



This paper is taken from

*A Europe of Many Cultures
Proceedings of the fifth Conference of the Children's
Identity and Citizenship in Europe Thematic Network*

London: CiCe 2003

edited by Alistair Ross, published in London by CiCe, ISBN 1 85377 369 7

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Papoulia-Tzelepi, P., Spithourakis, J., Kartergaris, A., Stefanidis, D., and Synesiou, C. (2003) Representations and attitudes of Greek children toward immigrant children, in Ross, A. (ed) A Europe of Many Cultures. London: CiCe, pp 79 – 85

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This paper does not necessarily represent the views of the CiCe Network.



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 herein.

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
- Cass Mitchell-Riddle, head of the CiCe Coordination Unit
- London Metropolitan University for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication
- The SOCRATES programme and the personnel of DGXXII for their support and encouragement.

Representations and attitudes of Greek children toward immigrant children

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Introduction

The multiculturalism of Europe and many European Union countries individually has been discussed at all levels, from policy makers to the layman (Ronge & Simon 2001; Committee of Ministers of Council of Europe 2000). Europe is not made up of nations established by immigrants (Favell 2000). In almost all European countries the percentage of foreigners has increased dramatically since World War II, and Europe is becoming a place in which immigrants and their descendants play an important economic, social, cultural and political role.

The issue of diversity has and remains central to discussions on the future of Europe. Evident in the policy and rhetoric of both Greek and European society is the fact that both are predicated on principles of social equality. It could be argued that Greeks and Europeans support integration and express an acceptance of cultural diversity (Committee of Ministers of Council of Europe 2000). However, among ethnic and cultural majorities as well as minorities there exists anxiety about cultural change and cultural power. This anxiety frequently finds its voice in xenophobia. Diversity impacts not only on individuals but the society they live in. Developing an understanding of others is fundamental to the acceptance of diversity. This acceptance, together with the ideals of equality and integration, can be transmitted through the process of socialisation, a fundamental role of schooling. Schools have the opportunity to create positive inter-group climates within which diverse groups can interact, learn from one another and develop positive attitudes towards one another (Levin 2003).

Schools in Greece, and in Europe as a whole, are becoming increasingly multicultural, and at the same time their proportion of 'native' population is decreasing. In Greece in 1991, the total number of elementary school students was about 871,000. By 1994 the number had decreased to 659,890 and by 2002 was down to about 601,000. The number of foreign-born students attending Greek public elementary schools in the same years was under 5,000 in 1991, 10,634 in 1994 and over 45,000 by 2002. While overall enrolment has decreased, the number of immigrant students (including secondary school students) currently attending Greek schools has leapt to nearly 65,000 (Malkidi, 2003; Nicolaou, 2000). A comparison of the 1981-1991-2001 Greek Census results shows that while in the first two censuses the population increase due to immigrants was around 33%, in 2001 it had risen to 95% (Malkidi 2003). If this trend continues the number of foreign-born residents in Greece and in schools will continue to increase; today one in four students attending school in the Municipality of Athens is foreign-born. Schools in virtually every corner of Greece have enrolled immigrant students and the figures increase every year. Immigrant children face significant challenges, and also pose significant tests for schools in their effort to help these children become part of their new society. At the same time the appearance of these children and the associated challenges has a direct effect upon the manner in which the native student population reacts to them, accepts them and makes them part of the Greek world.

The purpose of this paper is to present preliminary findings of a pilot study conducted in Greece, and to discuss them briefly, in tandem with literature on social representations, social identity, and diversity. It focuses on the representations held by native Greek children in relation to immigrant children within their respective worlds.

Social representations and social identity

Diversity and an understanding of it may be achieved by examining the way individuals perceive and represent the 'other'. The process/figurative entity shaped by such perceptions, through which a group establishes its universe of meaningful things, are social representations, which come into being in communication within the group (Moscovici, 1981). The group both produces social representations and determines the connections between them, limiting the freedom of association and prescribing an approach by which it can distinguish itself from other groups (Breakwell, 1993). Beyond helping to cope with the group's environment, social representations also have the function of constituting identity. Consequently social representations - consisting of knowledge, ideas, beliefs and values - help us understand how diversity is seen and accepted as they are socially shared, generated and sustained (Duveen & Lloyd, 1990). As Lehman (1998) posits, children come into a society which already possesses structured systems of beliefs and knowledge and that form the context in which a child's thinking develops. An absence of contact between groups can reinforce group boundaries, while inter-group contact can bring about generalised change in out-group attitudes (Hewstone and Cairns (2001).

