The Project on the Education of Muslim Minority Children in Thrace, Greece: Stimulating the Educational Process and Enhancing Collaborative Practices

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Abstract The present chapter presents a long-term educational intervention, aimed at increasing the social inclusion of Muslim minority children in the Greek province of Thrace, by reversing trends in massive underachievement and high dropout levels from 9-year compulsory education. It is a systemic approach, targeting teaching of Greek as a second language, the development of education materials, training of teachers, introduction of transformative pedagogy principles, creation of informal education structures, such as community centres and mobile units, Greek classes for parents, and work with the community as a whole. The historical and socio-political context within which the intervention takes place is presented, in view of highlighting how the conflicts of the past pervade the classrooms of the present. Difficulties encountered are discussed, and changes achieved are indicated in quantitative and qualitative terms.

Keywords Muslim minority · Educational intervention · Community centres · Empowerment of identities

1 Introduction

Greek society has been, since the end of WW2 and until the 1990s, relatively homogeneous. After forced exchanges of populations, the Nazi's extermination of the entire Jewish population of Northern Greece, and the persecution of minorities during the cold war,[1] the relatively high homogeneity provided rich soil for the

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[1] The wars between Greece and the Ottoman Empire, and then Turkey and the neighboring Balkan countries were followed by a forced exchange of populations in the 1920s and 1930s which moved much of the Turkish and Slav population beyond the Greek borders. Similarly, the Chams (Muslim Albanian-speaking populations), and, in 1949, the Slavo-Macedonians, were subject to persecution.

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establishment of the myth that Greece is a culturally uniform society. The Greek educational system has, accordingly, been mono-cultural, extremely centralized and uniform, highly ethnocentric and geared towards the development of national consciousness rather than the cultivation of critical thinking.

The large influx of immigrants into Greece in the 1990's, increasing the population by 10%, came as a shock both to the society and to the Greek school. Multiculturalism was placed on the public agenda, stimulating growing debates on difference and identities, while fueling racist and nationalist discourses and practices. This is by no means an exclusively Greek phenomenon. Racism, intolerance, anti-Semitism and xenophobia persist, at both personal and institutional levels, in more or less virulent forms, in every single country in Europe.

It is the mid-1990s that mark a shift, as regards the concern over accommodation of ethno-cultural diversity in the Greek school. The rapid increase of students of non-Greek mother tongue, the intensification of Europeanization processes, and the implicit pressure of international organizations towards minority protection challenged pressingly the educational system. Among the various institutional measures introduced, some proved to be more successful than others. In 1997, three large-scale educational projects were launched, funded largely by the European Social Fund, catering for the educational needs of three different groups of students: repatriated and foreigners, Roma, and those belonging to the Muslim minority in Thrace. The overall aim, for all three projects, was to reduce dropout from compulsory education; develop an intercultural dimension within the educational system; provide students with the opportunity to benefit from education, and enhance their social inclusion while maintaining their cultural characteristics.

The present chapter will tell the story of the project that is responsible for the education of the Muslim minority children in Thrace. We will first provide the socio-historical context within which the intervention takes place; we will continue by describing the various dimensions of the intervention as such; and we will end by discussing the difficulties encountered, and the changes achieved by providing quantitative and qualitative data.

2   The Socio-historical Context

In order to appreciate the complexity of the intervention, one has to understand how the Muslim minority came about, the historical and political background responsible for the clash between the majority and the minority, the underlying matrix of Greek-Turkish relations, and the articulation of religious identity with ethnic and national affiliation (Tsitselikis 2012). We will attempt to sketch briefly the above intricate nexus of these problems.

The Muslims of Thrace are a historical minority resulting from a Convention and a Protocol signed at the Lausanne Peace Conference in 1923, following the 1919–22 Greek-Turkish War. The Treaty of Lausanne stipulated the compulsory exchange of populations between Greece and Turkey, whereby Greek Orthodox living in Turkish territories were exchanged with the Muslims living on Greek soil. For reasons that are not the scope of the present chapter, the same Treaty catered for an exception and defined those to be excluded from the exchange: 130,000 Orthodox Greeks established in Istanbul, and about the same number of Muslims living in the Greek province of Western Thrace. Both population groups found themselves to be 'foreigners' in a re-defined homeland. There are still today Muslims in Thrace who lament that nobody asked them whether they wanted to leave along with their brothers or stay in Thrace.

It is owing to the millet system, categorizing the various population groups of the Ottoman Empire according to their religion, that the non-exchanged populations were defined according to their religious and not their ethnic identity. Hence religion can be freely practiced, while Turkish ethnic identity is not recognized. Moreover, the Treaty lumped together diverse Muslim groups living in Thrace – Turks, Pomaks and Roma. All they had in common was their faith, but they spoke different languages, had different traditions, customs and allegiances. This diversity within the Muslim minority is a controversial issue that is being used in political manoeuvrings, by all stakeholders.

In the years that elapsed from the Lausanne Treaty, the fate of both minorities was sealed by the historical Greco-Turkish conflict, and the nationalist ideals epitomizing the nation-building processes that followed the break-up of the Ottoman Empire. Up until very recently, Greece and Turkey have shared the ideal of a homogeneous nation-state, in which minorities have no place. The dominant paradigm has been undermining the concept of citizenship.

