intervene with teachers and pupils in order to foster a “positive adjustment” on their part by working on the symptoms (sadness, depression...) rather than the causes of the crisis. They propose activities aiming to restore optimism, confidence in self and one’s abilities, a “positive” climate and “positive” social behavior, an “OK feeling,” good relationships within the classroom and with the immediate environment (family, friends...) at both the individual and collective levels. We do not exclude the fact that there exist critical studies or programs conducted under the label of “resilience.” Even so, we would like to stress, along with other scholars (6), that so-called “preventive” social treatment through “resilience” is part of a specific agenda consisting in (a) inducing the conviction that one must put up with (great) precariousness, (b) checking “disorder,” “asocial” behavior, or public unrest and (c), as the case arises, legitimizing exceptional measures and/or the use of force.

A CRITICAL, INTERACTIVE APPROACH USING DRAMA

We took a different more critical approach, choosing not to endorse the role of experts, and instead to deal with the children as persons in their own right, deserving to be listened to, able to describe the phenomenon called “crisis”, and discuss the issues and possible solutions. We have thus, in parallel with nondirective interviews with teachers, school directors and union representatives, worked out an interactive

(5) “Connecting for Caring”: <http://www.connecting4caring.gr/en/c4c>

(6) For example, Georg Frerks, Jeroen Warner and Bart Weijts, “The Politics of Vulnerability and Resilience,” *Ambiente & Sociedade* 14, 2 (July-Dec. 2011): 105-122.

class intervention protocol alternating dialogues, interactive games, group work, brainstorming, drawing and drama. The latter utilizes theater techniques but differs from the theater in that its goal is not performance for an external audience but is entirely centered on the participants. Once children have accepted to participate, they draw on their actual experience to contribute actively to the creation of the drama project, then alternately play and improvise roles, or watch other players. Then, in the last sequence, they all go over what happened during each drama session. This non-threatening procedure gives them a large degree of freedom to take the risk of expressing their deeper emotions while hiding behind personas, to proceed from an imagined *elsewhere* to express themselves and give free rein to their creativity, to work on the way they relate to others and the external world, and to discover shared experiences and emotions.

Drawing on the method, intervention in the schools was successively organized around two major themes: (a) the *crisis* in Greek society and beyond, and (b) how to face it – this question was approached by addressing the notion of *solidarity*. By having children express themselves, we were not only seeking to gather data on the way in which they perceived, reacted to, and took their stand on social reality, but also to accompany and foster changes in the way they comprehended the world, others and themselves – changes that were induced by activities and the interactions between players. Judging from what the children told us, the experience had enabled some of them to become aware of what others were going through and feeling, even if they themselves were not exactly facing the same difficulties.

Before discussing part of what the children expressed, a few remarks are required on the difficulties inherent to the method.

THE LIMITS OF THE APPROACH

One of the problems we had to face was that of time. At the beginning of each session, it was necessary to (re)create a climate of mutual trust among all participants so that the children could fully exercise their freedom of speech and accept the rules of the game (the very few children refusing to abide by the rules or wishing to stop participating could do so without constraints). Depending on the – occasionally difficult – situations, this could take some time and slow down the progression of the program. Moreover, six hours per classroom and per school (as imposed by the Ministry of Education) were not enough to bring an intervention project such as this one to completion. For this reason, we had planned it as a start-up phase, after which teachers would take over until the end of the school year. Two of them have committed themselves and are currently continuing the program, but we do not participate as observers (with some irregular exceptions), and will therefore partly rely on second-hand information in future. It seems that a third teacher has not enjoyed sufficient autonomy in her school to

pick up the torch.

Understandably, the selection of schools for the study depended as much on the cooperation of teachers as that of the administration, particularly school directors. Now, because critical pedagogical approaches rest on alternative forms of knowledge and construction of meaning, and encourage children to take initiatives and develop their creativity, they stand in contradiction with dominant disciplinary logics and practices, educational orientations, and the vertical transmission of knowledge characteristic of schools. For that reason, even for a project limited in scope such as ours, and despite the fact that it was approved by the Greek Ministry of Education, only a few administrators and teachers were willing to receive us: our knowledge of the field nonetheless allowed us to find appropriate interlocutors. We hope to obtain ministerial approval allowing us to continue our research in other geographical areas (including those that are better preserved from the impact of the crisis) in order to develop a deeper sociological and political comparison.

