

“Identity Intersections” as a method of investigating the cultural identity of students. A case study through the course of literature.

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Abstract

The present research involves a case study carried out with eleven year-old schoolchildren in the course of their curriculum, and in the context of the scientific dialogue for defining cultural identity in multicultural societies. The aim of the research is that pupils, through the medium of graphic representation under the title “Identity Intersections”, associated with the method of analyzing subject matter, “Cultural Imagology”, recognize and determine first of all their own cultural identity, and secondly that of the “heroes” in a multicultural literary oeuvre. The findings, among other things, showed that there still exists a definite number of criteria that be it consciously or unconsciously are considered “objective” in connection with cultural identity, since and because literature can constitute a means of examining and amending aspects of national or local stereotypes.

Keywords: *Cultural Identity, Cultural Imagology, Identity Intersections, Multicultural Literature.*

1. Introduction

The conceptualization and definition of identity are key issues of modern theoretical searches because of social and economic changes at the local and global level. “The destabilization of cultural identity is part of the overall evolutionary trajectory and closely linked to globalization and the establishment of a ‘universal collective identity’.” (Maratou-Alipranti 2000:33). At the same time, local particularities do not appear to decline, but on the contrary they are boosted. Thus, a problem arises as to the way the concept is to be handled, being crucial for the individual, “since through it is ensured the consistency between experience, values and beliefs” (Dragona 2003:18); and its sense is based on a dual process which acts simultaneously: in the perception of similarity and continuity of our existence in space and time — the non-biological characteristics such as common ancestry, culture, history, language, beliefs, etc., provide team members the sense of common identity (Newman 2012:43) — and the concept of recognition of this similarity and continuity of others. It involves, that is, a permanent need of a person to bind his individual meanings with the surrounding culture, varying his characteristics according to the cultural context created by the activity and dependencies with the Other (Erickson 1968).

In the context of education, the recognition and enhancement of cultural identity of students this way also constitutes two of the main goals of modern education based on the new educational population facts, i.e., the presence of thousands of foreign students in primary and secondary

education and the creation of multicultural classes. The modern student “as a vehicle of established and ineliable individual rights must be able to provide himself with the ‘additional’ right to determine his ‘identity’ and vindicate his ‘difference’.” (Tsoukalas 2013:14). It is therefore important that he should be able to self-determine as well as hetero-determine the predicates he poses to himself and others, and build his learning experience on his self- and hetero-awareness, seeing that today cultural identity is not a status quo but is characterized by hybridity and a continuous flow, i.e., “an identity under negotiation” (Cummins 2003) or else a multiplicity of identities as a synthesis of multiple affiliations.

On the other hand, and according to Hobsbawn (1994:111), literature constitutes one of the four prime criteria for the formation of identity, whereas multicultural literature “presents to the readers, among other things, living conditions in a racist society, this being the most important.” (Cai & Bishop 1994:68). In multicultural texts pupils find a starting point, which allows them to share their personal experiences and family stories (Mathis 2011). Although certain writers of such books have no outright apprehension of the culture they are relating, nonetheless “they have every right to write within the bounds of artistic freedom and creation.” (Henderson & May 2005: 267). Of course, for the presence of a multicultural literature to function more practically and rally pupils, it needs to be placed systematically in the context of the Curriculum, but having first fostered a relation of mutual trust between pupils and teacher (Zapata 2011).

One method of analyzing a text, which helps the pupil-cum-reader to look into his personal cultural identity and that of the heroes in a literary oeuvre, is the so-called “Identity Intersections”. The present article attempts to link this method with the theory of Cultural Imagology by way of a case study that took place in a classroom in the school year 2013-4.

2. Identity Intersections

In 2002, the instructress Abigail Foss (1), in the application of the theory of critical literacy, through the teaching of Lee Harper’s award-winning antiracist novel “To Kill a Mockingbird”, created what she named “Identity Intersection” (Graphic Representation 1). Her objectives were, in a multicultural classroom as was her own, and on the occasion of the book’s content, to discuss with students on the multiplicity of identities and their presence in the wider social reality. Furthermore, to develop their skills in critical literacy which “focuses on identifying the social practices that dominate the social structures of thought and the general way of viewing society.” (Lewison. Leland & Harste 2008:3).

