The politics of intercultural education in Cyprus: Policy-making and challenges

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Abstract
The main goal of this study is to examine the politics of the development of intercultural education policy in Cyprus. More specifically, it examines the content of intercultural policies developed by the state and particularly the Ministry of Education and Culture. In addition, the study focuses on the challenges that may impede the development and implementation of such policies. The analysis draws upon policy documents collected from the Ministry of Education and Culture and interviews carried out with Cypriot policy-makers. The Ministry has initiated an educational reform, including a reform of the national curriculum, leading towards a more intercultural orientation. Nonetheless, the findings of this research indicate there is a gap between policy rhetoric and practice.

Keywords: intercultural education, intercultural policy, Cyprus education

Introduction
The socio-historical context of Cyprus entails various consequences for intercultural education. Since 1960, Cyprus has been an independent, sovereign republic of a presidential type. The 1960 constitution of the Republic of Cyprus recognises the Turkish-Cypriot and Greek-Cypriot groups as the two major communities of the island and establishes Greek and Turkish as official languages. Armenians, Maronites and Latins constitutionally belong to the Greek-Cypriot community, while the Turkish-speaking Roma (Gypsies of Cyprus) are affiliated to the Turkish-Cypriot community. Nonetheless, the division of the island in 1974 led to the massive relocation of Greek-Cypriots to the South and Turkish-Cypriots to the North. Even though since 1974 the Greek-Cypriot government has only controlled the southern part of Cyprus, it is recognised as the de jure government of the whole island. The current paper thus focuses only on the officially recognised state.

The 2000s proved to be a watershed for changes in the Cypriot socio-political environment and thus for intercultural education. In 2004, Cyprus became a member of the European Union (EU). Cyprus forms part of the ‘Southern European bloc’ along
with countries that are geographically located around the Mediterranean Sea and politically situated in the ‘South’ (i.e. Italy, Spain and Greece). Southern European states share a semi-peripheral/peripheral status within the EU due to the economic and power disparity between the ‘north’ (geographically located in the central-northern region of the EU) and the ‘south’. They have transformed from being net sources of immigration to ‘importers’ of immigrants. However, their own people’s former experience of discrimination (due to their status as immigrants in the past) does not necessarily restrict their current role as ‘oppressors’ (Trimikliniotis and Fulias-Souroulla 2006). On the contrary, the Southern European states have been called upon to become the ‘frontier’ of ‘Fortress Europe’ by eliminating the inflow of ‘outsiders’ into the EU. Cyprus’s participation in the European endeavour under these terms has seemed to “act as an additional layer of nationalism as European Unionism creating a boundary in this ‘new’ identity and politico-cultural space vis-à-vis the non-European other” (Trimikliniotis 2001, 61). Consequently, Eastern Europeans and Asians, who form the largest proportion of immigrants in Cyprus, are in danger of being excluded or subordinated on the basis of their non-EU citizenship.

In education, the debate about educational provision in diverse school communities – at the level of compulsory education – only appeared on the Cypriot political agenda towards the end of Cyprus’ accession negotiations with the EU. Immigrants were not originally recognised as a group at risk of exclusion due to their temporary residence status. This has led to a shortage of research focusing on intercultural policies. Prior to Cyprus’ accession to the EU, immigrant workers did not have the right of family reunification. This meant they often migrated to Cyprus without their partners and children. Previous ethnographical studies indicate that the Cypriot education system has fostered policies and practices promoting the assimilation of immigrant pupils (Angelides et al. 2004, Panayiotopoulos and Nikolaidou 2007, Hajisoteriou 2010). Notably, Angelides and Stylianou (2005) argue that Cypriot schools function as a pot of assimilation by merely marginalising immigrant pupils, who are presented as an obstacle to the smooth operation of society and the school. The aforementioned considerations trigger further questions about the ways in which Cypriot schools may develop and implement inclusive practices fostering intercultural education.

