



This paper is taken from

*Europe's Future: Citizenship in a Changing World
Proceedings of the thirteenth Conference of the
Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe
Academic Network*

London: CiCe 2011

edited by Peter Cunningham and Nathan Fretwell, published in London by CiCe,
ISBN 978-1-907675-02-7

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Dimakos, I., Spinthourakis, J-A. & Tasiopoulou, K. (2011) Greek students' attitudes towards their immigrant peers: Have their minds changed at all?, in P. Cunningham & N. Fretwell (eds.) Europe's Future: Citizenship in a Changing World. London: CiCe, pp. 194 - 199

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Lifelong Learning Programme

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Acknowledgements:

This is taken from the book that is a collection of papers given at the annual CiCe Conference indicated. The CiCe Steering Group and the editor would like to thank

- All those who contributed to the Conference
- The CiCe administrative team at London Metropolitan University
- London Metropolitan University, for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication
- The Lifelong Learning Programme and the personnel of the Education and Culture DG of the European Commission for their support and encouragement.

Greek students' attitudes towards their immigrant peers: Have their minds changed at all?

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Abstract

Greek society has undergone tremendous changes over the past twenty years. A sudden increase in the number of immigrants was followed by a number of changes. Schools have accepted at all levels a large number of students from other countries, and in some cases, foreign students make up the majority of students in the classrooms. Therefore, the investigation of students, teachers, administrators and their attitudes towards foreigners is of great importance for the benefit of the entire school community. Past research has shown that immigrants and foreigners are viewed suspiciously and are often blamed for problems in the schools and in society. The present study replicates our own investigation of 2001, which attempted to investigate the attitudes of Greek middle school students towards their immigrant peers (Dimakos & Tasiopoulou, 2003). Using the same materials and procedures as the original study, in the present report, students from various middle schools answered questions about immigrants on a brief, Likert-type scale and completed an open-ended question about immigrants. Results suggested that the students' attitudes may not have changed for better over this past decade and still remain somewhat negatively biased towards immigrants. The implications from the present study are numerous. Given the already negative approach towards specific foreign minorities and the difficult economic climate in Greece, schools should attempt to bridge differences either by presenting a more diverse curriculum or by introducing aspects of other cultures in the Greek mainstream education. In addition, the need for specific and focused psychological and counselling services for immigrant students should be addressed.

Keywords: *Immigrants, Greece, Middle school*

Introduction

Until a few decades ago, Greece was primarily a country from where Greek immigrants left to find a better living elsewhere. Recently, Greece has become a country receiving immigrants from other countries, especially during the 1990s from eastern European countries and Albania in particular (Karakatsanis & Swarts, 2007). This transformation has not been easy nor has it been entirely successful. It has been suggested that despite its long history as a sending country, Greece did not utilize its knowledge and experience when it became the receiving country for immigrants from other nations (Rozakis, 1997).

However, the inclusion and the degree of adaptation of all migrants in Greek society has been studied extensively (for a brief synopsis, cf., Besevegis & Pavlopoulos, 2008; Dimakos & Tasiopoulou, 2003; Karakatsanis & Swarts, 2007). In the study by Dimakos

and Tasiopoulou (2003), it was suggested that Greek students harbour negative opinions and attitudes towards immigrants. Interestingly enough, these negative opinions were shared by students across socio-economic strata and levels of academic performance.

The needs of immigrant students have been investigated and suggestions have been made in order to alleviate some of the difficulties and constraints immigrant students face in Greek schools (Giavrimis, Konstantinou, & Hatzichristou, 2003; Palaiologou, 2007; Palaiologou & Evangelou, 2008). For example, both the Palaiologou (2007) and the Palaiologou and Evangelou (2008) studies indicated that immigrant students faced not only learning problems but also problems of psycho-social adjustment. Moreover, it was shown that if the necessary services are provided, students may fare better in the schools (Giavrimis et al, 2003).

Karakatsanis and Swarts (2007) further expanded on the idea of xenophobia found within Greek society. Their study showed that immigrants were considered to make life worse, to cause a lot of problems, to be crime prone. Their findings were consistent with the findings by Dimakos and Tasiopoulou (2003) who also found that students believed immigrants to take away jobs from native Greek workers, to demand a lot in economic terms, to be pushing for more rights, more demands, more benefits and so on and so forth.

