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Adjustment of Romanian Immigrant Students in a New Educational Context

Aniella Mihaela VIERIU¹

Abstract

The present study focuses on the adjustment of Romanian immigrant students in emigration schools. The sample was comprised of 102 Romanian immigrant students, 40 male and 62 female, between the ages of 11 and 18, attending different schools in countries such as Spain, Italy and Belgium. Students' adjustment was investigated by means of a questionnaire consisting of four subscales: linguistic adaptation, cultural adaptation, school adjustment and teacher-student relationship. Results indicate that while immigrant students have a satisfactory level of educational and linguistic adjustment, the social adjustment is less satisfactory. We also obtained correlations between linguistic adaptation and school adjustment, linguistic adaptation and social adaptation, linguistic adaptation and teacher-student relationship, school adjustment and social adaptation, school adjustment and teacher-student relationship, social adaptation and teacher-student relationship. Other correlations were found between the number of years that Romanian immigrant students spent in the host country and linguistic adaptation, school adjustment and teacher-student relationship.

Keywords:

Romanian immigrant students, linguistic adaptation, school adjustment, social adaptation

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Introduction

The phenomenon of migration is a topic of both worry and debate, and the role it plays in education is vital to achieving a more just multicultural society in which social inequality has no place. Studying in a multicultural environment has become overwhelmingly popular all over the world. In the past decade, there has been considerable debate in the sociological literature concerning the well-being of migrant children (Hernandez, 2005; Hirschman, 2000; Gans, 1992; Harker, 2001; Harris et al., 2003; Jasso and Rosenzweig, 1990; Perlmann and Waldinger, 1997; Portes and Rumbaut, 1996, 2001; Zhou and Bankston, 1998). A large body of scholarly research is directed to understanding the adaptation and assimilation process of the immigrant children (Alba and Nee, 1997; Bankston and Zhou, 1997; Farley and Alba, 2002; Hirschman et al. 1999; Kasinitz, 2008; Gans, 1992; Jasso and Rosenzweig, 1990; Perlmann and Waldinger, 1997; Perreira et al., 2006; Portes and Fernandez-Kelly, 2008; Portes and Rumbaut, 1996; Zhou and Xiong, 2005).

This study focuses on the adaptation of Romanian immigrant students in four large dimensions: linguistic adaptation, social adaptation, school adjustment and teacher-student relationship. Immigrants' adaptation to their new societies is a dominant theme of research nowadays. It is indeed a complex and long process. Settlement in new and different socio-cultural systems involves experiences of new and different learning opportunities requiring ample adaptation and accommodation (Rogler, 1994).

Theoretical background

Recent studies showed that immigrant students encountered problems pertaining not only to socio-cultural adaptation, such as adjustment to social customs and norms (Schwarzer, Hahn, Schroder, 1994) and psychological adaptation, such as feeling depressed, anxious, and lonely due the loss of their social support networks (Sandhu and Asrabadi, 1994; Yang and Clum, 1995), but also academic adaptation such as worrying about academic performance (Hayes and Lin, 1994; Kagan and Cohen, 1990). For the children, this is an especially complex process since it involves disconnection, readjustment and some forms of integration in new surroundings. Immigrant children must therefore maneuver themselves in a new society by having to cope with a new and

different situation (Suarez-Orozco, 2001). In addition to the social and linguistic adjustment, immigrant children are required to adapt to a new educational environment. This often implies a need to learn different content areas in a language they are not familiar with, and to adapt to a different school culture, including teaching, methods, testing practices and learning material (Levin and Shohamy, 2008).

Competencies in the language of the host country are critical for integration (Esser, 2006). In most countries of the western world, immigrant children have severe problems with school language, and it takes them a considerable time to resolve such problems (Stanat, Becker, Baumert, Ludtke and Eckhardt, 2012). Language is the regulating instrument of social exchanges, the latter being the result of integration, adaptation and socialization (Carbonell, 2004). Extra and Yagmur (2004) reported on the linguistic diversity in Europe as a consequence of the migratory movements occurring on this level, working on it from different perspectives: phenomenological, demographical, sociolinguistic and educational. The study by Serra (1997) with immigrant children in the fourth year of primary school (9 to 10 years of age) stresses that the levels of linguistic knowledge are very poor. This certainly means that their difficulties with the use of language conditions inferior results in all areas of learning, resulting in failure at school. Several works carried out on the relationship between immigration and success at school are disappointing, given that the immigrant children obtain significantly lower results than native students (Huguet, Navarro and Janes, 2007; Navarro and Huguet, 2005, 2006). The results of the study by Rodriguez, Romero, Luque and Rocio (2002) in 8 state schools of Algeciras (Spain) indicate that immigrant children have lower levels of adaptation to school and academic performance than their native peers. They also point to the influence of socialization in learning difficulties and failure at school among immigrants. The study by Villa, Perera, and Serra (2006) concludes that integration and adaptation are decisive factors for the incorporation and development of language.