Foss’ idea was applied and exploited by Literature Professor, Janine M. Schall (2), who added yet another parameter: the creation of Identity Intersections for the heroes in literary works, as same are formed after reading the stories (Schall 2013).

“Identity Intersections” is a graphic representation of crossroads where certain basic forms of cultural identity converge: nationality, language, gender, geographic area, physical ability, religion, personal interests/activities, manners and customs, socio-economic status, family structure, educational level, *et al.* The graphic representation’s purpose is to familiarize children with the idea of cultural identity and show that (whether the readers’ or the literary heroes’) it is something open, that it has some “fluidity” in the context of the new consideration of social phenomena and the “overall and multiform transformation characterized by a general relativity and focused on the relation of the “self” with the “other.” (Konstantopoulou 2000: 15). The aspects of identity vary according to living conditions at the time of happening. Some aspects are more intense in our life,

others less, as per milieu (social, economic, familial). The choice of “roads” and intersections is to emphasize that the aspects of identity characterizing us does not mean that same characterize others as well. But all these aspects make up our identity at a given time.

Graphic representation becomes a manuscript, so that notwithstanding the examination of aspects so recorded (which and why they were chosen or excluded), the form taken by the “Intersection” is also “examined” — i.e., the design. This happens, since irrespective of the chosen aspects of identity, the size of letters is also examined (which aspects are stressed more graphically, consciously or unconsciously), the intersection design (for instance, the roads’ direction), painting and colour, *et al.* (Graphic Representations 2,3,4).

3. Cultural Imagology

Cultural Imagology is a branch of Comparative Literature whose objective is the examination of the “image” of the “Other” as presented in literary texts based on the level of words used, how relations are graded, thematic motifs and the plot of the work, while seeking similarities and differences in “social standards”, as food, housing, love, language, religion, manners and custom, etc. The text is also treated as a testimony to the “alien” or the “other” (Guyard 1988; Abatzopoulou 1998).

“Meanings and feelings invested through literary texts reflect the ideas, values, and attitudes of society, and are shaped not only by expectations of established subjects of any group, but also from the social and historical reality and the sovereign and ambient ideology it conveys.” (Karakitsios in Karasavidou 2011:22). “Children’s literature is appropriate to the method of Cultural Imagology, as children’s identity is developing.” (O’Sullivan 2011:6).

4. Methodology

The present research is a case study which undertakes to link the theory of Cultural Imagology, as a way of reading and interpretive approach of content of two literary texts, with the method of Identity Intersection which operates as a creative activity of students in order to identify and determine the individual and literary cultural identity. This method of investigation was chosen because a case study is an established way of collection and analysis of empirical data in social sciences, through which a contemporary phenomenon (cultural identity) is investigated in its real environment (classroom). Thus, the research questions were:

- ✓ What aspects of their identity students recognize.
- ✓ What aspects of the identity of literary heroes students recognize.

The venue of the investigation was the classroom on three two-hour occasions. As a methodological tool was used the content analysis, as a key instrument of data collection the graphic representations of students, and as an adjunctive technique for data collection, the researcher’s observation with systematic notes as an external observer in the classroom.

5. Research Sample

In the research took part twenty-two eleven year-old fifth formers of the 5th Primary School in Glyfada, a suburb of Athens, situated in the southern parts of the Athens Metropolitan Area. Eighteen of the students were native and four from immigrant families (Russia 2; Albania 2) but born in Greece and have acquired Greek citizenship.

6. Stages of Research

Stage A

Discussion with the schoolmistress, acquainting her with the purpose and current stages of the research, along with the method of Identity Intersections and the theory of Cultural Imagology. In common with the schoolmistress, two literary texts are picked from school books: one from the Book of Language and the other from the Anthology of Literary Texts, on which the research will be based.

Stage B

First two-hour occasion

The schoolmistress tells the children of Eléni Katsamás' book "Like the Swallows" (3). After a brief introduction to the book's contents, the pupils start reading the school passage. In the anthologized text, through the description of the two children's exchange of gifts, rise feelings of love and friendship, and certain cultural elements emerge which differ between the two children. Thus, questions are raised in order to comprehend the text, to determine when and where these events are taking place, and the persons taking part. In the context of the theory of Cultural Imagology, the questions' objective is

- ✓ That the children detect words, meanings and pictures that characterize the two heroes and signify their cultural identity.
- ✓ That through information provided in the text and the brief summary of the story that preceded, the children may distinguish the resemblances and differences in the two children's way of living.
- ✓ That the children explain the reasons for these differences and express their opinion, their knowledge and views concerning the subject of cultural difference and things "alien".