Further, previous research reports various barriers to the development and implementation of intercultural policies that mainly derive from the content and structure of the Cypriot education system (i.e. curriculum, teacher training, infrastructure). Thereafter, research in the field also engages with initiatives that could potentially promote the development of intercultural education in Cypriot schools. The need to develop school-based curricula is a suggestion that emerged from all of the above studies. Angelides, Stylianou and Leigh (2004, 313) suggest that the curricula of all pupils should include “programmes to combat racism, xenophobia and discrimination”. Such programmes may develop teachers’ awareness and teaching methodologies within diverse settings, and they can also encourage students’ collaboration
and interaction. Moreover, Panayiotopoulos and Nicolaidou (2007) propose that school-based curricula should promote teaching of the Greek language to pupils and their parents, and that reception and tutoring classes should be created for immigrant pupils’ preparations to enter mainstream schools. Papamichael (2008) goes a step further in recommending the introduction of bilingual education by teaching in the languages of both the host society and the countries of origin.

In this context, the current research seeks to examine the content of intercultural policies in Cyprus initiated and/or developed by the state and particularly the Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC). Further, it examines the ways in which Cypriot policy-makers conceptualise such policies, and the implications of this process for national constructs of intercultural education. Last but not least, the study focuses on the challenges that may impede the development and implementation of intercultural education policy. The contribution of this paper therefore is that it advances theory in terms of the ways in which Cypriot policy-makers: (a) conceptualise policies for intercultural education; and (b) understand the ways these policies influence the practice of intercultural education. Building on international literature and discourse and looking at what happens in other countries (i.e. Greece), we attempt to conceptualise the politics of intercultural education in Cyprus.

The reform of intercultural policy in Cyprus: Politics and challenges

The strong critique of the policy for intercultural education developed by the MEC necessitated a reinterpretation of the assimilationist direction of education. Moreover, prior to Cyprus’ accession to the European Union in 2004 European influences mainly coming from European institutions – such as the European Commission on Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) and the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC), which was later renamed the Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) – pressured the MEC to refrain from monoculturalism (Hajisoteriou 2010). On that account, the state had to evidence its capacity to design an intercultural policy. To this end, during the 2003–2004 school year the Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC) launched the Zones of Educational Priority (ZEP) programmes on a pilot basis. The policy of the Zones of Educational Priority constitutes a strategic choice of the MEC in order to fight functional illiteracy, school failure and school marginalisation in schools with high concentrations of immigrant pupils (Giannaka et al. 2007). In addition, in 2004 the MEC began a campaign to address issues related to intercultural education. The slogan “Democratic Education in the Euro-Cyprian Society” was adopted to describe the efforts to give the national education system an intercultural orientation (CER 2004, 1).

The Committee of the Educational Reform reinforced the following educational goals (CER 2004): (a) eliminating the ethnocentric and monocultural elements in Cypriot education; and (b) promoting an intercultural ideology that connects the Cypriot
tradition with knowledge of other cultures. In order to explain its policy guidelines, the MEC sent various circulars to the schools. Such circulars suggested the:

- revision of the curriculum in terms of intercultural education;
- teaching of the musical tradition, history, literature and the religious rituals of minorities; and
- launching of Greek-language programmes that smooth the inclusion of immigrants in local society (MEC 2004).

In addition, in 2008 the Council of Ministers of Cyprus approved the “Policy Document of the Ministry of Education and Culture for Intercultural Education” (MEC 2008, 1). The ‘new’ policy directive aimed to create an intercultural school that does not exclude but seeks to promote immigrants’ inclusion in the education system and society of Cyprus. Instead, intercultural schools should be conducive to the success of all students despite their socio-cultural, linguistic or religious diversity. The MEC declared its willingness to promote social justice in education, while eradicating stereotypes and prejudices (MEC 2008c). Although the MEC adopted the rhetoric of intercultural education, its documentation still failed to provide a concrete definition of intercultural education (Hajisoteriou 2011). Further, the MEC referred to knowledge of other cultures, instead of the interaction and interchange between Greek-Cypriot and other cultures. Gregoriou (2010) argues that the MEC still adhered to monocultural notions of education since it conceptualised cultural difference as an exclusive characteristic of immigrant pupils. Thus “the migrant student and not the multicultural class, the cultural difference of the ‘other’ and not ethnicity and ethnic borders became the focus of educational policy” (ibid., 39).

