

SCHOOL ADJUSTMENT DIFFICULTIES OF IMMIGRANT CHILDREN IN GREECE¹

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we present the methodology and main results of a longitudinal study in Greece that explored the learning and psychosocial difficulties of immigrant pupils, as compared to those of their Greek classmates. The 'Teacher-Child Rating Scale' (T-CRS) and 'Child Rating Scale' (CRS) were used as instruments to measure the school adjustment difficulties of our sample, according to their teachers' ratings. A total number of 3.561 scales were selected, and completed in full (by teacher and pupil) for each pupil. The sample of the study consisted of 5th and 6th grade primary school pupils (10-12 years) of Greek origin families who came from the former Soviet Union (n1=1100). The control group consisted of Greek classmates of the immigrant pupils (n2=713). Also, teacher attitudes towards the effectiveness of current educational policies in Greece for immigrant pupils, as well as the difficulties they face during the teaching process were explored through semi-structured interviews (n3=165). Immigrant pupils were interviewed to gain a better picture of their attitudes towards the Greek school (n4=260). In this paper, some of the research findings are presented that focus on learning and psychosocial difficulties. Finally, we offer suggestions for Greek educational policies pertaining to immigrant pupils.

Introduction: Multiculturalism in Greece

Since the early 1980's, a significant number of people with various ethnic identities – either foreign or Greek origin - have migrated to Greece. Multiple terms have been used to describe ethno-cultural differences, such as “migrants”, “immigrants”, “emigrants”, “minorities”, “repatriated”, “refugees” or “foreigners”. Though each of these terms has its own semantic content, their common element is that they divide people into categories according to their cultural background. Moreover, these cultural differences denote diversity and deviance from what is regarded as the ‘norm’ (Palaiologou, 2004, p. 317). The multicultural mosaic which defines the nature of contemporary Greek society is reflected in school population data as well as the provisions that characterize its educational system. The situation is similar in neighbouring countries (e.g. in Italy, see Portera, 2004).

During the period 1995-2000, there was a significant increase (9.7%) in the number of repatriated and foreign pupils in Greece. If we were to include Muslim and Roma children, then the total student population with different ethno-cultural characteristics represents 16.4% of those attending Greek Primary Schools (Palaiologou, 2004, p. 319). Dating back to 2001, the situation has changed - especially after the 2004 Athens Olympic Games. Among those immigrants who came to Greece as industrial workers, many have since returned to their home countries (e.g. Albanians).

As far as our research sample is concerned, many of the pupils hail from the former Soviet Union. The majority of them belong to repatriated families of Greek origin; so-called “Greek Pontians” or “Pontians”. Historically, previous generations migrated as refugees to the former Soviet Union, leaving Greece for political reasons.

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After the collapse of the Russian Federation, many Greek Pontians returned to Greece. For this reason, the term that is considered more appropriate for this ethno-cultural group is “repatriated Greeks” or, alternatively, “Greek Pontians” (Xanthopoulou-Kiriakou, 1991).

Currently, the immigrant and repatriated pupils that go to Greek schools attend special classes for several hours a day, in so-called “Reception Classes” (Taxeis Ypodochis). Pupils receive lessons Greek lessons in these classes to help them learn the Greek language at an adequate level and to allow them to better integrate into mainstream classrooms. The amount of time spent in these classes depends on how many years students have attended school, how many years of remedial instruction they have received and to what extent they are linguistically competent in Greek. There are also “Tutorial Classes” (Frontistiriaka Tmimata) which aim to help foreign pupils learn the Greek language through private school tutoring, usually as an after school program (Damanakis, 1997; Palaiologou, 2004, p. 322).

School adjustment difficulties

Studies have revealed that immigrant and repatriated students who enter the Greek educational environment appear to have difficulties in their school adjustment, at least at the beginning of their studies (Georgas & Papastilianou, 1993; Hatzichristou, 1995; Palaiologou, 2000). According to the literature, children experience difficulties in the learning domain as well as in their social behaviour and communication when they enter a new environment or one different from their family environment (Cowen & Hightower, 1986, 1989; Ladd & Price, 1987; Ladd, 1990). Moreover, it has been found that the self-esteem of foreign students tends to be quite low (Giavrimis *et al.*, 2003; Hatzichristou & Hopf, 1992, 1993; Palaiologou, 2000).

