Attitudes Towards Migrants: what do Greek students think about their immigrant classmates?

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Abstract  The constantly increasing number of immigrant families living in Greece has forced teachers to deal with one more factor affecting classroom dynamics: student attitudes towards their immigrant classmates, their families, and immigrants in general. A first step in dealing with such a factor is to establish the extent and nature of prejudice towards immigrants by measuring student attitudes with respect to immigrants. A questionnaire focusing on immigrant acceptance was prepared and administered to a sample of Greek middle school students, who also completed a paragraph about immigrants living in Greece. Results suggested that students held negative opinions about immigrants. In addition, positive comments were limited to the cheap labor provided by immigrant workers. Implications for schools and the educational process are considered.

Introduction

Recent geo- and socio-political changes in the greater Balkan Peninsula and Eastern Europe have resulted in an influx of immigrants from many countries neighboring Greece. Because of Greece’s high degree of homogeneity, the introduction of these new ethnic groups has resulted in several social changes, which Greek society and
the Greek state were not ready to cope with (Rozakis, 1997). One area where dramatic changes have occurred has been the Greek national educational system, as newly arrived immigrant students have begun to enroll in local elementary and secondary schools across the country (Nikolaou, 2000). The integration of these children into the local school systems seems to be a sine qua non for their adjustment to Greek society (Drettakis, 2001).

Moreover, this integration of immigrant students should not be limited to their registration in local schools. Nikolaou (2000) and Travasarou (2001) concur that the correct approach to the integration of immigrant students should include certain necessary educational services and the proper psychological support for them and their families. For example, towards that effect, a specially designed curriculum would allow immigrant students to learn their native language, history, and civilization, and at the same time follow the curriculum of Greek students (and thus learn more about their host society). Cooperative projects would help Greek students realize the benefits of studying along with their immigrant classmates and thus minimize their negative attitudes towards immigrants. Damanakis (1998) has suggested that any school which aspires to the principles of intercultural education should be based on the following principles: equality of civilizations, equality of educational opportunities, and equality of educational backgrounds for children from diverse cultural environments. Truly, such a school should benefit not only immigrant students but also local students, because it does not discriminate between the cultural and educational backgrounds of immigrant and local students and provides all students with opportunities to explore the cultural richness of both cultures.

To date, the exact number of immigrant students in Greece has not been accurately recorded (Nikolaou, 2000), with many sources reporting different numbers for immigrant and repatriated students currently enrolled in elementary or secondary schools. The most recent available data for the academic year 1999–2000 suggested that immigrant and repatriated students comprised approximately 15% of the total school population (Travasarou, 2001), a more than fivefold increase since the year 1995–96, when immigrant students enrolled in the local schools constituted approximately 3% of the entire student body (Drettakis, 2000).

Irrespective of the exact number of immigrant students, their arrival has brought to light several shortcomings associated with Greek schools. A large number of immigrant students are experiencing school failure and other school-related problems (Nikolaou, 2000). As Drettakis (2000) has pointed out, these students were immersed in a new language and culture without proper orientation, assessment of linguistic skills, academic instruction, and the necessary cross-cultural psychological services. However, apart from these practical considerations, one major concern was also not fully addressed, namely, the attitudes of local students towards these immigrant students and their families. For that matter, public opinion was not systematically and comprehensively researched on the issues revolving around the increase of immigrants in Greece.

Perhaps the most systematic attempt to survey public opinion on the issue of immigrants to date was the study conducted by Hantzi (2001). She examined local resident attitudes and stereotypes towards other target groups, namely Americans,
Albanians, Filipinos, and Western Europeans in general (with no particular country of origin mentioned). Results indicated that one’s country of origin influenced the perceptions of Greeks towards these particular target groups. Filipinos and Western Europeans were perceived more positively than Albanians and Americans, respectively. This study focused on particular ethnic groups and did not specifically address immigrants (legal or illegal) residing in Greece. However, it revealed certain xenophobic feelings and attitudes that Greeks have towards people from abroad, although Hantzi suggested that Greece is not a xenophobic society, because positive sentiments also surfaced with respect to particular ethnic groups. Certainly, these results are inconclusive, and the study needs to be replicated as well as broadened to address legal and illegal aliens living in Greece, their acceptance by Greek society, and their integration into this society.

