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Distinguishing between Bilingualism and Dyslexia: Views of Secondary School Teachers in Greece

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Abstract. Bilingual students with a migrant background are often misplaced in specialized education programs intended for students with learning disabilities because of their weaknesses in academic language ability (Hulse & Curran, 2020). The aim of this qualitative research was to explore the views of secondary education teachers in Greece regarding the academic characteristics of their bilingual students with a migrant background in relation to those of dyslexic students. The data collection and analysis took place in 2022. The participants were 71 teachers who answered an open-ended questionnaire, among whom five teachers additionally participated in in-depth qualitative interviews. The study showed that the secondary school teachers were not aware of the bilingual reality in their classrooms and that they hardly recognized their own inadequacy in appropriately distinguishing between bilingual and dyslexic students. Therefore, they seemed to avoid assuming responsibility for ineffectively dealing with the issue and not addressing students' needs. The study demonstrates the imperative need to make appropriate decisions at the level of teachers' education and training to adequately support both bilingual students with a migrant background and dyslexic students.

Keywords: Bilingualism; dyslexia; specialized education programs; teachers' views

1. Introduction

In recent decades, societies have increasingly been characterized by the phenomenon of globalization, movements of populations, and consequently the presence of bilingual students with a migrant background in education, which is an indisputable reality in the Greek educational context as well. Education in Greece is nowadays faced with the challenge of handling diversity and managing a new multicultural reality. One aspect of the current situation that raises theoretical and practical concerns is the observation of increased representation rates of bilingual students in special education programs.

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An overrepresentation of bilingual students with a migrant background in special education is an issue that has been addressed by various recent research studies at an international level (Hulse & Curran, 2020). This phenomenon is often attributed to teachers' beliefs that the inclusion of bilingual students facing learning difficulties in special education would help to alleviate these difficulties (Fernandez & Inserra, 2013).

In Greek secondary education, teachers are those who usually make the initial decision to refer their bilingual students who struggle to cope with school demands to special education. Those kinds of referrals occur more often than expected. The reason behind this phenomenon arguably relates to teachers' own inexperience in distinguishing students with genuine learning difficulties from those who encounter difficulties due to other factors, such as academic language constraints. A slow development of academic language skills is not taken into account as potentially causing problems in the learning process of bilinguals (Cummins, 2003). As a result, bilingual students are usually at a disadvantage because of inappropriate teaching and assessment methods. The phenomenon is attributed to teachers' attitudes and weakness to manage bilingualism due to insufficient training (Okhremtchouk & Sellu, 2019). It may be that teachers' choices and decisions affect the learning and social development of students in significant ways and even more so bilingual students with a migrant background (Cummins, 2021; Henderson, 2017).

The present research aims at exploring teachers' views on the distinction between bilingualism and dyslexia and the removal of bilingual students from general classes to be integrated into special education programs. Despite this being a crucial issue, no research so far has examined teachers' views regarding how they perceive and deal with bilingualism in relation to dyslexia in state/public schools in the Greek context. The present study aims to fill this research gap, to enrich our knowledge on the current situation in Greece, and to contribute to mitigating bilingual students' misdiagnosis.

The first part of the paper presents the theoretical background, focusing on bilingualism in the Greek educational system. Definitions of learning difficulties and dyslexia, as well as the main causes of inadequate assessment of bilingual students, are discussed. Teachers' views and practices within this context are also examined as reported in the literature. The methodological approach is then described, followed by the presentation of the qualitative research findings, the discussion, and the conclusion. Based on the results of the present empirical research study, the paper concludes with suggestions for educational reorientation to address the issue.

1.1 Aim and Research Questions

The aim of this research study was to explore the views of secondary education teachers in Greece regarding the relationship between dyslexia and bilingualism. The study was guided by three research questions:

1. What characteristics do teachers attribute to their bilingual students with a migrant background?
2. Do teachers associate bilingualism with dyslexia? If so, how?

3. Do teachers consider it necessary to refer bilingual students to specialized 'booster' programs due to their learning and communication weaknesses? If so, why?

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Bilingualism in the Greek Educational System

Broadly speaking, bilingualism is the ability to acquire and use two (or more) languages interchangeably (Baker, 2017; Genesee, 2016; Skourtou, 2011). In migration contexts, it often involves unequal language development in the first/heritage language and the second/dominant language, the former often being marginalized and considered as subordinate (Montrul, 2016).