A discussion pursues apropos the meaning of cultural identity, and the pupils make a list of what they consider constitute the basic elements of their cultural identity.

Second two-hour occasion

A first showing of the graphic representation of Identity Intersections takes place. The schoolmistress explains to her pupils the significance of graphic representation and the way it is made. In pursuit the pupils create their own handwritten graphic depiction of Identity Intersections. A discussion follows based on their graphic representations, and involving the selection of specific aspects. Graphic Representation 5 belongs to a native student and the Graphic Representation 6 to student from immigrant family (Russian).

Third two-hour occasion

The schoolmistress asks her pupils to tell what they know about the racial group of Gypsies (Roma) followed by the reading of Eleni Sarantiti's second text, "Our Friends the Gypsies" (4). In the context of Cultural Identity, the schoolmistress asks the children to spot in the text, through the author's verbal and narrative selections, those points providing us with information as to the Gypsy' cultural identity, the Greeks' views on them, as well as possible stereotypes. Afterwards, the children are provided with a sheet of paper divided in two. On the one side children design the graphic representation of the Gypsy' cultural identity, and on the other the graphic representation of the "Greeks". Two relative graphic representations are introduced designed by two pupils (Graphic Representations 7 & 8).

A discussion follows in class regarding the graphic representations and the “image” of the literary heroes as portrayed in same, as well as the existence of stereotypes in social life.

Stage C

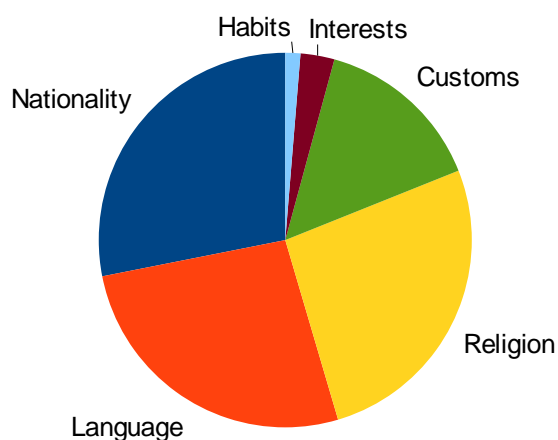
Collection of graphic representations and processing thereof, and discussion with the schoolmistress.

7. Results

The results derived from the collection of graphic representations and the observer’s notes are the following:

A. Regarding the individual cultural identity of students:

1. The majority of students, on the basis of their graphic representations, consider nationality, language and religion the principal aspects of their cultural identity, followed by customs, interests and habits.



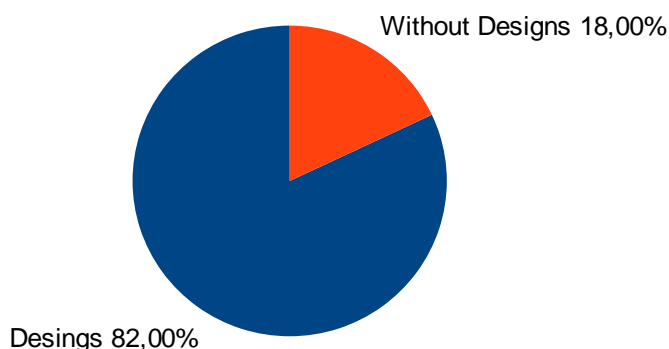
2. More specific references to aspects of cultural identity: of a total of twenty-two students the following facts resulted from graphic representations:

Aspects of Cultural Identity	Students	Rate
Greek	14	63,00%
Christian	14	63,00%
Greek Language	13	59,00%
Christmas	6	27%%
Easter eggs	5	22%%
Greek Easter soup	5	22%%
Tomatoes soup	1	4,00%
Christmas tree	1	4,00%
Songs	1	4,00%
Fashion	1	4,00%

3. As regards the three basic aspects of cultural identity — nationality, language and religion according to graphic representations:

- a. Ten out of eighteen native students (55%) reported nominally “Greek”, “Christian”, and nine out of the eighteen the “Greek language” (50%).
- b. Four out of four students from immigrant families (100%) reported nominally aspects, registering their bilingualism (Greek, Russian, Albanian), their nationality (Greek) and religion (Christian).

