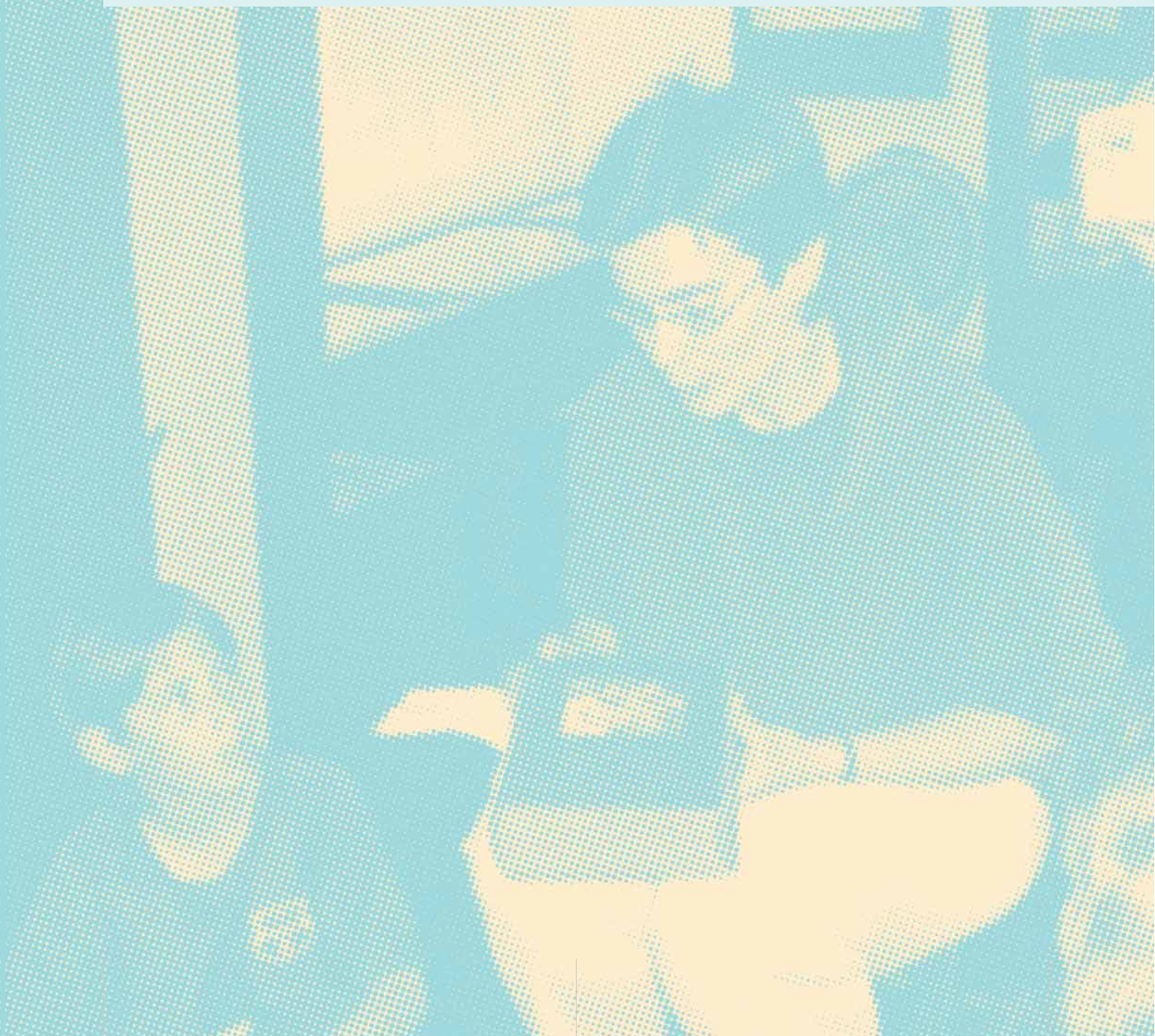


Crossing Cultures through the Intangible Heritage: an Educational Programme about Migration in Greece