Due to the large influx of immigrants and refugees in Greece in recent decades (UNHCR, 2022), the Greek education system has attempted to integrate immigrant or refugee students into mainstream schools. For this purpose, an institutionalization of corresponding educational structures was introduced in the Greek context, such as the establishment of intercultural schools (1996), Reception Departments and Tutoring Departments (1999), Educational Priority Zones (2010), Reception Structures for Refugee Education (2016), and immigrants' integration into general public/state Greek schools (2016) (Law 4415/2016). However, efforts for implementing intercultural education and preserving students' cultural identities have not been particularly successful (Marinaki, 2019). This has been mainly attributed to neglecting the use of the first/heritage language of students with a migrant background and/or, generally, to the presence of insufficiently qualified teachers in the general classes, who prefer assimilative educational approaches (Skourtou, 2011).

2.2 Learning Difficulties and Dyslexia

During the teaching process in formal education, cases of students who have difficulties in meeting academic school requirements are frequently observed. This fact may mislead teachers to misidentify 'learning difficulties' and refer bilingual students to specialized centers for evaluation and subsequent diagnosis of any learning difficulty which requires special intervention (Tatavili & Giarmadourou, 2020).

The term 'learning disabilities' is broad and includes generalized learning disabilities, specific learning disabilities-dyslexia, and difficulties related to emotional and behavioral problems (Stasinos, 2016). Dyslexia is a genetically predetermined phenomenon (APA, 2013) found in 5-12% of the student population (Tatavili & Giarmadourou, 2020). It requires treatment by special education services to which students with dyslexia are referred after being assessed, in combination with attending courses within the general classes (Law 4547/2018). The relevant law explicitly states that students who are referred to these services should not include students with low school performance that is causally linked to external factors, such as those related to linguistic and cultural diversity (Law 3699/2008).

2.3 The Causes of Inaccurate Assessment of Bilingual Students

The phenomenon of labeling bilingual students as dyslexic is very often observed in various educational contexts, including those in Greece. It has been attributed (a) to the existence of common features between dyslexia and bilingualism (Vender et al., 2021); and (b) to teachers' and authorities' inability to notice it (Okhremtchouk & Sellu, 2019).

The common features between bilingualism and dyslexia, which at first observation may lead to confusion, concern the low performance of bilingual students in oral and written expression, morphosyntax, graphophonemic matching, vocabulary, and pragmatic awareness (Alevriadou et al., 2012; Kieffer & Vukonic, 2012). Additionally, common signs include a passive attitude during the learning process; inability to follow instructions (Botsas & Sandravelis, 2014); difficulties in concentration, memory, organization, activity completion (Goldstein, 2004); and in performing automated activities (Polychroni et al., 2006). However, the causes of bilingualism-related weaknesses differ from those of dyslexia.

The deficits observed in bilingual students at the academic level are not linked to bilingualism itself but they stem from external factors (Vender et al., 2021), such as the degree of development of the first language; incomplete cultivation of the second language and its marginalization from the learning process (Botsas & Sandravelis, 2014; Grosjean, 2008); deficits in general academic language skills (Cummins, 2003); as well as the social and family environment (Pfenninger & Singleton, 2019). Alternatively, the learning deficits resulting from dyslexia are exclusively linked to endogenous and genetically predetermined factors of a neurological nature that negatively affect the ability of phonological awareness, problem solving, and the development of metacognitive and metalinguistic strategies (Dulude, 2012). In the latter domains, however, bilingual students do not present difficulties (Kieffer & Vukovic, 2012).

Apart from the existence of common features between bilingualism and dyslexia, the overrepresentation of bilingual students in special education is attributed to the way bilingual students are handled by the educational system in general, and by their teachers in particular. The factors which contribute to the inaccurate assessment of bilingual students as dyslexic also include the inability of valid assessment, due to tests not weighted towards minority populations (Wright & Baker, 2017); the marginalization of the first/heritage language and culture of minority populations (Geva, 2000); and teachers' incomplete training, often linked to negative attitudes towards linguistic and cultural diversity (Fernandez & Inserra, 2013; Klinger & Artiles, 2003). As a result, teachers make decisions based on the rejection and underestimation of bilingualism, which ultimately prevents the inclusion of these students in appropriate educational programs (Anastasiou et al., 2011; Artiles et al., 2004).

The aforementioned facts highlight the need for adequate teachers' training on the distinction of deficits that potentially stem either from bilingualism or dyslexia. The aim is for them to be able to assess their students more accurately and treat them accordingly, within the particular educational context (Klinger & Artiles, 2003).

