"I don't speak your language. Can we still be friends?"
Immigrant Children's Language Barriers in Forming Friendships with Peers in Multicultural Schools:
A Case Study from Cyprus

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Abstract

It has become almost a truism that children tend to affiliate and develop friendships and peer relationships with those who speak the same language and share the same cultural heritage. Social isolation of immigrant children in the classroom, as well during recess time, is the new "plague" in school communities all around the world, due to the rapid increase of immigration over the past few years. Weakness in communicating in the host country's dominant language may result in immigrant children experiencing feelings of isolation and loneliness. Furthermore, without proper socialization it is difficult for a child to even attempt to work toward goals in other areas. The paper draws on a case study evidence from a multicultural public primary school in Cyprus. Focus group interviews and observations were conducted with immigrant children who learn Greek as a Second Language (GSL), between November 2017 and January 2018. These interviews explored (a) what immigrant children think about friendship in general and friendship networks in their classroom/school, and (b) feelings they experience in various aspects of school life, such as work in class, and play during recess time. The findings are discussed relatively to the educational and socio-cultural context of Cyprus. This paper aims to (a) address calls for understanding immigrant children's language barriers in forming friendships with their peers and (b) provide new insights to contribute to the ongoing dialogue in the sub-field of inclusion in education, linked to children's peer relationships and second language teaching. Limitations and recommendations for further research, are also addressed.

Keywords: Immigrant children friendships, peer relationships, multicultural primary schools, language barriers, case study, qualitative research;

1. Introduction – The Context of Cyprus

"We left Latvia in September…I came to this school in November…I still don't know how to speak Greek very well, neither do I understand most of what the teacher and my classmates say in Greek…I feel invisible…ignored by everyone in class most of the times…The teacher gives me a piece of paper to draw whatever I want…and then she forgets about me…no one talks to me, neither boys nor girls…not even A. who sits next to me...I like most of my classmates, I think they are smart and funny! But they don't talk to me…I feel invisible to them….so lonely…I lost all of my friends when we left Latvia…I miss my old life a lot […]" (X., Latvia, Year 4, Early Production Stage of Second Language Acquisition) [1]

It has become almost a truism that children tend to affiliate and develop friendships and peer relationships with those who speak the same language and share the same cultural heritage; these two usually lead to similar attitudes and common interests [2]. Social isolation of immigrant children in the classroom, as well during recess time, is the new "plague" in school communities all around Europe and the world, in general, due to the rapid increase of immigration over the past few years. Weakness in communicating in the host country's dominant language may result in immigrant children experiencing feelings of isolation and loneliness. Furthermore, without proper socialization it is difficult for a child to even attempt to work toward goals in other areas.

The rapid increase of immigration in Cyprus, coming in line with the European migrant/refugee crisis, has created new and as yet only partially understood challenges in many key aspects of society. According to the most recent Cyprus Demographic Report prepared by the country's Statistical Service [3], out of a total of 947.000 inhabitants, 706.800 (74.6%) are Greek-Cypriot (Greeks, Armenians, Maronites and Latins), 92.200 (9.8%) are Turkish-Cypriots, and 148.000 (15.6%) are foreign residents. According, also, to the Directorate of Primary Education of the Cyprus Ministry of Education and Culture (MOEC) [4], statistical data for the school year 2017-2018 show that out of the

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51.487 children who attend public primary school in Cyprus, 8.884 are of immigrant families (17.25%). 7.452 of these children (14.5%) don't speak Greek as their first language.

Undoubtedly, the above-mentioned statistics show that today's public primary schools in Cyprus are racially, ethnically, culturally and linguistically diverse communities. As Papamichael [5] points out, the MOEC promoted diversity tolerance, inclusion and intercultural competence as the answer to the immigration phenomenon and the transformation of our society into a multicultural one. Does everyone involved in the educational procedure, though, understand the terms *inclusiveness* and *interculturalness,* not only in theory but in practice too? What are the perceptions of immigrant children who attend public school, regarding Inclusion in Action?