Similar inquiries have also focused on school personnel working with national and immigrant students (Bombas, 1996, 2001). In the most recent of two studies, Bombas interviewed a sample of 30 school principals with national and immigrant students about their non-Greek students, their academic performance, the problems and difficulties these students faced, and their in-school behavior towards teachers and fellow students. Bombas reported that the percentage of immigrant students attending these schools was approximately 12–13%, although it varied widely from a minimum of 5% to a maximum of 45% of the total school student body. The principals interviewed suggested that a lack of knowledge of the Greek language (the sole language of instruction in Greek schools) and the transition into the school environment were the two primary problems immigrant students faced. The language problem became more intense and acute for older students enrolled in the upper classes of the elementary schools, while students enrolled in the first or second grades faced fewer problems. These principals also mentioned that the teachers employed in their schools did not differentiate between immigrant and local students in terms of attitudes and behaviors. Similarly, school principals observed no negative attitudes on the part of local students towards their immigrant schoolmates. However, they all stressed the need for proper introduction and immersion of immigrant students into the Greek educational system and suggested intensive cross-cultural sensitivity training seminars for teachers currently working with immigrant students.

In an earlier study, 54 directors of elementary school directorates from across the country (one per each administrative prefecture in Greece) and the 132 local directors of elementary school administration offices throughout Greece were questioned about immigrant students attending local schools and the students’ status within the Greek educational system (Bombas, 1996). Only 37 directors agreed to participate in the study, although they represented regions and schools from across the country. The vast majority of the participants (87.5%) responded that immigrant students faced enormous adaptation problems in the schools they attended. Furthermore, one in three (32.4%) respondents believed that the presence of immigrant students in the classrooms delayed and negatively affected the educational process.

Unfortunately, the Greek state has taken only limited steps to ameliorate the
situation. Preparatory classes and tutoring schemes have been launched, and even multicultural schools have been established in certain parts of the country (Damianakis, 1998; Nikolaou, 2000). However, no systematic attempts have been made to increase the multicultural awareness of teachers and students (to prepare both the immigrant and the resident students for these changes in the educational process). For that matter, the opinions and attitudes of students, administrators and teachers has also not been systematically explored. Therefore, the purpose of the present study was to investigate the opinions of school students towards immigrants living in Greece. In this manner, the study sheds some light on the opinions of students towards their foreign born classmates, their families, and immigrants in general.

Method

Subjects

One hundred middle school students (50 boys and 50 girls) living in an urban city in northern Greece were randomly selected for the study. Their age ranged from 12 to 17 years (M = 14.11, SD = 1.04). One male student was excluded from the study because he did not complete any of the questionnaire or the other materials of the study.

Measures

(a) A brief questionnaire on attitudes towards immigrants was designed for the purposes of this study. It consisted of six items which solicited the participants’ opinions on issues such as governmental and media attention towards immigrants, racism as a social issue, financial discrimination against immigrants, immigrants’ acceptance by the host society, their struggle for financial status as well as more rights within the host society, and quality of life after the immigrants’ immersion into local society. All items were scored on a 5-point Likert-type scale. The questionnaire attempted to address issues and concerns about immigrants in Greece with more emphasis placed on the impersonal underlying values and beliefs rather than personalized actual behavior, so as to elicit genuine responses from the students who participated in the study. The six items of the questionnaire were loosely based on the Modern Racism Scale (MRS), introduced by McConahay (1986), although the questionnaire utilized in the present study was not meant as a Greek adaptation or translation of the original Modern Racism Scale, which measured racial attitudes of white Americans towards African Americans.