Last but not least, during the 2011–12 school year, a ‘new’ national curriculum was put in practice in Cyprus on a pilot basis. Arguably, we are not yet able to examine its impact on educational practice in Cyprus. However, we can draw some preliminary observations regarding the dimensions of intercultural education in the ‘new’ curriculum. Discourses of intercultural education appear to emerge in the ‘new’ curriculum. Hajisoteriou et al. (2012) argue that intercultural education is mediated through the notions of the “democratic and humane school”, which are set to be the cornerstones of the ‘new’ curriculum. As defined in the official curriculum, the democratic school is a school that includes and caters for all children, regardless of any differences they may have, and helps them prepare for a common future. It is school that guarantees equal educational opportunities for all and, most importantly, is held responsible not only for the success but also the failure of each and every individual child. On the other hand, the humane school is a school that respects human dignity. It is a school where no child is excluded, censured or scorned. It is a school that celebrates childhood, acknowledging that this should be the most creative and happy period of human life (MEC 2010, 6).
In the context of educational reform, the current paper seeks to analyse how policies for intercultural education are developed and implemented. To this end, we firstly establish the theoretical framework of our analysis by conceptualising the notion of intercultural education.

**Conceptualising intercultural education**

In general, intercultural education encompasses the development and implementation of official policies and reforms that aim to promote equal education opportunities for culturally (and/or ethnically) diverse groupings, regardless of their origin, social rank, gender or disability (Banks and McGee Banks 2009). Different typologies and discourses of intercultural education attempt to conceptualise its goals and classifications (Banks and McGee Banks 2009). For the purposes of this research we examine the categories of monoculturalism, multiculturalism and interculturalism as the different dimensions that underpin policy for intercultural education in Cyprus. However, in real-life situations (i.e. policy development and implementation at the national levels) these categories tend to overlap and are always tentative.

The ideology that lies behind monoculturalism suggests that “the formation of public ethnicity by immigration [...] would be discouraged, and there would be strong expectation, even pressure for individuals to assimilate to the national identity” (Modood 2007, 22). In education, monoculturalism operates as an assimilation mechanism which seeks immigrant children’s adjustment to the local culture and the school values and not a change of social and school stances and practices in order to meet their needs (Banks and McGee Banks 2009).

Partasi (2011, 373) argues that the formation of modern multicultural societies across Europe has challenged the appropriateness of traditional monocultural curricula, leading to debates over “the degree they must be expanded and revamped in order to incorporate different viewpoints”. The inadequacy of monoculturalism to evoke concerns of social injustice has been the reason behind its rejection (Modood 2007). Such debates have led to the development of pluralist agendas which have sought to legitimise multiculturalism (Gallagher and Pritchard 2007). The multiculturalist ideology suggests that different communities have separate, self-contained and unified cultural identities that can co-exist in a specific social setting. Hence each grouping demonstrates a single homogenous and enduring culture that is independent of interaction with other groups or the economic and political context. To this end, multiculturalism aims to promote awareness about the cultural “other” (Leclercq 2002). Multiculturalism focuses on the celebration of diversity, which appears to compel spurious attention to the cultural differences of minorities (Tiedt and Tiedt 2002).

On the other hand, interculturalism stresses the dynamic nature of cultures, which are an “unstable mixture of sameness and otherness” (Leclercq 2002, 6). Cultural boundaries alter and overlap to create a third space within which locals and immigrants share a hybrid cultural identity. Moreover, the model provides an active and
periscopic approach by empowering minorities through, *inter alia*, education. It aims to challenge power relations and promote social change (Tiedt and Tiedt 2002). With this in mind, intercultural education asserts that teachers and students ought to recognise oppression by promoting education for empathy, moral consciousness and an examination of discrimination from the victim’s perspective (Banks 2006).

