Expanded Pedagogical Spaces: Enhancing Roma Students Involvement in School

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Abstract A team of teachers and university-researchers encouraged the inclusion of Roma children in preschool education via a bottom-up project in which cultural and communicative resources from local communities entered in dialogue with the discursive practices of standard school practices. A collaborative reflection framework developed hybrid and multicultural learning ecologies, consistently evaluated and reshaped in process. Ethnographic strategies identified experiences, texts, and artifacts of Roma children's lives subsequently exploited in the design of the classroom practices, enabling the children to utilize all of their communicative resources (Romani, Greek, nonlinguistic modalities) for creating multiple texts – oral, written, digital. Pupil texts validated their cultural backgrounds as classroom participation increased in this pedagogical context. Roma students more fully invested in second language (Greek) and literacy learning, substantially increasing classroom interaction.

Keywords Hybridity · Multicultural · Multilingual · Learning · Ethnographic · Inclusive · Roma

1   Introduction

The research reported here is part of a large-scale project involving Roma children's education in the Thessaly area of Greece during the period of 2011–15, addressing all educational levels. Our involvement in the project concerned preschool education, focusing on the design and implementation of educational practices that allow

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for students' involvement in classroom communication, and the broadening of their communicative repertoire through the use of the Greek language and mathematical literacy practices.

Roma children face serious conflicts when they are required to participate in formal school settings (e.g. bilingualism, boundary identities), and the 'top-down' and monolingual processes adopted by common teaching practices seem to perpetuate marginalized and inferior positions in terms of both learning and cultural identities. Educational studies report that Roma students have low and inconsistent attendance in compulsory education, and that their dropout rates continue to be very high (UNESCO 2014). Taking the above into account, and considering the importance of preschool education, especially for children from minority cultural and linguistic backgrounds, we have explored the possibilities of a sociocultural perspective for developing a local-based classroom curriculum informed by spatial realities of students. For this purpose, a collaborative ethnographic inquiry went hand-in-hand with the activity design purposefully rooted in local, authentic practices, and within which students could operate using the full spectrum of their communicational resources. Such a pedagogical fusion of different mediational tools and discursive practices attempted to change the classroom dynamics, and in this way to develop more productive relations and forms of participation around second language use and literacy practices.

In the next section, we discuss the role of preschool education in more detail – mostly for non-mainstream students' school trajectories. We then briefly present our methodological choices and how they were applied in order to accomplish our project's aims. We follow with our theoretical perspectives that justify and clarify the background for our choices. The resulting pedagogical framework and the way it informed our classroom practices is subsequently described before our concluding remarks.[1]

2   Preschool Education and Non-mainstream Students

Over the last decades, the role of preschool education has been widely recognized as a positive component in the development of the educational biographies of all students. Empirical and comparative studies indicate that preschool experiences contribute to building necessary knowledge and skills for the successful transition to, and subsequent attendance in, elementary school. Also, its significance in successful school attendance, as an educational stage, appears to be especially determinative for students with minority cultural or even language origin, for whom it provides support in overcoming numerous learning obstacles related to their sociocultural background; preschool education thus contributes conditions that ensure equal educational opportunities for all (Becker and Tremel 2011).

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Discussion of the role of preschool education in ensuring equal educational opportunities for children from immigrant families, ethnic minorities, and socially marginalized groups dates back to the 1960s, but it has recently increased more rapidly due to interest in PISA findings and their potential correlations with possible school failure that children from the above-mentioned groups face. A central issue in this discussion is the timing for addressing knowledge deficits, specifically deficits in the language of instruction (Fuchs-Rechlin and Bergmann 2014), and connections to creating conditions that ensure equal educational opportunities for all (Gogolin 2009; Becker and Tremel 2011). In suggested compensatory strategies, the duration of school attendance and the quality of educational practices are included as main parameters that improve the learning results (Hasselhorn and Kuger 2014). The notion of quality of pedagogical practices refers to characteristics of pedagogical relationships and teaching, such as the range and frequency of pedagogical stimuli that preschoolers experience, the kind of pedagogical interactions they are involved in, and the culturally sensitive and creative learning contexts that teaching suggests (i.e. experiential and multimodal frameworks, music, drama techniques etc.). In particular, for linguistic competencies development, research has highlighted the importance of learning targets formulation and promotion, contextualization of targets in students' linguistic experiences, exploitation of home language in L2 learning, and support of bilingualism and multilingualism (Gogolin 2009; Cummins and Early 2011).

