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“How gender and age affect the acceptance of foreign pupils in the school environment by their Greek classmates”

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Abstract

The paper examines the issue of the acceptance of foreign pupils at primary school by their Greek classmates. In this context, it examines the existence of racist and xenophobic attitudes among 11 and 12-year-old Greek pupils, boys and girls towards foreign pupils in their class. Sixty-six elementary school pupils participate in the study. Using a questionnaire they were asked to answer several Likert-type questions on their attitudes towards foreign pupils in their class or at school. Results suggest that boys are more open-minded and tolerant towards different nationalities compared to girls. At the same time, younger children show less racist and xenophobic attitudes than older children. The results agree with similar studies that took place in Athens and Salonica in 2001; in Crete in 2006; and, in Lesvos in 2007 as far as the variable of age is concerned but show the opposite when taking into account the two sexes. Moreover, these results raise further questions on the role of the family in the development of racist and xenophobic attitudes among children.

Key words: *racism, xenophobia, attitude, acceptance, diversity, primary school*

Introduction

In recent years, globalisation of the economy, information and culture, as well as the free movement of citizens has formed new social realities and new educational conditions. The opening of the local communities towards a global, multilingual and multicultural society imposes the existence of educated citizens capable to coexist peacefully and equitably with the others, to respect the linguistic and cultural diversity, but also to maintain their national cultural identity.

Over the past decades, Greek society has faced intensely the new reality of “multiculturalism”. The term “multicultural society” suggests a society in which people of different cultures, languages, religions coexist (Mitter, 1996; Spinthouraki & Fterniati, 2003). Moreover, the term “multiculturalism” indicates a tolerance towards the existence of diversities. In other words, it reflects a neutral attitude towards a variety of cultural funds (Walterova, 1999: 558).

Multiculturalism in Greek society as a result of the coexistence of the indigenous population with the communities of Muslims, Roma, Greek repatriates and refugees has expanded a lot in recent years, due to the continuous arrival of immigrants. On the one hand, there is an increase of linguistic

and religious heterogeneity in Greece, while, on the other hand, the new social, political and educational reality has increased racism and xenophobia (Markou, 1996; Makrinioti 1996b, 1999).

“Foreigners” are now an integral part of the Greek society and an important factor of social, economic and cultural life of Greece. However, they often face discrimination and racist and xenophobic attitudes within Greek society.

The term “xenophobia” means the fear towards the foreign, the new and the unknown. It refers to the “non-acceptance of the new” compared to what we consider as socially correct. In particular, a xenophobe is someone who does not accept changes (social, cultural, economic, etc.) that occur in the social context in which s/he lives but at the same time does not necessarily oppose them with energetic action, yet attitudes remain at the level of thought (Gotovos, 1996). The term “racism” derives from the term “race” which means tribe. In fact it refers to the phenomenon in which a person, group or society shows not only xenophobia, but also acts against those expressing them (even if it has the form of tacit consent). In other words, racism is the expression of all xenophobic thoughts, views, trends that has a person, group or society (Gotovos, 1996; Markou, 1996b; Georgogiannis 1996b, 2006; Govaris, 2001).

It is given that immigration has brought about significant changes in the school environment where children of different nationalities coexist and often share the same desk. The success of a student who starts as monolingual and later on he / she becomes bilingual is not only guaranteed by the programmes of intercultural education, but also by his / her acceptance by the new school environment (Cummins, 1999 & 2005; Baker, 2001 & 2002). School must ensure that pupils become acquainted with the cultural diversity of their region, in order to develop intercultural skills that will contribute to the "meeting" of different cultures, ideas, languages, religions (Gotovos, 2001; Govaris, 2004).

Has this target been achieved in Greek school? Are there racist and xenophobic attitudes among pupils in the school community? Or are racist and xenophobic tendencies found only in adults? Do gender and age of the pupils affect their attitudes towards their foreign classmates?

Georgogiannis (2007) argues that the presence and attendance of culturally diverse pupils in schools is associated with the occurrence of several phenomena of aggression, prejudice, xenophobia and racism among pupils. However, Papanis and Giavrimis in a survey conducted in 2007 by the Advisory Station of the Aegean University, argue that the indigenous groups and immigrant pupils are mostly mixed, confirming the lack of racism. They point out that the majority of Greek pupils' views on their foreign schoolmates and vice versa, are overwhelmingly positive. Kallitsounaki (2006) expresses the view that children of school age are not hostile to differences, and that any evidence of “creeping” social racism is usually due to stereotypes that exist among adults who grew up in an ethnically homogeneous environment. She observed a difference in the attitude of boys and girls towards their foreign schoolmates, with the latter showing greater tolerance and willingness to work with children of other nationalities. She also

noted that primary school children are more familiar with diversity than older ones, because the larger number of foreign children in Primary Education. Research conducted by KAPA RESEARCH AE in 2001 on behalf of UNICEF resulted in similar conclusions to those of Kallitsounaki. The research concerned parents, teachers and pupils from the region of Athens and Salonica.