2.4 Teachers: Views and Practices

According to previous research on teachers' attitudes towards bilingualism, many of them express a positive attitude towards the bilingual identity of their students and recognize its positive effects on the school life (Karabenick & Noda, 2004). However, negative attitudes are in fact more frequent, as many teachers also report that students with a migrant background are at a disadvantage in terms of socialization and academic development, while their presence in general classes has been characterized as problematic (Fernandez & Inserra, 2013).

According to teachers' views, non-supportive families and educational environments, as well as insufficient cultivation of the second/majority language, are put forward as factors contributing to students' unfavorable position (Griva & Stamou, 2018). Consequently, many teachers recommend the exclusive use of the second/majority language, not only in the school, but also in the home context (Tsokalidou, 2015). This attitude reflects a monolingual policy, which contributes to distancing students' bilingual identities and a multicultural social reality. Thus, educational and socialization problems are attributed to bilingualism itself (Mattheoudakis et al., 2017; Michail & Stamou, 2009).

To address this issue, the educational system and teachers should assume their responsibility by adopting appropriate attitudes and teaching practices. Starting by recognizing and capitalizing on students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds and the parallel use of the available languages (Cummins, 2015), teachers may make good use of practices such as differentiated teaching (Carreira & Chik, 2018); collaborative group activities (Barahona, 2017); activities of varying difficulty; continuous feedback; as well as working with verbal and visual aids (Skourtou, 2011). Regarding teachers' choice of practices, further research would be useful. The present research examines the views of teachers on the issue of bilingualism and dyslexia, together with their reported practices.

3. Methodology

3.1 Data Collection and Analysis

Recognizing the complexity that characterizes social phenomena and especially the investigation of beliefs, a combination of research methods is the most appropriate way to explore the issue from different angles. The present qualitative study complements a quantitative study on the same topic, conducted by the same authors, which will be discussed briefly. Descriptive research and thematic analysis were chosen to analyze the collected data, following a social discursive approach (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). The present research was divided into two interrelated studies as follows:

In Study 1, teachers of secondary education in Greece (N=71) answered the following open-ended question: *"Do teachers associate dyslexia with bilingualism? If so, how?"*. At the beginning of the questionnaire, it was clarified that *"This research concerns bilingual students who were born in Greece by immigrant parents and who speak their heritage language at home and Greek as a second language at school or outside the home in general"*.

In Study 2, five semi-structured oral interviews were conducted with five of the 71 teachers of Study 1. The interviews allowed free and more detailed expression of personal views, as well as clarifications, where needed. The interview protocol

included four open-ended questions (see Appendix 1). The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for the information to be adequately processed and analyzed. In the thematic analysis, the qualitative data were carefully studied, organized, and coded after identifying recurring patterns, based on the research questions of the study. The data were analyzed thematically and then compared and discussed, considering previous research findings and information gleaned in the literature review.

3.2 Validity of the Research

The open-ended question of the questionnaire and the semi-structured design of the interviews reduced the tendency of participants to give answers that did not correspond to reality but concurred with socially accepted views. Ethical rules were followed regarding the anonymity of the participants, information on the purpose of the research, and their informed consent to the transcription and use of their reports for academic research purposes. A pilot interview was carried out to check the quality of the interview protocol and to ensure an unbiased and valid gathering of information. Finally, the data were studied and analyzed by two researchers, first independently and then in peer collaboration, to guarantee validity and objectivity in the data interpretation analysis, as far as possible (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

3.3 Participants

In Study 1, the open-ended question was sent by e-mail to the secondary education schools randomly selected throughout the Greek territory. The sample consisted of 71 teachers who taught in general classes in public/state schools. They were all specialized in the Greek language (philologists) and they lived in various parts of Greece. The participants' names have been replaced by codes P1, P2, P3 etc.

In Study 2, the interview sample consisted of five randomly chosen teachers who had already participated in Study 1 and the quantitative study (not reported here). A total of three interviews took place remotely using electronic means, while two interviews were conducted in person. In order to maintain anonymity, the teachers' names have been replaced by the codes E1, E2, E3, E4, E5.