According to Gillborn and Gipps (1996), the relatively low achievement levels of minority children can be compared to majority children in the domains of Language and Mathematics. If mental abilities are randomly distributed, then no social class or ethnic group is by nature better endowed than others. In the U.K., comparing the achievements of one ethnic group with others is a way of confronting educational inequalities. In this comparison, low attainment levels indicate differences that appear in the general population among different ethnic groups; it does not offer any information about the specific capabilities or success of a certain pupil and it does definitely not imply any deficit disorders. Furthermore, we should take into consideration that the factors that help us interpret differences in attainment among various socio-cultural or ethnic groups might vary (Evangelou & Palaiologou 2007). A relevant review by Tomlinson (1982) locates these factors in one of the following three categories:

- a. those that are due to familial and socio-economic variables, which include children from one parent families and ethnic minorities;
- b. those that are associated with the school process and, especially, teachers' expectations and the school curriculum; and
- c. factors that are related to the personal characteristics of pupils and mainly their language difficulties and their low self-esteem.

Verma *et al.* (1994) give two different meanings to the term ‘achievement in education’: a. Achievement as an institutional variable, and b. Achievement as a personal variable. The first refers to general achievement levels in schools and other organisations. The second refers to a pupil’s personal achievement. According to these authors,

achievement is not a uni-dimensional phenomenon, but the product of the interaction between pupils' efforts and abilities and the school organisation they belong to. It also includes, among others: teachers, lessons, exams, teacher-pupil interaction, school ethos and peer group.

The above findings highlight the importance of a systematic, early detection and assessment of pupils' school adjustment difficulties. Moreover, they emphasize the need for using effective, reliable and valid screening and assessment tests for primary school children within the school environment (Reynolds, 1979; Hightower, Cowen et al., 1987).

Language acquisition and command of a second or foreign language is a factor which influences pupil's general school achievement. Children coming from a foreign country, usually when they initially attend the school of the host country, appear to have learning and psycho-social difficulties, which to a great degree are due to the difficulties they experience during the process of learning a second or foreign language.

With respect to the pupils who participated in this research, the majority spoke both Greek and Russian (or dialect more specifically). When at home, they usually preferred to speak Russian, while at school they used Greek. Their language capacities in Russian and Greek were related to the number of years they resided in a former Soviet Union country and the number of years they had been in Greece with their families ('late' or 'early' arrivals) (Palaiologou 2000, p. 1).

The research: Research questions, sample and setting

The main aim of this study was to assess, in the view of their teachers, the extent to which immigrant pupils from the former Soviet Union experienced adjustment difficulties. Secondary aims included:

- identifying those factors that contribute to immigrant pupils' school adjustment difficulties (learning and psycho-social);
- exploring those educational provisions and arrangements that contribute to a better adjustment process, in their opinion and the opinion of their teachers; and
- exploring those teaching provisions that can aid teachers during the teaching process, and especially when teaching Greek as a second or foreign language to these pupils.

The overall purpose for conducting the study was to make recommendations regarding how to best improve the adjustment process of the larger student population (immigrants and indigenous), within the framework of an effective school policy with intercultural dimensions in Greek schools.

The study sample consisted of fifth and sixth grade (10-12 year old) primary school pupils from throughout Greece, who had migrated from the former Soviet Union (n1=1100). The control group consisted of the Greek classmates of these children (n2=713). The two groups were selected according to the method of stratified sampling. First, geographical areas were selected that were representative with respect to the percentage of families coming from the former Soviet Union. Subsequently, those areas that appeared to have a high representation of our study's target school population were selected. Finally, a number of schools, and within them pupils, were selected in these areas using random sampling procedures. Teachers were also part of the study's sample (n3=165). The research took place throughout Greece during the years 1997-2000 and the sample consisted of 54 schools in total. The same researcher conducted the research in the following geographical areas: in Attica Municipality (Athens, Piraeus, Kallithea,

Acharnes, Liosia), Thrace (Evros, Rodopi, Xanthi), Thessalia (Trikala), Macedonia (Salonica, Chalkidiki, Kavala), Crete (Chania).