4. The majority of students (eighteen out of twenty-two, 82%) drew on the margin of the paper various sketches: houses, street lamps, bakery, trees, hospital, cars, park and supermarket.



B. Regarding the design of graphic representation of the two literary heroes' identity: “Greeks” and Gypsies”:

1. The students in the discussion preceding the reading of the text referred to the following characteristics apropos “Gypsies”:

- a. They live in tents.
- b. They are swarthy.
- c. They speak another language.
- d. They don't wear shoes.
- e. They scare us.

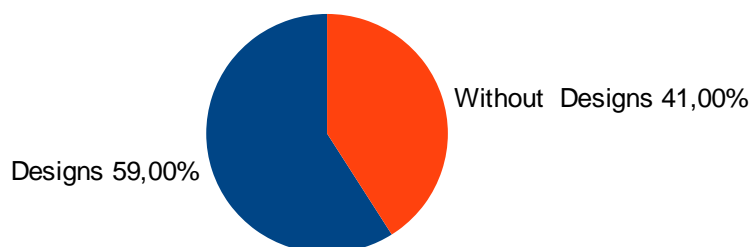
2. After reading the literary work, the majority of students (eighteen out of twenty-two graphic representations, 82%) reported as aspects of identity of the literary hero “Greeks” the following:

Nationality	Greek
Language	Greek
Country	Greece
Religion	Christian
Perceptions	Parental xenophobia

3. The majority of students (in seventeen out of twenty-two graphic representations, 77%) reported as aspects of identity of the “Gypsies” literary hero the following:

Country	Movements
Religion	Maybe Christian
Customs	Palmistry
Interests	Singing
Ideas-Conceptions	Socio-amiable

4. In thirteen out of twenty-two graphic representations (59%) the students enriched identity intersections with designs.



5. The students’ designs include the following:

GREEKS	GYPSIES
Houses- Block of flats	Camping
Trees	Trees
Pools	Rivers
Playground	Animals

6. There were no differences in the graphic way of representing intersections. The students designed intersections the same for “Greeks” as for “Gypsies”.

8. Discussion

From the collection and processing of graphic representations and the children’s remarks during the discussion with the schoolmistress, the following was ascertained:

Nationality, Language and Religion constitute for the children, regardless of cultural and linguistic asset, the most basic aspects to define their cultural identity. This means that a definite number of criteria still exist, which consciously or unconsciously “are considered ‘unbiased’, as common descent, genealogy, language and religion.” (Cuche 2001:149).

Pupils coming from immigrant families make special mention of their nationality (Greek), their language (Greek-Russian-Albanian), and their religion (Christian), unlike a large number of native pupils who refer to these aspects in general terms. This observation is vitally important. For a start, native pupils seem to appear both in their graphic representations and in their discussions with the schoolmistress more certain about their identity, seeing that same happens to be the official identity of their country. That is why they do not refer in greater detail to the aspects, considering them “objective”.

On the other hand, pupils belonging to migrant families wish to manifest that they, too, are part of the “official” cultural identity, and as such they refer nominally to it. It appears that they are in greater need of social identity — i.e., a person’s need to recognize himself as a member of a group (the dominant one, in this case) in the context of the theory of “social identity” (Tajfel & Turner 1979).

Pupils of immigrant families acknowledge the country’s official nationality (Greek) where they live (and were born, according to their birth certificates), as well as the established religion (Christian), the manners and customs and the country’s interests that received their parents, etc. They use two languages as a constituent of their bicultural identity, in spite of the fact that the second language (Russian, Albanian) is usually spoken in the family circle. From the graphic representations and the outcome of discussions ensues that these pupils are embodied in the principal culture of the country where they were born, regardless that it does not constitute the culture of the country of their parents’ origin. In other words, the development of their cultural identity is directly influenced by the process of their socialization within the bounds of the specific cultural group, in which they live and move, and according to the study in question appears to be the dominant one.

As a whole, the designs children made within the scope of graphic representation reveal homogeneity, since they involved themes of their urban environment (houses, traffic lights, bakery, trees, hospital, cars, park and supermarket). This shows that cultural identity is also influenced by the natural environment, given that cultural activity is based on the dialectical man-nature relation (Nitsiakos, 2003), and for them, at their age, it works more as an empirical reality than an imaginary device.