[Social identity] ... refers to the way we perceive ourselves as members of groups. Since we may see ourselves as members of more than one group, our identity may vary depending on the group we identify with at any particular time. Each of these identities is accompanied by its commensurate beliefs, expectations and behaviours defined by reference to the norms of the particular group. Identification with a group is only one of the three basic ideas of social identity theory' (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

The other two are categorisation and comparison. Categorisation is needed to make sense of our social environment. We create categories using racial, ethnic, religious, occupational, and other socially constructed categories that help organise our conception of our environment. The idea of social comparison is that in order to evaluate our group ... we compare it with similar groups ... group members tend to make comparisons in ways that reflect positively on themselves. They do that by using as the basis of comparison dimensions that are favourable to their group (McGarty *et al.*, 1994).

The formation of social identity is related to the society in which people exist ... Understanding that 'who we are' is socially constructed enables us to explain that how we and others see us is not fixed. Social circumstances, social learning and expectations create who we are and set our social identity (Spinthourakis and Katsillis, in press).

As Hewstone and Cairns (2001) point out, positive comparisons can provide a satisfactory social identity.

The aim and scope of our research was to investigate (a) the representations that 6th grade Greek public school children hold related to the situation of immigrant children, and (b) their attitudes towards the future place of their immigrant schoolmates in Greek society.

Methodology

The research team comprised two university faculty members and three elementary school teachers who met and prepared the *Representation and Attitude of Immigrant Children Structured Interview* protocol. The instrumentation packet consists of a colour picture with six children said to be attending Greek schools and representing different races and genders. These were used to establish student identity. There were also 27 open questions, 25 of which were asked twice.

Each respondent was asked to look at the picture, pick the child he/she liked and to imagine himself/herself was that child. The names of the children in the photo were Kim Lee, Aldo, Naomi, Fatima, Mohammed and Svetlana; an Asian, a Balkan, an African, two Middle Easterners and someone from a former Soviet Bloc country - all countries from which immigrants are represented in Greek schools.

The pupils were first asked to answer 25 questions with their assumed identity and then asked again with their real identity. The questions related to the child's family, language, work, eating habits, relationships, habits, aspirations and vision of their future. It was hypothesised that:

- few of the children would have more than a surface awareness of the immigrant child's reality
- children who were able to understand the immigrant child's reality would have different representations when taking on the immigrant identity from those of their own identity
- exposure and awareness of this reality would determine the degree to which they were able to express a realistic representation for the immigrant child as well as that of a positive social identity.

In the pilot phase of the study 18 children (nine girls and nine boys) attending the 6th grade in state elementary schools in the Western Peloponnese were interviewed individually. The pupils attended three urban state elementary schools; two inner city schools and one experimental school located on the university campus and heavily representative of university professors' and staff's children. The children from each school were chosen by a lottery system.

Each interview results were transcribed and tabulated by the interviewers. The analysis was qualitative and based on a comparative narrative format. Of the three schools, only the experimental school was mono-cultural.

Results and discussion

Each child interviewed was shown the picture of the six 'immigrant' children and asked to pick the one s/he most favoured. They were then asked to answer the questions as if they *were* the child in the picture. In Table 1 we see which identities the pupils interviewed chose.

Table 1: Identity chosen and designation of origin

Origin: Parents and child	Place of birth of child chosen	No. of children choosing country
Albania	Tirana, Albania	2
Ukraine	Russia	1
Saudi Arabia	Saudi Arabia	1
China	Japan, China	2
England	England (3), Liverpool	4
Denmark	Denmark	1
France	France	1
India	Delhi, India, Shanghai-China	3
Iraq	Baghdad	1
Germany	Germany	1
Africa	Africa	1

Two children gave a 'Greek' note to the child chosen (the particular children chosen were from Africa and England) indicating a Greek father and foreign mother; it is notable that there is a growing incidence of ethnically mixed marriages in Greece but only two children had such a representation. It is also interesting is that so few chose Albania, given that over 80% of immigrant children in Greek schools and in society as a whole are from Albania (Malkidi 2003; Nicolaou 2000). All the children, speaking in their assumed identity, said that were born abroad and came to Greece at 2-9 years old. What is interesting is that the majority (4/6) of the children from the experimental school indicated that the children chosen came from European countries. In part this may be explained in terms of their personal and family experiences; none have 'foreign' schoolmates and their parents tend to have professional contacts with European colleagues. The choice of India and China is far removed from their reality as the percentage Asian foreigners in Greek schools is less than 3%.