The Treaty oversaw the protection of the rights of these two minorities based on a reciprocity principle.[2] Yet, neither the principle of protection, nor that of reciprocity proved to be viable. The two minorities were caught in the clash between Greece and Turkey, and were used as means of pressure, or directly victims of reprisals. Both were exposed to considerable duress, such as restrictive and discriminatory policies, coercive emigration or, even worse in the case of Greeks in Turkey, large-scale deportation (Alexandris 1992; Oran 2003). As Tsitselikis phrases it, "reciprocal maltreatment began as soon as legal protection was set up" (2008: 75). We do not wish to delve into the considerable historiography relevant to this complex matter, nor account for the abuses that took place in varying degrees in both countries. What we are interested in is to show how the conflicts of the past have pervaded the classroom of the present.

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[2] Articles 37 to 45, http://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Treaty_of_Lausanne

2.1 Social and Economic Marginalization

Historical developments and political pressures prevented the minority from participating in the socio-economic changes of the Greek society, which were particularly rapid in the 1970s and 1980s. They were excluded from the benefits of development and remained in a disadvantageous, marginal position.

The most significant consequence of socio-economic deprivation is mirrored by the social structure of the minority. As revealed from a survey conducted at the onset of the project presented here, 42% of the economically active minority are manual workers, and 47% are agricultural labourers, while the national mean is of 18%. In other words, almost 90% of the minority belongs to the two lower social strata (Askouni 2006). In sum, compared to the rest of the Greek population, the minority suffers profound inequalities: it is far more economically deprived, and far less educated than the former.

The greater part of the minority lives in segregated communities. Out of the almost 500 settlements in Thrace, only 12% have a mixed population, while the rest are divided almost equally into homogenous majority and minority geographical units.

The minority, being agrarian and poor, has remained deeply traditional, mainly based on patriarchy and religious practice. Society in Thrace has, thus, been divided into first and second-class citizens, for a very long time; a dominant group that could freely exercise power, and a subordinate one, socially, economically and educationally marginalized. The reasons for this sharp division and disregard of human rights are the product of a complex causal nexus. The perception of the minority as Turkey's 'Trojan horse', to quote Heraclides (2001: 300), justifies patriotic rhetoric on the protection of 'national interests', expressing either fear for the threat to the fabric of the Greek nation, or concealing blatant economic exploitation, made possible through lawlessness. Furthermore, as everywhere else in the world, the co-existence of first and second-class citizens has nurtured authoritarian attitudes, has driven the hegemonic group to fiercely defend its status, and fight to maintain the privileges associated with it. It is thus obvious that education is the most important vehicle for fighting social exclusion.

2.2 Education: A Neglected Human Right

Muslim minority children have suffered from poor education for many decades. At the onset of the project in 1997, although there were neither reliable statistics on school attendance or on dropout rates, nor any educational or language competence assessment, it was common knowledge that children were coming out of primary school illiterate in Greek, and functionally illiterate in Turkish, while the dropout rate from 9-year compulsory education was nine times higher to that of children belonging to the majority population. The reasons for this massive underachievement are greatly social and political.

It is the Treaty of Lausanne that regulates education and constitutes the basic charter that gives both the Muslim minority in Thrace and the Greek Orthodox Christian minority in Istanbul the right to establish, manage and control schools at their own expense, in which they may use their own language and freely practice their own religion. In the name of reciprocity once more, education became the battlefield of choice for the two countries.[3]

The way education is designed and delivered is to a great extent related to the trials and tribulations the Muslim minority has experienced. The authoritarian nature of post-civil war Greece, the mounting difficulties between Greece and Turkey, and the Greek dictatorship from 1967 until 1974, have all had a great impact on minority education developments (Iliadis 2004; Aarbakke 2000). For a very long time, the tacit message was that there is no need to educate the minority, since it is better controlled when it remains illiterate.

On the basis of the Treaty of Lausanne and Greco-Turkish Cultural Protocols, minority schools have bilingual curricula and are attended solely by children of the minority. The Turkish language and the supposedly ideologically free mathematics, physics, chemistry, art, physical education, are taught in Turkish (and the Qur'an in Arabic), by teachers who are members of the minority. On the contrary, Greek language and the ideologically laden subjects, such as history, geography, environmental studies and civic education are taught in Greek, by teachers who belong to the majority. Since the Treaty of Lausanne lumped together linguistically diverse subgroups on the basis of their Muslim religion, the Turkish language is taught to all minority children, whether their mother tongue is Turkish or not.

Although bilingual, the minority primary schools are obsolete, segregated institutions, and none of the issues pertaining to current debates on bilingual education seem to interest education policy makers on either side. The school may be bilingual, but in reality, it operates as two parallel monolingual curricula. As Cummins noted, while sitting at a conference on minority education we had organized in Thrace: "Ironically, the Muslim children in Thrace have received bilingual education for the past 70 years, illustrating the fact that language of instruction itself is only surface structure. Coercive power relations can be expressed as effectively through two languages, as through one" (2004: 10).

Greek is the sole language used by the authorities for school administration, and, the inspectors supervising minority education are not expected to know Turkish. The same is true for the teachers who are in charge of the Greek part of the curriculum. Local male teachers have been preferred to female ones for a long time, because they were considered more appropriate for the implementation of this 'delicate and important mission' (Baltsiotis 1997: 344).

Up until 1997, the Greek textbooks used were the same as the ones used all over the country, for native Greek speakers. The educational authorities never thought of this as being a problem capable of impeding children's learning. The Turkish textbooks were, and still are, to be imported from Turkey.

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[3] Articles 40 and 41.

