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Minority Education in Greece: Voices of Ethnic Greek Majority Teachers Working in Muslim Minority Primary Schools in Western Thrace

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the views of ethnic Greek-majority teachers who work in the minority schools of Xanthi in the region of West Thrace in Greece towards their students' bilingualism, language and social development and their evaluation. The research method which has been chosen is semi-structured interviews of eight teachers (n=8). The results highlight teachers' views about the importance of students' first language development and maintenance; however, they also show discrepancies between their beliefs and their reported practices that aim at hindering the use of minority language at class. In addition, the results indicate how educational personnel is situated with respect to social and political matters. Relevant suggestions are offered for improving the minority education system in Greece.

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Education authorities have an important role to play in protecting and promoting regional or minority languages. The teaching of these languages takes place within a school curriculum, which can promote language teaching to varying degrees. Language friendly schools take advantage of learners' diverse linguistic backgrounds to increase students' cultural and language awareness. However, in the case of the minority schools of Thrace, which are almost a century old, research about their operation and effectiveness is limited (Tsioumis, 2010). A large-scale, interdisciplinary Project in the Education of Muslim Children (acronym in Greek: PEM) in Western Thrace⁴, Greece, was implemented during the years 1977–2004. Although PEM was a specifically educational project entailing teaching Greek as a second language, development of educational materials, teacher training and academic outcome, it was bound to involve identity issues and directly or indirectly embrace the entire Thracian community (Dragonas and Frangoudaki, 2006). The issue, however, of how intercultural theory and can be implemented and how bilingualism can be embraced in the specific context remains. This is the major scope of the present paper.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Bilingualism and the intercultural lens

The term "bilingualism" has occupied and continues to occupy the attention of the scientific community, while the requirement for a definition of a bilingual person is topical and persistent. However, the term "bilingual" is difficult to describe because the limit on the degree of use of a language and the acquisition of language skills is hard to distinguish. The range and ways of using a language are quite extensive, including many combinations and proportions, which can change during a person's lifetime (Cummins, 2001). Apart from this, in the scope of the present paper we also consider bilingualism as a reflection of political trends (Drobot, 2017), in the sense that bilingualism is also a matter of distribution of power between minority and majority groups and their languages.

The benefits of bilingualism are not limited only to the linguistic field, but also reach the cognitive field. According to language interdependence theory, bilingualism is characterized by "common underlying ability", in other words in the course of learning one language a child acquires a set of skills and implicit metalinguistic knowledge that can be drawn upon when working in another language. As a result, the two languages may seem superficially different, but at a second level of analysis there is common ground in bilingual persons' minds. The benefits of bilingualism are enjoyed by students later as they develop the two languages. Recently, Cummins (2015, p. 455) has pointed out the significance of the *intercultural lens* perspective which is:

conceptualized as including a focus both on generating understanding and respect for diverse cultural traditions and challenging inequitable distribution of resources and educational opportunities across social groups. As such, intercultural education incorporates notions such as critical literacy and culturally responsive education. By definition, socially marginalized communities have experienced social exclusion and discrimination, often over generations. Thus, educators who adopt an intercultural education orientation are also committed to challenging the operation of coercive relations of power within their school environments.

This orientation has been referred to as "teaching through a multilingual lens (Cummins, 2016; Cummins & Persad, 2014) when the specific instructional focus is on developing students' awareness of intercultural education, language and affirming their linguistic identities. However, the same orientation

⁴The official website of the Education of Muslim Minority Children in Greece, entitled "Addition not subtraction, multiplication not division" at: <https://museduc.gr/en/>

can be referred to as *teaching through an intercultural lens* when the instructional focus is broadened to include students' cultural knowledge in addition to linguistic knowledge" (Cummins 2015, p. 460).

These advantages are found in the cultural, social, linguistic and cognitive behavior of the student. The reasons why some bilinguals manage to show a great language development in all languages of their linguistic repertoire according to Hamers and Blanc (2000), is the degree of contact with language, its social power and the sociocultural context in which the use of language takes place. According to Cummins' Thresholds Theory (1976) which has significant implications for immersion programs, biliteracy is an important goal; As teachers we wish our students to be literate in both languages and to benefit from being balanced bilinguals.

In practice, balanced bilingualism is promoted when the individual connects the acquisition of language with personal benefit. However, in the case where only one language is reinforced, to the detriment of the other, the person tends towards *subtractive bilingualism*, which does not favor them.

Although modern scientific research advocates the benefits and superiority of bilingualism over monolingualism, much of the educational community and society insists on identifying bilingualism with school failure. Baker & Wright (2017), listing the causes of school failure with respect to bilingualism, mentions confusion, socioeconomic factors, language and cultural incompatibility between school and family. However, discounting all of the above, they blame school failure solely on inappropriate educational systems.

