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## **Teachers' beliefs about the performance of bilingual immigrant students with or without learning difficulties**

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### **Abstract**

*With increased numbers of bilingual students, changing population demographics in Greece have altered the landscape of education and teacher's now need to be prepared to work within this new reality. However, teachers often express uncertainty or even anxiety with regard to teaching bilingual immigrant students; something that does not help the building of communities. The present study therefore seeks to examine Greek teachers' beliefs about their ability to teach bilingual students. With the growing number of bilingual immigrant students attending Greek schools the Greek educational system has to correspond to the needs of heterogeneous groups of students, with a number of immigrant children included in mainstream classrooms. This study was designed to record the beliefs of Greek teachers of both general and special education in relation to bilingualism. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 40 primary school teachers. Study findings resulting from the qualitative analysis of interview data, revealed teachers' misconceptions and inconsistencies about certain issues relating to bilingualism, bilingualism and learning disabilities, and bilingual students' academic and linguistic performance.*

**Keywords:** *teacher's beliefs, school performance, bilingual immigrant students, learning difficulties*

### **1. Introduction**

Since the mid '80s and especially during the '90s, Greece became a reception country for foreign immigrants, some of whom are concurrently of Greek heritage as well as refugees. It is worth mentioning that the largest immigration wave started in the early '90s and the immigrants were mainly Albanians. Over the course of the last decade, as Greece changed from a migrant export country to an immigrant reception country, immigrants in the tens of thousands settled in coming from many parts of the world. Mass immigration into Greece has been reflected in the school population. According to the Institute of Intercultural Education of the Greek Education Ministry (IPODE, 2006), during the school year 2004-05, about 140,000 migrant and repatriated Greek pupils were enrolled in Greek schools, accounting for almost 10% of the overall school population.

As a result, bilingual phenomena in the Greek social and school environment started to be noticed and studied. Thus, the Greek educational system is being challenged, as the multilingual school context requires rethinking and redefining of everyday school

practices and projects. Consequently, the Greek educational system has to correspond to the needs of heterogeneous groups of students, with a number of immigrant children included in mainstream classrooms and teacher's need to both have the vision to as well as be prepared to work with this new reality.

The most common problem faced by students who grow up in a place where two or three languages are used is low performance in school resulting in isolation, but there is difference between language difficulties and learning difficulty. Teachers often do not know how to deal with these situations, resulting in the isolation of the bilingual student from the learning process or his referral for evaluation by the diagnostic service.

In the past, bilingualism was considered as a cause of low performance at school and often linked to learning difficulties (Triarhi-Herrman, 2000), proof of that is that a large number of children of language minorities, are following special education programs. However, other studies have shown that bilingualism does not necessarily have negative effects on lingual, cognitive and social development of children as they can acquire language experiences from different cultures (August & Hakuta, 1998).

Although attitudes have shifted greatly toward accepting bilingualism in childhood as "normal" and perhaps advantageous, these attitudes only apply to children who do not face learning difficulties (Paradis, 2007). As for the low school performance of immigrant children, it is attributed to other factors beyond bilingualism. Such factors include: a) bilingual children's deficits and difficulties in school language, b) linguistic cultural differences between home and school, c) lower quality of education provided to language minority students, as well as factors associated with their socioeconomic status (Cummins & Swain, 1986). Bilingual children are disproportionately represented in low-income populations, resulting in significant racial and social-class disparities in language learning linked to diminished learning opportunities. Evidence points to a well-established link between socioeconomic deprivation and the prevalence of mild or moderate learning difficulties (Emerson, 1997). The link is reflected in lower income, poorer housing, higher unemployment and a greater reliance on welfare benefits. Some evidence of a link between severe learning difficulties and poverty has been reported in a US study (Hatton, 2002).