Psychometric Instruments and procedure

- a) *Teacher-Child Rating Scale (T-CRS)*: This is a two-part scale assessing children's school adjustment difficulties. The first part includes 18 items (questions) and assesses three broad-band dimensions of problem behaviors, which derive from factor analysis. These are: Acting-Out, Shy-Anxious and Learning Difficulties based on a 5 point metric (Likert type) scale. The second part includes 20 items and assesses four competence dimensions: Frustration-Tolerance, Assertive Social Skills, Task Orientation and School Interest.
- b) *Child Rating Scale (CRS)*: This is a 24 item scale that assesses children's perceived strengths and problems using a 3 point metric scale.
- c) *Semi-structured interviews*: A certain number of teachers (n₃=165) and pupils from the former Soviet Union (n₄=260) were interviewed. Teachers were asked a variety of questions (e.g. pinpointing types of school adjustment difficulties, factors related to school adjustment difficulties, school - family relations). Pupil interviews explored a variety of issues as well (e.g. relating to the kinds of school adjustment difficulties experienced and exploring their general attitude towards school). The teacher interviews consisted of 16 questions and the pupil interviews consisted of 8 questions.

The two aforementioned scales were developed by Emory L. Cowen and Dirk A. Hightower, both Professors at the University of Rochester (USA). The two scales have been used worldwide and contain reliable, multidimensional measures and are easy to complete. A total number of 3.561 scales were completed in full (by teacher and pupil) for each pupil in the sample. The pupils were unaware that their teachers would be assessing them by completing similar rating scales. Pupils were also reassured that their answers would be strictly confidential.

Results: T-TESTS of independent samples

T-tests of independent samples (between groups) were used order to discover whether there were statistical differences between group means in our sample, each time using a different independent variable. The criterion for the level of statistical significance was $p < 0.05$. We used Levine's Test in order to find out whether equality of standard deviations (S.D.) existed or not between the two groups (pupils coming from the former Soviet Union and Greeks). In this section, we will present the t-test results of three independent variables.

Independent variable "ethno-cultural origin", dependent variable "school adjustment difficulties"

Table 1 shows the Means and S.D. of school adjustment difficulty factors related to ethno-cultural origin. Asterisks identify those factors where significant differences exist between means.

FACTORS	Pupils from former Soviet Union		Greek pupils	
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.
<i>Teacher's rating scale (T.R.S.)</i>				
Acting out *	13.21	5.19	12.50	4.57
Anxiety/Withdrawal*	13.48	4.07	12.76	3.77
Learning*	16.24	4.71	13.85	4.68
Tolerance/Frustration	17.15	3.18	17.29	3.05
Assertive Social skills	16.51	3.81	18.05	3.51
Task Orientation	16.27	4.34	18.31	4.09
Interpersonal social skills	19.46	3.40	20.64	3.25
<i>Child's rating scale (C.R.S.)</i>				
Compliance/Acting-out	15.49	2.07	16.19	1.83
Anxiety/Withdrawal*	10.46	2.26	10.33	2.13
Interpersonal social skills	14.77	2.27	15.24	2.17
School Interest	15.38	2.26	15.94	2.13
School achievement*	17.42	6.17	13.67	5.56

Table 1: Means and Standard Deviations of school adjustment difficulties related to origin

The results reveal that there are differences for almost all factors contained on the two rating scales (extracted from factor analysis). One can notice in Table 1 that the most important differences between Greeks and pupils from the former Soviet Union can be found in those factors that refer to the cognitive domain, in other words to “learning” (Mean for Greeks=13.85, Mean for Pontians=16.24), “task orientation” (Mean for Greeks=18.31, Mean for Pontians =16.27) and “school achievement” (Mean for Greeks =13.67, Mean for Pontians =17.42).

Another finding is that, according to the t-test results, there are significant differences between the Means on almost all factors. Indicatively, for the factors “learning”, “task orientation” and “school achievement the level of statistical significance is even $p < 0.001$. In general, we can conclude that the influence of origin is statistically significant for most of the factors, and is without any doubt important for the learning and psychosocial adjustment of pupils.