As a whole, the pupils — regardless of their cultural identity and socioeconomic situation — designed graphic representations that happened to express similar views on the two literary heroes (“Greeks”, “Gypsies”). This shows that the literary text can “overcome time, place and language, and help readers learn about an individual or a group of individuals, whose stories, although taking place in a particular historical and natural setting, reveal catholic feelings, thoughts and values.” (Jenkins & Austin 1987: 45).

As a whole, in their designs of the two literary heroes, the pupils portrayed the latter’s different ways of life and the different cultural identity of the two cultures. They pictured those elements

representative of the prevailing cultural “scene”, something which reveals that said “scene” constitutes a “social structure”, considering that, as they stated during the discussion, the pupils never had a close contact with the Gypsies.

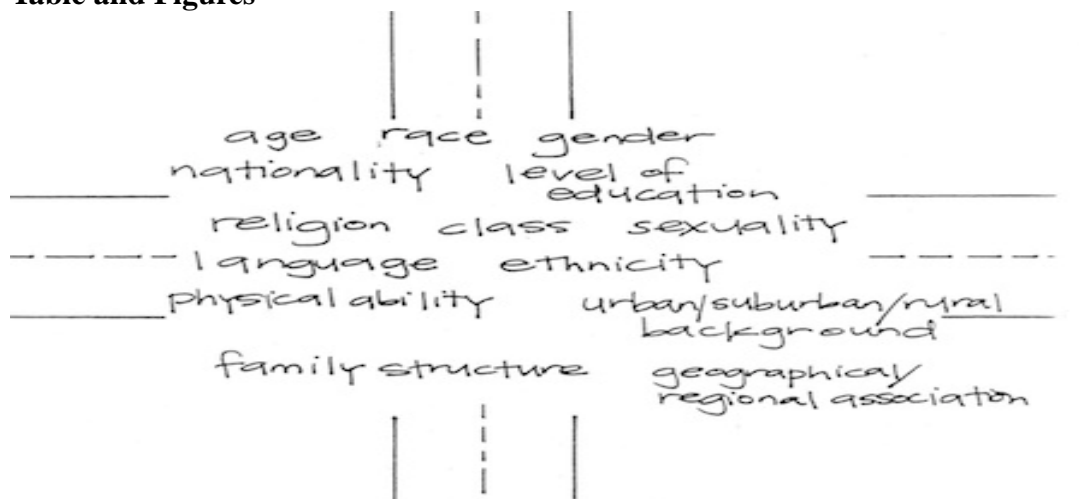
As a whole, the pupils, in the discussion that preceded the reading of the literary work, expressed certain stereotypic and negative opinions regarding the Gypsies. In their graphic representations, however, they had a favourable view of the “Other” (the “Gypsies”: their songs; their socio-amicable disposition), and criticized their own culture (parental xenophobia), a point constituting “a prerequisite for the development of intercultural sensibility and conscience.” (Markou 1996: 54).

Thus, on the one hand, the literary text allows for the investigation of attitudes and national and regional stereotypes, and on the other hand, for the partial or total modification thereof. Writers through literary stratagems can deconstruct stereotypical constructions, avoid conventional persons, and view the “Other” as a positive hero free of any stigma, thus offering texts that readjust and object to reality.