School facilities are quite rudimentary. Greek administration had not implemented any comprehensive policy. The schools have, therefore, long suffered from a lack of standardized education; 46% of the 140 minority primary schools operate with fewer than 20 students each, and in 68% of schools are grouped into two classes, where different age groups are taught together.[4]

Children attend at great percentage these minority primary schools, despite the fact that there is a gradual trend for parents to opt for the state monolingual school. As regards secondary education, they can choose between the only two existing minority secondary schools, and the two religious schools (*medresse*), or the state schools, where again there is no teaching of their mother tongue. Since at the time the Lausanne Treaty there was no preschool, no such provision was secured up until a few years ago and, even then, it was offered only in Greek. Bilingual education at the preschool level is a bone of contention for the minority.

In the eyes of the majority, minority schools have always had negative connotations, whereas for the minority, these are "their schools", where their language and culture can be secured and assimilation can be averted. The gradual trend toward state schools is dreaded by the minority leaders, who fear the loss of the minority's Turkishness. The more the minority supports its own ethnic schools nourishing an identity denied by the greater society, the more the majority calls for their depreciation, fuelling assimilationist aspirations. This creates what Watzlawick et al. (1967) have described as a pathological pattern of escalating complementarity that precludes change.

2.3   Wind of Change

In the early 1990s, Europe witnessed important political transformations as regards minority rights. International standards for the protection of members of minority groups were developed by the Council of Europe, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Greece found itself accused by international organizations for violating minority human rights (Anagnostou 2005). At that time, important transformations took place. After many long years of economic hardship and authoritarian governing, Greece envisaged the end of an extensive and difficult journey towards becoming a democratic European society.

These developments set in motion new policies concerning the Muslim minority, and economic revitalization measures for Western Thrace. Respect for human rights, political equality and substantial legal equality, educational policies against social exclusion, were gradually becoming part of the new agenda. Tolerance towards access to Turkish mass media was adopted; restrictions of movement in zones along the Greek-Bulgarian border, established during the cold war period,

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[4]These figures were much higher up until 2011, when half of the 221 minority primary schools were operating with fewer than 20 students each and 80% of the schools had only two classes.

were lifted. The Greek state began to realize that overt discriminatory measures against the minority were achieving the opposite of the desired effect. They only led to the strengthening of the ties between the minority and its kin-state Turkey.

The wind of change had direct implications for the education of minority children. An important affirmative action measure was taken in 1996, allowing a special 0.5% minority quota to enrol in Greek universities, thus readjusting and absorbing inequalities in the fields of language and social participation *de facto*. Ten years later, another measure was introduced: pilot instruction of Turkish at the secondary level.[5]

The latest development introduced by law in 2013 was the instruction of the Holy Qur'an by Muslim preachers, employed by the state. Minority children in the state school were until then exempted from the religion class for Christian students. The Koranic class is thus delivered separately to minority students in primary and secondary state school. While this measure is towards the direction of respect of students' religious identity, unfortunately is not followed by the instruction of mother tongue.

The educational project, presented here, was also part of this radically new policy against social exclusion and protection of minority cultural rights. As mentioned in the introduction, it was an initiative of the Greek Ministry of Education, funded mainly by the European Social Fund.[6] It started out as a 3-year plan, that was renewed three more times,[7] under nine different Ministers of Education, in five consecutive governments, showing, thus, a long-standing intent of the Greek polity.

3   The Project on the Education of Muslim Minority Children in Thrace

Known by its Greek acronym as PEM, the project, spanning over 18 years, aimed at increasing the social inclusion of minority children, by reversing trends in massive underachievement and high dropout levels from 9-year compulsory education. PEM

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[5] This was a very important measure that did not bear fruit. It was resisted from almost all involved parties. On the one hand, it was implemented very hastily and did not involve the minority neither in the planning phase nor in the implementation. On the other hand, minority hard liners read it as a measure that would jeopardize minority schools. Nationalists, on the majority side, were also resisting it as contaminating the Greek national school. Finally, the Ministry of Education that introduced the measure made no effort to implement it. These policy ambivalences are described later in this chapter.

[6] The Project on the Reform of the Education of Muslim Minority Children was directed by Professors Anna Frangoudaki and Thalia Dragonas; Greek Ministry of Education, Life Long Learning and Religious Affairs; Operational Program in Education and Initial Vocational Training I (1997–2000); II (2002–2004); III (2005–2008); IV (2010–2015) financed by the Greek Ministry of Education and the European Social Fund.

[7] Despite the fact the project is continuing since 1997, in reality, it has been in the field for 13 years since for bureaucratic reasons in-between the three open calls there were long intervals.

is a comprehensive intervention inside and outside the classroom, comprising teaching Greek as a second language, the development of educational materials, extensive teacher training and work with the community. This intervention can be placed in the tradition of action research, challenging discriminations, bridging research and activism in the field of educational policy and pedagogy, ultimately aiming at achieving social change (Abraham and Purkayastha 2012). Rooted in this tradition, that extends the *foci* beyond academia, we aimed at digging deeper in the connection between theory and practice, at expanding participation and collaboration, and at exploring ways to challenge unequal relations of power.

The situation was at great odds, when we first entered the field. A significant shortcoming in the design of the project was the Ministry of Education mandate for changes in only the Greek program of the minority school. This created an asymmetry, that affected both the reform as such, and the attitude of the minority towards the changes. However, the transformation of the minority school as a whole is a much more complex endeavour, involving reconsidering the principles guiding protection of the respective minorities, as well as the pending ratification of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. These developments are not there yet.

Limited access to education has led the minority to social and psychological deprivation, and hence to inability to impact social processes and build autonomy and self-determination. It has also created feelings of incompetence and powerlessness.