In the Cypriot context, previous research has suggested that national education goals pertained to monoculturalism. Due to the island’s division in 1974, education became inextricably linked to the nation-building project that aimed to promote the sovereignty of the state (Hajisoteriou 2009). According to Damanakis (2002), national education goals suggested the teaching of traditions and attitudes that may contribute to the “survival” of Greek-Cypriot Hellenism; the raising of a “fighting” consciousness for national liberation; and the conservation of Greek-Cypriots’ memory of their history and lost land. Similarly, Spyrou (2002) argues that in an ethnically divided society such as Cyprus education has drawn upon *nationalism* to define a political sense of “self” in contrast to “others”. This assumption has legitimated “attempts to ‘cleanse’ the national body [...] from such elements” (Papadakis 1995, 57). Nonetheless, the significant change in the island’s demographics due to the mass influx of immigrants in the 1990s necessitated a reinterpretation of the monocultural direction of education. Moreover, in the light of Cyprus’ accession to the European Union in 2004 supranational influences mainly coming from European institutions seemed to pressure the MEC to refrain from monoculturalism (Hajisoteriou 2010). The restriction of monocultural agendas reinforced a general expectation that the MEC would launch an educational reform.

In 2004, the Committee of Educational Reform echoed this expectation and pointed to “the ideological re-orientation of the goals of the Cypriot education through the elimination of the nationalistic, monocultural and chauvinist elements [...] in response to the trend of multicultural education” (Committee of Educational Reform 2004, 4-8). Multiculturalism in Cyprus “has assumed a descriptive meaning: the existence of multiple cultural groups in the same context” (Partasi 2011, 374). Nevertheless, the focus on differences enhances multiculturalists’ refusal to question the impact of these differences on individuals’ lives (Kincheloe and Steinberg 1997). They thus fail to establish social emancipation because of their inability to reveal and abolish institutional discrimination. The year 2008 officially marked a shift towards the discourse of *interculturalism*, which was ratified by the decision of the Council of Ministers. Intercultural education policy primarily emerged from attempts to ensure an equality of resources and access, while not acknowledging the need to reform systemic and school structures which allowed for immigrant students’ exclusion within physically integrated settings. Consequently, there was an absence of systematically thought-out initiatives to develop and implement a coherent intercultural policy. As a result, the Ministry reinforced the development and implementation of *symbolic* interculturalist (or *covert* multiculturalist) policies seeking the celebration of cultural differences and
ultimately the maintenance of Greek-Cypriot identity (a discourse which refers back to monoculturalism) (Hajisoteriou 2010).

Methodology
Our study reports on an analysis of the policy dynamics influencing intercultural education in the Greek-Cypriot context. We aimed to examine the context and content of educational policies and directives initiated and/or developed at the Greek-Cypriot level. To this end, we drew upon a policy-as-discourse approach. Policy-as-discourse is about “the production of knowledge and evolution of practices through language and interaction, with policy embracing a set of tacit assumptions determined by its relationship to a particular situation, social system or ideological framework and representing a struggle over ideas and values” (Shaw 2010, 198). Therefore, we not only examined the historical development of policy discourses of intercultural education within the socio-political context of Cyprus, but also the values, interests and power mechanisms that influence the development of such discourses. Therefore, we set out to examine the ways in which social processes and interactions shape discourses which, in turn, influence policy development.

In the context of this research, we sought to examine the context and content of educational policies and directives initiated and/or developed at the Greek-Cypriot level. Therefore, we drew upon policy documentary and data derived from interviews conducted with Greek-Cypriot policy-makers and education officers. Given the scant literature examining the field, policy documentation was a crucial data source. Interview data were also essential, as we regarded “the information yielded through the spoken word as a matter of ‘filling the gaps’ left by an incomplete documentary record” (Gardner and Cunningham 1997, 38). Triangulating these data through a comparison process provided an insightful understanding of intercultural policy, its contradictions and transformation.