4. Findings

4.1 Study 1

The following open-ended question was answered in written form by 71 secondary school teachers: *“Do you think that there are common characteristics between bilingual students and students with special learning difficulties-dyslexia? If so, can you name some of them?”*. The raw number of the responses is listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Relationship between bilingualism and dyslexia

Statements	Number of responses
There is a relationship	25
There is no relationship	43
Neutral/unclear position	3
Total	71

In 25 responses, out of 71 responses, the participants stated that there is no relationship whatsoever between bilingualism and dyslexia. In 10 responses, out of these 25, an additional justification of the aforementioned position was provided by the respondents. Specifically, it was argued that these are two inherently different phenomena, which cannot be connected. In five responses, it was stated that there may be some common characteristics between bilingual and dyslexic students due to the incomplete development of second language skills: *“bilingual students present difficulties in learning, since they have not sufficiently developed the skills of written and oral expression in the Greek language since primary school”* (P011). In addition, some participants expressed the opinion that the difficulties of bilingual students arise from their poor family and social backgrounds or from the different cultural backgrounds. In summary, the results regarding the bilingualism-dyslexia relationship are listed in Table 2, in which the reporting frequency of each view is presented.

Table 2. Teachers' views: No relationship between bilingualism and dyslexia

Statements	Number of responses
There is no relationship (no further clarification)	15
Different cause of difficulties in language skills:	
• Different origin of difficulties	3
• Incomplete second language development (bilingualism)	5
• Poor family and social background (bilingualism)	1
• Different cultural background in the case of bilingualism	1

In contrast, 43 out of the 71 teachers who responded the open-ended question supported the view that there are common characteristics between bilingualism and dyslexia. Only four teachers out of 43 did not clarify their response further. In the remaining 39 responses, the participants reported that they believe that there are common points in bilingualism and dyslexia. In particular, most of them commented on the difficulties faced by bilingual students in the written language (production, comprehension, processing), focusing mainly on issues related to limited vocabulary, spelling, morphosyntactic errors, and pragmatic awareness.

Several teachers also mentioned difficulties in reading, in distinguishing vowels or in pronunciation, while some also mentioned deficits in terms of phonological awareness and metacognitive skills, such as: *“There are common points and similarities between them [...] the incomplete metacognitive ability and the incomplete phonological awareness are some of them”* (P22). The participants also mentioned similarities between bilingual and dyslexic students at the level of behavior and classroom participation, as well as difficulties of perception and communication. They also mentioned the need for individualized/differentiated teaching support for both bilingual and dyslexic students.

After data processing and coding, the reporting frequency of the collected data is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Teachers' views: Bilingualism-dyslexia commonalities

Statements	Number of responses
There is a relationship (no further clarification)	4
Common features between bilingual and dyslexic students	
Difficulties in the production of written language	17
Difficulties in comprehending written language	13
Spelling problems – writing difficulties	12
Reading difficulties	11
Difficulties in the production of spoken language – word pronunciation difficulties	10
Grammar and syntax difficulties	9
Comprehension of oral language and pragmatics	8
Limited vocabulary	8
Omission and confusion of vowels, anagrams	5
Deficits in phonological awareness	3
Deficits in perception and responsiveness	3
Distraction - inability to manage time	2
Lack of confidence–unwillingness to participate in class	2
Need for individualized or differentiated instruction	2
Deficits in metacognition – inability to use metalanguage	2
They are obstructing the lesson	1
Difficult communication	1
Better performance in speaking	1
Difficulty with numbers	1

The teachers' responses to the open-ended question mentioned were subsequently examined more thoroughly through oral semi-structured interviews, as presented in the next section.

4.2 Study 2

The views of five secondary school teachers were further explored in more depth using semi-structured interviews. The interview data complemented the questionnaire data to answer the research questions.

4.2.1 Characteristics of Bilingual Students

All five teachers, when asked about the learning characteristics that they had identified in their bilingual students, based on their teaching experience, focused on the difficulties that bilingual students often face.

4.2.1.1 Weaknesses in the Written Language

All the teachers reported the weaknesses of bilingual students in the written language, both at the level of comprehension and the level of production. Specifically, the participants pointed out:

- a) students' inability to express themselves accurately.
- b) the use of unintelligible speech.
- c) the difficulty *"in understanding more complex written language"* (E1), especially when they use *"abstract concepts"* (E3) or words and expressions *"that they don't use in their daily communication"* (E1).

The teachers discussed language problems at the level of:

- d) semantics.
- e) morphosyntax.
- f) pragmatics.
- g) interferences from the heritage language at the level of words and phonemes to the second language (Greek).

However, at the level of the spelling of words, it was clarified by E1 that *"there were very few cases that [bilingual students] strongly differed in terms of their spelling compared to the rest of the children who were not bilingual"*.