2. Methodology

The paper draws on a case study evidence from a multicultural public primary school in Cyprus, in the rural area of Famagusta. The data used for analysis and discussion in this paper are part of an on-going large scale Marie-Sklodowska Curie funded project, which has begun three years ago and aims to examine the social interactions, dynamics and friendship networks of children in schools in different countries, including Cyprus, in order to build a Social Network Analysis (SNA) toolkit to enable educational professionals understand the social dynamics within their settings, and help eliminate phenomena of loneliness, rejection or neglect amongst their pupils. The paper focuses specifically on the experiences of thirty-six children, aged 6 to 10 (Year 1 to Year 4) categorized as being supporting pupils with additional educational needs (Second Language Acquisition), who are similar to many others studied within the project. Convenience sampling was used, as one of the authors teaches Greek as a Second Language (GSL) to these thirty-six children. Pupils were more relaxed when participating in the focus-groups, as the researcher was a familiar and trustworthy person. Both this case study and the process of data analysis adopted a critical and socio-ethnographic methodology, based on Onuegbuzie et al.'s Quality Framework for Focus-Group Research [6]. Amongst a variety of data collection tools, semi-structured focus group interviews and nonverbal communication observations were conducted in the school between November 2017 and January 2018. Both face-to-face group interviews and video-taped observations explored (a) what immigrant children think about friendship in general and friendship networks in their classroom/school, and (b) feelings they experience in various aspects of school life, such as having a friend to help with work in class, having a friend to play during recess time, or having someone to talk to when feeling sad or blue.

3. Results

Data discussed in this paper include quotations from interviews with some of the thirty-six pupils. The main criterion for choosing the membership of the focus-groups was the pupils' homogeneity with respect to demographic characteristics, background, knowledge, experiences, and the like [7], so as to positively affect a member's willingness, confidence or comfort to express their viewpoints. We aimed at giving voice to all participants, having an eye on their nonverbal reactions at the same time. Such nonverbal data include the proxemic (i.e., use of interpersonal space to communicate attitudes), chronemic (i.e., use of pacing of speech and length of silence in conversation), paralinguistic (i.e., all variations in volume, pitch, and quality of voice), and kinesic (i.e., body movements or postures) [8]. A sample of transcription conventions from the case study under discussion in this paper is presented below (Table 1). We only use the first letter of each child's first name, in order to keep them anonymous:

Focus Group No/Child Name	Grade /Gender	SLA*	Focus-group question					
			FRIENDSHIP/ HAVING A FRIEND	CHILDREN'S CLASSROOM PEER RELATIONSHIPS	CHILDREN'S PEER RELATIONSHIPS AT RECESS	PEER BEHAVIOURS	GENDER PREFERENCES	DIVERSITY ISSUES
FG1 M	1M	EP	LL→	FL↓	LL→	FL↓	LPL↑	SFL←
FG1 S	1F	EP	SFL↓	SFL↓	SFL↓	SFL↓	LL→	LL→
FG1 C	1M	SE	LL→	SFL←	LL→	FL↓	LPL↑	LL→
FG3 G	2F	EP	LL→	SFL←	LL→	SFL←	LL→	LL→
FG5 AM	2F	EP	SFL↓	SFL↓	FL↓	FL↓	LL→	LL→
FG6 CR	3M	EP	PL↑	FL↓	SFL↓	PL↑	PL↑	PL↑
FG6 M	3F	IF	SFL↓	SFL↓	SFL↓	SFL↓	PL↑	LL→
FG7 S	3F	EP	SFL↓	SFL↓	SFL↓	SFL↓	PL↑	LL→
FG7 X	4F	EP	SFL↓	SFL↓	SFL↓	SFL↓	LL→	LL→
FG7 D	4M	SE	PL↑	LPL↑	PL↑	PL↑	PL↑	PL↑
NOTATIONS:								
PARTICIPANT GENDER	M=MALE	F=FEMALE						
*ISCED IN YEARS (Y) =INTERNATIONAL STANDARD CLASSIFICATION OF EDUCATION SYSTEM	1=Y1	2=Y2	3=Y3	4=Y4	5=Y5	6=Y6		
SLA=SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION STAGES (Krashen & Terrell, 1983)	PP=PREPRODUCTION	EP=EARLY PRODUCTION	SE=SPEECH EMERGENCE	IF=INTERMEDIATE FLUENCY	AF=ADVANCED FLUENCY			
SYMBOLS FOR DOCUMENTING PROXEMIC, CHRONEMIC, PARALINGUISTIC AND KINESIC INFORMATION DURING FOCUS-GROUP INTERVIEW	L=LAUGHTER	S=SIGHING	F=FROWNING	P=PASSION	L↑=SPEAKER LEANS FORWARD WHILE TALKING	L↓=SPEAKER LEANS BACKWARD WHILE TALKING	L←=SPEAKER LEANS TO THE LEFT WHILE TALKING	L→=SPEAKER LEANS TO THE RIGHT WHILE TALKING