As expected, the way bilingualism is perceived, as a privilege or a disadvantage, is reflected in the education system. The main differentiating factor of all forms of bilingual education lies in its purpose, i.e. whether the educational program aims at the assimilation of the individual or the coexistence of many languages and therefore cultures. As the most successful bilingual educational model, Baker & Wright (2017) advocates forms of bilingual education which develop and maintain minority languages. He recommends that the community's minority languages be taught in primary education alongside the dominant language.

2.2. *Minority education in Thrace*

The minority school in the region of Thrace is an institution, the establishment of which dates back to the beginning of the 20th century with the Treaty of Lausanne and is addressed to the indigenous Muslim population of Thrace (Tsioumis 2010, 2010b; Mavrommatis, 2008). According to Tsitselikis (2007, p. 13) "the minority school in Thrace as an institution obeys three principles, the need to protect the minority language, as an element of personality formation, the legitimacy of the transmission of the minority language and the application of relevant law".

With regard to primary education, which is six years of study, the curriculum of minority education is composed of two parallel foreign language sub-programs, which have an almost equal number of teaching hours. These two programs have no reference or correlation to one another and operate independently. The teaching staff are Greek-speaking teachers who are members of the Greek majority and come from a Christian background, and Muslim teachers, members of the Muslim minority, with their mother tongue being Turkish or Pomak or Romani language (Magos, 2006). Teachers from the Greek majority are graduates of pedagogical schools without specialization in minority education, while Muslim teachers are graduates of a special pedagogical academy where members of the Muslim minority study in their mother tongue, Pomak or Turkish (Michail, 2002; Michail, 2003b). Also, a very small number of Turkish-speaking teachers come from Turkey in order to teach in the minority schools of Thrace (Tsioumis 2010, Tsarektsi 2013). Both majority and minority teachers have had the opportunity to be trained in bilingualism management as part of the Program for the Education of Muslim Children (acronym in Greek: PEM), a program with European and national funding held in Thrace for a number of years.

By the late 1990s, there was a very high rate of school dropouts, about 23% of minority students, which was attributed to the socio-economic status of the minority but also to its reduced interaction with the majority society. A significant change occurred with the operation of the PEM program and the improvement of Greek-Turkish relations (Tsitselikis & Mavromatis, 2019). One of the aims of the PEM project was to support Muslim students' education as well as reducing the dropout rate at a significant level.

Although the minority schools in Thrace seem to have the characteristics of an effective bilingual model, it must be borne in mind that the success of a bilingual educational model is reflected at the school attainments of its students and in particular in whether it cultivates balanced bilingualism. Of course, the quality of education, which is the result of a series of factors, plays a key role in the school performance of its students. These factors include the employment of bilingual instructors, their national backgrounds and level of commitment, the balance of bilingual and monolingual students in the classroom, the use and sequence of bilingual teaching methods, curricula, the strengthening of the mother tongue and culture and finally, appropriate educational material (Baker & Wright, 2017).

Regarding the curriculum of the minority schools of Thrace, Kelesidis (2001, p.103) talks about two unrelated bilingual programs that have as an outcome a "fragmented perception of the world", "vague images" and "deficient knowledge" on the part of the students, while it seems that teachers' orientation is towards "one-way directions that lack the characteristics of intercultural composition" and this is the catalyst in the reproduction of the permanent scheme "minority schools-sub-education and illiteracy-social exclusion". The "double monolingualism" of minority schools is due to the rapacious Turkish and Greek nationalism, which in a competitive relationship leads to the existence of "parallel monolinguals".

An addition to this is the fact that the Muslim minority, whose common denominator is religion, hence its name, is a synthesis of three different language subgroups, i.e. Turkophone, the Pomakophone and the Romanophone people (Huseynoglou, 2012, Mavrommatis 2008, Tsioumis 2010). These different languages still exist in the Muslim minority until today and the language issues of Minority Education still remain an important matter. Any research about the operation and functioning of minority schools in Thrace offers insight in this direction.

Although students differ from each other in their mother tongue, only the Turkish language is taught in the minority school as the dominant and official language of the minority. According to Luciak (2006), the educational programs of recognized minorities usually aim to preserve and promote the minority language and culture. Therefore, while for the Turkish-speaking minority, the principle of protection of the minority language and its promotion is served through minority schools, the other two language groups, the Pomak-speaking and Romanian-speaking students do not have the opportunity within the above system to be taught their mother tongue/first language (Tsioumis & Michail, 2005). On the contrary, an assimilationist policy is promoted.

Also, as Hanna (2016) suggests, both the minority and the dominant cultural identity need to be the subject of a teaching approach in the context of citizenship education for both minority and indigenous students, in order to cultivate interaction and empathy. Such a teaching approach, in the context of education in Thrace, is not institutionalized, but is left only to the initiatives of teachers who wish to manage the specific issue.