However, Greece has become entangled in an unprecedented economic turmoil with major social repercussions. On a daily basis, Greece-related news make the headlines across the globe. Such dire economic conditions have led to a deterioration of the living standards for many Greeks, to the loss of income and job positions throughout Greece and to increased hostility towards foreigners, particularly undocumented illegal immigrant workers. While it can be argued that Greeks were somewhat xenophobic to begin with (Karakatsanis and Swarts, 2007), the intensity of the current financial upheaval may have caused (or at least contributed to) a shift in attitudes towards immigrants.

Therefore, the purpose of the present study was to investigate once more the attitudes and opinions of Greek adolescents towards their immigrant peers and immigrants in general. It was hypothesized that because of the change in financial and social conditions, their opinions may have changed for the worse.

Method

Participants

Two hundred and forty four students (131 boys and 111 girls) attending all three grades of various middle schools in western Greece participated in the study. The distribution of students by grade and sex was as follows: 47 boys and 36 girls in 1st grade, 43 boys and 32 girls in 2nd grade and 41 boys and 43 girls in 3rd grade.

Materials

A 7-item Likert-type questionnaire asking students their degree of agreement or disagreement on issues such as demands made by immigrants, social integration, social mobility by immigrants, respect by the media and the government towards immigrant issues, anger towards racism and so on. The items were similar to the ones used in the Dimakos & Tasiopoulou study (Dimakos & Tasiopoulou, 2003) which were based on the original items used by McConahay in his study on symbolic racism (1986).

Students also completed a short paragraph that started with the incomplete phrase 'Immigrants in Greece are ...'. The purpose of the paragraph was to elicit students' opinions and ideas about legal and illegal immigrants currently living in Greece.

Procedure

Students completed the questionnaire and the open-ended paragraph during regular school hours. The authors-investigators visited the schools and secured the requisite permissions from school administrators and classroom teachers. Following, the investigators explained the purpose of the project to the students. It was stressed that the answers were anonymous and confidential and did not affect their school marks. The entire process lasted approximately 30 minutes.

Student responses on the questionnaire were averaged and this score was used in further analyses (the higher the score, the more negative the opinions of the students towards immigrants). The researchers evaluated the student paragraphs for the number of ideas regarding immigrants they contained. These ideas were further classified into three categories: positive ideas (i.e., ideas favouring immigrants, e.g.: 'they are hard workers'), negative ideas (i.e., ideas against immigrants, e.g.: 'they are responsible for robberies'), and neutral ideas (i.e., ideas without a particular position either in favour or against immigrants, e.g.: 'immigrants come from many countries').

Results

Quantitative analyses

Table 1 presents means and standard deviations for the questionnaire score for all students by grade and sex. The analysis of variance showed no effect for either grade ($p = .35$), or sex ($p = .20$) and no interaction of the two factors ($p = .08$).

Table 1: Means and standard deviations for questionnaire scores

	Boys	Girls
1st grade	2.64 (.65)	2.80 (.69)
2nd grade	2.91 (.72)	2.67 (.63)
3rd grade	2.76 (.58)	2.52 (.60)

However, there was a significant correlation between the questionnaire score and the most recently available marks students reported in this study. This correlation was $r = -.184$, $p = .004$, indicating that the relationship between self-reported school marks and

opinions towards immigrants was negative (i.e., the higher the school performance and school marks, the lower their score on the questionnaire).

Further analyses of the relation between the questionnaire score and the number of idea units included in the student paragraphs showed the following. There was a significant correlation between the questionnaire score and the number of negative ideas included in the paragraphs ($r = .265, p = .008$). Also, there was a significant (but negative) correlation between the questionnaire score and the number of positive ideas (students whose paragraphs contained more negative ideas scored higher on the questionnaire, $r = -.315, p = .002$).

Finally, separate analyses by grade suggested that students in the first grade wrote statistically more negative ideas than positive ones in their paragraphs ($t = -4.227, p = .0002$). This finding was not observed in the other two middle school grades.