Research Methodology

Given the above discussion, we attempted to investigate this question by conducting relevant research in schools of the county of Achaïas. This investigation was an attempt to establish a link between gender and age with the different attitudes of Greek primary school pupils towards their foreign schoolmates. In particular, we investigated the views of 11 and 12-year-old boys and girls concerning the establishment of friendly relationships with children who come from another country, the participation of these children in school events and their inter-cooperation.

The selection of pupils in primary education was based on the fact that a greater number of foreign children attend primary school, and at the same time, this is the main area where smooth or confrontational relationships between the pupils and the school are established (Nikolaou, 2000). Finally, the selection of pupils that attend primary education is clearly due to the ease of access to the specific population and due to personal interest.

Research Aim

- Our research aim was to study xenophobia and racism among primary school pupils.

Research Questions

1. Is the “coexistence” of pupils, Greek and foreign ones, a source of racist attitudes and perceptions?
2. What is the role of gender and age in the attitudes of pupils in primary schools towards their foreign schoolmates?

Research Sample

Sixty-six (66) pupils of the last two grades of Primary schools of the county of Achaïas took part in this research. 34.8% of the sample were boys, and 65.2% girls. Their age ranged from 11 to 12 years old. The sample consisted of pupils of Greek origin. The distribution of the sample by gender and age is shown in the following table:

Age	Gender		Total
	Boys	Girls	
11-year-old	19	24	43

12-year-old	4	19	23
Total	23	43	66

Research Material

A questionnaire was used to collect the data. The questionnaire was composed of two parts. The first group of questions concerned the demographics, the gender and the age of the respondents. The second group contained 12 Likert-type questions (from 1 = very little / not at all to 5 = very much). The selection of questions was made by the researcher, after she had studied various previous researches concerning this particular theme. It was not necessary to make a pre-checking, because there were several prior studies in this area.

Research Procedure

The researcher visited children at school and informed them about the purpose of the questionnaire. She also made clear to them that the questionnaire was anonymous, that their participation was not mandatory, but it would be extremely helpful if they could answer it and, that their answers would not affect their grades at all.

Statistical Analysis

For the purposes of this research, it is examined the relationship between the variables of gender and age with all the questions in the questionnaire. Thus, the answers given to each question were summed and it was found the percentage (%) based on these two variables. The data was analysed with the use of the statistical package (SPSS) Statistical Package for Social Science. In particular, in order to investigate the relationship between the variables and the responses given to each question it was used the statistical criterion χ^2 . The choice of this criterion is due to the fact that χ^2 is a non-parametric test, which does not require any assumption about the precise form of the distribution of the population. In fact, this criterion examines the relationship between the categories in the columns and the rows of a table. It has to do with categorical data in the form of frequencies (Roussos & Tsousis, 2002: 338).

Results

The presentation of the results of the research will focus on the variables of “gender” and “age”. For a better analysis of the responses of the second set of questions, which constitutes the main group, questions are divided into two thematic groups:

A) Interpersonal relations between the Greek and the foreign pupils: it aims to investigate whether there are friendly relations between the Greek and the foreign pupils within and outside the school environment and whether the different nationality is a criterion for the development of interpersonal relationships. Questions that explore the

above mentioned are: “Would you hang out with a foreign student?”, “Would you like your close friend to be from another country?”, “Would you invite home a foreign classmate?”

There are some differences in the answers given by 11 and 12-year-old pupils as well as by boys and girls in almost all questions. As far as the age variable is concerned, it is observed that the 11-year-old pupils have more positive attitudes towards foreign pupils than 12-year-old ones. To the question “Would you become friends with a foreign classmate?” younger pupils gave more positive responses than older ones. The same was so with the question “Would you like to have in the same team working with you a foreign classmate?” In the question “Would you like your close friend to be from another country?” there is considerable variation in the responses given by the 12-year-old pupils compared to the ones given by the 11-year-olds, since 26.1% of the 12-year-olds and only 9.3% of the 11-year-olds answer “not at all”. In the same question 4.3% of the 12-year-olds and 14% of the 11-year-olds respectively give the answer “very much”. In the question: “Would you play with a foreign classmate during the break?” both age groups show a positive mood by giving high rates to the options “very” and “very much” respectively. But even in this question there is a slight difference between the two age groups with the 11-year-olds giving a little more positive responses compared to the 12-year-olds. As far as the questions referring to interpersonal relationships among pupils outside the school environment are concerned, such as: “Would you go to a foreign classmate’s house if you were invited?” and “Would you invite home a foreign classmate?” there is a greater reluctance on behalf of the older pupils compared to the younger ones in having relations with foreign classmates outside the school environment.