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the preliminary results of a research programme on the social and cultural impact of migration into Greece conducted on the Greek island of Skiathos. The programme involved educational activities which were based on the collection and analysis of oral material. A school class of eleven years old students, both native and immigrants, was asked to search into their family history and bring to light heirlooms and related narrations which represented oral traditions in their countries. In a first phase of the project the artifacts and the accompanying oral material were used as stimuli for discussion between native and immigrant children in the class. Subsequently, the collected tangible and intangible material was displayed in a temporary museum exhibition entitled 'With a suitcase full of dreams'. The perceptions which all the groups of children, participants and visitors, native and immigrants had about migration before and after the educational program were recorded and analyzed in relation to the impact of the oral traditions on them. The results of the study are discussed with respect to the new communicative role which institutions of formal and informal learning could undertake due to the multiple use of intangible heritage in the approach of subtle social subjects such as migration. Among the most important findings was the fact that children who took part in the project and visited the exhibition realized that through discovering other people's culture they could develop their knowledge of unknown aspects of their own culture and history.

Introduction

'As everyday we listen to many people speaking in different languages, we have the impression that we live

in a different country. For all that, we live in our place which has been changed because of the foreign people who had migrated recently'. (Andreas, 11 years

old schoolboy)

In Greece the debate about intercultural education is very recent. The beginnings were seen in the 1980's, when ethnic Greeks and immigrants who derived mainly from neighbouring Balkan countries crossed its borders. The education and other measures implemented in the light this reinforced the integration of students who had a different cultural identity(1). However, the applied school curriculum does not provide sufficient or effective opportunities for either the satisfactory coexistence of both native Greek and immigrant children nor for developing the necessary intercultural communication among both groups of schoolchildren.

The transition from a perception of a single Greek dominant culture to the awareness of the multicultural character of today's society requires educational activities which promote the assimilation of differences instead of mere recognition of and acquaintance with these. Greek schools follow a curriculum that is basically centred on teaching and learning factual knowledge, and which does not offer appropriate stimuli for the cultivation of social skills such as interaction with 'other' people. In parallel with this, the nation's museums are generally not flexible enough to develop an inclusive, communicative role to tackle contemporary social subjects such as migration. Also, oral exhibits are restricted in comparison with the tangible pieces of heritage, and the oral archives are generally not sufficiently endowed with narrations which are based on or refer to local history of the area served.

The present study is intended to examine two questions. First, what is the importance of intangible heritage on the learning process in both the school and the museum? This was based on an educational programme which was carried out in a multicultural school community of the Greek island of Skiathos in the year 2006. The records of the two local primary schools showed that out of about around three hundred enrolled students, about one third were immigrant children who have migrated to Skiathos from either Balkan or north-west European countries. In relation to this, a principal objective of the research was to shed light on children's perceptions on migration according to their own experiences in their multicultural social and school environment. It also aimed to examine how the oral traditions which immigrant people narrated either in school or in a museum environment affected students' impressions about migration. The second aim of the

research was to estimate the extent to which knowledge of the other's intangible heritage produces empathy toward the immigrant people and their cultures.

Research methods

The whole 2006 research programme lasted six months, and it was conducted with the active participation of the eleven years old students of the 1st and the 2nd Primary Schools of Skiathos. An important part of the study was to establish a baseline record of the participating children's existing ideas and preconceptions about migration and migrants before the work began, and then to review this again after completion of the project, so that the two can be compared.

For the first part of the study, i.e. the recording of pupils' perceptions and preconceptions about migration, the students were divided into four groups according to their origin and involvement in the project. The first two groups together comprised a class of the 2nd local Primary School who were all to participate in the organisation of the planned museum exhibition on the findings of the project at the end of the study. One of these two groups consisted of twelve native Greek students, while the second group had eight children who had immigrant parents. The immigrants in the study were mainly found to have family origins in the Balkans or north-west Europe, with families who had settled in the Island during the last two decades, though there were also children from returning native Greek families who were descendants of the first migrants who had travelled from Skiathos to the United States during the major period of Transatlantic Migration (1890-1910)(2)

The other two groups consisted of ninety students of the same age, from the second primary school, who visited the exhibition: the third group being native Greek students (as with group 1), while the fourth were either themselves immigrants or children of immigrants (as with group 2).