Only a small portion of academic underachievement belongs to learning disabilities. In the 1990s, the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD) defined the term learning disability as: a general term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities. Reading disabilities, or dyslexia, is the most common learning disability. All these disorders are intrinsic to the individual, presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction, and may occur across the life span. Problems in self-regulatory behaviours, social perception, and social interaction may exist with learning disabilities but do not by themselves constitute a learning disability. Although learning disabilities may occur concomitantly with other handicapping conditions (for example, sensory impairment, mental retardation, serious emotional disturbance), or with extrinsic influences (such as cultural differences, insufficient or inappropriate instruction), they are not the result of those conditions or influences (National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, 1991). Children with

learning disabilities are referred to those displaying a severe discrepancy between intellectual ability and performance on a standardized achievement test (Berninger, 2006). They are usually diagnosed when individually administered standardized tests in reading or written expression are well below that expected for their respective age, intelligence and schooling (American Psychiatric Association, 1994).

Evidence for disproportionate representation of minority students among students with learning disabilities have been reported (Harry, 1992. Harry & Anderson, 1994). Understanding why disproportionate representation occurs and deciding how to respond appropriately require both a coherent conceptual framework and meticulous empirical investigation (Utley & Obiakor, 2001). Artiles et al. (1998) described the persistence of disproportionality along a continuum ranging from discriminatory professional practices to innate deficits of minority children.

Some of the major issues, bilingual children with learning difficulties face, are: (a) language delay in both the native language and second language, (b) delay in the acquisition of reading skills in both the native and second language, (c) learning problems related to the lack of instruction and appropriate transition from the native language to the second language, (d) behaviour problems associated with experiences of failure either in regular or special education, (e) increasing number of at-risk and drop out students due to the lack of appropriate instruction in the L1 and L2, (f) cultural identity problems, and (g) poor self-esteem problems associated with cultural factors (Maldonado, 1994).

Moreover, research has shown that simultaneous bilingual children with specific language impairment make the same type of errors as monolingual children with specific language impairment (Paradis, Crago, Genesee & Rice, 2003). Furthermore, it has been indicated that bilingual children with Specific Language Impairment will manifest that impairment in both of their languages, although the nature of the language difficulties they exhibit will differ across languages (Paradis, Crago & Genesee, 2006).

## **2. The study**

### ***2.1 Purpose and objectives of the study***

Teachers are expected to meet the varied needs of their students to teach and support students who are minority language speakers (e.g., August & Shanahan, 2006; Gersten et al., 2007). However, the teachers employed in the Greek educational system often express their anxiety and unwillingness to teach to minority students (Tressou & Mitakidou, 1997 in Griva, Dinas & Stamou, in press). Therefore, the information about teachers' beliefs is extremely important in terms of improving teaching effectiveness (Nespor, 1987). Moreover, teachers' beliefs about bilingualism and bilingual education can play a central role in terms of adopting effective teaching processes.

The present study was conducted with the aim to provide an account of primary school teachers' beliefs about bilingualism and their views on bilingual education, as well as to

identify their aspects on issues related to bilingual students with learning difficulties (disabilities).

The major objectives of the study were the following:

1. To identify the way teachers define bilingual children's linguistic and cognitive profile
2. To record teachers' perceptions about learning difficulties of bilingual children
3. To record their beliefs about bilingual students' school performance
4. To reveal their views on issues related to bilingual and special bilingual education policies

## ***2.2 The Sample***

The participants involved in the study were in total 40 primary school teachers (25 women and 15 men); Their teaching experience varied: the least experienced teachers had been working from one to fifteen years (60%), while the most experienced teachers had been teaching for more than fifteen years (40%). 13% of them held a Master's degree in Psychology or Special Education. In addition, 35% of the teachers attended seminars or training courses related to bilingualism or special education.

## ***2.3 The research instrument***

Semi-structured interviews were used as the basic instrument to collect that data, which comprised the following sections: a) profile of bilingual children, b) Bilingual children and school performance, c) Bilingual children and special difficulties, d) suggestions about education policy.

The interviews were conducted individually, and were tape recorded, transcribed and analysed qualitatively. The verbal data underwent the following procedures of analysis: Data reduction, which involved first and second level coding, resulted in groups of categories/sub-categories (Miles & Huberman, 1994), which were then classified into basic thematic strands.

