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THE ROLE OF CULTURAL FACTORS IN THE EDUCATIONAL PROCESS OF RECENT IMMIGRANT CHILDREN OF GREEK AND ITALIAN BACKGROUND*

Introduction

I prepared this paper in 1983, as a resource educator for the bilingual Greek programme in the Public Elementary Schools in New York City. One of my responsibilities was to act as mediator and liaison between parents and teachers, in cases where children of Greek parentage are considered by teachers to have problems. Teachers in the bilingual Italian programme indicated that there were also specific problems with recent Italian immigrant children in the schools which seem to interfere with their learning.

All the case studies were concentrated in a school where the percentage of immigrant children was significant. The schools were in neighbourhoods of upper lower to lower-middle socio-economic class, and included many children whose families were recent immigrants (in total school population, Greek children accounted for approximately 20% and Italian children for approximately 17%; the total District Foreign Pupil Population was 60%).

Background of the Problem

Much has been written about the reasons why ethnic minority groups fail in school. Many theories have been advanced concerning possible causes of academic and social failure. In general, external factors, such as language problems, social and economic pressures and cultural assimilation, have been held accountable. Undeniably, such forces have been at work. However, it seems logical that one must study the ethnic groups themselves, in order to determine possible additional factors which might contribute to the overall problem.

The examination of cultural sources of strain in the family plays a significant role in the formation of character. Therefore, as Spiegel (1971) stated, in order to understand a person it is imperative to understand as much as possible about the family. To appreciate the makeup and function of the family, it is essential to understand its cultural determinants, which are of utmost importance in assessing the degree of integration and conflict within the family. Cultural values and characteristics are deep-rooted, influential, and constant, and do not change easily.

* Original: English, 34 pages

Children from minority groups, like any other children, and think, believe and act according to certain patterns, in part, because their cultural background is unique.

The assumption that membership in an ethnic minority group, as well as a subculture group low in socioeconomic status, handicaps the child seriously, is substantiated in research studies. Arnold and Wist (1970) offered supporting evidence in their study relating to problems in auditory discrimination among American middle-class children. They stated that, although individuals from low socioeconomic groups experience difficulty in attaining the skills necessary for reading achievement, members of ethnic groups have a higher incidence of such problems. Wakefield and Silvaroil (1969) pointed out, in their studies of language patterns among low socioeconomic groups, that children from ethnic minority groups are at a distinct disadvantage in schools where the middle-class English-speaking American is superior in linguistic skills. Smith (1974) discussed the characteristics that are common among many children of low socioeconomic groups, maintaining that low self-esteem, poverty and poor health constitute factors that are conducive to failure in school. In his study, Feitelson (1968) indicated that many disadvantaged minority children entering school lack the self-confidence necessary for successful adjustment to the school environment.

In order to understand immigrant children better, it is imperative to take into consideration some cultural factors that affect their ability to adapt to a different culture.

I used the following procedures to collect the data relative to this study:

1. What data can I find in the school to describe the problems of recent Greek and Italian immigrant children?
2. What does the literature say about recent immigrant children of Greek and Italian background that may throw some light on their problems and strengths; which teachers might use to work more effectively with these children?

Information Related to Recent Immigrant Greek "Problem" Children

The information about recent Greek immigrant children was collected from school records, teachers' and specialists' comments and case studies.

Empirical Data

In working with "problem" Greek elementary school boys, recent immigrants between the ages of seven and twelve, I have noted common elements in all of their histories (see Table 1). The majority of the boys were described by their teachers as underachievers and aggressive youngsters, whose peer relationships were poor. The teachers and interviewers considered them to be amiable and responsive on a one-to-one basis, but lacking in the social skills necessary to develop satisfactory peer and social relations. They were also regarded as poorly

motivated and failing to work up to their potential. The teachers and interviewers did not have any complaints about the girls and indicated that the girls were well-adjusted. My screening of their school records indicated that they were born in Greece and came from families that are intact, but not extended. They had been in this country less than five years. Their level of tested achievement was within grade norms, although their teachers were convinced they were not working up to their potential and were poorly motivated.