In each case the ideas of each participant about migration and migrants, and about their response to the exhibition, were collected through a questionnaire which comprised both open and closed questions before and after their participation in the research. In addition, many students were inspired to draw the stories that they had heard, and to write letters to an emigrant child of their age, while the response to the exhibits in the museum exhibition were video-recorded too.

Everyone has got his own history

The first phase of the research was carried out in the school class. Using the message 'everyone has got his own history' the pupils of the first two groups were encouraged to discover the paths their ancestors followed before arriving in Skiathos. With guidance and participation in activities which contributed to the necessary knowledge they researched their own family's past, as well as that of their school mates. It was important in terms of developing self-esteem to ensure that their efforts were praised as each activity and its findings were presented by each child to the others in the class.

In particular, a primary learning activity was developing a so-called *personal life line*, by which the students had the opportunity to recall parts of their life story and place them within the wider chronological context of the real events in the local society. Additionally, the students made *family maps*, on which they illustrated the route which their parents and forefathers followed before coming to Skiathos. In relation to this, it was noticed that many children who started out believing that their families had been in Skiathos for a very long time discovered unknown aspects of their family past such as the fact that their great-grandparents had migrated temporarily or permanently to other countries too. Furthermore, they formed family *photo-mosaics* of their families, which were seen to illustrate similarities and differences, as well as uncommon features of the cultural environments from which they derived (Figure 1).

What proved to be a particularly appealing and constructive task for the students was their search for *heirlooms*, i.e. representative objects of their family which had passed from generation to generation. The children had the opportunity to inform their schoolmates about the origin of the particular objects, the date and

the place of their fabrication, the names of their predecessors, their real and emotional value, and their use. At the same time, they realised the special value which these objects had in revealing aspects of each individual's past and of its cultural identity. 'The objects could lead back to the people who used them and through doing this we are drawn to an appreciation of ourselves and of those who have forgotten' (3). Furthermore, in relation to the immigrants the presentation of their heirlooms constituted a unique chance to draw attention to life stories and material culture of peoples whose voice was generally ignored. These also provoked discussions among native and immigrant children about the prevailed customs in each country of origin.

After the students were familiarised with the process of interviewing, twenty-seven individuals who had migrated to the island of Skiathos were invited to the meet the first class in order to be interviewed by the students and to tell their own life story (Figure 2). Frequently the questions asked by the students focused on the family's decision to come to Greece, and on the way of living, the manners and the customs of the immigrant's motherland, and the things for which they felt nostalgic - in other words many different aspects of the intangible cultural heritage.

In the same way the immigrant presenters and interviewees talked about their tangible heritage: the personal objects (heirlooms) brought to Skiathos, and which are reminders about either their family or their school life at their home country (Figure 3). Also, despite initial hesitation, eight parents of immigrant students agreed to attend sessions as informants, and other guests were relatives and friends of the immigrant children. These narrations motivated the children to work in groups seeking out immigrants from different



Figure 1
Example of a photo-mosaic depicting the cultural environment from which children are derived

Figure 2
An immigrant informant narrates her own life story in the school class.



Figure 3
An immigrant tells a story about a family heirloom.

Figure 4
Each exhibit was accompanied by a relative short story which was written by the students.



countries in order to find out more information about their countries of origin.

Using a cross-curricular learning approach, they also collected additional information, for example about the culture, the politics, the economy and the educational system of each country. The results of all this research by the students and from written sources were combined with related abstracts of the interviews on special posters.

'With a suitcase full of dreams' exhibition

The second phase of the research project was a temporary museum exhibition entitled 'With a suitcase full of dreams' and took place in the Cultural Centre of Skiathos. Held in June 2006, this was focused on the first phase of the research, the main content being the family heirlooms and the accompanying comments and information from the contemporary immigrants. The exhibition also included visual material from written sources such as archives and letters, and from the mementos and narrations of the ethnic Greek people whose ancestors migrated from Skiathos to United States during the period of the Transatlantic Migration (1890-1910) but whose families have now returned to Greece.