Independent variable “language”, dependent variable “school adjustment difficulties”

Table 2 shows the Means and S.D. of school adjustment difficulty factors connected with language spoken at home. In general, pupils can be divided into two groups: those who speak more Greek at home and those who speak another language more frequently (n=570 who speak Greek or the Pontiac dialect, n=530 who speak Russian or a Georgian dialect). A survey of the Means in the following table indicates differences for almost all factors. It is noticeable that the most important differences between repatriated pupils who tend to speak more Greek at home and others are related

to the following ‘cognitive’ factors: “learning”, “task orientation” and “school achievement”.

FACTORS	Greek language		Other language	
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.
<i>Teacher's rating scale (T.R.S.)</i>				
Acting out	12.95	5.40	13.49	4.97
Anxiety/Withdrawal	13.24	4.13	13.75	4.00
Learning	15.76	4.75	16.75	4.55
Tolerance/Frustration	17.24	3.21	17.04	3.15
Assertive Social skills	16.90	3.93	16.09	3.66
Task Orientation	16.65	4.14	15.78	4.50
Interpersonal social skills	19.79	3.35	19.11	3.43
<i>Child's rating scale (C.R.S.)</i>				
Compliance/Acting-out	15.67	2.14	15.29	1.98
Anxiety/Withdrawal	10.45	2.30	10.46	2.32
Interpersonal social skills	14.95	2.14	14.56	2.39
School Interest	15.18	2.13	15.57	2.37
School achievement	16.56	6.00	18.35	6.22

Table 2: Means and Standard Deviations of school adjustment difficulties related to language

According to t-test results, the differences on almost all factors were statistically significant.² This implies that the influence of the factor “language spoken” is without any doubt important for the learning and psychosocial adjustment of pupils. The majority of pupils from the former Soviet Union preferred to speak Greek at school, something which might imply that they might progressively forget their mother tongue - the Russian language.

Pearson Correlations

If we examine the correlations between the variable ‘percentage of repatriated former Soviet Union pupils’ and ‘Greek pupil achievement within a school’, we can state that our data show that the higher the percentage of repatriated, the lower Greek pupil achievement is (Table 3). This result highlights the importance of providing appropriate education and teaching addressed to the needs of all pupils. Only then can improved achievement across the board be expected. Otherwise, the lack of effective measures and provisions might cause both immigrant and indigenous pupils to underachieve (see Table 4).

² More specifically, for the factor “learning”, the t value was 3.513 (p<0.001); for the factor “task orientation”, it was -3.324 (p<0.001) and for the factor “school achievement” it was 4.839 (p<0.001).

Variable	Pearson	p
Percentage of repatriated pupils x Greek pupil achievement	0.457	0.001

Table 3: Correlation coefficients related to effect of percentage of repatriated pupils on achievement levels of Greek pupils

Variable	Pearson	p
Percentage of repatriated pupils x Greeks pupil and repatriated former Soviet pupil achievement	0.323	0.017

Table 4: Correlation coefficients related to effect of percentage of repatriated pupils on achievement levels of both Greek and repatriated pupils

Discussion and Recommendations

The above findings reveal that repatriated pupils (with Greek heritage) from the former Soviet Union, who attend Greek primary schools, face difficulties in both the learning and psycho-social domains. These results are in line with the results of similar studies in Greece regarding other ethnic groups (see e.g. Hatzichristou and Hopf pertaining to repatriated pupils from Germany (1992, 1993a, 1993b); Dimakos and Tasiopoulou (2003) exploring the attitudes of Greek pupils towards their immigrant classmates; and Korilaki (2005) on school attainment of pupils from the former Soviet Union and Albania.

With respect to the pupils who participated in this research, we can state the following: given prevailing educational policies for immigrant pupils, they will most likely forget their mother tongue in the long run and will be assimilated into Greek culture and society. Unfortunately, this applies to almost all immigrant pupils due to the lack of appropriate provisions for educational services in their first language. Until now, only a few primary schools in Greece have become bilingual. The need for appropriate bilingual educational policies that would promote interculturalism and social justice remains a high priority.

Another point is that Greek teachers who ‘assess’ and rate their immigrant pupils might be overly influenced by the average performance of pupils in their classroom and tend to give their grades according to a normalized distribution in their classroom. This means that teachers do not give grades to their student according to nationwide performance levels. Teacher assessments would be better informed if the personal history of each child and the difficulties s/he faces at the personal and/or family level were taken into consideration (Evangelou & Palaiologou, 2007).