In addition, the socio-cultural background of the students is far from negligible as its range extends from the urban center of Xanthi to the Turkish-speaking villages of the plain, as well as the remote mountainous villages. A number of other factors also play an important role, such as the relations between the minority and the "mother-homeland" (in this case Turkey), relations between the citizenship state and the "motherland" (in this case Greek-Turkish relations), the minority languages in the region, and the manner, time and reason for the performance of minority and especially language rights (Mavrommatis et al, 2019).

Luciak (2006) notes as one of the main factors influencing the school performance of minorities the type of contact and communication between minorities and the majority and the way they deal with it, and states that the attitude of indigenous minorities in education, such as the Muslim minority of Thrace, is basically defined by their historical relationship with the dominant group, resulting in the acquisition of certain beliefs about the value and benefits of education. This relationship is partly described by the "homogeneous school class", which according to Magos (2006), is maintained and reproduced by a number of teachers of the dominant population group, many of whom attribute to Greek identity characteristics of superior European culture in contrast to the "lower", according their views, Turkish culture. This negative attitude on the part of certain majority teachers towards the cultural diversity of their minority students is perceived by the minority students the same (Magos & Simopoulos 2009). It is important to note that in Greece bilingualism was considered by the state for many years more as a disability than as a value or qualification, as the "other" language was perceived as a link to the national culture of a non-friendly neighboring state and a potential competitor – i.e. a link to a nationalist ideology that may have threatened Greek national integrity (Tsitselikis & Mavrommatis, 2019, p. 34). According to the relative literature, it is quite often that the education in several countries and states to be framed within a monoglossic ideology, which values only monolingualism and ignores bilingualism (Garcia 2009). In addition to the language issue, the Muslim identity of minority students is considered by some teachers as a "stigma", especially after the intense Islamophobia that has developed worldwide. (Arshad, 2017).

According to Yağcıoğlu (2004), in Western Thrace "the conflict has a triadic character, meaning that there are three sets of main actors in the conflict. Each actor's actions and perceptions are influenced by and linked to the perceptions and actions of the other two actors. It is this triangle of mutual interaction and perception that is the crux of the conflict. The triad of actors basically consist of: a) the Muslim-Turkish minority and its elite, b) the government of Greece (central and local) and the local Greek majority, and c) the government of Turkey".

According to Magos (2006) strong stereotypes from the majority population continue to exist against the Turkish speaking minority people who still represent a national enemy, especially according to the older generation's beliefs.

3. Methodology

3.1. The Research Participants

The purpose of this research was to investigate and record the perceptions of today's majority teachers operating in the minority schools of the Prefecture of Xanthi towards the education and the bilingual development of their minority students. The research participants were eight (8) teachers who work in six different minority primary schools in Thrace. Half belong to the age group of 30-40 years and the other half belong to the age group of 41-50 years. Gender segregation is equal, i.e. four (4) women and four (4) men. All these teachers belong to the majority, they have Greek ethnic and cultural identity as well as Greek as their mother tongue/first language. In the minority schools of Thrace these teachers teach the subjects (courses) of the Greek language curriculum. All the 8 teachers had acquired a University degree in Education and three of them had also acquired a Master degree in Education Sciences.

3.2. The Research Procedure

An invitation- open call for expression of interest was sent by the researchers to Greek teachers of minority schools in order to participate in the research. From the 15 teachers who expressed interest were selected 8. The main criterion for their selection was the participants diversity in terms of age, gender,

previous service/recruitment in minority schools as well as the level of education. Two pilot interviews were done in order the research questions to be tested. After light changes in some of the research questions aiming to their clearer understanding the final interview guide was created. Each interview had a duration between 30-45 minutes and took place either in school or in a friendly outside place.

3.3. *The Research Instrument*

A semi-structured interview format was chosen as the data collection technique, as according to Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2008), through this type of interview information about the subject's knowledge, values and attitudes can be collected.

The interview questions focused on the relationship between the first and second language, the effects of bilingualism and factors which influence its development, the evaluation of minority education and its effects on students, as well as suggestions for its improvement.

Due to the particular socio-political influences that take place in the minority school, approaching it as a research object was challenging. The bipartisan composition of the minority school and the conflictual political atmosphere are additional obstacles to the consensus of those involved in the research. In addition, observation as a research method would have been prohibitive for a researcher who is not himself an active minority school teacher.

3.4. *Data Analysis*

For the processing of the recorded interviews, the method of content analysis was followed. The "phrase" was defined as the classification unit of the research material. The classification resulted in two broad categories: bilingualism and education. Bilingualism includes the following subcategories of answers: 1. the relationship between the first (mother tongue) and second language, 2. the evaluation of bilingualism, and 3. the factors influencing bilingualism. The category of education includes the following topics of answers: 1. the learning problems, 2. the teaching methods, 3. the teaching staff and 4. the minority education context.

