

MINORITY EDUCATION IN GREECE THE CASE OF WESTERN THRACE

*Western Thrace Minority University Graduates Association
Egnatias 75, 69100 Komotini-Greece
Tel/fax: +30 25310 29705 E-mail: btaytd@otenet.gr*

There are 228 minority primary schools, two secondary and high schools in Western Thrace. The curriculum of these schools is bilingual. The statue of the minority education system in Western Thrace was established by the Peace Treaty of Lausanne and the bilateral agreements signed between Greece and Turkey. All these schools have autonomous statues. According to international and bilateral instruments these schools are managed by the minority. In the last decade the situation of the private minority education has been changed and the mother tongue (Turkish) curriculum has almost collapsed. In this paper you will find the latest information about the Turkish minority's educational system and the changes in it.

For the development of a community in political, social and economic level, education plays a decisive and major role. Taking this into account, the role of the education gets more importance while we are referring to the minority groups within majorities. In Western Thrace region of Greece, Minority Education has been subjected to pressures caused by numerous problems accumulated over the years. The status and the principles governing the Minority Education have undergone radical changes due to the interventions, which have been an extension of the political, social and economic circumstances, and difficulties that have dominated the region for decades. Consequently, an extremely complicated set of regulations has emerged, which is inconsistent within itself and incompatible with the delicate balance established by bilateral and international agreements that Greece signed and ratified.

Legal Foundations of the Minority Education in Greece:

At the outset, the following principal documents, defining the status of the education of the Muslim-Turkish Minority are highlighted.

- a) The Treaty of Lausanne which was signed by Allied Powers and Turkey (also between Greece and Turkey) in 1923 determining the status and the basic rights of the Minority in general.*
- b) The Cultural Protocol signed between Turkey and Greece on 20 April 1951 and the Exchange of Notes in 1952 regarding the issue of exchange teachers who would be assigned in Minority Schools.*
- c) The Protocol of the Turkish-Greek Cultural Commission, signed in 1968.*

Article 40 of the Treaty of Laussane, in connection with the article 45, emphasizes the following points:

"...Members of the Minority shall have equal rights to establish, manage and control at their own expense, any charitable religious and social institutions, any schools and other establishments for instruction and education, with the right to use their own language and to exercise their own religion freely therein."

By the Article 37 of the Treaty of Lausanne, Turkey and Greece have undertaken that the stipulations contained in the Articles 38 to 44 shall be recognized as fundamental laws, and that no law, no regulation, nor official action shall conflict or interfere with these stipulations, nor shall any law, regulation, nor official action prevail over them.

The following provision is, also, mentioned in the Article 28 of the still in force Greek Constitution, by which the significance of the international agreements signed by Greece, is highlighted:

“The generally recognized rules of international law and the international conventions after their ratification by law and their having been put into effect in accordance with their respective terms shall constitute an integral part of Greek Law and override any law provision to the contrary.”

Minority Education in general

Currently, there are 228 minority primary schools that implement both Greek and Turkish curriculum under the Treaty of Lausanne and other relevant agreements and regulations. It is estimated that the number of minority students attending those schools is more than 7500.

Every year, around 1.000 students graduate from Minority primary schools. Slightly over 250 of these children are admitted to the minority secondary high schools. The rest of them are transferred to public high schools, where the language of instruction is only in Greek, due to reasons beyond their choice, such as inadequate number of schools and/or the unsatisfactory level of education in the minority schools.

The Greek State insistently ignores minority's demand on establishing new minority high schools. So with no other choice minority students attend public schools where the mean of instruction is only in Greek.

Minority schools suffer from serious shortcomings of well-trained teachers, buildings and other educational equipments. Many of the laws and regulations have been adopted since 1964 are in contradiction with the provisions of the treaties and agreements regarding minority education, and even some of the Greece's fundamental laws, royal and Presidential decrees. Some of those regulations have even been reflected in the decisions and regulations adopted by governments that succeeded the military Junta (1967-1974). Gradually, the legislation and decrees inflicted serious damage to the autonomous structure of the minority education. Although democracy has been restored following the downfall of the Junta, negative practices undermining minority education have not been rectified yet. Uncertainties and discrepancies continue even today, due to which minority education looks like a jigsaw puzzle.

Textbooks

Following the recent developments in Greek-Turkish relations and the negotiations between the authorities of the two countries, the distribution of the new textbooks was agreed in 2000. Since then, the new textbooks have been distributed regularly to minority schools. However, there is still a growing need for additional professional training for the minority teachers on methods of application of the new textbooks.

