"She is a very good child but she doesn't speak": The invisibility of children's bilingualism and teacher ideology

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A B S T R A C T

This paper discusses the micro-level ideologies of four teachers in mainstream Greek schools concerning linguistic diversity, bilingualism, second language learning and minority language maintenance. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews with the teachers and observations in the school context which focused on their views and attitudes concerning the presence of Albanian background children in their classrooms and the way the Greek school responds to the children's bilingualism and to linguistic diversity. Thus, we attempt to bring to the surface aspects of the broader language ideologies which underlie their school practices. Teachers' responses could be placed on a continuum ranging from awareness of the importance of bilingualism and minority language maintenance to the absolute rejection of the minority language and the subtraction of bilingualism.

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1. Introduction

Teacher attitudes towards bilingualism and language diversity are part of the language ideologies which underlie their language practices. Their assumptions about second language teaching, bilingualism, the relative value of languages and the way schools respond to diversity are central to their language policy making and to the shaping of their everyday teaching practices (Skilton-Sylvester, 2003). Looking into teachers' views and their underlying ideologies concerning languages on a micro-level is very important as they represent a layer of language policy making and planning and affect school contexts (Ricento and Hornberger, 1996).

1.1. Language ideology

The notion of ideology is thoroughly studied and discussed by scholars working in the area of Critical Discourse Analysis such as Van Dijk (1996, 1998) and Fairclough (1989). Van Dijk (1996:8) argues that ideologies are the foundation of the social beliefs shared by a social group and that group members use ideologies to "guide their interpretations, discourses and other social practices in a specific social domain, for instance, in race relations", stressing their complex, diverse, cognitive and social nature. Moreover, language ideology has been defined in many different ways (Woolard, 1998). According to Martínez-Roldán and Malavé (2004:161) "it is a term through which the notion of ideology is linked to language or discourse to characterize the development of beliefs and attitudes towards the learning and use of a particular language". Therefore, teachers' language ideologies include their views and attitudes towards bilingualism and language learning, as schools can be viewed as highly diverse social contexts and "particularly revealing sites" (Heller, 1999:337) of struggle among different

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groups and competing ideologies. Language ideologies, as a construct that emerged from linguistic anthropology (Schieffelin et al., 1998) are defined by Silverstein (1979:173) as "sets of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalization or justification of perceived structure and use". Such a definition may help us study and understand teachers' beliefs about (minority) language use and second language teaching and learning focusing on the political and ideological load of their beliefs which is directly related to issues of power relations between different linguistic resources.

1.2. Research on teachers' attitudes towards diversity and the Greek educational setting

Teachers' dispositions towards minority students and their background relate directly to the effective instruction of minority children (Ball and Lardner, 1997). Research on teachers' attitudes towards minority languages has revealed that teachers who have not received training in second language teaching do not see a role for themselves and for schools in minority language maintenance perceiving it as the sole responsibility of immigrant parents (Lee and Oxelson, 2006). Studies on teachers' attitudes towards linguistic diversity have also revealed a discrepancy in their views which tend to be positive towards the theoretical aspects of bilingual education and native language instruction but appear less positive towards the practical implementation of these principles in the classroom (Ramos, 2001; Mora, 1999; Shin and Krashen, 1996). Research has also shown that teachers' negative attitudes towards linguistic and cultural diversity can be brought about by perceived difficulties in dealing with it in the classroom (Dooly, 2005). Moreover, studies have documented the negative consequences of first language loss and the subtraction of bilingualism (Lambert, 1974) concerning the children's language, cognitive, social and psychological development as well as the role of widespread negative perceptions of bilingualism, which can lead to the bilingual children's disempowerment at school (Cummins, 2000, 2001; Baker, 1996; Wong Fillmore, 1991).

During the last decade, Greek school classrooms have become highly diverse since almost 10% of the total student population is immigrant pupils, a great number of whom are of Albanian background (IPODE, 2006). In response to this challenge, the Greek state has introduced 'tutorial' and 'reception' classes in schools, followed by the legislative framework of 'Greek Education abroad, Intercultural Education and other provisions', which led to the establishment of intercultural schools to be attended mostly by immigrant and repatriated students. Despite the official policy makers' discourse, the prevailing educational policies and practices are still oriented towards the linguistic and cultural assimilation of immigrant students, the latter experiencing academic and other school-related problems and often being subject to discrimination and negative school attitudes (Skourtou et al., 2004; UNICEF, 2001; Nikolaou, 2000).

1.3. Research on Greek teachers' attitudes

Research on Greek teachers' views regarding linguistic diversity has attested to the existence of commonplace assumptions about the learning and adaptation problems of the minority students and their belief that their presence creates difficulties to the academic progress of the class (Skourtou et al., 2004; Skourtou, 2002; UNICEF, 2001; Bombas, 1996). The majority of the teachers reveal their incapability to respond to issues of diversity in their classrooms and their need for further training (Skourtou et al., 2004; Skourtou, 2002). The teachers' documented lack of awareness of issues related to bilingualism is also revealed in their use of the term 'aloglossa pedia' (that is 'other language-speaking children') to refer to non-native, bilingual children, a practice which has important ideological and educational repercussions to the bilingual students' lives in and out of the school context (Tsokalidou, 2005). Although teachers have in general positive attitudes towards bilingualism and minority language instruction, they are not aware of its benefits for the children's second language and academic development and consider bilingualism as a human right which is however not related to the process of school learning (Skourtou et al., 2004; Skourtou, 2002). The dominant belief and practice revealed from research is discouraging immigrant parents from using their first language at home in order to maximise exposure to the Greek language and enhance its development (Gogonas, 2007; Kassimi, 2005; Skourtou et al., 2004; Skourtou, 2002). All in all, research has revealed discrepancies and a degree of confusion in Greek teachers' views concerning linguistic diversity which emphasizes their need for special training in bilingual and intercultural education (Skourtou et al., 2004; Vratsalis and Skourtou, 2000).

2. The study

The present study is part of a two-year ethnographic research investigating, on the one hand, the views and language practices of a sample of 20 Albanian minority preschool and early primary school children and, on the other hand, the views and practices of their parents and teachers concerning the children's bilingualism. The overarching goal of the research is to examine the multiple ideologies through which bilingualism is perceived and experienced by the minority children both within their school and their home contexts. Selecting a qualitative interpretive approach to study the broader research questions about ideologies of language and the relationship between practices and beliefs about language (Heller, 2008), we used the ethnographic methods of participant observation in the children's classrooms and the school context, informal interviews in the field and formal semi-structured (individual and group) interviews with the children, their teachers and their parents. Thus we concentrated on multiple perspectives and sources of data collection to grasp the multidimensional and complex phenomenon of language ideologies mediating children's language behavior (González and Arnot-Hopffer, 2002).

In this article, the study examines the views and attitudes of four teachers, who are the teachers of the children of the research sample, towards linguistic diversity and bilingualism, attempting to reveal aspects of the underlying language