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Immigrants´ Children and their Feelings of Social Support in the Czech Republic

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Abstract

The paper describes research among immigrant children. We were interested in their feelings of social support in the Czech Republic. The sample of the respondents consists of 90 Vietnamese and 93 Ukrainian pupils. We used CASS - CZ inventory focusing investigation of the social support from the perspectives of pupils' families, their schools, teachers, friends and schoolmates. The result comparison implies different approaches and attitudes to various minorities of immigrants within the Czech society.

Introduction

The Czech Republic is becoming the target destination for an increasing number of various foreigner groups. Life in the Czech Republic is attractive especially for some of the former Soviet Union nation members as well as for some of the Balkan country inhabitants because of the language similarity and close culture. This fact means new challenges for Czech schools as the school attendance of immigrants´children was limited in the past, mostly confoned to separate individual cases.

Teachers, educators, social workers and other people working in close contact with children from ethnic minorities need to be able to recognize their personality, family background and environment in order to estimate the possibilities of the child´s development and mutual cooperation.

The process of learning about members of other nationalities also involves mapping their social support, which can be, to a certain extent, influenced by individual cross-cultural diversities.

The term ´social support´ can be perceived in different ways. There are two categories of perception, depending on the aspects accented – either the sociological aspects or the psychological-medical ones. Another classification by aspect offers three categories, which are relatively independent – the sociological category, the psychological category and the communicative/interactive one (Mareš, 2001).

We tend to agree with the following definition of social support: it is an activity provided willingly and with good intentions, with the provider being on personal terms with the acceptor, and yielding improvement either immediately or over a longer span of time. According to some author (Mareš, 2001), social support clearly represents a multidimensional construction and it is not easy to find a short definition of the phenomenon. Its growth makes it an interdisciplinary issue. It is a dynamic process with its form and level tending to changes in relation to time, situation, life events, age, and

social integration of an individual. It can be perceived differently by the provider, the acceptor and by an independent observer (Mareš, 2001).

The Method Used

The questionnaire method was used in the research. We used the CASSS-cz Social Support Questionnaire for Children and Teenagers (translation and moditification: D. Komárek, E. Ondřejková, J. Mareš, E. Švarcová). It contains 60 graphically structured items, further divided into the sections entitled: My Parents, My Teacher, My Schoolmates, My Friend and People in My School. Each section includes 12 items and the pupil gives information on the frequency of the phenomena in question - social support – and on the importance of the phenomenon.

The CASSS-cz questionnaire informs about the pupils who are in the focus of attention of research workers from many disciplines, such as pedagogy, psychology, state politics, nursing, public health, and so on (Mareš, 2001) .

Researched Group

The researched group was represented by a selected sample of children population aged 11 to 15. These children (together with Czech children) attended classes with children of other nationalities (Ukrainians, Vietnamese, Germans, Poles, Americans, Italians, Bulgarians, Greeks, Albanians, Japanese, Turks, Cubans, Kazakhs, Belorussians, Russians, the Dutch, Slovaks, Mongolians and Armenians).

 The CASSS-cz questionnaire was used for the upper classes of primary school pupils.

There were 183 respondents to the questionnaire. Out of this number, 93 respondents were Ukrainian and 90 respondents were Vietnamese.

All the data processing was carried out using the NCSS 2000 statistical programme.

Research Hypothesis

We anticipated that the subjectively perceived social support in Vietnamese children compared to the subjectively perceived social support in their Ukrainian peers will be lower in the entries of teachers´support, schoolmates´support and support by the people in their school. On the other side, we thought that Vietnamese children would score higher in the entries of parents´support and friends´support.

Our estimations were based on the fact that both Vietnamese as a language and its culture and mentality bear striking differences to the central European way of life, while Ukrainians share the same Christian roots, have a similar course of history (a long totalitarian period) and their language is similar to Czech. All these factors should contribute to their higher feeling of comfort in a Czech school.

Result Interpretation and Analysis

Section 1 entitled ´My Parents´ contains for example these entries: my parents – they show how proud they are of me; they understand me; they listen to me when I talk to

them. They showed no significant difference in the perceived social support in Vietnamese children and Ukrainian children. No significant difference was in Section 4, either, which is entitled ´My Friends´: my friend (regardless of their sex) understands me and my feelings, will stand up for me when other children don´t treat me well and helps me, when I feel lonely.