## **3. Interview Results**

### ***3.1 Qualitative Results***

The verbal data derived from the EFL teachers' interviews underwent first and second level coding, as well as pattern coding, which involves giving descriptive or conceptual names. Codes resulted in groups of categories; then similar categories with common characteristics were clustered into basic themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Coding of the verbal data resulted in 60 codes, which were grouped into 16 categories of the following thematic strands:

- A. Bilingual children's profile
- B. Special difficulties and bilingual children
- C. School performance of bilingual children
- D. Suggestions about parental involvement
- E. Suggestions about educational issues

### 3.1.1 Bilingual children's profile

In an attempt to outline the profile of bilingual children, a noteworthy number of the participants considered 'ability to communicate in two languages' and 'Awareness in Intercultural Communication' as their basic characteristics. Regarding the advantages and disadvantages of bilingual students, the majority of the teachers considered the 'communicative sensibility' and 'multilingual awareness' as the main advantages. These advantages have been reported to include, in comparison with monolinguals, at least as good and often better performance by bilinguals in language, literacy, and various realms of cognition (Cummins, 2000; Lindholm, 2001). Moreover, there can be a positive influence on children's general educational development (e.g. cognitive, emotional, cultural) and on the formation of a multilingual and intercultural identity.

At the same time, a significant part of the teachers claimed that bilingualism is related to learning difficulties, language deficits and academic disadvantages. Most participants emphasized the problems caused by bilingualism in education and specifically the problems student's encounter in reading and writing (table 1).

**Table 1. Themes, categories and codes related to 'bilingual children's profile'**

THEMES/CATEGORIES	CODES	REFER
A. BILINGUAL CHILDREN'S PROFILE		
		30
1. Differences between monolingual and bilingual children	AWINTECO=Awareness in Intercultural Communication	27
	DIFCODE=Differences in cognitive development	4
	CULTDIF=Cultural differences	11

	COMMLANS=Communication two languages	38
2. Bilingualism – Advantages	COMSENFL=Communicative sensibility/flexibility	33
	CREATHI=Creative thinking	8
	PLURSEN=Plurilingual sensitivity	17
	MCUAWAR=Multicultural awareness	18
	MLINCOM=Multilingual competence	12
3. Bilingualism – Disadvantages	CODSWMI=Code switching/mixing	10
	CONFL1L2=Confusion between two languages	3
	LEARNdif=Learning difficulties	22
	DEFLASK=Deficits in language skills	6

### 3.1.2 Special difficulties and bilingual children

When the teachers were asked to identify the criteria they use to determine if a bilingual student has special learning difficulties, the majority of them felt that the basic indicator is the existence of difficulties and problems related to writing, while 15 participants reported the existence of learning disabilities in both languages as a basic criterion. It cannot be ignored that almost all teachers admitted that there are language deficits in bilingual students. Most of them referred mostly to problems and difficulties in bilingual students' writing skills, highlighting the presence of a number of spelling mistakes and the difficulty in vocabulary acquisition.

Nevertheless, it cannot be ignored that an overwhelming percentage of the participants (29 teachers) declared they cannot distinguish the general and special learning difficulties of bilingual students. However, if they had to diagnose possible learning disabilities, they would use the same criteria and techniques employed for identifying

monolingual children's learning disabilities, or even they could use their own experience (table 2).

A significant part of the teachers reported that they do not know how they should treat bilingual children's learning difficulties in the context of primary school classroom. At the end of the spectrum, only a few of them stated that they will use a variety of simple tasks and teaching aids for the linguistic and cognitive development of the specific target group.

**Table 2. Themes, categories and codes related to 'special difficulties and bilingual children'**

THEMES/CATEGORIES	CODES	REFER
B. SPECIAL DIFFICULTIES AND BILINGUAL CHILDREN		
4. Defining learning difficulties	LEDIFL1L2=Learning difficulties in L1 and L2	15
	DIFREWR=Difficulties in reading and writing	25
5. Conceptual identification of special difficulties	CONSPLDI=Teachers' confusion in identifying language difficulties and special learning difficulties	29
	UNSPDIF=Understanding children with specific learning difficulties	11
6. Treating bilingual children with learning difficulties	CLOSTAS=Closed-type tasks	18
	VATEAID=Variety of teaching aids	15
	CONTRME=Confusion about using appropriate treatment methods	20
	INDLEAR=Individual learning	22

### 3.1.3 School performance of bilingual children

Since language is the basis of understanding all other subjects, poor language competence of the specific group of students could lead to poor performance in other

subjects (10 teachers). However, it is noteworthy that the majority of the teachers claimed that although most of the bilingual students face difficulties in language skills and have a limited vocabulary range, they can show satisfactory performance in maths and science.