To reverse this situation, our intervention was informed by the concept of empowerment, as a process that takes place within the individuals themselves, in relation to others, and as an outcome measured against expected accomplishments (Hur 2006). Empowerment does not involve the minority group exclusively, but the majority one as well, and entails dissociating from the notion of zero-sum dynamics. We were guided by the basic principles that have been associated with empowerment theory, such as the willingness of each member to contribute collectively towards a common goal; development of relationships to promote mutual respect; enhanced communication and collaboration to achieve common objectives; investment in decision making and sharing a sense of responsibility for individual and collective outcomes (Larkin et al. 2008). In the area of education and pedagogy, it was Cummins' (1996) definition of empowerment that influenced us most, in terms of negotiating identities in the classroom, and the establishment of collaborative relations of power that enable students to achieve more. Subordinated group students, according to Cummins, will succeed academically to the extent that the patterns of interaction in the school challenge and reverse the ones prevailing in the society at large.

The entire intervention is geared towards reconciling unity with diversity, cultivating inclusion without being assimilationist, promoting a common sense of belonging, while respecting cultural differences, and valuing plural identities without diminishing shared citizenship. Hence the logo of the project: "Addition *not* Subtraction, Multiplication *not* Division".

An 18-year old intervention is difficult to summarize.[8] We limit ourselves to a brief outline of the various activities of the project and the fields covered.

3.1   Research[9]

In 1997, there was a glaring paucity of any kind of reliable population statistics, or any other kind of data concerning the Muslim minority and its education.[10] Thus, we started out by a number of surveys and qualitative studies, that were carried out on students', teachers' and parents' profiles; language use and language assessment; dropout rates; parents' attitudes towards education; and representations of ethnic identity. Collection of data in an environment where each group defends its own interests was far from being an easy task.

3.2   Classroom Materials[11]

Forty new textbooks following an integrated learning approach were produced, for use in the primary school, on Greek as a second language, history, geography, the environment and civic education. At secondary level new materials were developed to be used in conjunction with existing ones, covering the instruction of Greek as a second language, literature, history, mathematics, physics and geography (for the pilot use of the materials of history, literature and natural sciences see in the present volume Apostolidou et al., Tsafos, and Tselfes). Other educational materials for learning Greek were also developed, both conventional and electronic, such as a 6000 entries Greco-Turkish dictionary for children aged 6–12, a three-languages dictionary (Greek, Turkish and English) for students in secondary schools, as well as a comprehensive Greek grammar for adolescents whose maternal language is other than Greek. Interactive educational applications were designed, and lyrics set to music were produced. The new materials promote self-expression and help develop children's conversational competencies before introducing the official

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[8] Interested readers can look up more information in www.museduc.gr and Dragonas and Frangoudaki (eds.), 2008.

[9] Coordinated by N. Askouni (Sociology of Education).

[10] With regard to the size of the minority group, there is a notable lack of reliable, official statistics. It is worth noting that the last figures published by the Greek Statistical Service concerning language and religion date back to the 1951 census. All the subsequent information regarding population statistics of the minority has been considered classified material. According to various estimates the minority in Thrace ranges from 115,000 to 130,000 and constitutes 30 percent of the total population of Thrace (Dragonas 2004).

[11] Coordinated by G. Kouzelis (sociology); A. Iordanidou, S. Moschonas, and M. Tzevelekou (linguistics); Ch. Sakonides (mathematics); V. Tselfes (physics); E. Avdela (history); V. Apostololidou (literature); E. Hondolidou (education); N. Lambrinos (geography).

school language; they view both language and literacy as context-embedded, emerging from children's particular experiences; they respect pupils' mother tongue and enhance their sense of identity.

An important novelty in developing the educational materials was that they were built gradually, and at every stage they were tried out by the teachers in the classroom. Thus, instead of being a top down process, whereby 'experts' would develop textbooks that subsequently would be sent to schools, it was a back and forth, collaborative act between teachers, who know their students' needs best, and textbook specialists.

The development of teaching methods for Greek as a second language is invaluable since, unlike the teaching methods as a foreign language for other languages, and mainly English, there existed no material for Greek as a foreign language, addressing children. The new history books are another significant contribution.[12] They do not reproduce the historical narrative of the nineteenth century, as the mainstream textbooks do. They try to teach students how to think historically and to familiarize them with the method of historical research. Moreover, their scope is not to evaluate the past, but to incite its understanding–the only means for the comprehension of conflicts, wars and violence without reproducing hatred between neighboring countries. They create the necessary historical distance that helps students appreciate that the past was different, because different values pervaded, different goals mobilized human groups, and different principles governed societies.[13]

Given the fact that the Greek educational system is extremely centralized (the curriculum is very rigid, and there is only one textbook per subject, prepared under the supervision of the Ministry of Education, and distributed nation-wide) the educational materials, prepared for the needs of the project, constitute the very first diversion from the rule, introducing a crack in the rigid homogeneity of the educational system.

3.3   *In Service Teacher Training[14]*

No matter how good it may be in itself, no teaching material can ever bear fruit, without being backed up by effective teacher training. Extensive human and financial resources have therefore been allotted to the in-service training of hundreds of teachers. Teachers had no prior knowledge in instructing bilingual children, while many among them had been hired years earlier, at a time when their duties were designed to meet nationalistic goals rather than academic ones. Borrowing once

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[12] This is important since there is an ongoing public controversy in Greece on school history.

[13] It is not only the educational materials for history, but also the materials for all other subjects that are characterized by an innovative approach. For materials of literature and physics see in the present volume Apostolidou et al., and Tselfes.