4.2.1.2 Weaknesses in Oral Language

The participants reported problems with the skills related to the production and perception of spoken language. Teachers E1, E3, and E4 distinguished speech into the one required for daily oral communication and the one related to academic language needs. They thus focused on the fact that any difficulties of bilingual students are not located at the level of daily communication, but at the academic language level. To illustrate this, E4 reported that *"they don't understand the language of the school, there is a big discrepancy between the language of communication and the school language, the academic language"*.

4.2.1.3 Bilingual Students' Behavior

It is noteworthy that teachers E2, E4 and E5 mainly discussed the negative behavior of bilingual students during the teaching processes in the classroom. All three teachers pointed out the existence of a causal relationship between a linguistic deficit in the Greek language and behavioral problems, as well as school success/failure. Specifically, according to E5, bilingual students are usually *"disruptive"*, while, according to E2, *"there is often a commotion"* because of them.

The teachers also mentioned some related issues, such as the tendency of bilingual students to distance themselves from the teaching process, indifference, and abstaining from the learning process due to deficits in the second language (Greek) or due to interference from the heritage language, causing *"a confusion ... which results in them not paying attention to the lesson and not meeting the learning goals"* (E2). At the same time, teachers reported signs of low self-confidence, phobias as a consequence of discrimination, and negative behavior. E2 also expressed the view that the presence of bilingual students in the general

classroom, and their language deficit, hinder the lesson and teacher's work. These findings are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. Teachers' views on characteristics of bilingual students

Characteristics of bilingual students	Teacher
Weaknesses in written language in:	
Accuracy in written production	E2, E3
Understanding of complex language	E1, E3
Interference from the heritage language	E2
Semantics	E1
Pragmatics	E1
Spelling	E1, E2, E4
Morphosyntax	E1, E5
Weaknesses in oral language in:	
Accuracy in oral production	E1, E3, E4, E5
Understanding	E1, E2, E3, E4
Difficulties in academic language	E1, E3, E4
Behavioral problems:	
Impulsive – problematic behavior	E2, E4, E5
Detachment – abstinence – indifference	E2, E5
Reduced self-confidence	E4

4.2.1.4 Factors Contributing to Learning Difficulties

During the interviews, all five teachers explained the factors that, in their opinion, bring about the aforementioned difficulties. It was reported that bilingualism itself has a negative effect on students' progress and that the language deficit, deriving from it, is attributed to the incomplete use of the second/Greek language at school or even at home. According to E2, the use of the heritage language at school may also result in a penalty. E1 went in the opposite direction, stating that *"bilingual students do not ... face any substantial problems"*, while E4 emphasized the non-existence of a relationship between learning difficulties and cognitive ability in the case of bilingual students.

The factors that burden the learning process of bilingual students include the discrepancy between academic and everyday language (E4, E5), a fact that creates a language deficit, which is attributed to:

- a) the unsupportive family environment (E1);
- b) the absence of *"basic linguistic resources"* that should be acquired in primary school (E1) or

- c) classmates' discrimination against bilingual students, which leads to discouragement of the latter (E4).

These findings are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5. Teachers' views about the factors contributing to learning difficulties in bilinguals

Factors	Teacher
Bilingualism itself	E2, E3, E5
Use of heritage language at home/school	E2, E5
Academic vs everyday language discrepancy	E4, E5
Family environment	E1
Discrimination	E4
Lack of school supplies	E1
Bilingualism is not a problem	E1

4.2.2 Linking Bilingualism and Dyslexia

Only one teacher (E3) reported the non-existence of a connection between bilingualism and dyslexia. Furthermore, E1 emphasized that, despite the presence of common characteristics between dyslexia and bilingualism, the origin is different and teachers should not link these two phenomena. Regarding the extent to which teachers seem to link bilingualism with dyslexia, E1, E2, E4, and E5 stated that there are observable similarities between the two phenomena. The teachers expressed their views on the limitations of bilinguals in written language. More specifically, they discussed the illegible handwriting, spelling mistakes, limited vocabulary, and difficulty in understanding complex concepts. They also mentioned difficulties at the level of morphosyntax, word omission, and misspelling. E2 commented on the problematic behavior and E4 brought up the issues of "*social distance*" and "*low self-confidence*". These are portrayed in Table 6.