Social ties of forms of “social capital” are important as they provide information about biographical options and thus, allow the building of long term personal investments. The social integration refers to the quantity and quality of social connections and interactions that people have with others. For immigrants, inter-ethnic social capital

(Esser, 2003) is especially relevant as it reaches into the group of natives within the society and hence, allows utilization of established resources. A similar argument points to the negative effect of segregation and the isolation of immigrants. In the context of immigration, the term integration is often used to refer to a type of acculturation strategy in which immigrants have regular contact with host nationals and maintain their original cultural identity (Berry, 1997).

It is a quite well established regularity across most Western countries with long immigration tradition that immigrant children achieve lower educational attainment than natives (Kristen, 2002; Werum, Davis, Cheng, 2011). But according to the most optimistic views on immigrant adaptation, immigrant children experience an educational disadvantage only temporarily and, in the long run, they display similar educational attainment to natives (Alba and Nee, 1997).

Romanian migrant students schooled in different educational systems may experience identity problems due to cultural differences and poor language proficiency (Eirini, 2001), and are characterized in some research reports as less autonomous and rarely open to group work and social participation (Ion, 2011).

Building on these previous results, the aim of the present research study was to establish levels of linguistic, social and school adjustment and identify existing relationships between these forms of adjustment.

Method

Participants

The sample included a total of 102 Romanian immigrant students between the ages of 11 and 18. Of these 102 individuals, 40 are male and 62 are female. They attend different schools in countries such as Spain, Italy and Belgium (i.e. the main countries of destination for Romanian migrants). They have been contacted through the Institute for Romanian Language and attend elective classes in Romanian language, culture and civilization supported by the Romanian Ministry of National Education.

Instruments

The immigrant children adaptation was investigated by means of a questionnaire consisting of four subscales: linguistic adaptation, cultural adaptation, school adjustment and teacher-student relationship.

The questionnaire contains 22 Likert-scale items and requires participants to rate events' frequency (1-total disagreement to 5-total agreement). Internal consistency of the version employed in the present study is satisfactory: reliability coefficient (Cronbach's alpha) for subscales is .72.

Procedure

The first phase of the research was carried out on the basis of data provided by the Institute for Romanian Language. The schools with the greatest number of Romanian immigrant students were analyzed and a representative sampling selection of the immigrant students was performed. Contact with Romanian immigrant students was facilitated by the Institute for Romanian Language, along with teachers involved in the previously mentioned program.

Results

A composite score was used for studying the levels of adaptation. The results showed that the variable with the highest average (3,36) was the linguistic adaptation, followed by teacher-student relationship variable with an average of 3,15. Next, the school adjustment variable had an average of 3,03. Finally, the variable with the lowest average was social adaptation (3,02).

ANOVA Repeated Measures design was used for studying the levels of linguistic, social and educational adaptation. Results revealed significant differences between the four dimensions that were compared (linguistic adaptation, social adaptation, educational adaptation, teacher-student relationship) ($F(3,303)=8,97$; $p<0,01$). Post-hoc comparisons made in pair (through Bonferonni test) indicated that linguistic adaptation has a significantly higher level than the other three variables.

By averaging responses to the items that make adaptation dimensions we found correlations between composite scores. We obtained the following correlations: there is a significant correlation between linguistic adaptation and school adjustment (Sig.(2-tailed): $0,001<0,05$, $r=0,31$); there is a significant correlation between linguistic adaptation and social adaptation (Sig.(2-tailed): $0,008<0,05$, $r=0,26$); there is a significant correlation between linguistic adaptation and teacher-student relationship (Sig.(2-tailed): $0,0082<0,05$, $r=0,3$); there is a significant correlation between school adjustment

and social adaptation (Sig.(2-tailed): $0,003 < 0,05, r = 0,28$); there is a significant correlation between school adjustment and teacher-student relationship (Sig.(2-tailed): $0,01 < 0,05, r = 0,23$) and a significant correlation between social adaptation and teacher-student relationship (Sig.(2-tailed): $0,002 < 0,05, r = 0,29$).