The exhibition's primary objective was to communicate the multi-faceted synthesis of the local population by presenting different voices and personal objects. It also aimed to affect positively the attitude of its visitors, especially of the children of the school year surveyed, towards the immigrants in their community, through their interaction with the exhibits and especially

with the invited informants. In particular, it was intended to estimate the impact which the presented intangible material had on the eleven years old pupils in relation to their attitudes to migration and immigrants.

The exhibition was designed by taking into consideration the special cognitive and emotional needs of children in the school age. The language and the style of the texts were pre-evaluated in order to be understandable to students of that age. Concerning time, a regressive time-line from the present backwards was used rather than a traditional chronological presentation, and student research group wrote a considerable part of the texts.

The forty-five objects were displayed in thematic contexts according to their country of origin, and the way they were presented varied. Some objects were accompanied by a tape- or a video-recording narration. Three of the exhibits were demonstrated by their owners who kindly participated in the exhibition process and told the related story. A replica of an exhibit was used by children who impersonated the members of a family who had migrated to Skiathos. There were also exhibits which were presented by the migrant students (the second experimental group). The first section of the exhibition was titled 'Everyone has got a family history' and it comprised of family heirlooms. Each object was accompanied by a relatively short story which a child, whether native or immigrant, had written by using the information derived from the interviews (Figure 4).

For example, the story of one object exhibited was presented orally by a student who originated from Albania. In this case the schoolboy presented an icon of the Virgin Mary which was bought by his great-

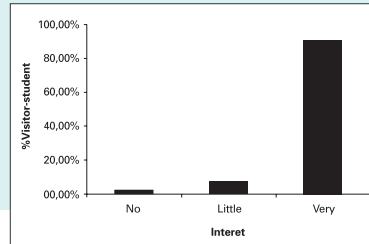


Figure 5
The pair of golden earrings.

Figure 6
How interesting was the exhibition?

grandfather with a piece of silver that he had found. Successively, he donated the icon to his son, and the latter offered it to the student's father to take with him as a talisman when he migrated to Greece. The boy showed this artifact with pride, because it was his family's special heirloom, which would pass to him when he became an adult. As this section encouraged the schoolchild visitors to ponder on similar objects and customs, other children explained that icons were used as talismans in Greece too.

In another example, a girl from Poland gave a presentation about a pair of golden earrings which her grandfather had offered to her grandmother as a symbolic gift on their marriage, and which her mother had accepted as a bridal gift, (Figure 5). "These will be given to me when I get married too", she explained. Again, other children explained that similar customs are found in Greece, especially the provinces: in this case when girls become engaged they usually accept golden rings as presents from their fiancés.

The second thematic unit comprised of exhibits which belonged to immigrants from Balkan and north-west European countries. Each of these exhibits was accompanied by a photo and a related abstract from its owner's story about the life in the homeland and their 'uprooting'. There was also a poster with information and photos of the country which the first and the second experimental groups of students had selected. Thus, each object was presented in an appropriate, meaningful context. In respect of the impact of the live narrations on children, three immigrants-parents were invited to display their heirlooms and explain the related histories and traditions.

The third part of the exhibition comprised of personal objects of families which had migrated from Skiathos to the United States in the period 1890-1910, but who had now returned to Greece. Through this thematic unit the visitors learned about a little known often disguised

aspect of the social and cultural history. It is also the case that these returning immigrants have brought into the society of Skiathos some new customs and habits(4).

There is a comparison here with the experience of contemporary migrants, and the information revealed common practices in seeking to adjust themselves to a new country. Besides, both sets of migrants - those to the USA a century ago and the recent migrants from other parts of Europe into Greece - were shown to have shared similar dreams and needs. In the same way the visitors were stimulated to remember names of people who had migrated to America during the same period, and this information was recorded and then verified using the USA's Ellis Island Immigration Museum's archive(5).