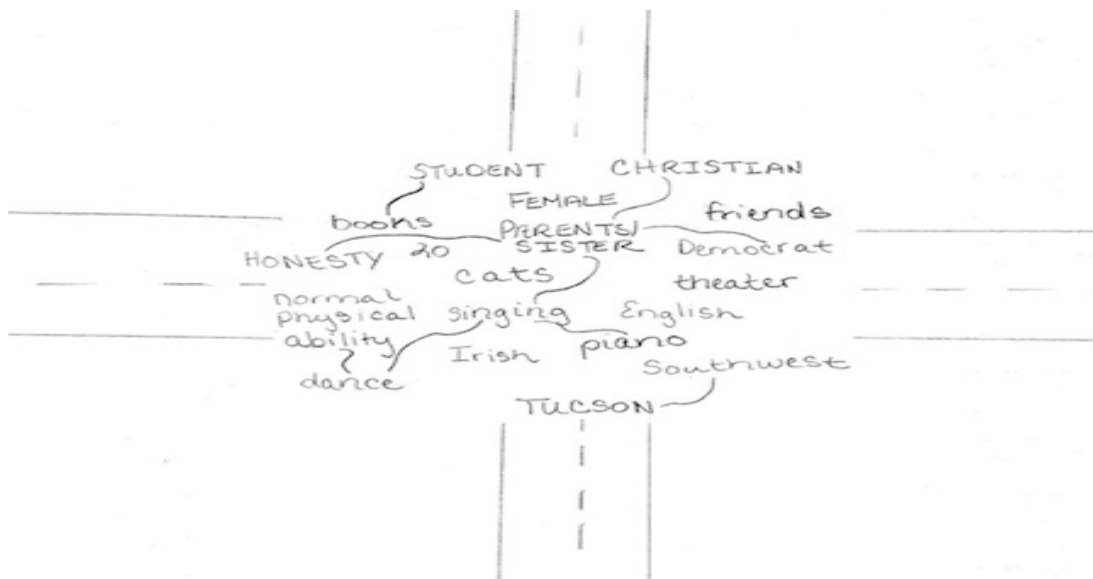
9. Conclusion

The findings of the present research, whereas it involves a case study — that is, “a description of attitudes and decisions of certain people under certain circumstances, the element of subjective presentation and judgment thus conspicuous” (Kazakos 2004:6) — which materialized on the basis of a small number of pupils, may well comprise material for a wider research relative to the always timely subject of cultural identities. It is especially important for pupils, enabling them to look into their identity, both for their sake (self-determination) and for the picture others have for themselves (hetero-determination). This also applies to schoolteachers who will thus have a clearer picture of their pupils’ profile, since, irrespective of the “real-cum-institutional” identities whose characteristics are objective and thoroughly checked, being subject to statutory elements, they must also take into consideration during the learning process and evaluation those characteristics attributed to members of a group and are of ideological nature — therefore subjective and difficult to check — that is, “imaginary” identities. So the “Identity Intersections method” in combination with the theory of “Cultural Identity”, could well be during a literature lesson a pleasant and handy methodological tool for the schoolteacher adapted to a learning level, compatible with the new facts and demands of intercultural education.

Table and Figures



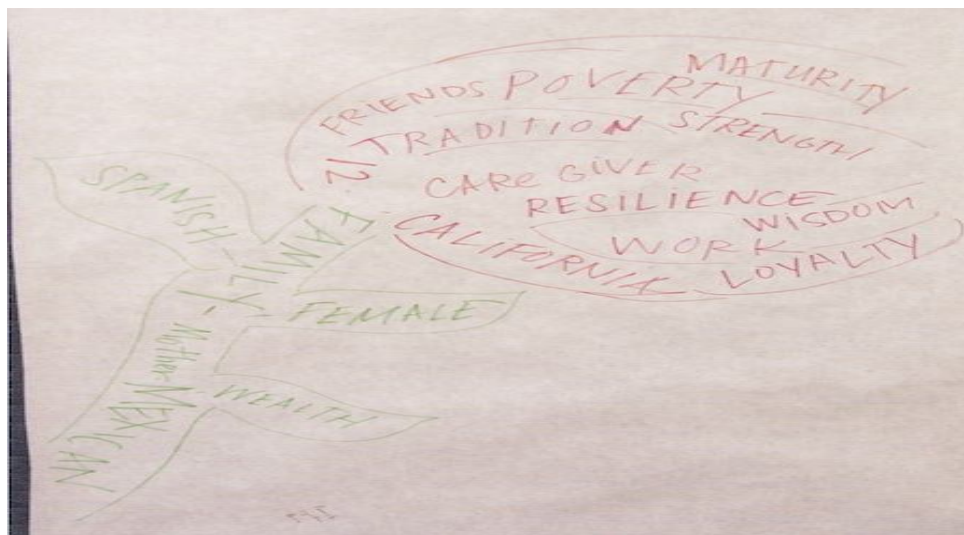
(Graphic Representation 1, Foss 2002: 397)