Reviewing all of the above, it becomes clear that one should be very careful when generalizing about those with a different national origin, and specifically with regard to recommendations one might make with respect to educational policies relating to the repatriated and immigrants. For this reason, we would like to reflect on the contention that many of the problems immigrants face in the host country’s school system are

primarily due to their language difficulties – though this does seem to be one of the variables having an effect. It is too simplistic to attribute all responsibility for learning and psychosocial problems of immigrants to a lack of language skills (Palaiologou & Evangelou, 2003, p. 220).

Creemers (1994), among others, has identified the effect of classroom and school on pupil achievement. Although factors at the school level influence education at the classroom level, the classroom level appears to have a more direct effect on pupil achievement. Referring to the main findings of our research, a negative statistical correlation exists between the learning achievement of Greek pupils and the percentage of pupils from the former Soviet Union attending the school. In general, the higher the percentage of Pontiac pupils from the former Soviet Union, the more negative the general school performance of Greek pupils appears to be.

According to Creemers (1994), variables at the school level and, especially at the content level, influence the quality of instruction, learning time and opportunities. These variables are clearly reflected at the classroom level, but the school level creates the framework for their functioning. Creemers (1994) indicates three elements that contribute to the quality of instruction at the classroom level: curricula, the peer group and teacher behaviour. Curricula, group composition, teacher behaviour and educational goals all have an important impact on pupil learning. Creemers (1994) also pinpoints the synergistic effect of all these variables which define the quality of instruction and effective teaching.

All the above imply that teachers need to adapt their textbooks and curricula, as well as their instructional methods, in order to meet their pupils' learning and pedagogical needs. A critical point is that none of the above factors in isolation can contribute to the improvement of the pupils' educational outcomes; a combination of them is needed during the teaching process to eliminate pupil learning difficulties and raise their self-esteem. In other words, a critical factor is the ability of teachers to create a warm, human environment in his/her classroom, and, at the same time, his/her ability to adjust the learning process according to the knowledge level his/her pupils have. At the same time, the teacher should take into consideration the factors that create barriers within the teaching process.

Another important factor is the social interaction and acceptance of immigrant students by their Greek classmates. Social interaction might be limited because of the difficulty the former have in understanding and communicating with their Greek peers in Greek - this especially applies to late arrival immigrants. An encouraging issue is that Greek pupils were eager to build friendships with their immigrant classmates, though the latter contended that when they first attended a Greek school they experienced exclusion and isolation from the Greeks (Palaiologou, 2000). This indicates a need to improve educational opportunities and chances for immigrant pupils in order to improve their grasp of the second language, while maintaining their mother tongue.

On the whole, immigrant and repatriated pupils do not have 'special education' needs, but they do have special educational and psycho-social needs. A democratic educational system that respects human rights, and by extension, diversity, thus becomes necessary. What these pupils need is effective intervention at a psycho-social level (Giavrimis et al., 2003), as well as adequate – both in terms of time and quality- second language teaching.

The implementation of a Bilingual Intercultural Education model in the Greek educational system, with bilingual textbooks and appropriate teaching methodologies is a matter of urgency for all public schools. Within such a framework, the values of social

justice and human rights become part and parcel of the school's overall approach and bridge the complexities arising in modern multi-cultural societies. Until now, teaching with bilingual textbooks has shown to have positive results only for a few schools at the pilot level. Unfortunately, immigrant pupils in Greece do not have sufficient opportunities in school to maintain their cultural heritage and mother tongue.

Appropriate educational measures and provisions need to be implemented in order to meet the needs of all pupils with differences (cultural or special needs) in the direction of Compensatory Education and supportive teaching. Moreover, teachers and especially those who are working in reception or tutorial classes, should attend special education programmes throughout their undergraduate studies. In-service training is also needed to remove their hesitations or fears about teaching in a multi-cultural classroom environments and feel reinforced in the difficult role they have. (Palaiologou, 2001).

In conclusion, the Greek educational system needs to keep up with the new intercultural needs of our era and contribute with its democratic and human values to the new type of person who is well-rounded and feels comfortable in various cultural settings, the '*homo-interculturalis*' person (Palaiologou, 2000).

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