We are schoolmates but not friends...

The initial collection of children's perceptions about migration contributed to defining and developing further the most important guidelines of the particular research programme. It became clear that the mere co-existence of individuals and families of different in schools or neighbourhoods for a long time did not necessarily lead to acquaintance with the 'other'. On the contrary, most of the eleven year old native students who constituted the focus groups had a rather negative attitude towards the immigrants. They made much of their national identity as Greeks: for example a schoolboy said: "...I am Greek! I don't have any immigrant friends, because I don't trust them..." In the same way an immigrant boy said: "I am usually informed about the classes [school timetable] by children of my nationality. It's difficult to cooperate with the others". It was noticeable that the ideas of the female students seemed more conciliatory or at least more encouraging. For example, one girl said: "I don't have any problems with the immigrants. They came here to find jobs. Friendly or hostile people could be found in any community."

It is worth saying that most of the native students had adopted perceptions of the superiority of Greek culture over those of the immigrants derived from family and social environment influences. They were prone to show discriminatory attitudes and behaviour towards people from Balkan countries, and especially those from Albania. For example, one student said: "...There is no problem with the English migrants. Those do not react in the way the Albanians do...". The characterisations mostly accorded with the predominant stereotypes, i.e. these were: "Uncultured, slovenly, impoverished". The students were unwilling to get to know each other. "Their customs are sometimes weird. I can't understand them". Conversely, the non-native children mainly talked in the third person when they were asked about migration. They seemed aware of the reasons for the immigrants' arrival in Greece, but they avoided accepting that identity themselves. Characteristically, two boys consistently used the phrase "move in" instead of the word "migrate" when writing their story lines.

Linguistic skills were seen to have special validity within the discourse. On the one hand, the knowledge of the Greek language was regarded and used by the native students as a means of stressing their power against their immigrant schoolmates. On the other hand the immigrant students frequently used their mother tongue as a means of defence. The difficulty of speaking, and especially of writing (in a non-Roman script) in Greek dissuaded them from being more communicative.

Another native student expressed the need for adaptation and assimilation: "I don't accept immigrant children not speaking in Greek language when they are in school. Sometimes they talk in their own [language] as a way to keep secrets". However, among the two groups of children the oral narrations proved to be a chance to express ideas and emotions which had remained repressed for a long time, within fragile but rather sensitive 'equilibrium'. The initial reservations about the process of collecting heirlooms and customs by interviewing foreign people were considerable but they were gradually reduced because their relation to the social history became better understood.

Listening to the 'other'

Setting up a museum exhibition about migration was a complex educational experience for the eleven year old

students, which led to the development of both the cognitive and social abilities among the participants. In particular, their acquaintance with the use of intangible culture changed considerably their ideas about history in two directions: firstly they realized that the historical past is not only written and found in their books, but it can also be discovered by more conceptual researching methods such as interviewing. Actually it contributed to the acquisition of meta-cognitive or "meta-historical" knowledge(6). Secondly, they began to comprehend that history is not restricted to the ancient or the heroic past actions within an ethnocentric approach. It may also comprise the ordinary, and in many cases of the underestimated stories of individuals which can enrich and bring to light new aspects of history.

Both the theme and the content of the exhibition seemed very interesting to the most children who were asked about them during the survey (Figure 6). Native children who participated in the collection and the presentation of the oral narrations were found to have changed significantly their negative attitudes about their non-native schoolmates, and they asserted that they could cooperate with and give support to an immigrant child. Additionally, their initial repulsion of migrants has been reversed into empathy with them. They understood that each object hid a sensitive human story. Each narration was about a person who "strived for a better life", as one typical child put it.

The children's ability to perceive the individual motives for migrating was notable, and they recognised differences in the political and social circumstances of the countries of origin which may have contributed to the decision to migrate to Greece. Instead of the original stereotypes migration was evaluated in accordance with the specific context of values and beliefs(7).