McConahay (1986) investigated racial attitudes in the US and addressed the issue of genuine responses to racial attitude questionnaires. In his attempt to study racism towards African Americans in the US, he noted that direct questions about racial issues often elicited socially desirable, negative responses. However, these responses did not coincide with the respondents’ actual behavior, thus often leading to incomplete conclusions about the racial attitudes and opinions of individuals. He therefore introduced the MRS, a Likert scale using broad and impersonal questions
so as to counter the social desirability bias. The results of McConahay (1986) and further application of the MRS (Maass et al., 2000; Sabnani & Ponterotto, 1992) indicated that it is a valid measure of the underlying thoughts and attitudes of actual behavior patterns towards a particular minority group.

(b) An open-ended paragraph starting with the phrase “Immigrants in Greece are …” was also given to students. The paragraph was used in an attempt to solicit students’ unbiased opinions about immigrants in Greece. It was deliberately left vague without any further instructions in order to avoid leading students towards stereotypical answers about particular ethnic minority groups.

(c) A brief personal interest questionnaire was also given in order to collect personal and demographic information about the students, their school GPA, hours watching TV, their parents’ employment. This was done to gain possible insight into sources of student opinions and attitudes towards immigrants.

Procedure

Prior to the administration of the questionnaire on racism, its content validity was examined. On the basis of information gathered from the literature and past studies, an early draft of the questionnaire was prepared and distributed to a limited number of students and teachers (N = 20) who did not participate in the main phase of the study. These subjects were asked to respond to the questionnaire items. They were then questioned about the clarity of the statements, their relationship to each question, and the issue of immigrants living and working in Greece. They were also asked to consider whether this questionnaire was indeed appropriate for use within Greek society. The subjects indicated their agreement and satisfaction with the questionnaire, its items, and its intended purposes, thus providing partial evidence in support of its content and construct validity. The completion of the questionnaire did not require more than 10–15 minutes of the subjects’ time.

During the main phase of the study, the administration of the questionnaire and the open-ended paragraph was completed on two separate dates. Students first provided the necessary personal information, and then they were asked to complete the paragraph on immigrants in Greece. The session did not take more than 30 minutes. One week later, the questionnaire on racism was administered, and the students who participated in the study were asked to respond to it. This session lasted approximately 15 minutes.

Scoring

Based on the responses of the questionnaire on racism, a total score was calculated for each student. The higher the score on the questionnaire, the stronger the negative feelings and opinions students held about immigrants. In addition, two independent raters read and processed the paragraphs by analyzing them into their constituent idea units. They also classified the idea units according to their content into positive, neutral, or negative ones. Interrater agreement was 0.97 for the division and classification of passages into idea units. The following are some
examples of positive, negative and neutral idea units, respectively: “they came here looking for a better life”; “they take the jobs of local people”; “there are many immigrants”.

The number of idea units per paragraph was correlated with the questionnaire score obtained for each student. Idea units were also subjected to content analysis in order to reveal patterns in the students’ opinions and attitudes towards immigrants. In addition, a brief analysis of the psychometric properties of the questionnaire on racism was also performed.

Results

Table 1 shows means and standard deviations for the attitude questionnaire scores, the idea units extracted from the student writings, and the percentage of positive, negative, and neutral idea units per paragraph, both for the entire sample and separately by gender. Analyses did not reveal any significant differences in the overall questionnaire scores between boys and girls ($p > 0.48$). However, there was a significant difference due to gender in the paragraphs that students wrote. The girls wrote significantly longer paragraphs (i.e. their writings contained more idea units) than the boys in the sample ($F_{1.92} = 9.15$, $p < 0.003$).

Despite their limited length, student paragraphs contained mostly negative or neutral comments and opinions about immigrants. There were no significant differences due to gender with respect to the negative or the neutral idea units. However, the girls did provide significantly more positive comments than the boys ($F_{1.92} = 9.94$, $p < 0.002$).

The analyses of the effect of various personal and demographic variables, such as school GPA, amount of TV viewing time, parental occupation etc., did not indicate any significant effects attributable to these factors. Nevertheless, there was a moderate, yet significant, correlation between student age and the questionnaire score ($r = -0.222$, $p < 0.015$), which suggests that the negative views students have about immigrants appear to decrease as students grow older.