Qualitative analyses

While the authors of the study did not analyse the content of the paragraphs using a qualitative methodology, it is important to mention but a few of the reported ideas found in the paragraphs students completed. The following are some of the most frequent ideas students communicated in their written texts:

Negative ideas

- They should not be here; they should leave the country.
- We are afraid to leave our homes because they are everywhere.
- Crime rates have increased because of them.
- Killings, robberies, they are their fault.

Positive ideas

- They have a right to live in peace.
- They have a right to work.
- They try hard for their future.

As can be seen from the above, the negative ideas students expressed related to the idea of lawlessness and crime attributed to the presence of immigrants in Greek cities. On the other hand, the limited selection of positive ideas suggests a limited perspective with regards to some basic rights to employment, peaceful living, and so on.

Discussion

Summarising the results of the present study, it is evident that Greek students still harboured negative opinions about immigrants (as indicated by the higher score on the questionnaire they completed). In addition, these negative opinions were reinforced by negative comments in the written paragraphs the students completed. Moreover, the negative ideas and comments students wrote outnumbered their own positive ideas about immigrants. While no text-mining techniques were employed, evidence from the written

paragraphs suggests that students were primarily concerned about the purported criminal activities of immigrants. At the same time, there were limited positive things to say about them. Finally, students achieving lower marks in school held more negative opinions than their peers who reported better marks.

These findings are in partial agreement with the original Dimakos & Tasiopoulou study (Dimakos and Tasiopoulou, 2003). First, high scores on the questionnaire were observed in the present study thus indicating negative (or even racist) attitudes towards immigrants. This was also evident in the 2003 study. On the other hand, the ideas of students in the present study (as expressed in their written paragraphs) were slightly different from the corresponding ideas of the 2003 study.

In the 2003 study, students commented on the social contributions of immigrants in Greek society. In the present study, no such comments were made and only some plain (and perhaps, vague?) declarations of the right to live and work in peace were reported. At the same time, while in the 2003 study negative comments also referred to criminal activities by immigrants, the results from this study included a new element absent in the previous study: the fear students experience because of the presence of immigrants.

This is a new finding, consistent, however, with the findings of the Karakatsanis and Swarts study which reported the perceived contribution of immigrants to crime and the deterioration of living standards in Greek society (Karakatsanis & Swarts, 2007). One possible explanation for this finding may be found in the specific conditions of the city of Patras, where this present study was conducted.

The city of Patras is a major port with regular ferry service to Italy and other European countries. It is utilised as a gateway for commerce and passenger service between Greece and Italy and further destinations to other European countries. It is a common phenomenon for illegal, undocumented immigrants to gather by the roadside leading to the port gates in vain attempts to sneak into outbound lorries. Fights among lorry drivers and immigrants are all too common. Police operations have not halted this phenomenon and this situation may have affected students in their negative comments. In recent years, images of illegal immigrants literally storming the gates of the port and clashing with the police and port authority personnel have made headlines world-wide.

Implications - Recommendations

So, what can be done in order to alter and to improve the opinions of students towards their immigrant peers and immigrants in general? How do the findings of this study relate to the findings of the Palaiologou study (2007) and the Giavrimis et al study (2003)? Is there a role for education? Could psychological and counselling services provide an answer? Moreover, could such services help not only immigrant students but native students as well?

Let us begin with the notion of proper psychological and counselling support and services, which has been documented in earlier studies. Such services could assist immigrant students in their integration within their school classrooms, their school

communities. In addition, if these services were extended to the family, they could perhaps facilitate a smoother social integration within the host society. But, how does this apply to native students? The answer is simple: if such services could show some of the positive aspects of the immigrants' lives, culture, traditions, customs, that would definitely benefit native students, as well.

In addition, a truly intercultural curriculum where all students are able to present their own culture and be exposed to other cultures will assist in the development and establishment of truly diverse and open classrooms and school communities. The role of the teachers in this endeavour is of the utmost importance. Teachers who are willing to work with individual students without any prejudices about the students' ethnic origins could provide the necessary support to native and immigrant students alike. Thus, teachers broaden their students' horizons and perspectives and (perhaps) help them see immigrants for what they really are: people trying hard for a better life. In an open and democratic school, where the focus is not on core academic subjects, but on the preparation of the citizens of tomorrow, the acceptance of immigrants is a major step in such a process.

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