4. *Findings*

4.1. *The Relation Between the First and Second Language*

With respect to the relationship between the first and second language, teachers as a whole (8/8) consider it necessary to have a good knowledge of the first language in order to master the second language. They agree that there is a correlation between the level of the two languages. As a consequence of this logic, respondents asserted that it would be unlikely for a student to have a high level of the second language when the mother tongue/first language level is low. As teacher (T1) says, in line with the other teachers:

Languages are built at the same time, you conquer one, that is the native language and so with the second, first the mother tongue and then the second; when you have rich vocabulary in your mother tongue you can learn many words in the second.

Contradictions were observed in later questions where most teachers cited examples of excellent students, who have not been systematically taught grammatical and syntactic rules of their mother tongue/first language, nor know its written form, or cases of first-class Turkish-speaking students in the majority primary schools who, although they have not been systematically taught their mother tongue/first language, perform well in the Greek language. In these cases they attribute the success to the child's personal effort.

T1: The child really tries hard, studies, tries and studies

T3: they did not learn it [the mother tongue] so well in the written form, but they speak it perfectly

T5: the mother tongue because it is automatically mastered and does not obey rules, as my three-and-a-half-year-old daughter will speak as well as a child in school who goes to fourth grade [i.e. a native Turkish-speaking child],

Therefore, there seems to be a dilemma as to whether it is necessary to teach the mother tongue/first language in order to achieve a high level of proficiency in the second. An important finding is the unanimity of all teachers that bilingualism is beneficial rather than a disadvantage.

4.2. *The Evaluation of Bilingualism*

According to the teachers, bilingualism offers mainly cognitive benefits, as the majority referred to an increase in intelligence and the ability to acquire additional languages, as well as improved awareness more generally.

It helps in their development in every way. I think it also expands the mind [...]. I think their horizons open up (T4)

However, all teachers (8/8) regard their minority students as having poor development in terms of bilingualism, presenting them as semi-bilingual because they do not know either language well enough. As a result, later, when minority students register at the mainstream public secondary schools (called gymnasia, in Greek), the difficulties they face in language appear.

The main problems that arise are cognitive and emotional, as well school drop-out due to changing school.

Well, they don't know well either of the two languages that are taught, their mother tongue that they aren't taught [i.e. Pomak speakers], and they are semi-literate in everything. They don't know the languages properly, either Greek or Turkish (T3).

4.3. *The Factors Influencing Bilingualism*

In highlighting the factors that affect students' performance in learning the Greek language, teachers mentioned the family environment as the most important. Specifically, as its main components, the majority mentioned the socio-educational level of the parents, the motivation with respect to their studies and their attitude towards the Greek language. Finally, half of the sample referred to the language level of the family and the degree of use of the Greek language.

T6: The educational level of the family often goes together, not always, but often, the educational level goes together with the financial one... families were among the so-called "good" ones who supported the children, who have a good educational level as families, they study

T5: To study at a Greek university, to succeed in the country where they live, there are parents who do not show much interest in this perspective, because they expect their children to go to the minority high school, that they do not in other words, they will need to have good development in the Greek language.

The second factor significantly influencing the students, according to the teachers, was the social language environment. Frequent contact with Greek-speaking residents of the city of Xanthi, in contrast to the isolated monolingual mountain villages, contributes to the development of the Greek language.

T1: Children have no motivation because a child is in his/her village; s/he does not feel the need to communicate and lives well without using it [i.e. the Greek language] at all

A mandatory factor in improving the level of Greek language was compulsory attendance in kindergarten.

T7: Because we had a kindergarten there [a mountain village], they had basic knowledge of Greek, that is, they could communicate in some things, not all of course. There were cases that were very difficult, but in the basics we could communicate.

An important parameter for the successful acquisition of Greek is the existence of a philhellenic policy, while pro-Turkish policies can hinder acquisition. This is aided by strategies of "isolation" of the Greek, but also of the Turkish state and religious bodies, which hinder the learning of the Greek language and as a result act as a brake on progress in the Greek language.

T1: There is a denial in general of everything Greek, because the children also accept propaganda that is against Greece and everything that is implied with it, mainly that concerning issues of religion

At the same time, some teachers (3/8) argue that emotions catalyze the learning of a language and students' attitude towards it, citing mainly negative emotions of their students that are obstacles such as fear, indifference and feelings of exclusion-isolation.