Despite the fact that the literature highlights the positive role of preschool education, and despite the gradual accrual of insights regarding qualitative characteristics of pedagogies that ensure benefits of school attendance for students with multicultural and lingual diversity, Roma students do not yet appear to benefit from such research findings. A recent comparative study (UNESCO 2014) on the educational situation of Roma children in European countries states that the number of students attending compulsory education in European countries is still too low. Further research maintains that Roma children arrive at school without adequate preparation, and with little understanding in the majority language. Top-down educational policies addressed to the mainstream students, combined with the ways that teachers interpret and materialize those policies in contexts including Roma students, appear to significantly account for diminished school attendance of Roma children. Relevant considerations have been described with regard to the Greek educational reality, as well. The Greek educational system, like most educational systems in European countries (Govaris 2005), is not yet in a position to effectively respond to a school reality characterized by linguistic and cultural diversity. The applied pedagogies formulate a field of unequal distribution of opportunities for recognizing and exploiting the learning resources included in the linguistic and cultural capital of a diverse student body. Papachristou (2014) investigated student teachers' conceptions about learning conditions and the potential for Roma students in school setting and found that teachers: (a) do not recognize background knowledge of Roma students, (b) do not exploit Roma students' orality during teaching processes, and (c) are tenacious in maintaining stereotypical beliefs about Roma students' potential for school learning. In fact, Greek school practices guided by an assimilationist ideol-

ogy seem to ignore or understate fundamental characteristics of children's cultural identities. Their culture is usually assessed as insubstantial and worthless, and most teachers presume that non-Greek home languages do not contribute, or even stand as an obstacle to their school performance; teachers are furthermore unlikely to use the home language as a resource. In such an educational context, Roma children's erratic school attendance and their dropout rate which is among the highest in the country could be strongly linked to the silence, marginalization and underestimation of their world that Roma children experience in classrooms (Noula et al. 2015).

3   Methodology and Data Collection

3.1   The Setting of the Research

The project addressed children from six Roma communities in the area of Central Greece (Thessaly) who attended conventional preschool classes. They came from communities with different geographical, social and economic characteristics and thus the family and social practices vary from one community to the next. Concerning linguistic communication, some children use only or mainly Romani to communicate, and their linguistic skills in Greek are limited to understanding; they rarely use everyday words and formulaic phrases in the Greek language. However, most children had interpersonal communication skills in Greek in varied degree of proficiency. Also, the variety used showed phonological, morphological and semantic deviations to standard Greek language. In each school there were students of all linguistic categories, but in rural areas the number of infants who barely communicated in Greek was especially high. Oral and visual forms of communication (e.g. TV) were dominant in all communities, and the levels of reading and writing literacy were low.

The recent increase of Roma children in kindergartens, resulting from a special state policy against Roma school exclusion, brought inconvenience to the educational community, which had previously been formed professionally within the monocultural and monolingual assumptions of the Greek school. Teachers who were working in the regional schools had little experience with and very little or no training in teaching classes with students of diverse cultural and language background. The project undertook supporting them in the application of suitable teaching practices. Through the initiative of two teachers, who acted so as to establish contact with the other schools where there were Roma students in the classes, the main issue that emerged was the improvement of the students' competencies in the Greek language and the related development of linguistic and mathematical literacy. In this context, reflecting critically on common pedagogical practices and empowering teachers in adopting a multicultural and a "multilingual lens" (Ntelioglou et al. 2014) became a necessity and a challenge for this project.