The content analysis of the paragraphs that students completed produced the following results. First, there were almost twice as many negative idea units as

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Questionnaire</td>
<td>17.39 (5.99)</td>
<td>16.75 (4.68)</td>
<td>17.07 (4.41)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idea units</td>
<td>3.23 (1.46)</td>
<td>4.21 (1.67)</td>
<td>3.72 (1.64)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Positive</td>
<td>14.82 (23.3)</td>
<td>32.42 (9.22)</td>
<td>23.62 (28.33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Negative</td>
<td>42.82 (36.50)</td>
<td>34.76 (11.8)</td>
<td>38.79 (35.46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Neutral</td>
<td>40.34 (12.60)</td>
<td>32.28 (26.9)</td>
<td>36.31 (31.6)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
positive ones (23%). Secondly, more than one in every three idea units (36%) contained neutral comments and ideas about immigrants. Thirdly, there were no variations in student opinion due to school GPA or even parental occupation. In other words, students consistently did not think highly of immigrants, irrespective of their socioeconomic background or educational achievement level.

More important than the number of the negative idea units were student opinions, as expressed in these paragraphs. The analysis of these negative student opinions showed that students were concerned about a small number of social issues: crimes committed by immigrants, jobs being available to immigrants (due to low labor costs) and the resulting unemployment for local residents, health risk problems being introduced by immigrants in the host society. However, a small, yet alarming, percentage of students (approx. 5%) expressed even more extreme opinions such as “expel them all now”, “they are criminals, thieves, rapists, all of them … [mentioning in particular several nationalities from the former Eastern Block countries]”. At the same time, an equally low percentage of students suggested that immigrants, through their cultural heritage, music, and traditions contribute to the host society’s culture. This was perhaps the sole, truly positive aspect of the students’ comments in the study.

Correlation coefficients between the overall score on the questionnaire and the percentage of positive and negative idea units in the paragraph were also examined ($r = -0.351, p < 0.001$, and $r = 0.39, p < 0.0001$, respectively). These results suggested that students whose paragraphs contained many negative idea units also had low scores on the questionnaire, while the opposite was true for those who had high scores.

Discussion

Using a questionnaire format, Greek students’ opinions of immigrants were investigated in this study. Paragraphs written by the students on the issue of immigrants in general (i.e. without differentiating between legal and illegal aliens in the host society) provided further insight into student opinions and attitudes. This study revealed strong opinions about immigrants. Generally, immigrants were considered “unhealthy”, crime-prone, and fiscal opportunists. Their introduction into Greek society was considered likely to affect the society and the country adversely. These points of view seemed to be constant across respondents’ social and economic lines. Of course, it should be noted that, because of the limited psychometric properties of the questionnaire, these findings should be viewed with some caution.

The findings of the present study partially agreed with and extended those of Hantzi (2001), whose study of racism using older subjects showed similar patterns towards certain ethnic groups. The present findings were also consistent with the earlier work conducted by Bombas (1996, 2001) about the opinions of school principals and administrative personnel throughout Greece, which suggested that the current situation in Greek schools was far from ideal, acceptable, or even tolerable.
Further evidence about xenophobia and hostility towards immigrants was provided by the European Union. In a recent Europe-wide study of young Europeans aged 15–24, which was conducted in all 15 member states between 12 April and 22 May 2001 (in other words, approximately during the same time as this present study was conducted), Greek youths were found to be among the most hostile ones towards immigrants (European Commission, 2001).

Sadly, these findings paint a rather disparaging picture for immigrants and how local children perceive their immigrant classmates. As was noted earlier, the lack of proper cultural sensitivity training for both national students and teachers may contribute to this increase in hostile sentiments towards immigrants. The extreme opinions expressed by a certain number of students also need to be considered. They highlight the fact that the introduction of immigrants into Greek society has not only caused certain educational problems, but also created a series of social services concerns and worries, and exposed an even greater problem. Greece and Greek society, although a country of origin for generations of immigrants, has been unprepared to receive scores of immigrants from other countries (Damanakis, 1998; Nikolaou 2000; Rozakis, 1997).