The Issue of Teachers

Article 40 of the Treaty of Lausanne grants the minority the right to establish, manage and control its own schools and religious institutions. It would be natural that the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs appoint the teachers who will implement the Greek Curriculum of the minority schools. On the other hand, it would

only be relevant that the teachers who will provide the Turkish curriculum be actually selected by the minority itself; in other words, it is necessary that these teachers are appointed in accordance with the preference and approval of the school boards and parents. Yet, the laws and regulations currently in force substantially restrict the right of the minority to choose and assign teachers. In the last seven years, more than 20 teachers, who instruct in Turkish, have been appointed to the two minority high schools. Initially, the right to appoint teachers was accorded to the Prefects. More recently, this right has been transferred to the Regional Secretary and thus, school boards' and parents' right to choose remains on paper. Job applications filed by minority teachers to the school boards are declined by the administration. The minority still hopes to be able to achieve a tangible and lasting solution to this problem achieved within the national judicial system.

Teacher Training System

The most important problem regarding the teachers of the minority primary schools has been the imposition of the Special Pedagogical Academy of Thessaloniki (S.O.P.A). This institution was established in 1968 by the military Junta regime with the aim of altering the educational system, which was established under the Treaty of Lausanne. The members of the Minority are admitted in this Academy selectively. There, they follow a specially designed education (for three years) after which they are appointed by the Government to provide Turkish instruction at minority primary schools. The pedagogical and linguistic proficiency of these teachers are lower than that of the minority teachers who graduate from pedagogical schools in Turkey. Actually, the appointment of the S.O.P.A. graduate teachers to minority schools has not only created a communication gap between the citizen and the government but also undermined the climate of confidence, downgraded success levels of minority schools, caused tension and disturbances within the members of Minority.

While the S.O.P.A. graduates whose numbers exceed 290 have been serving in minority schools through appointment for over 35 years, most of the minority teachers educated in Turkey have been subjected to discrimination and mistreatment by means of refusal of their job applications, indefinite suspension on grounds of vague excuses or early retirement due to age limit (60) although they carry a special status and are not beneficiaries of the usual national pension and social security schemes normally applied to civil servants.

Until recently, the candidate teachers admitted to the Special Pedagogical Academy of Thessaloniki have been selected from among the graduates of the two minority Theological schools where today 350 pupils attend. These schools have nothing in common with any secondary school within the national educational system of Greece. Consequently, when these people are appointed as teachers to minority primary schools, the pedagogical techniques they apply, as well as their linguistic proficiency and professional background remain insufficient for teaching. Furthermore, many teachers graduated from this academy admits there weaknesses of teaching fluently the Turkish instruction with the new textbooks and for several times have applied to the Greek Ministry of Education for additional training in Turkish. However, The Greek Ministry of Education insists on not responding their needs.

At the outset of the 21st century, the S.O.P.A. problem is started to be criticized by some Greek scholars and academicians who find this Academy insufficient enough for the training of teachers. If the Greek political authorities wish to make a fresh start by bringing acceptable and comprehensive solutions to the problems of minority education, they should opt for a radical change in their attitudes vis-à-vis the Special Pedagogical Academy of Thessaloniki.

Regarding the future teacher training mechanism to replace *S.O.P.A.*, the Government is expected to take the negative experiences of the past into consideration, listen to the views and aspirations of the minority, and pursue an attitude of dialogue and cooperation with Turkey throughout the planning and implementation of the programs.

Candidate Teachers Trained Abroad

Since the end of 1960's, the members of the minority who have graduated from schools abroad (especially in Turkey) have not been appointed to teach at Minority primary schools. Consequently, a large number of qualified teachers remained idle. Furthermore, as the years went by the number of Turkey-educated teachers in the minority primary schools gradually declined due to aging. Recently, some flexibility has been observed in Government's attitude towards such personnel. As mentioned above since 2000, 21 teachers graduated from universities in Turkey have been appointed to minority secondary schools. Yet, there has not been any change in the attitude towards the 228 minority primary schools which would need hundreds of teachers. In view of the time required for training qualified and contemporary new generation teachers, urgent improvements are needed.

School Committees

After a long time, private minority primary school-board elections took place. However, school board members still cannot use the right to appoint teachers for the Turkish curriculum. Schools boards' responsibilities, powers and rights are reduced day by day.

Course Schedules

The Greek and Turkish curricula of the minority schools were balanced by a different agreements and protocols between Greece and Turkey. Yet, as the number and duration of the lessons taught in Turkish have been reduced, this balance has been changed in time. The weekly schedule of minority schools was initially decided by a Decree of the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs in 1958 and later on superseded by another Decree in 1975 of the same Ministry.