3.2   Data Collection and Analysis

The project opted for the Collaborative Inquiry framework and built on recursive ethnographic processes for data collection and analysis. The goal of a collective pedagogical inquiry framework, as explained in Ntelioglou et al. (2014), is for the school-teachers and academic-based researchers to work collaboratively to examine the possibilities in a specific pedagogical context, to explore possible alternatives, and to mobilize both the research evidence and their own pedagogical experiences to articulate school-based policies. In line with this methodological framework, teachers and teacher-educators in this project worked together to search for and analyze the knowledge and experiences that Roma students bring from their everyday life to school (funds of knowledge), as well as to explore the possibilities for incorporating them when planning classroom work. We also worked as a team to evaluate the choices made in the design of learning activities, through analyzing the data from the implementation processes, and, therefore, to recursively redesign the pedagogical practices. In both conditions, the collection of the pragmatological material of the research drew on ethnographic techniques for data collection; that is, in looking for students' cultural experiences, we used *in situ* observations in the communities, field notes, interviews and photos. Additionally, our discussion of the activities' implementation is based on teachers' analytical journals about their classroom experience, usually accompanied by visual and audio material. We present next the fundamental axes of our methodological processes.

3.2.1   The Fieldwork in the Communities

In order to avoid reductive and essentialist approaches to culture as a closed system (e.g. the Roma identity) – and having a more dynamic conception relating culture with place and time characteristics, namely the particular practices, means and tools used in every local community – we attempted a form of fieldwork in the Roma communities of the region. Our aim was to explore the "funds of knowledge" (González et al. 2005) that the students bring to the school and to productively exploit them in the design of teaching practices. The program addressed children in kindergarten from different Roma communities, and, as was previously mentioned, each community had unique characteristics. For example, depending on whether the community was close to a city or not, the presence of "environmental print" varied (e.g. street signs, signs in the stores, advertising material etc.), as did the available linguistic codes (e.g. in rural areas most inhabitants spoke only Romani), the social and family practices of the members (e.g. different jobs, everyday habits, relations to literacy), and students' involvement in these family practices, as well as their attitudes and expectations about education.

Searching for funds of meaning in the students' everyday life, both school teachers and teacher-educators conducted research on the spot throughout the school

year. We drove down the streets, we observed the neighborhood, the surrounding area, and the external markers of what identifies this as a neighborhood. We interviewed people, we visited student's homes, and we discussed with parents and other family members about what they do, where they go every day, and how they are involved with their children. In each visit we looked for material clues to the students' possible funds of knowledge in their everyday experiences. The field notes from *in situ* observations and interactions, photos, and some occasional videos were brought into team meetings and were analyzed cooperatively. Through the different episodes which were analyzed and which were connected to different domains and categories of practice in the communities (e.g. family, the inside and outside of the community, association with peers, popular culture etc.), tools, linguistic profiles, ways of acting in everyday issues, and texts were identified. The results of the analysis informed the design of the learning activities and the pedagogical projects implemented in each school; ideas were exchanged, and alternative teaching techniques were discussed. We made sure that the curriculum planning integrated texts (written or oral), tools and practices linked with lived experiences of the particular students of the school. For instance: signs, posters from the neighborhood, social contexts with which the specific students were familiar, such as locations and routes they knew, transactions in and outside their community, games that the students played with their peers or their family, logos from on their clothes, etc.

3.2.2 The Collaborative Mediation of the Pedagogical Processes

Teachers and academic-based researchers interacted continuously and acquired in the process a "common language", new knowledge, and a common approach to teaching. The group met face-to-face about once a month, and online weekly to discuss and analyze the "journal of teaching" that each teacher communicated to the group. The journals were analytical reports with the best possible detailed descriptions of the activities' (final) design, along with descriptions of the implementation processes that took place in the teachers' classrooms (e.g., what they showed/asked, in what means, the procedures of participation and the students' roles, how he/she gave feedback to the children, and so on). The Roma children's involvement and performance in the learning activities were presented, and photographs of the children's artifacts as well as audio or video documents supported these reports. By means of an open digital frame, the journals elicited the team's feedback: Teachers and teachers-educators commented on specific issues; asked for clarifications; and proposed alternative teaching techniques. These collaborative reflective processes offered consistent feedback to the teaching and learning processes insofar as they facilitated the teachers in reorganizing and reshaping their practices. In this sense they appear to have supported processes of teachers' empowerment in their efforts to provide a multicultural and multilingual pedagogical context for their classroom.