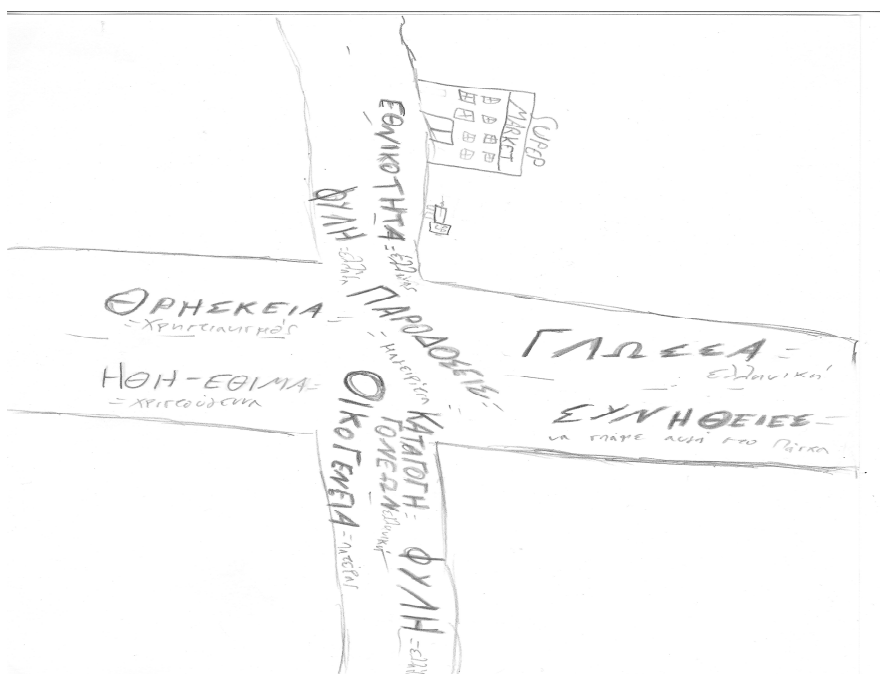
(Graphic Representation 2, Schall 2013)



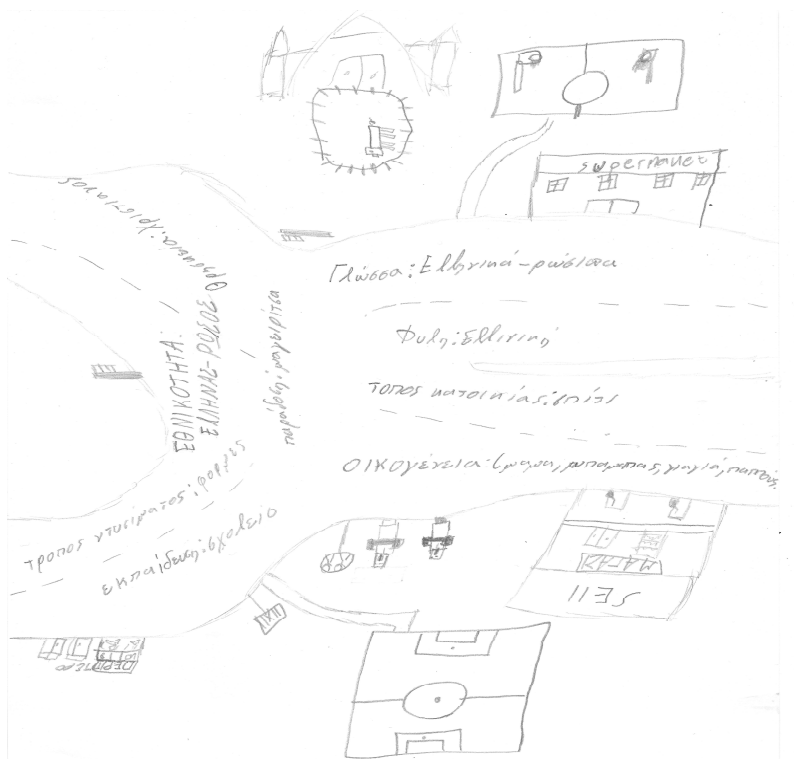
(Graphic Representation 3, Schall 2013)