[14] Coordinated by A. Androussou (educational psychology).

more Cummins' words on the occasion of his visit to Thrace: "Change in the deep structure will come, only when educators walk into their classrooms burdened, not by the anger of the past and the disdain of the present, but with their own identities focused on transforming the social futures towards which their children are travelling" (2004: 11).

For the very first time in the history of minority education in Greece, teachers from the majority and the minority were trained side by side. Training has focused on the use of the new materials, on classroom dynamics, on the development of self-reflective practices, and on identities and negotiation of differences. Teaching practices is not a neutral enterprise: they either reinforce coercive relations of power or promote collaborative relations of power. In order to be able to affirm their students' identity, teachers first had to adopt a self-reflexive position, and re-examine their own feelings and representations of the alien 'other' they were to teach. Teacher training proved to be in a way the most difficult of all activities, since it required deep transformations in self and other representations, in values and in teaching styles.

Teachers in remote villages have also been systematically visited on the school premises. A team of trainers has been calling on villages in the heart of winter, where no visitor had set foot for weeks. Extensive teacher training material was developed, and themes relevant pertaining to the education of minorities were broken down into 34 booklets, that are also available in e-learning format.[15] A documentary, examining the dialectics of identity in Western Thrace was also produced to be used as teacher training material.

3.4   Compensatory Classes[16]

Compensatory classes, as another way of fighting social exclusion, were offered to thousands of lower and upper secondary students for 7 years.[17] They took place on the school premises in the afternoon or during the weekend, and were taught by trained teachers using the new materials. Instruction principles were very different to those in traditional classrooms of the mainstream school, where learning is largely memorization and 'one size fits all'. Compensatory classes were informed by inquiry-based pedagogy, whereby students are active learners; they learn by doing; language is used for meaningful communication, either in oral or written forms; learning is meaningful rather than institutionally imposed; process of learn-

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[15] www. kleidiakaiantikleidia.net

[16] Coordinated by professors H. Dafermou and M. Sfyroera (education); Ch. Sakonides (mathematics).

[17] Compensatory classes stopped being offered when the Ministry of Education decided to implement a nation-wide scheme of remedial education. Unfortunately, minority students did not benefit from this provision which was implemented for only a couple of months.

ing is more important than the content. The number of students taking compensatory classes reached per year 2122 for secondary and 1570 for primary school.[18]

3.5 Community Centres: Opening Up to the Community[19]

During the first 5 years, the intervention was geared towards changes within the minority schools. Yet, it soon became clear that minority schools, operating as ghetto structures, are rigid, homeostatic systems providing very little room for morphogenetic transformation. Officially recognized bilingualism takes place only in minority structures, while the state school is monolingual, mono-cultural and blind to minority children's identities.

Since little room was left for radical changes in the formal education system, efforts were directed towards the development of new, parallel structures that would bypass the rigidities of the past, and would operate as open systems, sensitive to the social environment, and aware of what the outside does to the inside. Such efforts focused on new values and new rules that would reinforce collaborative rather than competitive and coercive interaction. A new kind of 'space' was deemed necessary, wherein the above assumptions would be tested. It is well documented that important worldwide reforms are often held back, due to the inertia inherent in the educational system (Bourdieu and Passeron 1970) and that structures bypassing formal schooling may prove to feedback positively to the official system (Derouet 2000).

As Giampapa (2004) aptly puts it, the act of claiming identities and claiming the spaces of identity is a political act. Thus, a new 'real', 'imagined' and 'symbolic' space was born. A new space that would rupture those rigid boundaries the majority has set to exclude the minority, and the ones the minority has raised in order to protect itself. Ten Community Centres have been gradually set up: three in the three large towns and seven in smaller villages.[20] The Centres are staffed by equal numbers of minority and majority personnel, contributing, thus, actively to the discourse of identity politics. It is for the first time that members of the majority and minority found themselves striving for a common goal.

The Centres are open 7 days a week, eleven and a half months a year. They offer to almost 2000 children creative activities for pre-schoolers, afternoon and summer

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[18] Due to drastic budget cuts, the number of primary school students has fallen to 126, while compensatory classes for secondary education are currently offered within the Community Centre.

[19] Community Centers are currently coordinated by H. Karavia (anthropology) and M. Konstandinidou (literature). Overall supervision by M. Zografaki (literature)

[20] Since 1993 when the first Centers were set up there have been changes as regards location and the Center in Alexndroupoli (prefecture of Evros) was closed down Currently the Centers are located in Xanthi, Evlalo, Selero, Ehinos, Drosero (prefecture of Xanthi), Komotini, Iasmos, Sapes, Organi (prefecture of Rodopi).

classes to primary and secondary school students[21]; the use of computers; Greek classes for parents; Turkish classes for Greek speaking teachers; counselling for parents and teachers; vocational guidance for youths; and they operate a lending library. They represent a microcosm, where different identities coexist, and languages alternate, overcoming division and segregation. It is an interpersonal space, where knowledge is generated, and identities are negotiated.

Moreover, four mobile units (named by the children as "kangaroos of the mountain"), equipped with computers, educational games and a lending library, travel to 58 isolated communities daily, hold classes and engage almost 1000 children per year in alternative creative learning.[22]

The Centres host the Creative Youth Workshops (D.E.N.) that provide a physical, social and psychological space, in which adolescents belonging to both minority and the majority can run their own creative projects, with the help of youth workers, also members of both groups.[23] Youths may co-exist in the state school, but for the very first time in Thrace, they are involved in common tasks. Girls, who are traditionally kept at home and refrain from mixed social activities when they reach adolescence, increasingly join in. More competently than many of the adults, the youths creatively discover, through collaborative practices, a meaningful presence and a promising future.