T3: One issue [which supports] the learning either their own language, or our own language, or any language, is the lack of negative emotions and fear

4.4. The Learning Problems

First (6/8) in the methods teachers employ to deal with the problems faced by students is the use of the mother tongue of students. Half (4/8) of the teachers chose to learn Turkish. The main reason was its instrumental use for the teaching of Greek, either as a means of understanding the difficulties and mistakes of students, or for the direct translation of words, or to indicate correspondence between the two languages by the teacher. Also, a teacher justified his initial motivation to learn the student's mother tongue (Pomak) in terms of his desire to understand what students are saying to each other, and therefore to improve the perception of the classroom climate, the views of his students and his communication with them. The remaining (4/8) teachers, although unfamiliar with the students' language, are positive about the use of the mother tongue/first language as a means of teaching, as they give older students or more able classmates the role of "interpreter" to facilitate the learning of weak students.

In addition to the practical advantages offered by the use of the mother tongue, teachers also talk about the emotional impact this had on their students: the knowledge and use of the mother tongue by the teacher indicates interest and respect for the culture of his students.

T3: ... that you understand their problem, because you also experience it, that experientially, that is, you approached them, that's where I saw a big difference and that was the second year I worked in the minorities. Then I decided to learn Turkish and I saw the difference.

T7: I didn't force the children not to speak [their mother tongue], I paid attention to their own language - Why did you do that? - Out of respect, first of all, to show respect, because it is their mother tongue, so on that I can click to understand things in the second language

4.5. The Teaching Methods

As for teaching methods, most (5/8) teachers stated that they use teaching methods that promote the creation of communication conditions and the construction of adapted cognitive and linguistic material and playful experiential learning.

T3: In this case, I tried to use their communication needs, to have a mood to work, because otherwise only with exercises...

Regarding the approach to grammar, which has been cited as the main problem for students, most teachers have argued that they use up-to date teaching methods, while half of them agree with the use of additional support material focusing on teaching the Greek language with more attractive ways, such as playing group exercises and other types of interactive participatory activities.

Finally, half of the teachers consider the use of visual material to be an appropriate a way of teaching their bilingual students.

T8: Using a lot drawing, sketches, painting

Also, some teachers (3/8) observed positive results in learning Greek due to the inter-school contact of students, i.e. in activities co-organized by minority and majority schools, where the motivation for learning was the contact amongst students:

T5: Volunteering programs that we undertake, environmental programs, health education, all this, in all this we bring students in contact with society, with the institutions, with the language they understand. That is, they must feel the school as part of society.

4.6. The Teaching Staff

The reasons for teachers choosing to serve in a minority school were the factors of luck, love for the minority, the former financial benefits and the non-demanding school-family environment.

T4: Yes... you can see... there are people who really have one, let's say, obsession, love with minorities and they like this thing, they like to get in touch with something different.

T7: To obtain points in order to be recruited as teacher, but without any real interest in teaching Greek as a second language; or having less pressure from parents and greater freedom of movement in the teaching approach

As we can see from the above excerpts, Greek teachers in minority schools can be divided into two broad and opposite categories. The first includes those who choose to work at this type of schooling believing that they are fulfilling a duty, that they support these students who belong to a vulnerable group. The second one believes that they are working at this type of school only for utilitarian reasons.

As for Muslim colleagues, half of the respondents (4/8) described them as quite traditional teachers, a fact that they attributed mainly to the textbooks of the detailed Turkish program. Also, the same proportion of teachers reported a low level of knowledge, which they felt was due to their academic training, but especially to the Turkish language in cases where teachers were Pomak speakers.

T7: Such things did not exist [i.e. modern methods], "do not disturb my routines" – traditional teaching

T1: Yes, there is an issue that many of them [Pomakophones] went to school to become Turkish teachers without knowing Turkish well.

Regarding the question "What advice would you give to an inexperienced teacher who is called to teach in a minority school?", most teachers (5/8) answered the acquisition of knowledge and information about the diversity of the minority, and understanding the emotional approach of the children.

T6: First of all, to have a lot of patience, to love children and not have demands, that is, to try to do what they do and the program to create a positive predisposition to Greek.

Half (4/8) of the sample advise the use of different teaching methods, such as teaching Greek as a foreign language, adapted teaching based on the student level of the classroom and experiential learning. Two teachers (2/8) spoke of lowering the teacher's expectations and adjusting his classroom requirements, thus indicating the low level of learning of minority school students. Also, two teachers (2/8) suggest special training and seminars for the appropriate training of the teacher.

T6: Yes, for a start, to come down to the level of children is a very basic thing that I did too

T2: I don't know if he goes to a school down in the plain, in the mountainous area, in a small school? To see how things are and to be helped with seminars, with consultants and such and how he will be able to cope.

With regard to school counselors and their work in minority schools, almost all the teachers (7/8) argued that they had not received any assistance or that they received inadequate assistance. They attribute their ineffective cooperation to the inexperience of school counselors in minority education, to the general and theoretical suggestions that did not solve the problems effectively and to their reduced number in line with the large number of minority schools in the area.

T6: Look, since the recording is anonymous, I think the help from the consultants was minimal, they were nice people, okay, we have contact, but they didn't have anything very important to tell me.