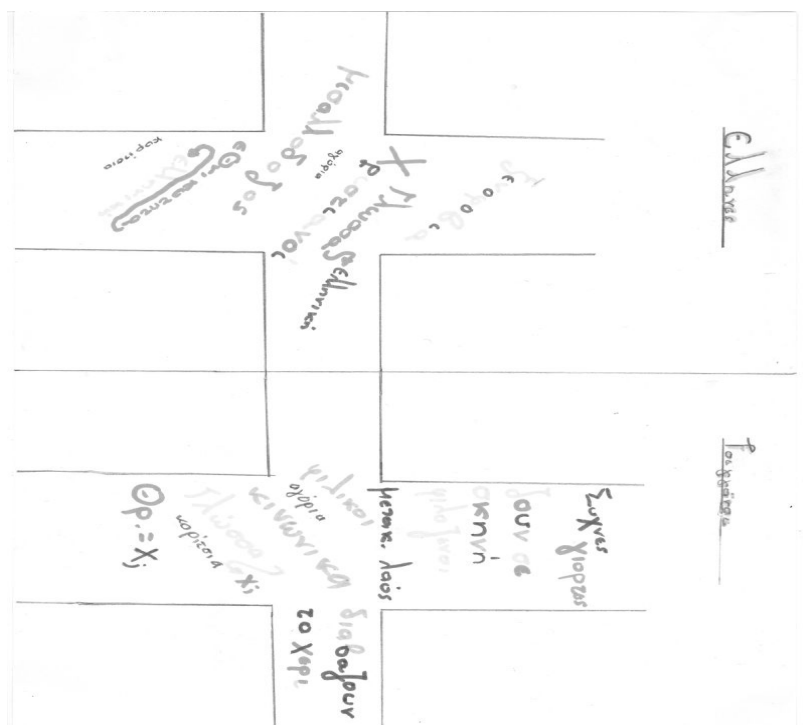
(Graphic Representation 4, Schall 2013)



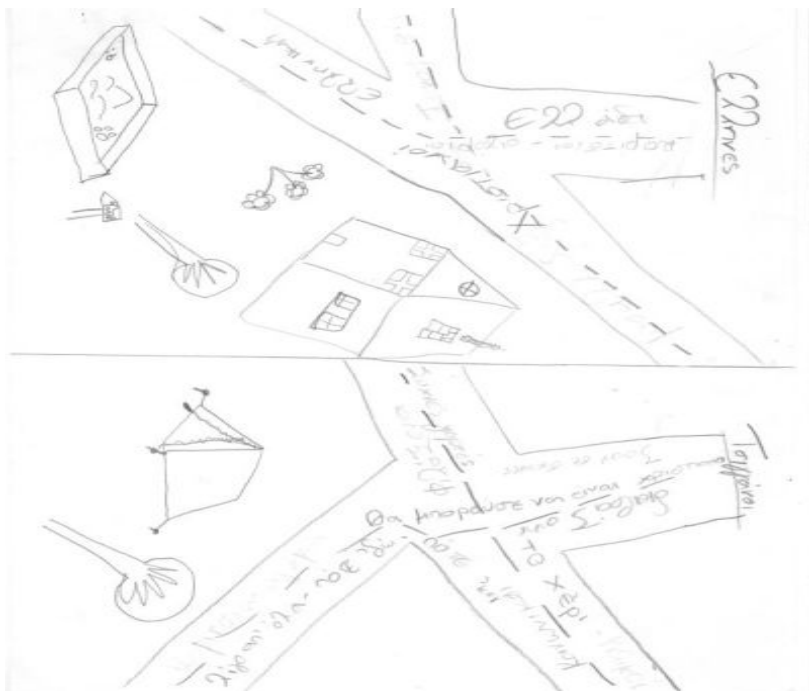
(Graphic Representation 5)



(Graphic Representation 6)



(Graphic Representation 7)



(Graphic Representation 8)

Notes

1. Teacher at Esperero Canyon Middle School in Tucson, Arizona. She got the idea from the article by Aegerter Lindsay Pentolfe, "Michelle Cliff and the Matrix of Identity" published in the Journal of Caribbean Literature (Spring 1977: 7-20).
2. Professor at the University of Texas – Pan American College of Education.
3. Published by Pataki in 1997. It is the story of a young Greek who is spending his summer holidays with his grandparents in Galata. He meets the young gypsy girl, Adel, and members of her tribe who are camping near the small port, and experiences the prejudices that the people of Galata have for the Roma. The story ends (from where the excerpt) with Adel's departure with her tribe from Galata to continue their vagabond life.
4. The passage is from the book "The Garden of Statues" (Kastaniotis 1997). It is the story of a company of children during the summer holidays. The children became friendly with the gypsies in the area who, this time every year, camp in here.

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