Their written speech seemed enriched with the adoption of relevant terminology. Discussing the explanation of an example of migration one boy said: "The regime didn't allow the citizens to cross the borders into other countries or to own real estate. It was authoritarian." Their substantial engagement with the collection of narrations and customs had also affected positively their acting in the small role-play dramatisations that were organized within the context of the exhibition. More particularly, the native students realized the significance of the "speech" and customs of the others, and acknowledged that the immigrants could

have the right to bring their cultural traditions and values with them into another country.

The *immigrant-students* who participated in the organization of the museum exhibition realized that although they themselves may have regarded the life stories of their parents as uninteresting, and perhaps rather embarrassing parts of their past even to their own children, through the programme these have proved to be crucial evidence, towing light on as important a social matter as migration. Furthermore, these stories constituted an additional source for local social history. Thus, despite the frequent denial of their own identity initially, they now seemed to acknowledge and support their home country and culture.

Their ability to “step into the others’ shoes” was significant in terms of developing understanding and tolerance. The questions which they asked of other migrants were more substantive and to the point. In addition to the observed improvement in both their oral and written speech, they tended to be much more inventive in finding alternative ways to express their thoughts and feelings. Their drawings which were informed by the interviews were more focused and expressive and each object was presented in the appropriate context (Figure7).

The survey and other feedback from *child-visitors* to the exhibition showed that they were satisfied by its content. “It hadn’t got statues but it comprised of interesting and significant objects too”, a girl admitted (Figure 8). Just like the child participants in the project they realized that very common objects can be precious because they are tokens of the personal and the local history too - because of their intangible associations.

Each exhibit reminded them of similar objects and customs within their own cultures and traditions. Furthermore, the visitors were motivated to think of wider global human values such as democracy, freedom of speech, and friendship. The exhibits therefore stimulated ‘intercultural dialogue’.

At the end of the exhibition the children mostly recalled objects according to the short narration of their owners rather than their external features (Figure 9), indicating the significance of having a people-centred exhibition. The oral descriptions were easily accessible, and the children found those objects and stories which referred to the school years or had children as heroes as especially appealing. A typical story was that of a boy called Jovalin, whose parents originally left him back in his own country while they migrated illegally to Greece on foot. Eventually his grandparent found the money needed to pay for a visa for entry to Greece and gave him three banknotes in order to buy a bicycle when he arrived in Greece, though “I could never spend this money”, the boy said, referring to these notes.

Reading and hearing about these life stories the *native child-visitors* recognised the motivation of the immigrant families to come to their country. In the surveys 72% of those children understood and recalled the reasons for their move to Greece given by the various migrant informants. They felt supportive of these immigrants but they mainly focused on their financial rather than emotional needs. It is also notable that native and immigrant visitors reacted to the same extent to both the two types of assistance. (Figure10). “I would give to an immigrant a place to stay and food”, a girl declared. The solutions which they gave were mostly related with the

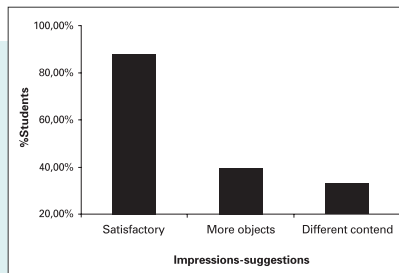


Figure 7
An immigrant student describes the trip of an immigrant who travelled from Skiathos to United States in 1895.

Figure 8
Children’s suggestions about the exhibition.

Figure 9
Student visitors recalling objects taking into consideration their owners' narrations.

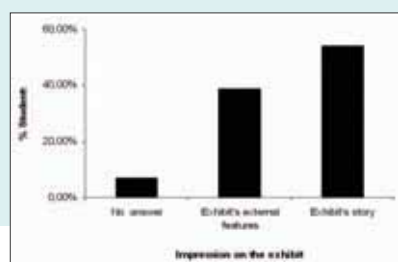


Figure 10
The indigenous children who visited the exhibition asserted that they could support an immigrant child.