4.7. The Minority Education Context

References to disadvantaged minority schools were made by six (6/8) teachers. These include the lack of contact with peers of Greek-speaking students, the reduced hours, the reluctance and incomplete training of the teaching staff, inappropriate school mathematics textbooks, and limited possibilities for educational activities.

T3: I believe that the provision of knowledge in the public school in relation to the minority is clearly upgraded for many reasons. But the main thing for me is that both the Epathites [i.e. graduates of the EPATH school, which is a teachers' college only for Muslim origin students who want to be teachers in minority schools] and the Christian teachers who go to the minority schools ... em ... do not work hard enough. They don't work hard enough, because the former don't know, and the latter choose the minority schools for ... our ... reasons.

T6: Things are much less, the possibilities you have in a minority school for actions, for programs ...

Teachers explain the choice of parents sending their children to minority schools, attributing it to the exclusivity of minority education in mountainous Muslim villages, while one (T6) differentiates the village closest to Xanthi, Sminthi, where because of this proximity the minority school has a large loss of students to the city's majority school. In addition, the reason is the fear of criticism of the co-religious social environment. Finally, two teachers (2/8) attribute the choice of parents to their political orientation and the desire of their children to be in contact with religion through school.

T1: But most who would also like to do so, because they have the outcry of society [i.e. enrollment in a majority school] they avoid it

T6: There is no such possibility [i.e. enrollment in a majority school],... they are forced to be distributed to the local villages, there are some cases of nearby villages. For example from Sminthi many children come down here [Xanthi] for this and while it has a certain population, Sminthi has a four-class school because many students transfer to the schools of Xanthi

The majority of teachers (5/8) notice significant cognitive deficits in students, which makes their level of knowledge insufficient for the requirements of minority education. The main reason is attributed to the ignorance of terminology and the limited vocabulary that results from the teaching of math and the sciences in the Turkish language.

T3: In minority schools they ended up with clear problems... eee ... basic language skills and math skills.

T7: I don't think it makes sense for a child who continues his/her education at a Greek high school to learn mathematics or physics or any other subject in Turkish, or a child who knows math can't follow, because s/he doesn't know the language of mathematics in Greek!

In other words, minority students who have been taught math in the Turkish language at the primary school have difficulty to attend later at the Greek gymnasium math lessons in the Greek language.

Half (4/8) of the teachers on the goal of the minority school explain that it does not serve the needs of bilingual students, but political purposes. In particular, there are extracurricular and social influences that divert the minority school from the goal of intercultural education.

Is the minority school adapted to the needs of the bilingual student?

T1: It is more adapted to political conditions and does not listen to introductory pedagogical science on how to teach to a bilingual student. Minority education is controlled and goes according to political trends and not pedagogical ones.

As for suggestions for improving minority education, all teachers (8/8) suggested increasing teaching hours in Greek by reducing the teaching hours in Turkish. Five teachers (5/8) speak specifically about teaching all subjects in the Greek language and teaching Turkish only as a language lesson a few hours a week.

T1: To do a few hours in their mother tongue, in the rest of the hours to teach all the lessons only in Greek

Three teachers (3/8) support studying at the majority common school with the main argument being the existence of contact between the minority children and their peers of the majority, which is a strong motivation for them to learn Greek.

T1: In public schools they are forced, they have a stronger motivation to keep company and socialize, ... when you have classmates [i.e. Greek speakers] to keep company, to play, to speak a common language.

Six teachers (6/8) identify the majority school with the ability to go on to higher education. The children graduate with a higher level of knowledge, which is due to more hours of learning Greek, the acquisition of special terminology, extracurricular activities, the monolingual learning environment. Two teachers believe that through the majority school, children can acquire the level of a natural speaker, so they become balanced bilinguals.

T1: they will find it difficult to keep up with the level of the classroom [i.e. in the majority school], but they will not have more difficulty; they will learn the same things, equally and not only stimuli, events that take place, theaters

T7: In general, I have seen that Muslims from public schools have a good level, are completely equal to natural speakers, and also go on to university.

Three negative conditions were mentioned for the Muslim children who study in the majority, which are the teaching of Greek as a first language, the feeling of marginalization and the difficulty of communication and understanding of Greek in the first grades.

T1: It is a defect that schools [i.e. the majority schools] are not adapted for foreign language teaching

T5: Sometimes, when a student leaves the minority school and goes to the Christian [i.e. majority school], he may experience some marginalization, they may even make him a little more marginalized, because he is a minority there.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

Before discussing the findings, it is important to reiterate the difficulty of finding participants in minority education surveys, especially when following the semi-structured interview method. It is likely that individuals who are positive about participating in such research reflect only a small percentage of the educational community. Despite this, the findings presented and extending to many areas of minority

education agree in many respects with existing scientific literature, as presented below. A very important finding is the teachers' unanimity that bilingualism is a qualification that offers cognitive benefits, such as increased intelligence, the ability to acquire additional languages and a more general improvement in awareness, which is a good match between the first and second language.