Table 6. Teachers' views on the relationship between bilingualism and dyslexia

Common characteristics	Teacher
There are no common characteristics	E3
Restrictions on the written language	E1, E5, E4
Spelling mistakes	E1, E4, E5
Illegible handwriting	E4, E5
Inability to understand complex concepts	E1, E2
Confusion of graphemes and word omission	E5
Limited vocabulary	E1
Difficulties at the level of morphosyntax	E1
Problematic behavior	E2
Social distance and low self-esteem	E4

4.2.3 Integration of Bilingual Students in Specialized 'Booster' Education Programs

All the teachers who participated in the interviews seemed to support bilingual students' integration in specialized 'booster' education programs, stating that it is a practice from which students may benefit. All five participants deemed that the difficulties emerging during the learning process, for both bilingual students and teachers, can be alleviated with the collaboration of a special education teacher. Weaknesses in oral speech, writing, expression, spelling, and text comprehension,

according to E3 and E5, are characteristics that justify the inclusion of bilingual students in specialized 'booster' programs. However, they also expressed their doubts about the extent to which this integration is always beneficial for bilingual students, considering the possibility that these programs do not always or adequately fulfill their purpose.

In connection with the last-mentioned point, E5 reported that *"some of them benefit, but not too much. The results are not... they are not dramatic, let's say, a little, just a little benefit"*. According to E4, the inclusion of bilingual students in specialized 'booster' programs is a practice used to provide help and intervention to students, due to the common features between the two phenomena, which cause confusion. In a similar manner, E1 recognized that bilingualism as such does not create a problem. However, she recommended that bilingual students attend specialized 'booster' programs. This is because, in her view, students with signs of specific or generalized learning difficulties, or those from unsupportive family environments, may receive individualized help and support, so they may eventually perform better in class.

It was also reported that the presence of a lower number of students in special education contexts could have a positive effect on the support of bilingual students. For instance, *"there are only few children there ... they encourage them to participate in the lesson more often, they do together their homework. There is more time"* (E5). E2 also mentioned that this involves the opportunity that the special education teacher has to examine the student more carefully and, thus, to identify the real problem. In fact, it was observed that, in general, classrooms bilingual students cannot be helped *"because there are many students and they remain in obscurity"* (E5). This is demonstrated in Table 7.

Table 7. Teachers' views on the inclusion of bilingual students in specialized 'booster' programs

Reasons for inclusion of bilingual students in specialized 'booster' education programs	Teacher
Support, help, individualization	E1, E2, E3, E4, E5
Limited number of students	E2, E4, E5
Existence of deficits in the second language (Greek)	E3, E5
Early intervention due to common characteristics with dyslexia	E4
Need for teacher with special training	E2

5. Discussion

Regarding the learning characteristics which the teachers attribute to bilingual students, weaknesses in production and comprehension of complex spoken or written language, as well as difficulties in spelling, grammar, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics were reported in the interviews. In agreement with the literature review (Cummins, 2003; Griva & Stamou, 2018; Zaga et al., 2015; Kieffer & Vukonic, 2012), the insufficient cultivation of the academic language was mentioned, in the interviews, as factors which contribute to learning difficulties. The qualitative data reported here were also compared with the quantitative data collected on the same topic (to be published shortly). It was demonstrated that, in

both pieces of research, the teachers' views are identical in terms of recognizing the learning difficulties that bilingual students face. The quantitative data indicated that most of the participants observed differences between bilingual students with a migrant background and monolingually raised students in written (productive and receptive) language skills, while a lower percentage observed differences in oral language skills. The qualitative findings did not contain views regarding any positive effects of bilingualism, although the quantitative data showed that they play an important role in foreign language learning fluency and the development of communication skills in general.

In order to interpret the phenomenon of bilingual students' limited language skills, the inability to respond to school obligations, and the consequent low school performance, teachers blamed the lack of practice and cultivation of the second/majority language relating it to their limited vocabulary. For these deficits, they reported that the responsibility lies in the persistent use of the heritage language, instead of the Greek/majority language inside and outside school, and the insufficient provision of language resources during the students' studies in primary education.

These data corroborate, respectively, research findings by Angelopoulou and Manesis (2017), Gaintartzi (2018), Griva and Stamou (2018), and Zaga et al. (2015) on teachers' opinions. In addition, teachers appeared to accuse students' unsupportive family and socio-cultural environment. These findings agree with the research findings of Sbarra and Pianta (2001, as cited in Skourtou, 2011), according to which immigrant children who grow up in non-privileged environments face difficulties in coping with school requirements.