THE “CRISIS” IN THE CHILDREN’S EYES

The children’s representations of the “crisis” primarily involve material deprivation. They have no toys. Their diet is insufficient. Schools are closing down. In the three schools where we have so far intervened, children mentioned again and again, drew and represented poverty, hunger, the homeless, people rummaging in garbage bins, soup kitchens, the burden of taxes, price increases (particularly transportation), shrinking retirement pensions and salaries, the lowered economic activity (store shutdowns, property sales, layoffs), dwindling family savings, abandoned pets, debts, unpaid bills, power cuts, foreclosures, the ravages of gambling...



“I am hungry” (drawing by a twelve-year-old girl).



Garbage bins (detail; drawing by a twelve-year-old girl).

They explicitly perceive the consequences of the crisis. For instance, during a brainstorming session, the question “What first comes to mind when you hear the word ‘crisis’?” elicited the following answers from the class:

- *Family problems [...] parents quarrel because of money, they may divorce, one of them may leave...*
- *Jail*
- *Drugs*
- *Racism everywhere, at school, on the street, in politics...*
- *Injustice... For instance, if someone demands justice, the man who has more money gets it because he pays for it...*
- *Power... For instance, they take your home if you don't pay*

They thus established a direct link between financial problems and increasing family conflicts, between poverty and prison, between the “crisis” and a large set of phenomena including the deterioration of the urban environment; suicides; diseases left untreated; exploited, unpaid or underpaid workers; maltreatment and exploitation of children, who are forced to work and rummage in garbage bins; increased tensions at school and within society; thefts; homicides (“*because we'll be unemployed and homeless, and we'll be killing each other*”)...

They pointed to culprits, named political figures and parties, mentioned a justice system catering to the rich, and the latter's contempt for the poor.

Taking a stand on these problems and finding ways out of them was no simple matter. While we worked on the notion of solidarity as a possible solution, children spontaneously came up with ideas centering on acts of philanthropy, charity, help to family or friends, love of one's neighbor. Emigration also came up: “*Emigration [...] more than 10,000 people have left in three years. So emigration can be a solution, but it's not great either...*”

"Don't move!... No!!! I don't want this bitter life" (detail; drawing by a twelve-year-old boy).



It took some time before they eventually identified forms of social and solidarity organization. They noticed that there were many such initiatives in Greece (solidarity clinics and privately tutored solidarity schools, for instance), but that few people launched them or volunteered. Two girls stated, "There's practically nothing like that in Greece!" and "*because [...] nobody cares to know if you're dead or alive.*" Their improvisations and role-plays depicted the extreme solitude of the poor. The homeless/beggar persona never asked for help because he knew in advance that he would not get any. "*He got no help, so he committed suicide.*" said a boy. And when the children watching the scene approached this persona with solutions, they very often imagined that they or their parents could offer him "a lot" of money ("*My father is retired, he makes a lot of money, 800 euros per month*"), a shelter and a job. They also expressed strong emotions. After the conclusion of a scene in which a boy-player had run into a friend turned homeless in an imagined trip to Athens, the boy was asked:

- *Do you want to add anything?*
- *I don't think so... I still want to speak with George...*
- *Why?*
- *Because I left him in Athens. I was ready to drop everything and stay in the street and cry...*

Tomorrow's adults, the children we met were fortunate not to have experienced school mergers and crowded classrooms. There were between twelve and twenty pupils per classroom. Their teachers, who like all other adults were highly uncertain as to their future and carried on their (undervalued) jobs under increasing pressure, could nonetheless meet their expectations, help them, talk with them and make them speak. A teacher said that children do speak and want to speak about the crisis at home and at school. One wonders, however, how many of them can do so freely and have access to cooperative, rather than intolerant, socialization.