4 Conceptual/Theoretical Perspectives

Our conceptual framework drew on a sociocultural approach to learning, specifically from the conceptualizations of classroom curriculum as a "third space", the pedagogical framework of "identity texts", and the descriptions of "translanguaging" and 'dynamic bilingualism' in communication.

Sociocultural theory conceptualizes learning as a dialogical, social process, in which situated participants engage in culturally-valued activities using tools such as languages, symbols and other multimodal resources, and in so doing, form and develop themselves as learners and community members. Participation in classroom interaction has a predominant status, as it allows children to learn by means of communicating, and to develop a sense of the order of the school world and their place within it, through the relative legitimacy ascribed to their cultural and linguistic resources. Therefore, any question about performance and achievement is addressed by taking into account contextual affordance for students' involvement in school practice, and every interaction constitutes a moment of self-definition where students take action within and upon their relationships with the teacher and their classmates (Toohey et al. 2007).

Moll, Amanti, Neff, and González early in the 1990s undertook an ethnographic study in low-income neighborhoods, foregrounding the assumption that everyday community experiences that students bring from their home could function as a repository of resources potentially strategically tapped to provide resources for classroom practice. They designated "funds of knowledge" as historically accumulated and cultural developed bodies of knowledge and strategies upon which people draw for daily survival and wellbeing (González et al. 2005). Based on such theorizations, many educational researchers, and especially scholars who work with students from culturally and linguistically marginalized environments, argue for the potential of bridging students' home knowledge with school; these educators foreground the metaphor of "third space" as a fruitful framework for conceptualizing such transformations involved in the pedagogical context and processes (Moje 2004; Moje et al. 2004; Gutierrez et al. 2011). The notion of "third space" is informed by postcolonial descriptions of space as socially-produced and co-constructed by material, abstract and lived experiences (Bhabha 1994) relates to the borders or the boundary area between the two sectors – two spaces – which is often an overlap area or a hybridization – i.e., a "third space" – that includes a shifting combination of the characteristics of each of the two border areas. The theories of hybridity argue that people make meaning of the world through the integration and interaction of multiple knowledge resources; in this way, it becomes important to highlight the status of the "intermediate" (in-between), i.e., the interplay of knowledge, tools and discourses often competing and sometimes contradictory to each other that produce learning processes and that are directly implicated in the identity development. In school settings such a hybrid area could be shaped when the "first space" of the home, community and peers enters in dialogue with the "second

space" of the school for the creation of "expanding learning spaces", that is the realization of particular social situations of students' participation, cognitive engagement and learning development.

Pedagogical conceptualizations of classroom hybridity and third space provide for typical school practice transformation through incorporating students' spatial realities of sociocultural backgrounds and funds of knowledge as well as for the use of multiple, diverse mediational tools and roles (Gutierrez et al. 2011). Students' resources are not only recognized in learning processes, but rather expanded and/or potentially transformed as they are linked to new knowledge, new discourses and new literacies. Home languages are unmarked and strategically and naturally commingled with school discourse for supporting and navigating students' accomplishments in both cognitive and social development. Moje et al. (2004) report three views through which the construction of hybridization and third space is understood in educational practice: as a supportive scaffold that links traditionally marginalized funds of knowledge to school discourse; as a "navigational space" in gaining competency and expertise to negotiate differing discourse communities; and finally, hybrid space, where the potential for an expanded form of learning and the development of new knowledge are heightened.

The theoretical framework of third space, at least as described in Gutiérrez work, seems suitable to facilitate 'translanguaging' practices (Creese and Blackledge 2010) within classroom interactions, permitting speakers to shuttle between languages and treating the diverse languages that form students' linguistic communication repertoire as an integrated system. Gutierrez et al. (2011) describe the emergence of a third space in a multicultural and multilingual class through the "matrix of polylingual strategies" that students use in creating hybrid cultural productions when involved in literacy practices. Although not mentioned explicitly, in recognizing the interrelatedness of languages within student's linguistic profiles and the importance of thirdness to "leveraging students' linguistic repertoires towards learning", Gutierrez seems to foreground a dynamic view of language development which could be related to the notion of dynamic bilingualism as described by García (2009a).