The characteristics of indiscipline, impulsivity, indifference, low self-esteem, and detachment, according to teachers' views, are directly related to bilingualism and attributed to bilingual students with a migrant background. However, this depiction of bilinguals, if not recognized because of devaluation and pressure for assimilation exerted on bilingual students (Skourtou, 2011), indicates segregation tendencies and teachers' inability to manage diversity within their classroom.

Some participants in the present research attributed the school's failure of bilingual students to the discrimination that the students face within the school environment. Nevertheless, they focused only on the behavior of students' peers and not on the behavior of teachers themselves. This attitude reveals an attempt to distance themselves from the classroom reality, as also reported in previous research by Angelopoulou and Manesis (2017).

Moreover, the recognition of the value of bilingualism seems to be limited at a superficial level only. At the level of actual teaching practice, the uncertainty or even the inability of teachers to manage the needs of bilinguals is notably revealed (Botsas & Sandravelis, 2014). At this point, it is worth observing that, contrary to the results in Zaga et al.'s (2015) survey, in which teachers identified the need for continuous education, in the present research, none of the teachers stated anything related to further teachers' training. In agreement with Angelopoulou and Manesis (2017), the present study also revealed teachers' tendency to avoid assuming the responsibilities that should lie with them. Cummins' (2015) claim that teachers tend to assign responsibility for school failure either to students'

inherent characteristics/genetically predetermined mental abilities or to their different linguistic and cultural background, i.e., to their bilingualism, is thus validated.

As for the main research question of this study, which concerns whether and how teachers of general classes connect bilingualism with special learning difficulties-dyslexia, the results are mixed. The inability to make a clear distinction between the two phenomena was revealed by most teachers. They focused on deficiencies in language skills, they linked bilingualism to features of dyslexia (phonological awareness, meta-linguistic skills, and meta-cognitive skills) or they separated the two phenomena based on different causes of learning difficulties. The common characteristics between bilingualism and dyslexia, predominant in the open-ended question, were also mentioned by the teachers in the interviews without showing awareness of particular differences between the two phenomena.

The study showed that few participants had knowledge of the different nature of the two phenomena. Ignorance and confusion on the part of most general education teachers seems to prevail regarding not only bilingualism but also dyslexia. This ignorance also became evident through incorrect positions, such as attributing the appearance of dyslexia to interference from the heritage language. This statement is fundamentally wrong as dyslexia is a genetically predetermined phenomenon (Tatavili & Giarmadourou, 2020). According to the DSM-V, it is not linked to external factors, as is the case of deficits linked to bilingualism (APA, 2013).

Some teachers also mistakenly attributed characteristic features of dyslexia to bilingual students, such as deficits in phonological awareness, metacognitive and metalinguistic ability or number discrimination (Griva & Stamou, 2018; Kieffer & Vukovic, 2012). Views were also expressed regarding the complete disconnection between bilingualism and dyslexia, which is rejected by the literature, given the existence of common features (Baker, 2017). However, in terms of identifying commonalities between bilingualism and dyslexia, most teachers seemed to identify them in line with the literature, such as limitations in written language, spelling errors, illegible handwriting, limited vocabulary, errors in accent and pronunciation, letter confusion, inability to read, difficulty in reading comprehension, difficulties at the level of morphosyntax and pragmatics, difficulties in oral expression, reduced participation in class, inability to concentrate, impulsivity, problematic/aggressive behavior, as well as problems with sociability and/or socialization (Alevriadou et al., 2012; Botsas & Sandravelis, 2014; Griva & Stamou, 2018; Zaga et al., 2015).

Regarding the teachers' views about whether to refer bilingual students to specialized 'booster' educational program, all five teachers who took part in the interviews were unanimous about the need to refer bilinguals to special education. The interview data also showed that teachers observed bilingual students' deviant behavior and indifference in classroom. These findings suggested a discrepancy between the participants' responses through the quantitative and the qualitative approach, which will be reported in more detail in future work.

In agreement with Karabenick and Noda (2004), the teachers of the present study revealed a positive stance towards the presence of bilingual students in general classes. They seemed to support the view of a beneficial effect exerted from bilinguals, both on them and on the monolingual students. However, at the same time, the teachers seemed to favor bilingual students' partial expulsion from the general class and their inclusion to specialized 'booster' education programs.