We firstly examined a wide range of official documents from the MEC published within the last decade. In our selection of policy-related documents, we included: (a) documents conducted by policy-makers, including legislation, recommendations and directives; (b) external documents, such as circulars sent to schools; and (c) internal documents like reports and meeting minutes. Thereafter, we examined the respective website of the MEC and its archives to identify policy-related documents using its search engines and electronic archives. The sampling strategy that guided the collection of these documents was purposive. Denscombe (1998) defines purposive sampling as an attempt to select documents according to a predefined set of criteria. We selected our documents according to the following criteria: (a) documents published by state bodies pertaining to diversity and intercultural education; (b) documents published over the last decade; and (c) documents that are publicly available. Although our sample was not exhaustive, we gathered a large data corpus. In order to select a sub-sample for further in-depth analysis, we followed a purposive
selection of the policy documents taking into consideration “their importance within the ongoing debates and historical configurations” through which the Greek-Cypriot state is re-constructing intercultural education (Lindblad and Popkewitz 2001, 32). We thus selected documents directly relating to intercultural education and migrant education. In the event, a total of 30 documents published primarily in the past ten years was selected for thematic analysis (see Table 1 below).

Secondly, we identified the bodies involved in the development of intercultural education initiatives during the last decade. Such bodies include the office of the Minister of Education and Culture, the Bureau of Primary Education, the Pedagogical Institute of Cyprus, the Committee of Educational Reform and the European and International Affairs Office. It is noteworthy that all of these bodies operate under the auspices of the MEC. Thereafter, we conducted interviews with Greek-Cypriot policy-makers and officials working within the bodies involved in the development of intercultural policy. The small size of the Greek-Cypriot education system, numbering less than 400 schools, explains the restricted manpower working in the central education authorities. We thus purposively selected only one policy-maker or official from each of the identified bodies, according to the level of his/her involvement in the development of intercultural policy. Ultimately, we interviewed three male participants: the first had a managerial position in the Bureau of Primary Education (PM1); the second was an official at the European and International Affairs Office (PM2); while the third was appointed in the Committee of Educational Reform (PM3). Moreover, we interviewed two female participants: the first came from the office of the Minister of Education (PM4) and the second from the Pedagogical Institute of Cyprus (PM5). All interviewees had more than 20 years of experience in the education field. The interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes. The interview questions focused on the interviewees' understandings of the content of intercultural education policy in Cyprus; the development and implementation processes of intercultural policy; the implications of educational reform for intercultural policy; and the European influences on intercultural education policy in Cyprus. All interviews were tape-recorded and fully transcribed so that no verbal information would be lost. To maintain credibility, we adopted a member check measure (Creswell, 2003). The interviewees were thus asked to review and revisit the interview transcripts and the themes that emerged from their interview accounts.

In our analysis, we firstly identified the ‘story’ of intercultural policy developments in the Greek-Cypriot context. To document this narrative, we sought to provide a descriptive account of intercultural education initiatives. The narrative also identified the educational and other institutions involved in the formulation of each initiative. Nonetheless, Neuman (2007, 335) argues that the ‘story’ of what occurred presents “concrete details in chronological order as if they were the product of a unique and ‘naturally unfolding’ sequence of events”. Thus, “by reading the official texts alone, sometimes the reader is given the impression that the author [...] holds a single position on a topic”
Table 1. Overview of policy documents produced by the MEC and analysed for this study