However, in relation to the bilingual category they fall into, minority students are understood as not being balanced bilinguals, i.e. having a similar level of proficiency in the two languages, due to the low level in both languages, which is attributed to the linguistic insufficiency of the mother tongue. It is noteworthy that as a way to deal with the linguistic difficulties facing such students, teachers suggest reducing the number of Turkish-speaking courses, the non-teaching continuity of the mother tongue/first language in minority education, and the choice of the majority primary school over the minority, because it is felt to be enough to achieve only a basic level in the minority language. Therefore, the first language is treated "as a tool", that is, as the basis on which the second language will be built, which must be developed and surpass the first language. There is, therefore, a discrepancy in the words of the teachers, because perhaps as connoisseurs of modern theories they support the teaching of mother tongue/first language and the benefits of bilingualism, but ultimately suggest assimilative bilingualism as a successful choice for all Muslim students without exception. Also, their views focus on the cognitive benefits themselves, removing from the equation the psychological factors that lead to balanced bilingualism.

According to Baker and Wright (2017), the use of the mother tongue in the minority school environment enhances the student's self-image, gives him the feeling that his culture enjoys recognition and prestige, while attending a majority school evokes feelings of inferiority, as he often suffers. The underestimation of the values of the minority student's family under such conditions can lead to feelings of vulnerability and a loss of motivation. In the search for factors that affect students' performance in the Greek language, teachers focus on the family environment. It is curious that for teachers the family acquires the most decisive role with respect to the child's school success, a fact that relates to Dragona's view (2007, p. 29), according to which, in the case of school failure or poor behavior on the part of the student, the relationship between the family and the school can become an antagonistic.

A second significant factor influencing the performance of the minority school students and their development as bilingual speakers is the social and linguistic environment; in particular the marginalization of students prevents the development of the Greek language. The social restriction of the Thracian minority has been implicated in many studies related to the attitudes and educational level of the minority, as reported by Frangoudaki (2011) and Askouni (2007). A third cause of learning problems is the kind of political influence that often bears on minority education, leading to a deviation from the values and purposes of bilingual education. It is concluded that teachers identify the factors that influence bilingualism as being outside of the school, thus relieving the school community of any kind of responsibility. It is also an important finding that the use of the mother tongue/first language while teaching Greek has a positive effect, as half of the teachers decide that their work in this respect helps students communicatively, practically and emotionally. This strategy is included in the theory of code switching, according to which students resort to this approach in order to build a communication framework (Nilep, 2006).

The findings suggest the belief of teachers in the principles of interculturalism, that the teacher is not the only transmitter of language and culture, but also, as a member of the same society as her/his students, s/he is respectful of and open to their culture/s (*Tsarektsi*, 2013). At this point, however, it could be argued that minority school teachers are aware of the need to use students' first language, as they themselves are a minority. In particular, in the minority school, where the classes are mainly linguistically cohesive and the communication between students and Turkish-speaking teachers is unimpeded, in combination with the fact that students know the Greek language, it is possible that there may be a sense of "linguistic isolation" among Greek-speaking teachers. It would be interesting to ask the question of the use of the mother tongue to teachers of the majority schools as well.

Also important are the findings regarding the teachers' views that allotting equal time to each language does not serve the students well because it causes problems in the rest of the educational process. It is important to note that teachers identify the problem in the division of teaching hours and not in the autonomy or in the lack of coordination between two different programs. Vakalios et al. (1997), however, target as key problems the absence of joint planning in teaching, in the connection of teaching subjects, as well as in a common teaching philosophy. Scholars speak of one-way directions, which form incomplete and fragmented images of the world in students' minds (Kelesidis, 2001, p. 103).

In addition, teachers attribute to the linguistically homogeneous nature of minority schools the social marginalization of minority students, as they lack social contact with Greek-speaking interlocutors. Linguistic distance and isolation was also reported at the social level, sometimes due to the homogeneous Muslim local environment, sometimes due to the conscious choice of the students' family. For teachers, this results in a reduction to their motivation to learn Greek, as "according to the theory of active learning (Androussou, 2007, p. 20), motivation derives from the creation of internal needs and through contact with others". Most teachers, on the other hand, recommend attending majority schools with first language compensatory classes as an ideal educational program. This view implies weak bilingualism, where teaching of the first language is considered inevitable as a tool to support the latter, while the books and the way of teaching Greek will be addressed to monolingual students.