We also draw on "identity texts" (Cummins and Early 2011) as a compatible and complementary construct to the theoretical premises of the third space framework. Based on poststructuralist theorizations for identity and identity investment in language teaching (Norton 2000), Cummins suggests that language learners need to develop their senses of identity in relation to literacy practices in their additional language and culture. He argues that optimal literacy development occurs within the interpersonal space of the classroom only when there is both maximum cognitive engagement and maximum identity investment on the part of the students. Cummins calls the students' creative work or performances carried out within such pedagogical context "identity texts", since students invest their identities in these texts (written, spoken, visual, musical, or combinations in multimodal form), which then hold a mirror up to the students; their identities are reflected back in a positive light. When students share identity texts with audiences (peers, teachers, parents, grandparents, the media, etc.), they are likely to receive positive feedback and affirmation of the self. Cummins and Early (2011: 4) demonstrated that "identity texts" enabled stu-

dents in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms from kindergarten through Grade 12 to "connect new information and skills to their background knowledge", using their first language as a "cognitive tool", and increasing "awareness of the specialized language of school areas". Resulting benefits included affirmation of students' identities as "creative and linguistically talented", and heightened "awareness of the relationships between their home language (L1) and the school language (L2).

5 Pedagogical Context and Classroom Practices

Our teaching design provided for the reshaping of the standard school practices in "expanding learning spaces" (Gutierrez et al. 2011), that is in contexts in which the social experience and linguistic resources, as well as various other mediation tools and communicative strategies from the three different communities that participate in the educational process – the Roma community, the educational community and the dominant cultural community – came into dialogue and informed one another. In this respect, the classroom was transformed into a hybrid -third space- where a conscious pedagogical fusion of semiotic means, forms and learning processes attempted to bridge the discontinuities between in- and out-of-school students' discursive experiences, in order to increase Roma students' participation and cognitive engagement in classroom learning processes, and thus to enable the broadening of their cultural and communicative resources.

Themes and social situations familiar to the Roma students, texts (e.g. posters and signs from their own neighborhood), routines and discourse practices (e.g. ways to negotiate issues in travelling), knowledges and experiences of different processes (e.g. mathematical notions, situated transactions and local constructions procedures, games), cultural symbols and artifacts, were purposely integrated into teaching. Contextualization in students' spatial realities opened up possibilities to engage more fully in classroom processes and to develop productive relations and forms of participation around second language use and literacy. Their home language, Romani, acquired "audibility" in the classroom; the students could draw from the full spectrum of their linguistic repertoires (Romani, Greek, and even some English words they learned from their digital playing, like "go", "start", "hero") to shape experiences, gain understanding and negotiate their ideas and actions). Therefore, although monolingual in its basic orientation, the classroom language arrangement allowed for "flexible convergence" in students' language practices (García 2009b: 291). It also provided for scaffolding techniques, including experiences of "translanguaging" (Lewis et al. 2012: 661). In cases where the skills of a student in Greek were very limited and there was difficulty in understanding, another student made the translation for him or her; literacy-related teaching practices, such as activities to promote phonological awareness or creative writing, were often implemented in both languages, with teachers using words and phrases they had learned in Romani or using a student-mediator. Common second language techniques were also employed, such as multimodal scaffolding (gestures, visuals, demonstrations etc.),

cuing, and "linguistic modeling" through rephrasing or expanding the "limited" linguistic articulations of the children, to further support their communicative potential in the dominant, Greek language.