Regarding the variable “gender”, there are differences among the responses of the girls and those of the boys. In most questions of this thematic group, girls were less positive than boys in developing relationships with foreign students, both inside and outside school. For example, to the question: “Would you invite a foreign pupil to your house?” 16.3% of the girls respond “not at all” compared to 4.5% of the boys. Also, to the question “Would you go to a foreign classmate’s home if you were invited?” 18.6% of the girls respond “not at all” compared to 4.3% of the boys.

B) Integration, equal opportunities and participation of foreign pupils in the school environment: it aims to investigate whether Greek pupils are positive or negative towards the integration and participation of the foreign pupils at school, but also how they face distinctions that foreign pupils may achieve (high scores, sporting achievements, etc.). Questions that explore the above example are: “Would you like to have as your team leader a foreign classmate?” and “Would you mind if the best pupil in your class was a foreign one?”

In this category too, there are some differences in the answers given by 11 and 12-year-old pupils as well as between boys and girls in almost all questions. When asked: “Would you mind if foreign pupils are the majority in your classroom?” both age groups (11 and 12-year-olds) show positive attitudes without significant differences. However, in the question: “Would you mind if the best pupil in your classroom was a foreign one?” there is a clear difference in the answers given. 14% of the 11-year-old children

answer “not at all” and 23.3% of them “very much”. As for the 12-year-olds, 26.1% of them answer “not at all” and 8.7% “very much” respectively.

Regarding gender, in responding to the question “Would you like to have as your team leader a foreign classmate?” 32.6% of the girls answered “not at all” as opposed to 17.4% of the boys. Also, in the question: “Would you like the best pupil in your classroom to be from another country?” girls show greater discomfort than boys.

In each case, however, in this study, only statistically significant results for the two variables, gender and age will be presented.

The Variable “Gender”

Controlling the variable of gender with each of the questions, it revealed that the χ^2 test showed statistically significant results ($\chi^2 = 11,107$ for $p < 0,05$) as far as gender and question 8 of the questionnaire is concerned about the inconvenience the greater number of foreign pupils in the classroom would cause the Greek ones. Specifically, a higher percentage of boys compared to that of the girls said that they would not mind the presence of a larger number of foreign pupils than Greeks in their classroom. In contrast, girls appear to be bothered “too much” at a greater extent than boys from the presence of a majority of foreign pupils in their classroom.

The Variable “Age”

Checking then, the variable “age” with each of the questions, it was found that the χ^2 test showed statistically significant results between the variable “age” and the questions 4 and 7 respectively of the questionnaire. In particular, in the question “Would you mind to sit in the same desk with a foreign classmate?”, the variable “age” seems to affect responses ($\chi^2 = 9,469$ for $p < 0,05$). A very large percentage of 11-year-old pupils appear much more positive to the idea of sitting in the same desk with a foreign classmate compared to the 12-year-old ones, who appear much more reserved.

Regarding the question 7 about whether the Greek pupil would like the team leader to be a foreign one, the variable “age” seems to affect responses as well ($\chi^2 = 14,109$ for $p < 0,05$). The overwhelming majority of the 12-year-old pupils respond negatively to this question. In contrast, younger children do not mind so much the possibility of having a foreign classmate as a team leader.

Limitations of Study

This study contains several limitations, mainly related to the fact that it took place in a specific area with a significant presence of foreigners (which may not be representative of other counties of Greece). Furthermore, the sample of pupils who participated in this research was in no case random and representative, which is an additional restriction, as

schools' selection was based on the researcher's easy access to them. These restrictions prevent generalisation of the conclusions of this research.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to investigate the acceptance or rejection of the foreign pupils by their Greek classmates at Primary school. The results of this research indicate the existence of some statistically significant correlations between the variables "gender" and "age" with some of the questions of the questionnaire.

In particular, boys are more "open-minded" and more tolerant towards diversity than girls: this is surprising, as previous studies, KAPA RESEARCH AE and Kallitsounaki (2006) show the opposite. Younger pupils (the 11-year-olds) show a much smaller percentage of racist and xenophobic tendencies towards their foreign classmates compared to the older ones. These results are consistent with the findings of the two previous studies and the study of Papanis and Giavrimis in 2007 who reported that greater coexistence among different nationality pupils reduces the chances of racist and xenophobic tendencies. On the contrary, the evidence does not seem to confirm what Georgogiannis (2007), says that the coexistence of native and immigrant students leads to the phenomena of racism and xenophobia.

Finally, it would be interesting, perhaps in a future research to study the influence of the family and parents in the development of racist and xenophobic attitudes and perceptions by the Greek pupils towards their foreign classmates.

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