Efforts to Improve Minority Education Standards with EU Support

Between 1997 and 2007 the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs initiated a project with the financial support of the European Union in order to improve the standards of minority education. Some universities cooperated with the Ministry in implementation of this project. Later, a similar program started to be carried out for which the Professors of Kapodistrian University of Athens initiated a dialogue with minority associations. The main aim of this project is to upgrade the quality of instruction of only Greek language and other lessons of the Greek curriculum at minority schools to national level through teachers and educational materials.

It is beyond doubt that minority children also need to learn the official Greek language fluently in order to become, law-abiding, competent and harmonious citizens. In fact conscious of this requirement, certain members of the minority launched commercial complementary educational programs through which they also offer Greek language instruction.

Evaluating the overall picture of the minority education in Thrace, what needs caution is the necessary respect for the principles and sensitive balances of the minority education system while designing and implementing comprehensive projects that may have an impact on the minority curriculum and a parallel effort towards simultaneous

improvement of the quality of both Greek and Turkish curricula. The minority has always stood ready to contribute to projects to be carried out with this understanding.

Kindergartens and Nurseries

Minority is aware of the growing need for kindergartens, which are considered as crucial ‘cornerstones’ of education in today’s world. A child’s vital need for proper education starting from very young ages cannot be ignored. In view of the growing number of working minority mothers, increase in the number of the kindergartens and nurseries has become a necessity in today’s Thrace.

There should be no doubt that like other segments of the society, Western Thrace Turkish Minority, also, is determined to raise its younger generations according to the contemporary values and high educational standards of the 21st century. Therefore, establishment of kindergartens and nurseries in mother tongue/or bilingual, rather than existing ones in which the Greek language only is used, in the areas inhabited by the Turkish minority is a desirable objective provided that fundamental principles and criteria concerning the minority are safeguarded. In other words, it may be useful that nursery education becomes an integral part of the social and cultural life of the minority and its educational system. Recently, the Ministry of Education has announced that kindergartens will be compulsory in 2008. However, there is no indication of offering mother tongue education. The framework and methods about kindergarten-education could be identified in line with the views and expectations of the minority and implementation should start gradually, according to a calendar, only after sufficient preparations are carried out. It is imperative that instruction in these institutions should be in mother tongue/or bilingual, Turkish and Greek, in conformity with the status of the minority, and the legal framework of the arrangements based on an agreement between Greece and Turkey as it has been in the case of Lausanne and other relevant agreements.

Conclusion

In its current form, the Minority Education System does not reinforce and promote relations between the State and the Minority. On the contrary, it creates tension and crisis of trust. This state of affairs not only undermines the obligations that Greece has undertaken by treaties and agreements, but it also contradicts with the EU legislation, directives and criteria. The current distorted structure of the Minority Education drives the minority children who enjoy both Greek and E.U. citizenship, into becoming inadequate, second-class citizens.

It is thought that Minority Education cannot tolerate further delays and postponements since the resolution of the outstanding problems has become more and more urgent over the years. Reasonable and applicable solutions could be found only if principles of “supremacy of law”, “sincere dialogue”, “scientific debate” and “impartiality” could be adopted as criteria. Only then, the search for the solution of the problems of Minority Education would stand on reasonable grounds. By this way, the education of the Minority pupils will be conducted with an unbiased, just, reliable and enlightened attitude in line with the existing Treaties and the standards prevailing in Europe.

Recommendations

- a) *In order to improve the quality and conditions of minority education it is desirable that a dialogue is initiated between the Ministries of Education and Religious Affairs of Greece and Turkey.*

- b) A project needs to be developed in order to identify and appoint the unemployed minority teachers who have adequate teaching qualifications.*
- c) The number of teachers who would be sent by Turkey to teach at minority schools in Thrace should be restored to 36, as has been agreed by the Exchange of Letters in 1952. These teachers should be allowed to serve at minority schools in a fair and balanced manner as it was and they should be charged in a balanced way at all schools of the region.*
- d) The general principle of the 9-year compulsory education should be extended to cover the minority schooling system.*
- e) Physical infrastructure, equipment and teaching staff of the minority secondary and high schools in Komotini and Xanthi should be improved.*
- f) 4 new minority high schools, 1 minority vocational training school should be founded. While the ownership and management of these schools would belong to the minority, the State is also expected to protect and support these institutions.*
- g) A dormitory section needs to be established for the students of the minority high school in Xanthi.*
- h) Kindergarten education in the areas inhabited by Turks should be in mother tongue/ or bilingual.*