Parents, teachers and representatives of the community as a whole join the children's open workshops, regularly held every few months. To maintain the dialogue open, meetings with leaders of the minority, local Members of Parliament, local educational authorities, and majority and minority teacher trade unions are held regularly.

4   The Long Process of Change

What makes this project rather unique is its systemic approach in introducing change ranging from classroom materials to the work with the community, the long duration of sustained concerted effort, and its interdisciplinary nature.[24]

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[21] Owing to budget cuts, the number of children profiting from the services at the Centres is currently 1241.

[22] The current year (2015–2016), owing to financial constraints, the number of remote villages visited has fallen to 31 and the number of children profiting to 478.

[23] Coordinated by A. Vassiliou (social psychology).

[24] Our team comprises sociologists of education, psychologists (educational, social, clinical), pedagogues, social workers, linguists, anthropologists, historians, philologists, physicists, mathematicians, geographers, artists (musician, photographer, designers) and practicing school teachers. They have all worked as team engaged in an interdisciplinary dialogue.

4.1   Measurable Outcome

Striking measurable changes have taken place since the inception of PEM. It would be unfair to attribute these changes exclusively to PEM. In the past almost 20 years since the onset of this intervention, the advantageous university entrance exams for the minority children have created a dynamic towards the Greek educational system, while many social changes have taken place. Thrace is a very different place than it was when we first arrived. However, the educational system per se (both minority and state), characterized by an intrinsic inertia, has largely remained immobile. Thus, we can justifiably claim that PEM has had a very important impact on enrolment statistics and decrease of dropout rates. In the year 2000, the dropout rate from compulsory 9-year education was 65%, while the national mean was 7. This figure decreased to 28%. The number of students enrolled in lower secondary education grew from to 1501, in 1997, to 3964 (increase by 164%); and that of upper secondary students from 547 students to 3029 (increase by 453%). Figures have changed dramatically for the girls as well, who, as a rule, were withdrawn from school by the end of primary school. There is an increase of 504% at the level of lower secondary (from 611 girls in 1997 the number has risen to 3692), and an increase of 840% at the level of upper secondary (from 310 to 2916).

There is also a significant move from the minority school to the state mainstream school. The number of minority children attending the state primary school has increased from 5% to 22%. In other words, almost 1/4 of minority children attend primary state education.[25] As regards state provided secondary education, 2/3 (73,7%) of minority students attend lower secondary school and 3/4 (80,3%) attend higher secondary school.

The current segregated minority school, no matter how it may improve academically, will never accommodate rigid dichotomies, will not promote dialogue between cultures, and thus will not encourage collaborative relations of power. Yet, the leaders of the minority, fearing assimilation and wishing to preserve their language and culture, deter parents from sending their children to the state school. Minorities, at the extreme, says Wagner (1991), may follow an 'illiteracy of resistance' strategy, preferring to remain illiterate, rather than accept the kind of education imposed by the majority, and risk being assimilated and lose their language and culture. Their fears are understandable, since the state school makes no effort to appreciate minority children's identity. Their language is not acknowledged, their culture is absent from the curriculum or the everyday practices (Dragonas 2004). Hence, in this intervention, we took in consideration the fear of losing their culture and language, and actively tried to improve the learning conditions at the minority school. Yet, we have accumulated evidence to be convinced that separate schooling leads directly to minority children's isolation and consequent marginalization, and never refrain

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[25] This increase is definitely higher, if one was to include the Roma children who in their majority are Muslim. This is the result of the categorization system employed by the educational authorities that differentiates Roma children from the rest of the minority children.

from openly pronouncing it. At the same time, we are critical of the monolingual nature of the state school, and we highlight that understanding is not an individual but a relational achievement, we build on children's cultural and linguistic experience in their homes, and aim at empowering minority children, rendering them more visible in the Greek society.

Finally, figures have changed impressively at the tertiary level, owing mainly to the positive discrimination measure regarding university entrance exams. In 1997 only 68 youngsters, members of the Muslim minority attended Greek Universities. In 2015, 496 youths, at equal numbers as far as gender is concerned, are students at the tertiary level. The increase is 608%.

As impressive the above changing figures may be, minority children still lag behind, and low educational levels characterize hugely disproportionate numbers of minority children, in comparison to the majority ones. The dropout rate of minority children from the 9-year compulsory education is still almost five times higher than the national mean (28% versus 6.09%).

4.2   From Caution and Reserve to Acceptance and Trust

Looking at the 18 years that have gone by, the first ones were very hard. The minority proved difficult to approach. This was the case for the everyday individuals with whom we came into contact, but even more so for the minority *Elite*. They were watching and waiting. Contacts were made through the minority teachers' unions and associations. All were very reluctant to voice an opinion, and most of the time the impression was that there was a party line they were strictly adhering to. Parents were reserved; mothers all the more so.

Our team had entered the field as a top-down initiative of the administration. Thus, we were perceived as outsiders, identified with state powers that have traditionally marginalized and excluded the minority from decision-making. They believed that even if we were not to bring harm, we had at least a hidden assimilationist agenda. It took long before a relationship of trust could be established. We gradually witnessed parents, teachers and minority leaders acknowledging that this intervention was based on the conviction that the battle to reverse the structural aspects of exclusion and school failure of minority children is of socio-political nature, and it concerns equally all citizens. This recognition brought change. One can clearly trace an unfolding process from caution and reserve to acceptance and trust.