The participants in this study characterize the Turkish-speaking program teachers as "traditional teachers" with incomplete, teaching and sometimes language skills, a position supported also in Magos' research (2004). Also, for political and ideological reasons, Pomak-speaking teachers reject the use of their mother tongue/first language as a teaching tool, in contrast to the interviewees who are positive about its use, which demonstrates the dissimilarity of teaching approaches applied in the two programs. Conversely, references to Greek-speaking teachers did not revolve around their educational training and ability, but focus on the reasons they previously chose to serve in a minority school, which included convenience, due to reduced minority teaching requirements, extra school holidays and financial benefits, a situation that has now been reversed, as financial support has ceased and parental demands are constantly increasing. At this point, it could be argued that there is a tendency to attribute accusations to teachers, but it seems that only for the teachers of the Turkish-speaking program are the main disadvantages related to their educational training. In addition, the advice they would give to young teachers – i.e. to understand the notion of difference, to follow an emotional approach, to use different teaching methods adapted to teaching Greek as a second language – reflects teachers' awareness of their students' identity issues (Michail, 2003a). It turns out that the teachers of the sample recognize the importance of creating a climate of security and acceptance of cultural diversity. As for school counselors, teachers are mostly dissatisfied with the help they receive, judging their suggestions ineffective (Michail, 2003b). Teachers' statements imply the urgent need for specialized school counselors, well trained and informed about the particular educational situation of minority education in Thrace, as well as an indirect acceptance with respect to what they themselves lack with respect to teaching training.

Finally, it is interesting to correlate the findings of the present study with those of the research of Poursanidou (2016). These two studies have similar goals, were carried out at the same period of time and their sample comes from the same educational level and geographical area. Their differences lie in the methods, research tools and sample, as Poursanidou's research used a quantitative approach with questionnaires for two hundred (N=200) teachers who teach in minority and majority schools.

Comparing the results of the two studies, i.e. the current study and Poursanidou's study, many similarities and some differences emerged. Initially, both studies agree that teachers perceive bilingualism as a positive characteristic of the individual and the need for knowledge of the mother tongue as necessary in learning the latter. They also converge on the fact that teachers blame low school performance on family and especially the exclusive use of the mother tongue at the family environment.

An important difference with the present research is that few suggested as a method the use of the students' mother tongue by the teacher. As a suitable teaching model, the results reveal teachers' preference for reception classes with trained teachers, organized bilingual schools, and, as an additional means, more frequent contact with parents, while few referred to teaching by bilingual teachers. Thus, there is a preference for a multicultural type of education, which, according to Palaiologou (2012), often leads to assimilation, with an emphasis on the Greek language and culture, ignoring the students' mother tongue and their cultural background.

The differences in the findings of this study with the study of Poursanidou (2016) concerning the bilingualism of teachers and the knowledge of the mother tongue/first language of bilingual students as teaching practice, can be attributed to the fact that the sample in the second survey comes from the majority schools, while the sample of the present study works or worked mainly in minority schools, where students' mother tongue predominates. Probably in the case of the teachers of the minority schools the knowledge of the students' mother tongue/first language is an important means for the approach, the communication and the teaching, while in the case of the teachers of the majority schools the knowledge of the mother tongue does not have the same weight. (Katsirma, 2013; Siakka, 2017.)

On the other hand, according to participants' views, the preference is for a monolingual teacher who can support bilingualism as well as the reception class teacher, rather than the bilingual teacher who may use mainly his/her mother tongue. Contradictory views – in particular the positive attitudes towards bilingualism as opposed to the downplaying of first language's significance, either with suggestions for eliminating it from the family environment or through bilingual programs in the school environment – are often expressed amongst the teachers. In addition, the lack of reference to an intercultural context, which, according to Magos & Simopoulos (2009), promotes a communication environment that respects differences, promoting mutual acquaintance, harmonious coexistence and cultural exchange, may indicate feelings of cultural superiority.

7. Epilogue

Teachers in Thrace's minority schools are a special category, as they are called upon to teach mainly culturally and linguistically homogeneous students, with differentiated books, in an educational environment with inherent and ongoing problems, without being properly or adequately trained. On the one hand, they are witnesses of a distorted educational system with an indistinct goal, and on the other hand, they become partakers of this problematic situation due to their lack of specialization. The interviews show the teachers' anxiety about the progress of minority education and their call for an immediate change. The findings reveal that even though modern bilingual theories are familiar to them, the following paradox is observed: despite statements of acceptance of the minority students' cultural identity, the use of the mother tongue/first language as a teaching tool casts doubts and the need to prioritize the teaching of their first language, as the primary educational goal is the acquisition of the Greek language and the subsequent assimilation of the minority students within modern Greek society.

A noticeable difference in the direction of intercultural education for immigrant children is that minority students are indigenous, study mainly in culturally homogeneous classes, have a common code of communication within the school, and usually within a local community, often as the sole cultural group. Thus, in our view, there is an urgent need for the education of the Thracian minority to be approached by the broader scientific community, as a separate and complex educational case.

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