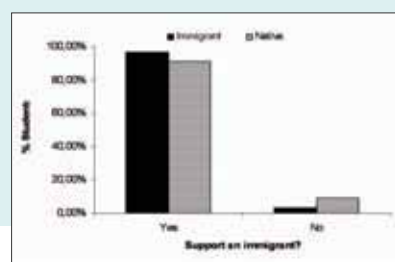
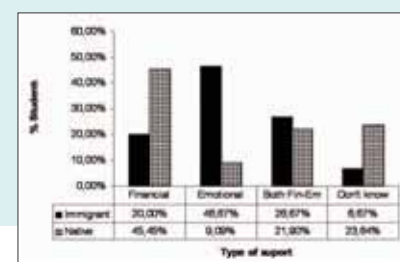


Figure 11
The type of support to an immigrant.



adjustment to the environment or assimilation. "I would help him to learn our language or our area". Additionally, according to their answers they proved to be much more objective about the effectiveness of each story. The use of oral content in the exhibits enabled them to perceive the meaning of migration and to sympathise with the difficulties which migrants confront, even though they had not had to deal with the issue before.

As for the *immigrant-children visitors to the exhibition*, these were impressed by those objects which evoked similar life experiences of their own. They found it easy to compare themselves with other people who had migrated to Greece as well. For example, a boy said: "Perhaps when that person came to Skiathos, he wouldn't have spare clothes or a place to stay" and these children used their own accumulated knowledge in order to understand the cognitive and affective state of other migrants(8). Also, they could recognise and recall less obvious aspects of each life history displayed. Children in this category did not conceal their origin. On the contrary, they were given the chance to discover parts of the history of their country of birth, and to relate these to their own family and personal history. Accordingly, immigrant students who visited the exhibition proved to be more understanding and sensitive in referring to the type of help they could offer: "I could give him a house and a job" or "We could be friends". Their speech was similarly emotionally affected (Figure 11).

As an epilogue

The utilisation of the intangible heritage of recent immigrant families in this particular study facilitated the educational approach to the rather subtle and delicate subject of migration. At the same time it affected

considerably both the *historical* and the *museological* aspects of the research. In particular, it projected the 'individual' experience and viewpoint which is usually restricted or omitted altogether in the presentation of historical issues.

In relation to the *historical* aspects, the active participation of many people-both the four groups of children and some immigrant parents - in the research was an indication that history has a private as well as public side, and the 'social' dimension of the construction and the reconstruction of the past were ascertained. The voices of the immigrants-people who talked about their family, their country and their coming to Greece - contributed to a more pluralistic and 'inclusive' view and understanding of history. The programme gave both indigenous and migrant children the chance to break the prevailing silence (and in some cases, prejudice) and adopt more active and positive roles in the relationships between Greek and immigrant children and families both in the school and in the wider community.

With reference to the *museological* aspect of the study, it was clear that the use of the oral material within the exhibition makes rather complicated issues such as migration and its effects more accessible and understandable, while the narrated customs and life stories which accompanied the exhibits promoted a people-centered approach of the past. Furthermore it indicated the crucial role which a museum can play in sensitizing a community to important and perhaps complex social matters. As a contemporary 'forum' prepared with active involvement of both Greek and immigrant children (the first and second groups of the study), this particular exhibition facilitated the interaction among the visitors, especially children, drawn from often quite different cultural environments, and successfully

promoted interchanges of ideas about their tangible and intangible heritage. In addition, it was found that the presentation of 'difference' presupposes an acknowledgement that the various cultural communities need to be regarded as equals and respected for each member's specific characteristics and needs(9).

In the *educational* process the collection of the intangible heritage acquainted children with the research process generally, and knowledge of historical research procedures in particular. The students who participated in the collection of the oral material were able to exercise critical judgments towards the migration and to actively perceive the changes in their society that this is producing. Furthermore, all the children who visited the exhibition realized that through discovering other people's culture they could also discover and enhance knowledge of hidden aspects of their own culture and history. Listening to other people's voices is a prerequisite for the co-existence and collaboration within society and in making cultural progress. 🇬🇷

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