The Centres, at the cutting edge of space politics and identity, introduced the potential for agency. Their mixed majority and minority personnel would either reproduce the dominant paradigm in the Thracian society, or they would promote communication by first acknowledging and then working through suppression and denial of diversity, pluralism, complexity and conflict. They chose the latter. It was a difficult but challenging task for these young people, with no prior experience of

co-existence in a formal state. New values and new rules were negotiated, advancing thus equal participation and democratic pluralism in a jointly created institution.

Parents and especially mothers felt welcomed in the Centres. Interactions are never neutral with respect to societal power relations. In the Centres, mothers could speak their language with the staff, and felt their culture was respected. They gradually started asking for Greek lessons. They said they wanted to help children with homework. But it was clear that learning Greek allowed them to claim a voice in a social context where they are invisible.

Relationships of trust took equally long to develop with the majority. As mentioned earlier, this intervention was carried out under nine Ministers of Education, in five consecutive administrations. This undoubtedly shows a long-term commitment to this specific policy. Yet, at the same time there have been strong ambivalences at the administrative top, that have trickled down to the local educational apparatus. The implicit double message, in almost all of the administrations to a smaller or greater degree, has been assuming ownership of a politically correct policy, while at the same time disqualifying it. Not a single Minister of Education, visiting Thrace, ever paid a visit to the Centres, which are structures they have been boasting about when audited by international human rights organizations.[26] Very revealing is the answer of the socialist Minister of Education in 2014 to a question posed in the context of parliamentary control, asking what measures was the government planning to take to support minority students' learning of Greek.[27] The Minister provided a long reply with peripheral information and avoided any mention to the project – the actual measure his Ministry had been taking for the past 17 years.[28] Even more revealing is the Secretary of Intercultural Education prohibiting in 2011 the distribution of, commissioned to us by the Ministry of Education, supplementary educational materials for secondary education minority students, arguing that this would be an act of discrimination. This same person stopped the Turkish language classes we had been delivering to 665 Greek-speaking teachers for several years.

We have witnessed unabated this back and forth movement denoting deep ambivalence. The local educational apparatus, long socialized in an intolerant and defensive ideology, swinging from marginalization of the minority to its assimilation, adopted the same ambivalent position. The educational authorities were disinclined to accept the change of policy, and for a long time were convinced that one-day this intervention will come to an end, and everything will revert to what

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[26] See the Recommendation 96, in the following report of the Council of Europe: Michel Hunault, *Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights, Freedom of religion and other human rights for non-Muslim minorities in Turkey and for the Muslim minority in Thrace (Eastern Greece),* AS/Jur (2009) 01, 22 January 2009. See also Recommendations 92 and 93 in the: Report of the independent expert on minority issues, Gay McDougall, Human Rights Council, United Nations, A/HRC/10/11/Add. 3, 18 February 2009.

[27] Question addressed to the Minister of Education no 1181/ 17-7-2014 "Measures securing equitable education of Muslim Greek citizens of Thrace"

[28] Answer by the Minister of Education 128,280/11-08-2014.

was before. Gradually they had to admit that things were changing, but most of them did so half-heartedly.

In the first years, the local Greek press, for the most part, was very unfriendly. We were represented as pawns of Turkey or at best as politically naive academics that intruded into nationally sensitive local affairs. The journey from hostility to acceptance was a difficult one. Today the picture is very different. Most of the press, local radio and TV are very interested in what we are doing and systematically highlight the achievements accomplished.

Teacher training also proved difficult. Teachers were sincerely convinced that their students could not achieve at high levels, their backgrounds riddled with deficiencies. These attitudes were gradually tempered, and teachers started focusing on the strengths of their students. Many, and even more so those working in the Centres or in the compensatory classes, engaged in self-reflection and a process of transforming their teaching practices. They became aware of the socio-political dimensions of learning and underwent a personal change. Yet others have remained sceptical.

Interestingly, when a group (either majority or minority) would become more accepting, the other would withdraw its support, showing that there is still a long way before majority and minority can engage in collaborative practices. The hardliners on either side will always doubt our intentions. Minority extremists will keep serving Wagner's notion of "illiteracy of resistance", and majority fanatics will keep producing their 'patriotic' rhetoric asking for a policy of "negative reciprocity".

4.3　External Evaluation

A very thorough system of internal evaluation is being followed from the very beginning. However, the project was also assessed twice by independent evaluators in 2004, and subsequently in 2014.[29] According to the first external evaluation the project «had contributed to the improvement of the most important failings of the existing educational system»; «the educational materials were praised»; and the suggestions for the future underlined the need for continuation and further expansion towards "increase of numbers of teachers to be trained, establishment of more Centres, additional compensatory classes and expansion of the intervention to pre-school and tertiary education".

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[29] Evaluation of Currently Implemented Programs; Detection and Location of Further Needs; Design of Supportive interventions for the Second Phase (2005–2008) of Action 1.1.1: Programs for the Integration of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Student Population into the Educational System, 2004, Remaco, S.A. Consultants, pp. 14 and 15.

External Evaluation of the Project "Education of Muslim Minority Children in Thrace", MIS 295403, for the period 2010–2014, Operational Program "Education and Life-long Education", CMT Prooptiki, December 2014, pp. 342.