Table 1.Documenting proxemic, chronemic, paralinguistic and kinesic information

Out of thirty-six children who participated in the focus-group interviews, twenty-six of them (72.2%) seem to enjoy friendships at school, which is, according to them, an inclusive environment, where the concept of diversity encompasses acceptance and respect. These children engaged in more cohesive conversation during our interviews and were more likely to alternate concersational turns and to offer explanations to peers. On the other hand, ten out of the thirty-six interviewed children (27.8%) feel rejected or even neglected by their peers; these children were less contingently responsive, took longer conversational turns, made more irrelevant comments and interruptions, and were not talkative during peer interactions. Almost all of them (94.4%) argued passionately that having a good friend in school is of vital importance for their wellbeing and boosts their self-esteem to attempt to achieve goals in all areas of school life. D. from Latvia (Year 4), whose level of verbally communicating in Greek is quite good, says *"I have friends! Only boys! I don't like girls! We play [with boys] during recess and I like it!"*. A. from Serbia (Year 4), who can also communicate in Greek in a satisfactory level, says *"My friends in school are the most important part of my life. Even more important than home. Because my most precious moments happen in school, and I don't know what I would do without my school friends!".* Furthermore, it seems that school is the place for children to build strong friendships, although what the interview participants mentioned is that they tend to build friendships and peer relationships with children they share the same language and/or share the same cultural heritage, and experiences. S. from Syria (Year 3), who is still in a very preliminary stage of Greek Language acquisition, says *"I like recess time, because sometimes I hang out with my friend, who is in Year 4. She teaches me Serbian, and I teach her Arabic…we use a few Greek and a few English to communicate with each other…and we play and laugh a lot together…I love her very much!"* [1]. According to research evidence [2] children who share the same language and cultural heritage are more likely to build friendships in school. This didn't happen with X. (girl, Year 4, Early Production of GSL) and D. (boy, Year 4, Speech Emergence of GSL) who are both from Latvia and are in the same

classroom, but didn't manage to build a friendship, or a peer relationship, as expected by their teachers.

4. Conclusion

This case-study was an exploratory one. Previous research on the experiences of immigrant children in public primary schools in Cyprus, regarding language barriers in forming friendships with their peers is not existent. As a result, there are a number of areas requiring further research, such as language issues in relation to the school's level of inclusive and intercultural norms, etc. A limitation in conducting a behavioural study, is that there may be children who feel quite lonely but do not wish to acknowledge this to others or even to themselves. What this study's findings reccomend is that focus-group interviews and nonverbal communication observations analysis, as part of a Social Network Analysis approach, are strong tools for examining the social interactions, dynamics and friendship networks of (immigrant) children in schools, in order to help eliminate phenomena of loneliness, rejection or neglect amongst pupils, through raising every single child's profile in school, enhancing inter-cultural understanding, and providing greater opportunities for isolated pupils to become more involved in the classroom/school community, not letting language issues to be a barrier in forming successful peer relations.

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