The instructional context promoted a task-based approach, in which tasks related to real, social oriented action to be accomplished (e.g., varied construction in and out of the classroom, exchanges of recipes and cooking, creation of Halloween costumes after exploring and reflecting critically on print and digital advertisements, etc.). In this framework, many mini-projects were implemented in each school, and varied multimodal tools, such as drama, varied types of play, digital media etc., supported learning encounters. Such orientation to teaching has been reported productive for the preschoolers' language development, and in this project seems to have been especially fruitful for Roma students' investment in appropriating second language and literacy awareness concepts, reflecting the socially-embedded and experiential character of learning that the students brought with them from their cultural environment (e.g., they function in groups/learn by doing).

Here, we describe an educational activity that one of the schools put into practice, to demonstrate the pedagogical framework and the instructional choices that the aforementioned program created.

In one of the Roma communities in our project, parents and students often referred to "Tzazia" in the context of different communication instances, both inside and outside of the school. There was no notice of a similar reference in the other Roma communities of the area; however, the frequency with which it appeared in the context of this specific community led to the pursuit of its identity. The teacher discovered that it is about a symbolic cultural figure considered to intervene to restore "order" in occasions of confusion and noise. She reported some anecdotal stories from cooperation meetings of teachers and teacher-educator in which the children and the adults of the community told of "Tzazia's" intervention in people's lives. Therefore, in the context of a project about "stories we heard at our house", Tzazia "came" into the classroom and contributed to materializing communicative, mathematical and social educational goals.

Specifically: The Romani students, using translanguaging and multimodal communicative practices, informed the teacher and their classmates about how Tzazia might look, as well as its usual actions (figure description and processes account textuality); they retold stories of their community (narration). Trying on this particular identity of knowledge-producer, children moved in and out of a range of language practices, experimenting with new language forms, and drawing from both languages and local varieties – as well as on other semiotic modalities like gestures, visual expressions, and movement and so on. The class then decided to make the "Tzazia doll", and Romani students further participated by giving instructions about its specific features, counting and comparing sizes (oral procedural text-mathematical skills). They collaborated with their classmates to create and "write down" an imaginary script about the adventures of Tzazia as she visits their school (all students used design and invented spelling), and constructed with plasticine the scenery of the varied episodes and the heroes of the script (scaffolding resource for awareness of narration's textuality), on the basis of which the class created a digital

version of Tzazia's story with animation techniques (familiarization with digital medium and skills). When this digital "identity" story was displayed in a school gathering situation where all the classes of the school were invited to participate, the positive feedback students received seemed to invert the usual positioning of inferiority ascribed to Roma students, affirming them as creative and resourceful members of the school.

In the "expanded educational environment" (Gutierrez et al. 2011), the participation of young Roma children in school practices was reinforced, as they acquired a "voice" and an acceptance of their cultural background. In the context of the active role in the school community, they acquired affirmation of self, and their "communicative dynamics" was strengthened with mathematical notions, vocabulary and expressive possibilities in the Greek language and literacy textures, while at the same time their understanding regarding the means available and the different forms of representation and communication of information that are used in the broader social environment was expanded.

6   Concluding Remarks

In this chapter we discussed some methodological choices undertaken in order to respond to the serious conflicts Roma children face when attending mainstream classes. Young children are too often limited to participation in classroom practices narrowly organized around monocultural and monolingual ideologies that limit the possibilities to develop productive relations and forms of involvement around learning processes. Exploiting the possibilities of a sociocultural perspective and using ethnographic inquiry procedures such as fieldwork on the spot, we designed and implemented activities rooted in students' lived experiences. Students' cultural experiences and communicative resources were strategically integrated with school practice, while the use of various modes and forms of representation served as the mediators that engaged and supported the children's second language and literacy learning, both mathematical and linguistic. The example of the Tzazia mini-project presented above could reveal the ways that such a hybrid classroom culture might emerge in general, built on the ways that Romani students utilize their communicative repertoires, as well as on the constellation of various modes and forms of representation and roles that have been instantiated during the teaching and learning processes. Such a pedagogical framework creates spaces in the classroom enabling Roma student voices to be heard, legitimated, and honored. These changes in classroom dynamics are also related in general to learners' access to potential identity positions in school settings, enhancing their second language and literacy learning as aspects of their communication repertoire.

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