According to the 2014 evaluation, besides the improvement of the educational indicators, such as enrollment in secondary education and fall of drop-out rates, eight strong points were highlighted: (1). The project being an effective 'ambassador' of the Greek polity in Thrace; (2). The acceptance of the project by the minority, the establishment of relations of trust and the positive influence on women; (3). The innovative approach in issues regarding identities; (4). The acknowledgment by the minority of the Greek language use; (5). The mitigation of the minority's social and cultural isolation in remote and disadvantaged settlements; (8). The reinforcement of students' motivation. Among the critical comments were the poor relations with the local educational administration and the failure to cover the educational needs of the entire minority student population.

Both evaluations praised the effectiveness of the Centres in meeting the goals set, while the second evaluation highlighted the contribution of the mobile units (which were set in motion in 2005–6) in lifting the isolation of remote and inaccessible communities.

4.4   "Addition not Subtraction, Multiplication not Division"

While measured outcomes are quantifiable, the examination of the process of empowerment has yielded in depth, qualitative insights. This intervention brought to fore important identity issues; claimed a position of knowledge embedded within communal relationships; professed a move from authoritative monologic to dialogic practices of meaning making in the educational setting; and aimed at raising the understanding of the historical, social and political conditions within which education of the Muslim minority takes place.

One of the most important achievements is that a number of young women, members of the minority, who were students at our Centres, went on to study in the Greek universities and are currently working within the project, teaching minority children Greek. A full circle has closed. There is dynamic identification between students and teachers that enriches the outcome.

We will provide a few vignettes in order to highlight how the guiding principles of empowerment were applied, in view of fostering development of relationships to promote mutual respect, autonomy, enhanced communication, willingness of each member to contribute collectively toward a common goal, investment in decision making, and sharing a sense of responsibility for individual and collective outcomes.

4.4.1 Reading Kavafy in Drosero

During the pilot instruction of literature (see in the present volume) in Drosero, a Roma settlement in Xanthi, the teacher introduced the Greek poet Kavafy to his adolescent students. They read the poems "As much as you can" and the "Walls".[30] A few days after the class interpreted the poem, a 14-year old Roma girl went to the teacher and said that the poem had spoken directly to her heart, and led her to break the engagement her parents had arranged for her, because she realised that "walls were built around her" and she wanted to "shape her life the way she wants" (Daniil and Hodolidou 2015).

4.4.2 "Our Room Smelled of Respect"

The Creative Activities Workshops (D.E.N.) provide a space, where action is generated by the youths themselves. The youth workers, members of the minority and the majority acting as facilitators, are responsive to the ideas that develop during group work with the youth. They provide youngsters access to information, resources, support, and an environment that enhances growth and promotes empowerment. They use collaborative critical inquiry, enabling youth to analyse the social realities of their lives and of their community. A circumstance of increased complexity is generated, when the creative activities take place in mixed minority and majority groups (Vassiliou & Dragonas 2015). In the words of a 13-year-old boy, member of the minority:

> D.E.N. transported me to different worlds. It was a space where I expressed the artistic world I had inside me. It is as if the world begun there. I learned to share my feelings there. It was a space I shared friendship…even if one quarrelled, our room smelled of respect.

4.4.3 Negotiating with the *Imam*

In the first years, the mobile units travelling to isolated villages, were received by children with great enthusiasm. An outsider had not set foot for weeks in their village. Yet the local *imam* was reluctant. The classes and creative activities organized by the mobile unit's personnel disrupted his Koranic classes, and he was losing his students. The locals would never go against his will. Thus, the unit would travel for 2 h to reach the village, and the children were not available because they had to attend the Qur'an class. We have now reached a stage whereby, in many cases, the timetable is jointly negotiated between the local *imam* and the mobile units' personnel, so that children can follow both activities.

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[30] http://www.cavafy.com/poems/content.asp?id=113&cat=1

4.4.4 "This Is Our Home"

As mentioned above, mothers asked for Greek lessons. In a remote village visited by the mobile unit, women requested that one of the two rooms of the minority school be used for Greek classes. Yet this did not prove an easy task. A lot of negotiating with their husbands was necessary. When they did manage to come to class, there was so many that chairs had to be brought from the adjacent coffee shop. This act of emancipation is reflected in the way they lifted their fingers in a V sign in the photo taken at the end of class.

Women enjoyed their classes immensely. They learned enough Greek in order to pass the driving test, to go on to second chance school or to pass the national test (KPG). "This is our home", said a motivated young woman, talking about the Community Centre where Greek classes are held.

All of the above vignettes are indicative of the range of social actors involved in this educational project: minority and majority staff at the Community Centres, minority and majority youth, teachers, parents, community members.

5   End Note

The aim of PEM was to reverse trend in massive underachievement and high drop out from the 9-year compulsory education, as well as fight social exclusion that has had profound consequences, preventing minority people from making decisions about the course of their lives, or the course of events for which they are responsible. Exclusionary and assimilationist educational policies, implemented for a very long time, have rendered subordinated minority members invisible and inaudible. Learning Greek is a necessary condition for minority members to become equal within the state. Yet marginalization cannot be remedied only by acquiring the language of the majority.

PEM devotes a lot of resources to improving the teaching of Greek, but also argues strongly for what counts in educational practice –namely, the local embedding of curricula, the breaking of disciplinary boundaries, educational practice in societal issues, a shift from child-centred modes of education to a focus of relationships. We promoted the notion that all good teaching is grounded in the lives of students, is participatory, encourages questioning, advances explorative thinking, allows for mistakes and, more importantly, challenges inequality. PEM provides opportunities towards identity negotiation and collaborative relations of power.

In our 18 years in the field we are deeply convinced that, as long as education keeps empowering students, teachers and parents, the new generation will be increasingly more capable of negotiating conflicts, inventing successful compromises, and building bridges across the divide.

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