In Table 2 we see that languages spoken between the parents and with the child range from exclusive use of the mother tongue to exclusive use of the second language. In terms of the children's representations/understanding of the immigrant child's reality, the languages most identified as spoken with parents is somewhat skewed since first generation immigrants tend to use their mother tongue (Baker, 1992). Nearly half the children said their parents spoke to them in Greek. Interestingly, five of the six experimental school respondents said the parents spoke to them in their mother tongue, a closer representation of what is seen as the norm.

The parental occupations given represent a cross-section: unskilled labourer, construction workers, bank clerk, businessman, sales clerk, doctor, engineer, teacher, housekeeper, lawyer, pilot. Many said these were the same jobs their parents held in their native countries. Few of the occupations chosen represent jobs immigrants actually tend to occupy in Greece. Ten children said their mother did not work, clearly a skewed representation since economic survival requires both parents working. Thus, in terms of occupation the respondents seem to have unrealistic representations of an immigrant child's reality.

Table 2: Language of communication

Origin: Parents & child	Language between parents	Language with parents
Albania	>Albanian; Albanian	Greek & Albanian; Greek
Ukraine	Russian	Russian
Saudi Arabia	Arabic	Greek
China	Chinese; both	Chinese & Greek; Chinese & a little Greek
England	English at home-Greek outside; Greek-sometimes English	English; only Greek; Greek
Denmark	Danish	Danish
France	French	French & Greek
India	Indian, usually Indian	Indian; Mostly Greek
Iraq	Arabic	Arabic
Germany	German & Greek	Greek
Africa	Greek	Greek

When we look to their associations/relationships we find that twelve out of eighteen state that their friends are all Greek. Of the others, one said he didn't have Greek friends because he didn't speak Greek very well and that during recess other children didn't play with him: the remainder said that they had both Greek and foreign friends. The child who referenced his language ability and lack of Greek playmates is probably closer to the norm of the newly-arrived immigrant child and thus has a closer representation of the immigrant child's reality. However, several children responded to questions about invitations to others' homes or their own that tended to more closely match the reservations many Greeks would have, e.g. 'Not many would invite me because: they're embarrassed; their parents wouldn't let them - I'm from a different country; I'm Albanian'. The rest tended to give answers more closely linked to that of *any* child's interactions with other children regardless of origin.

With respect to religious affiliation, fifteen children said they attended Greek Orthodox services, one Catholic services and two that they didn't attend any church as they weren't baptised *yet*. Of interest here is that none referenced a non-Christian service. Even though several had chosen children of predominantly Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist backgrounds, none seem to have that representation.

Fifteen children in their immigrant identity saw themselves as good to very good students, and three as average - only one referenced language as a handicap. Here too there appears to be a mismatch between the real and the perceived; few identified language arts as a problem; most indicated history, maths or science, a closer match to their own reality. Many immigrant children struggle with language arts and tend to do well with the maths and sciences since these are less dependent on language ability.

About future careers, the children's expectations as immigrants, and in their own identities, were quite high. As immigrant children seven wanted to be doctors, five teachers, two architects, two lawyers, one a civil engineer and one a wood craftsman. As Greeks, seven wanted to be doctors, six teachers, one an architect, one to work in marketing, one a computer engineer and one was unsure. This could be interpreted as the

pupils having high expectations generally and a belief that immigrant children are not limited on the basis of their immigrant status, but it may also be seen as their not having a well-developed awareness of the probability of immigrant children going on to higher education. The drop-out statistics for Greek immigrants between elementary and secondary school are extremely high; only 27.8% of registered 6th grade immigrant students go on to junior high school (Nicolaou, 2000).

Nine of the children thought of themselves as Greek, four as having joint 'other'-Greek status and five as having the 'other' nationality, but sixteen of the eighteen expected to live in Greece when they grew up; only two mentioned returning to their native country. In response to the question on how it felt to be an immigrant in Greece only three children mentioned possible difficulties, the rest gave answers that did not reflect the realities of adjustment.

Conclusion

Our preliminary findings tend to support our hypotheses in that few of the children had an in-depth awareness of the immigrant child's reality. Furthermore the few who were able to 'step into the shoes' of the immigrant child had different representations to the same questions when asked to speak of their own reality. It would appear that the lack of exposure to a different reality determined the degree to which the majority was able to express a realistic representation of an immigrant child. Their own group identification was apparently transferred onto that of the immigrant child, prescribing for those children an equally positive social identity.

It would appear that the children had a limited understanding of what it means to be an immigrant child in Greece today. Further research of the representations of Greek children with respect to their immigrant schoolmates is ongoing. The data gathered may prove useful in developing different strategies to meet the changing needs of both the majority and minority populations in the Greek schools.

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