The participants appeared to ignore that students with special educational needs do not include students with low school performance that is causally linked to linguistic or cultural peculiarities (Law 3699/2008) and consequently cannot be referred to the specific educational program. These data confirm the conclusion of Botsas and Sandravelis (2014) about the unequal placement of students from cultural minorities in special education programs, revealing that the problem of overrepresentation of bilingual students in special education, as discussed in Artiles and Trent (1994), still exists after decades.

Crucially, the qualitative data clearly showed that the teachers did not consider bilingual students with a migrant background as students with dyslexia. They recommended bilingual students' integration in special education programs because of their language deficits and deviant behavior or because they see bilingualism as a problem, due to communication difficulties.

In agreement with Maligkoudi et al. (2018), the teachers admitted that they are unable to manage the "particularities" of bilingualism. They justified their view on the basis that bilingual students need individualized help and support from a special educator in a separate environment. This indicates either ignorance of the role of these specialized 'booster' education programs or insecurity and awareness of their inability to help. In fact, although some teachers in the present research proposed the admission of their bilingual students to special education, at the same time they stated that they were not sure about the effectiveness of this practice, which also highlights their insufficiency. Moreover, it appears that they ignored the fact that such a decision may exacerbate problems of negative behavior and reduced self-esteem (Zaga et al., 2015), while healthy self-esteem has been suggested by them as necessary in the learning progress.

Essentially, the inability to manage the bilingual reality in the classroom, according to Due et al. (2015), is due to deficits in the intercultural competence and intercultural understanding of mainstream teachers. They appear to be aware of the difficulty to interpret language weaknesses or learning difficulties and then to adequately support their students by making appropriate decisions. Of course, recognizing the need to provide differentiated and specialized teaching is a positive sign but, at the same time, it also highlights the tendency to abdicate responsibilities and move away from the problem, which is ultimately entrusted to teachers of special classes (Angelopoulou & Manesis, 2017).

Therefore, it appears that, in the Greek school reality, the main cause of overrepresentation of bilingual students in special education is the inability of teachers to manage diversity, together with attributing their inefficiency to the bilingual reality of their students. The findings of the present research validate findings in previous research conducted by Fernandez and Inserra (2013) on the New York context, and by Angelopoulou and Manesis (2017) on the Greek

educational reality. It is important that teachers' viewpoints are studied for appropriate teachers' training and educational policies that promote bilingualism and ethno-cultural diversity to be designed.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this research was to investigate the views of secondary education teachers regarding the relationship between dyslexia and bilingualism. The present research revealed that the majority of teachers of general classes in Greece show ignorance of the linguistic, cognitive, and learning characteristics of their bilingual students with a migrant background. The lack of relevant knowledge prompts them to assign the difficulties that arise during the teaching process to bilingual students themselves and their bilingual situation to their family and socio-cultural environment or even to the behavior of their peers. Even when they recognize that bilingual students need a specialized approach, they consider that this is special-education teachers' responsibility.

It is shown, therefore, that teachers of the general classes have no efficient supervision of the situation and they tend not to assume the responsibilities assigned to them. Demonstrating an attitude of detachment and resignation, they move away from the educational reality that they must face, preferring other people (students, special education teachers, etc.) to be the main decision-makers for solving any difficulties. This is an aspect of the school reality that should be considered in order to adequately implement intercultural education.

The presence of bilingual students in Greek classrooms is not an exceptional event but the norm. There is an imperative need for specialized training of teachers of general classes combined with the development of their intercultural competence, in order to be empowered to understand the real needs and problems of their students. However, the healthy operation of the school presupposes adequate teaching staff, reorientation of goals, and restructuring of the educational policy, regulations, and practices.

Lastly, it would be of particular interest to study the views of bilingual students who are referred to special education programs, together with the opinions of their teachers, and also the role of the school leadership and education systems in perpetuating this phenomenon.

7. References

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Appendix 1

Interview Protocol

Sex: male/female

Age: 25-30 31-40 41-50 50+

Level of education: Bachelor/ Master/ PhD

Educational seminars in bilingualism / intercultural education: Yes/No

Prior experience in education (years): ...

1. Did you have bilingual students in your class?
2. What characteristics do bilingual students have? Could you give us some features that characterize them/that make them different from non-bilingual children? [supplementary: Do your bilingual students have any difficulties during the learning process? Can you list some of them?]
3. Do you think there are commonalities between bilingual students and students with special learning difficulties?
4. Have you ever referred any of your bilingual students to a specialized 'booster' education program? [additional: Do you think that the inclusion of bilingual students in special education works beneficially?]