To identify gender differences in size adaptation we used *t test for independent variables*. Results showed that there is no gender difference in the adaptation dimensions ($p > 0,05$).

To verify the existence of significant correlations between the number of years that Romanian immigrant students spent in the host country school and adaptation dimensions, we used a composite score. We obtained the following correlations: there is a significant correlation between the years that Romanian immigrant students spend in the host country and linguistic adaptation (Sig.(2-tailed): $0,00 < 0,05, r = 0,64$); there is a significant correlation between the years that Romanian immigrant students spend in the host country and school adjustment (Sig.(2-tailed): $0,03 < 0,05, r = 0,20$); there is a significant correlation between the years that Romanian immigrant students spend in the host country and teacher-student relationship (Sig.(2-tailed): $0,009 < 0,05, r = 0,25$).

We also wanted to identify if there were significant correlations between the age of Romanian immigrant students and the adaptation dimensions using a composite score. Results showed no significant correlation ($p > 0,05$).

In the last phase of the study we wanted to see if we could find significant differences between Spain and Italy regarding Romanian immigrant students' adaptation. The *t test for independent samples* was used. One significant difference was identified between Italy and Spain (countries with the highest score) for linguistic adaptation (Sig.(2-tailed): $0,035 < 0,05$). The mean value for Romanian immigrant students from Spain was 3,51 and the mean value for Romanian immigrant students from Italy was 3,19. Thus, it can be said that Romanian immigrant students from Spain have a higher level of linguistic adaptation than Romanian immigrant students from Italy.

Discussion and conclusion

The research reported in this paper focuses on Romanian immigrant students' adaptation in emigration schools. The findings confirm that immigrant students have a satisfactory level of educational and linguistic adjustment, but a less satisfactory level of social adjustment. Post-hoc comparisons made in pair (through Bonferonni test) indicated that linguistic adaptation displays a significantly higher level than the other three variables. We also obtained correlations between linguistic adaptation and school adjustment, linguistic adaptation and social adaptation, linguistic adaptation and teacher-student relationship, school adjustment and social adaptation, school adjustment and teacher-student relationship, and social adaptation and teacher-student relationship. We also found correlations between the number of years that Romanian immigrant students spend in the host country and linguistic adaptation, school adjustment and teacher-students relationship. We also identified a significant difference between Italy and Spain (countries with the highest score) for linguistic adaptation.

Vila (1999) stresses that, for the integration of immigrants, a good linguistic adaptation is necessary, since it is difficult to discuss of integration if there is no possibility for communication in the new society. Language is necessary as a means of communication for intergroup relationships. The dominion of the language explains the effectiveness of communication and can lead to integration with or distancing from others (Briones et al., 2005). Previous research documented that increased linguistic adaptation was associated with increased identification with the group and increased psychological adaptation (Noels and Clement, 1996; Noels et al., 2001). Vila et al. (2006) and Vila et al. (2009), conclude that integration and adaptation are decisive factors in the incorporation and development of a language, and that its importance invalidates other agents such as age, the time spent in the country or the number of hours spent in the classroom. Baohua and Huizhong (2012) conclude that self-confidence and linguistic dominion of the second language is especially important for the immigrant student's motivation to integrate, as well as for his/her socio-cultural and academic adaptation. Lasagabaster (2004) and Pagina, Hubbs-Tait, and Kennison (2009) stress the relationship between children's verbal

capacity and their social competence- with the school being the ideal place to facilitate the learning of the language of the adoptive country through interaction with the others members of the school system. Similarly, the difficulties in initiating and maintaining interpersonal relationships make up a mediating variable in the association between the linguistic deficit and antisocial behavior (Lopez-Rubio, Mendoza and Fernandez-Parra, 2009).

The educational centers should be aware of the complicated process of teaching/learning that immigrant students go through; making didactic plans specially adapted to them and taking into account the fact that it is not just the linguistic difficulties of these students that influence their learning acquisition. As Garcia-Corona, Garcia-Garcia, Biencinto, Pastor, and Juarez (2010) point out, inclusive education goes beyond intercultural education. It goes one step further; it considers that quality education for all involves attending to the diversity of each student (Oller and Colome, 2010). Upon arrival in the host country, immigrant students need an education aimed at the basic dominion of the language and teachers should adapt their didactic methods to particular circumstances and demands (Serrano, Puyuelo and Salavera, 2012).

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Biodata



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