When teachers were asked about the factors which influence their linguistic development, it is very interesting that the vast majority, focused first on individual factors and then to factors related to the environment. The personality gained the highest references as a very important factor that affects L2 learning. Also, early bilingualism and the context were marked as important factors by a certain number of the teachers. The age factor played an important role, since the majority argued that 3-6 was the best age (early bilingualism). However, the similarity of L1 (first language) and L2 (second language), the motives provided by school were received of medium importance for the majority of the interviewees (table 3).

**Table 3. Themes, categories and codes related to 'school performance of bilingual children'**

THEMES/CATEGORIES	CODES	REFER
C.SCHOOL PERFORMANCE OF BILINGUAL CHILDREN		
7. Cognitive performance	FAMLADE=The role of family in language development	23
	ACHSCSU=Achievement in science subjects	31
	COUORPE=Interrelation between country of origine and students' performance	26
	LCOMPER=Interrelation between language competence and school performance	33
	PROLEDI=Problems with school performance because of special learning difficulties	2
8. Language competence	LPERLAN=Low performance in language courses	15
	SPELMIS=Presence of a number of spelling mistakes	15

	DIFVOCA=Difficulty in vocabulary acquisition	13
9. Factors affecting L2 learning	BELEALA=Bent towards learning languages	7
	ASSILAN=Assimilation of languages	13
	BILCHPER=Bilingual student's personality	34
	STMENPO=Student's mental potential	17
	ROSOCONT=The role of the social context	20
	EARBILG=Early bilingualism	25
	SIMBILG=Simultaneous bilingualism	11
	LATBILG=Late bilingualism	5

### 3.1.4 Suggestions about parental involvement

It was strongly suggested increasing parental involvement in children's homework as well as the cooperation between school and immigrant parents, since such a co-operation could have an impact on school attainment of their children and could improve results for students with disabilities. They indicated the necessity for fostering children's language development, promoting the social and academic growth of children. For this reason, it was emphasized that encouraging Parent/family involvement at home is a current necessity. Schools and parents/families must cooperate and work collaboratively to improve the learning experience of bilingual children with or without difficulties. Nevertheless, some interviewees (12 teachers) highlighted the fact that immigrant parents may face many barriers and challenges to active participation in their children's educational experiences in Greece (table 4).

**Table 4. Themes, categories and codes related to 'Suggestions about parental involvement'**

THEMES/CATEGORIES	CODES	REFER
SUGGESTIONS ABOUT PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT		
10. Immigrant Parents' involvement	L1PRFAM=L1 practice in family environment	30
	L2PRFAM=L2 practice in family environment	10
11. Cooperation with parents	DICOOPAR=Difficulties in developing a good cooperation with parents	12
	COEDUBA=Interrelation of cooperation with educational background	20
	PARCHED=Parental interest in children's education	13
	PAWILCO=Parents' willingness to cooperate with school	25

### *3.1.5 Suggestions about educational issues*

The teachers were asked to express their views on certain issues related to educational practices applied to bilingual children with or without learning difficulties. In quest for the improvement in standards of learning attainments of bilingual children factors need to be taken into consideration:

- Factors related to teaching practices: Almost all the teachers agreed on the need for early intervention to bilingual students with special learning difficulties in order to stabilize teaching strategies and principles to address the requirements of these children. In addition, all participants considered the cooperation of school with Centres of Assessment and Support responsible for children with special educational needs to be very important. Also, 'activating cultural

background of bilingual children' was highly favoured by the majority of the participants.

- For a significant number of teachers, 'Bilingualism' was regarded as a principal on which to reorganize teaching and organize a multilingual-multicultural education system. However, the rest of the participants were against this institution as it does not either help students or facilitates the educational policy of the country.
- Factors related to teachers' professional development, which include the skills and the qualifications of teachers and the level of training support provided to them in order to treat bilingual children with or without learning difficulties. They believed that teaching both in primary and secondary schools should be supported by the establishment and provision of appropriate in-service training programmes, which interrelate theory and practice (table 5).

