Russian immigrant adolescents in Finnish society – integration from the perspective of language and education

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine the integration of Russian-speaking immigrant adolescents into Finnish society. The starting point is the idea that education, language proficiency and culture as well as social relations are central factors in the integration process. As regards the factors affecting the integration of Russian-speaking immigrant adolescents were investigated their studying in the Finnish school, proficiency in the mother tongue and Finnish, and their linguistic and cultural identification. The target group consisted of 16 selected immigrant families in the Jyväskylä region. This is a qualitative longitudinal study the data of which consist of thematic interviews with Russian-speaking adolescents and their parents and were collected on three separate occasions: parents (n=18) were interviewed in 2002 and 2005, whereas the interviews of adolescents (n=15) took place in 2008 when they were 14 - 23 years old. The data also comprise official documents that steer and regulate the education, learning, and integration of immigrant adolescents. Principles of qualitative content analysis were applied to analyzing the data. Results indicated that Russian-speaking immigrant adolescents have certain important initial resources that make it easier for them to adjust to new circumstances. Their parents’ high level of education and adolescents’ own good knowledge base, acquired through previous studies, constitute human capital that has a favorable effect on their studying in Finland. Factors influencing adolescents’ studies included the time of arrival of the family in Finland, their place of residence, resources available at the school, and municipal education policy. It is difficult for Russian-speaking adolescents and their parents to understand some of the ways in which the Finnish school works. Their views on and experiences about the Finnish school reflect both the norms and values of the Russian school and the specific features of national culture. There was considerable variation in the use of Finnish and Russian, the competence in these languages, and their meaning in lives of Russian-speaking adolescents who had moved to Finland at different points of their lives. Finnish dominated the linguistic environment and language use of those adolescents who had moved to Finland before starting school. These young people mixed mainly with their Finnish peers, most often regarded themselves as Finns and favored assimilation or integration. Those who had moved to Finland in primary school age identified themselves with both Russian and Finnish culture, used both languages daily and regarded their command as important. These adolescents maintain social contacts with both Russians and Finns as well as with other migrant groups. The acculturation strategy that they preferred was most frequently integration. The dominant language of Russian-speaking adolescents who had moved to Finland as teenagers was Russian. Even then they knew Finnish well and considered it important. The social network, closest friends, a significant other or spouse, of adolescents in this group was mainly Russian by ethnic background. The acculturation strategy of these adolescents suggests segmented integration. The findings of the study also clearly show the importance of the role of the family and parents in the formation of adolescents’ bilingualism and acculturation strategies.