Table 1

Profile of Greek Students Considered as "Problem" Children

Characteristic	No.	Percent
Total number of Greek students	500	100
Number of "problem" children	30	6
Sex	Male	-
Years in the U.S.	1-5	-
Description of "problem" children by teachers		
1. Underachievers	24	80
2. Aggressive	18	60
3. Poor peer relationships	27	90
4. Poorly motivated	29	97
5. Prolonged problems - several years	15	50

Note: Percentages are based on n = 30

Information Related to Recent Immigrant Italian "Problem" Children

The information about recent Italian immigrant children was collected from school records, teachers' and specialists' comments and case studies.

Empirical Data

The bilingual Italian teachers and the school specialists stated that, in working with elementary school boys of Italian background, they have noted many similarities among students categorized as "problem" children (see Table 2). They also indicated that these children's teachers described them as lacking in motivation and poor in social adjustment. Their teachers frequently voiced discontent over these children's failure to achieve in accordance with their abilities. The teachers and interviewers did not express dissatisfaction with the girls and stated that the girls were well-adjusted. My screening of their school records revealed that they were born in southern Italy and came from extended families. They had been in this country less than five years. Their level of tested achievement was within grade norms, although their teachers indicated that they were not working up to their potential and were poorly motivated.

Table 2

Profile of Italian Students Considered as "Problem" Children

Characteristic	No.	Percent
Total number of Italian students	350	100
Number of "problem" children	120	34
Sex	Male	-
Years in the U.S.	1-5	-
Description of "problem" children by teachers		
1. Underachievers	100	83
2. Aggressive	60	50
3. Poor peer relationships	110	91
4. Poorly motivated	110	91
5. Prolonged problems - several years	60	50

Note: Percentages are based on n = 120

Review of the Literature

First, some general information on culture and development is presented, and then some cultural information about Greek and Italian children.

Abrahams (1972) maintained that the culture of a people includes all of the systems, techniques and tools that make up their way of life. Material culture encompasses all of the physical artifacts produced by the society. Non-material or expressive and institutional culture includes all of the systems used to regulate the relationships between persons, between a person and the supernatural, and between a person and the environment, as well as all the customs, beliefs and values related to these. This dimension of culture concerns the "manners" of the group, their life styles and their more abstract systems of family, religion, government, and so forth. Members of different cultures cannot live in the same objective world; the whole organization of knowledge, perception and behaviour is strongly determined by the individual's culture.

Fielder (1977) defined culture in the anthropological sense, referring to the traditional, accepted customs and ways of doing things of a group of people who have lived together for several generations. A culture provides its members with directives and prohibitions, justifications and explanations, and methods and techniques for almost all of the situations they are likely to encounter.

According to Singer (1971), culture includes all of the life patterns that human beings in a given society learn from their elders and pass on to the next generation. Culture and personality are inextricably woven together in the gestalt of each person's identity. Cultural identity is the symbol of one's essential experience of oneself as it incorporates the world view, value system, attitudes, and beliefs of the group with whom such elements are shared.

Peter Adler (1974) stated: "All human beings share a similar biology, universally limited by the rhythms of life. All individuals in all races and cultures must move through life's phases on a similar schedule: birth, infancy, adolescence, middle age, old age, and death ... Yet the ultimate interpretation of human biology is a cultural phenomenon; that is, the meanings of human biological patterns are culturally derived. Though all healthy human beings are born, reproduce, and die, it is culture which dictates the meanings of sexuality, the ceremonials of birth, the transitions of life, and the rituals of death" (p.26).

Thus, culture is learned, shared and transmitted. Each child is born into a society whose members practice a way of life, or a culture. The child really has no choice. His/her cultural learning will be limited only by inherent intellectual capacities and cultural exposure and experience.

People's behaviour is controlled far more by their cultural heritage than they are aware. Hall maintained that, "There is a growing accumulation of evidence to indicate that man has no direct contact with experience per se but there is an intervening set of patterns which channel his senses and his thoughts, causing him to reach one way when someone else with different underlying patterns will react as his experience dictates" (p.113).

Alfred Adler (1927) has suggested that the fulfillment of achievement needs may be one of the most important goals of human behavior. His concepts of "inferiority complex," "masculine protest" and "striving for superiority," and other factors, such as social order, determine behavioral patterns of children and development of their personality.

According to Grandall (1963), at least three broad cultural and social influences have been found to affect the development of the child's achievement and behaviour. These are the general cultural milieu into which the child is born, his racial, religious, and ethnic background, and the socioeconomic class to which his family belongs.