**Table 5. Themes, categories and codes related to 'Suggestions about educational issues'**

THEMES/CATEGORIES	CODES	REFER
SUGGESTIONS ABOUT EDUCATIONAL ISSUES		
12. Early intervention	EARINTDI=Need for early intervention to bilingual children with difficulties	35
	COSPEINS=Need for cooperation with special education institutions	40
13. Use of Teaching techniques	IGAPRTEC=Ignorance of using appropriate techniques	12
	ACTBAKN=Activation of background knowledge	9
	GROUWOR=Group- working	11
	USIMAGR=Using imagery	8
14. Multicultural education	INMULSC=Institution of multicultural schools	20
	ESTBILTE=Establishment of bilingual teacher assistant	23

	OPESMULS=Opposed to the Institution of multicultural schools	17
	OPBILTE=Opposed to the establishment of bilingual teacher assistant	20
15. Teachers' professional development	PRTRAIPR=Need for providing in-service training programmes	34
	LITHEPRA=Linking theory with practice	30
	TTRWITSC=Training within the school context	32
	INSTRBID=Insufficient education and training on issues of bilingual education	30
	INTRBISPE=Insufficient education and training on issues of bilingual special education	36

#### 4. Discussion

In the present study an attempt was made to record the beliefs of Greek teachers of general and special education in relation to bilingualism. The findings resulted from the qualitative analysis of interview data, revealed teachers' misconceptions and inconsistencies about certain issues related to bilingualism, bilingualism and learning disabilities, and bilingual students' academic and linguistic performance.

Despite the fact that teachers acknowledged various cognitive advantages in bilingual thinking, they expect bilingual students to have communication problems and to show lower performance in language skills. It is surprising that even today there are still teachers who "condemn" bilingualism, following the theory of separate underlying linguistic competence, according to which languages are separate linguistic systems and the human brain has a limited space for learning them. A few teachers relied on the interdependence of language and the theory of additive bilingualism (Cummins, 2005; Paradis, 2007).

Bilingualism was regarded as a reason of low performance at school and often linked to learning difficulties (Griva et al, in press; Hatton & Emerson, 2001; Triarhi-Herrman, 2000). Moreover, they showed uncertainty or even ignorance about what type of intervention to implement (Gersten, et al, 2007). They simply referred to the use of

simple tasks and individualised teaching. As a result, a large number of immigrant children are following special education treatment. Most of the teachers admitted they are unable to distinguish between learning difficulties and learning disabilities of bilingual students included in Greek mainstream classes. In order to identify “learning disabilities” of bilingual students, teachers declared that they usually employ the same criteria applied to monolingual children. The research suggests that reliable diagnosis of learning disabilities among bilingual children can be achieved by examining within-language differences (L1 and L2) on various indices of basic reading skills such as phonological processing, and by noting a significant gap between oral and reading comprehension. The need, also, for alternative assessment approaches becomes even more evident in the context of research findings related to the length of time bilingual students require to catch up academically in the second language (Mcnamara, 1998. Padeliaou & Patsidimou, 2007).

Half of the participants supported the establishment of bilingual-multilingual schools and implementation of the institution of bilingual teacher. Specifically, they considered bilingual/multilingual education a necessity for an effective education policy, since it plays a crucial part in both fostering literacy, students’ and authentic cultural identities (Kymlicka, 1991: 166). However half of the participants were against, especially because of the fear and anxiety that comes from ignorance and lack of training. Regarding their readiness to take over a class including diverse population, the teachers expressed their need to be trained to acquire the appropriate skills. Furthermore, it was emphasized that parental involvement plays a central role to children’s successful literacy attainment (Marsh, 2006), since they agreed on the fact that the children whose parents are actively involved in their development are more likely to succeed in school (Desforjes, & Abouchaar, 2003).

Concluding, the misconceptions as revealed by this study should be considered for the design of efficient educational programs aiming at dispersing prejudices and commonsensical ideas about bilingualism as well as training teachers to treat bilingual children with learning disabilities. It is vital that educators striving for inclusive communities to be in a position to contribute to the building of these communities. The role of language generally and in education specifically with respect to citizenship, identity and community building is a debate that can be found around the world. It is a debate that includes issues such as diversity, social exclusion, and discrimination and is also related to teachers’ beliefs about their students’ abilities.

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