On the other hand, differences occured in Section 2 ´My Teachers´, Section 3 ´My Schoolmates´ and Section 5 ´People in My School´. Sample entries for Section 2 were for example: my teachers – they are interested in me, they treat me fairly, they don´t mind me asking questions. Sample entries for Section 3 were for example: my friends – they are nice to me, they like most of my ideas and opinions, they count me in. Sample entries for Section 5 were for example: people in my school – they are interested in me, they understand me, they listen to me when I need it.

We found one of the research outcomes very interesting and, actually, not easily explainable. Regardless of the case, section or entry and the level of social support perception, the results showed that Vietnamese children perceive the social support from the side of their teachers, schoolmates or parents much better than Ukrainian children.

Table 1

Ukrainians	Social Support - Parents	Social Support - Teachers	Social Support - Schoolmates	Social Support – Friends	Social Support – People in My School
Number	93	93	93	93	93
Mean	4,20	3,84	3,45	4,44	3,45
Median	4,16	3,50	3,42	4,67	3,25
Standard Deviation	1,07	1,07	0,97	0,99	0,75

Table 2

Vietnamese	Social Support - Parents	Social Support - Teachers	Social Support - Schoolmates	Social Support - Friends	Social Support – People in My School
Number	90	90	90	90	90
Mean	4,30	4,42	4,04	4,45	4,12
Median	4,59	4,25	4,17	4,54	4,13
Standard Deviation	0.96	1,06	1,14	0,92	1,08

Result Interpretation

Our estimations were not confirmed by the study results. Naturally, we sought an explanation for this fact. Several consultations with demographers and sociologists led us to the following conclusions: on average, Vietnamese families have spent a longer time period in the Czech Republic (having arrived before 1989 or at the beginning of the 1990s). The main wave of the Ukrainian immigration has only reached its peak during the past decade. The Vietnamese tend to stay closer together as opposed to the Ukrainian population, which remains scattered and frequently hostile within itself or even fighting.

The Ukrainian population is often under pressure from various mafia groups and blackmailing gangs.

Czech citizens do not perceive any significant differences between both immigrant groups. It turns out that the most influential factor causing that Vietnamese children feel more supported in Czech schools is the outer manifestation of their typical features. While the Ukrainian children are more similar to Czech children in their behaviour but they are handicapped by the fact that they are foreigners, the Vietnamese children show more diligence, more effort and more obedience. Most teachers who have had an opportunity to teach Vietnamese pupils agree on that. They even score better results as far as learning Czech is concerned, although, ironically enough, Czech represents a language very different from their own language. So, as they are praised more often for the above mentioned qualities, it is only natural that they perceive this overall positive approach positively, too, and feel stronger social support.

Conclusion

Immigrants´children do not find themselves in an easy situation. They are in a new environment, with their life conditions not always up to the standard they had been expecting. Their parents are often worried about the future and finding job and, therefore, they cannot spend enough time with their children. Or, vice versa, as they cannot find a job, they spend too much time with them and control their every single step. Both these situations make the role of school and teachers twice as important. (Průcha, 2001)

As opposed to adults, children only gradually develop and acquire the lasting behaviour structures and the traits typical of their temperament and personality. The personal experience of two different formative environments (their homecountry – the past - no longer experienced but reminded about by their parents, and the foreign country – the present – alive but strange) can help develop an ambivalent relationship to their environment, to the strange but fully experienced culture and country.(Průcha, 2002)

Given such a relation to the world, the child´s inner integration of inconsistent experience could be more complicated. Children can be easily influenced by both the good and the bad in both cultures (Kocourek, 2002).

These adaptation problems contribute to the fact that these children need a sensitive approach. It is not only the fact that they belong to a diverse culture, have different traditions, beliefs or their parents´ way of life and their attitudes.

The above mentioned research implies that Ukrainian children do not feel as much social support from their teachers, schoolmates and people in their school as Vietnamese children.   This fact gives evidence of a certain ill preparation of our schools, teachers and people in schools to provide social support not only to the children showing the signs of character and mentality traits evaluated positively at school, but also to the children not showing the desirable traits and more similar in spirit to the less diligent and less hard-working Czech children. The problem lies in the lesser ability of our teachers to approach individual ethnic minorities in accordance with their national and cultural differences. Teachers still tend to approach the problem instinctively and with much improvisation (as shown in another research). It is obvious that schools cannot work

without special focused programmes, which would enable them to tackle the minority education issue in a professional and efficient way. (Šišková, 2001)

The research results point us towards the appropriate course that we should take in education of children from diverse socio-culture background.

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