**Recommendations**

Of course, one does not solve the problem by simply identifying or talking about it. Certain steps and programs need to be introduced in order to (a) provide immigrant students with the proper educational opportunities, (b) assist immigrant students and their families in their new host society, (c) make resident students and their families comprehend and accept immigrants, and (d) reduce the feelings of xenophobia and hostility towards immigrants and foreigners in general.

There have been attempts to deal with this complex problem, although no such study has been completed in Greece to date. For example, the Greek parliament has enacted legislation which established preparatory classes, inclusion programs, and multicultural schools throughout Greece for immigrant and repatriated students (Damanakis, 1998; Nikolaou, 2000). Unfortunately, no evaluation study has been conducted to assess the effectiveness of these preparatory classes and programs. Furthermore, as Nikolaou (2000) has recently pointed out, certain measures did not work as expected. One such measure was the establishment of multicultural schools, which were supposed to serve as a meeting ground for national and immigrant students in a truly culture-enriched environment. Although immigrant students enrolled in such schools, national students stayed away from them, fearing that such schools offered limited opportunities for learning. Eventually, these multicultural schools became schools that catered exclusively to foreign students and did not become the centers of cultural exchange the authorities had initially envisioned. Even though the international know-how and the experience in measuring, dealing with, and explaining cultural and racial differences to students has been more than adequate, Greek authorities have not yet tapped into this source of information, nor have they attempted to.
In a very simple, yet effective, attempt to teach racial difference to nursery and kindergarten students, Simplicio (2001) used different M&M candies to teach about differences in skin color. He gave different colored M&M candies to children. No matter what the color of the outer cell, all M&M candies tasted the same, a metaphor for the fact that “differences in skin color are not what is important. What is important is what the person is like inside” (p. 110). As Simplicio noted about the success of the M&M scheme and the judging of characters, “this lesson, although quite elementary in nature, leaves a rather long-lasting impact” (p. 108). Such a simple attempt may be a helpful trick in the bag of every teacher in whose classroom there are students with a different skin color.

Certainly, candy may be a big hit with young children. Older children, however, and adolescents need more information about immigrants, other cultures, ethnic groups and identities. Utilizing a sample of approximately the same age, Garces and Rodenas (2001) provided information to students about specific concepts related to immigrants, such as “xenophobia”, “racism”, “ethnocentrism”, and “prejudice”. After learning the meaning of these terms, students were asked to converse with immigrant volunteers. Changes in their thinking about the previously mentioned concepts were then recorded. Results suggested that young people who received the necessary information expressed more sympathy towards immigrants. Knowledge has always been the key to tolerance, acceptance, and positive attitudes towards immigrants.

The provision of the appropriate psychological and educational services to all students, regardless of their background (ethnic, racial, cultural, or linguistic) is not only legally mandated in certain countries, but required in order for these student to be able to achieve in school (Rogers et al., 1999). Pedersen (1994) stressed that these psychological and educational services must be multicultural in nature. A multicultural educational approach could include, among others, ethnically diverse topics in the reading textbooks, excerpts of the literature from the home countries of immigrant students, and the establishment of truly multicultural schools. Students could further explore the cultural richness of other homelands and languages through music, poetry, art, and sports. An additional step could be the proper multicultural training of teachers and school psychologists.

It seems therefore that multicultural awareness should become a priority within the Greek educational system. Using the experience of other countries with multicultural education, applying already proven methods and developing new ones, adjusted to the Greek social system, is a necessary prerequisite for the integration of immigrant children into the local schools. According to Pedersen, multicultural awareness is “a means toward increasing a person’s power, energy, and freedom of choice in a multicultural world” (1994, p. 25). And this may indeed be the key to a better understanding among people and cultures without prejudices and misperceptions.

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