| Year | Document Details |
|------|------------------|
| 1999: | Criteria for the Provision of Time for Support Teaching to Schools. Circular sent to primary schools by the Director of Primary Education. |
| 2001: | 12 October. Other-language Speaking Students in Cyprus Schools. Circular sent to primary schools by the Director of Primary Education.  
3 November. Intercultural Education. 3 November. Memo sent to primary schools by the Director of Primary Education.  
3 November. Policy of the Ministry of Education and Culture for Other-Language-Speaking Students in Cypriot Primary Schools. Circular sent to primary schools by the Director of Primary Education. |
| 2002: | 14 March 2002. Visit of Officials from the Bureau of Primary Education in Athens for Issues of Intercultural Education. Report by the Bureau of Primary Education.  
Proceedings of Seminar for Intercultural Education. 8 April. Circular sent to primary schools by the Director of Primary Education.  
Proceedings of Seminar for Intercultural Education organised by the Pedagogical Institute.  
15 October. Intercultural Education. Circular sent to primary schools by the Director of Primary Education. |
| 2003: | 30 April. Intercultural Education. Circular sent to primary schools by the Director of Primary Education.  
26 September. Intercultural Education. Circular sent to primary schools by the Director of Primary Education.  
Question No. 23.06.008.03.304, Date 30 December, Posed by the Member of the Parliament Mr George Perdikis. Communication with the Parliament. |
| 2004: | Intercultural Education in Cypriot Schools. Circular sent to primary schools by the Director of Primary Education.  
Ayios Antonios Primary School. Intercultural Education. Communication letter sent to Ayios Antonios Primary School by the Director of Primary Education. |
| 2005: | Foreigners/Turkish-Cypriot Students. Circular sent to primary schools by the Director of Primary Education.  
Plan for a Bicomunal Intercultural Educational Programme. Memo circulated within the MEC.  
18 October. Support Teaching for Other-language-Speaking Students for the School Year 2005-2006. Circular sent to primary schools by the Director of Primary Education. |
| 2006: | 30 June. Support Teaching to Other-Language-Speaking Students. Circular sent to primary schools by all District Bureaus of Education.  
21 November. Programme of Greek-Language Teaching to Asylum Seekers. Circular sent to primary schools by the Director of Primary Education. |
| 2007: | 24 October. Intercultural Education. Circular sent to primary schools by the Director of Primary Education.  
Support Teaching to Other-Language-Speaking Students for the School Year 2006-2007. Circular sent to primary schools by the Director of Primary Education. |
| 2008: | 28 August. Intercultural Education. Circular sent to primary schools by the Director of Primary Education.  
6 February. European Year of Intercultural Dialogue 2008. Circular sent to primary schools by the Director of Primary Education. |
| 2009: | Support to Children Coming from Families of Immigrants, Refugees and Asylum Seekers. Circular sent to primary schools by the Director of Primary Education.  
5 October. Greek-Language Programme offered to Repatriate and Other-Language-Speaking Students. Circular sent to primary schools by the Director of Primary Education. |
| 2010: | Curricula of Pre-primary, Primary and Secondary Education. Vol. A.  
Intercultural Education for the Smooth Integration of Students with Immigrant Biographies. Booklet.  
10 September. Greek-Language Programme offered to Repatriate and Other-Language-Speaking Students. Circular sent to primary schools by the Director of Primary Education. |
| 2011: | Intercultural Education. Post on the MEC official website. http://www.moec.gov.cy/dde/diapolitismiki.html  
Reception Guide in Cypriot Education. Booklet published by the MEC.  
10 January. Support Teaching to Other-Language-Speaking Students. Circular sent to primary schools by the Director of Primary Education. |

**Total number of documents analysed: 30**
In order to examine the multiple positions and viewpoints included in the policy, we carried out an inductive analysis of our interview data in order to identify the thematic priorities of each interview. These priorities were compared and contrasted across the different interviews so common themes could emerge. Thus, we began examining our data for groups of meanings, themes and assumptions and tried to locate how they were connected within a theoretical model (Creswell 2003). We examined our interview data looking for the continuities, discontinuities, silences and contradictions in the discourses of intercultural education. This enabled us to identify similarities and differences in the definitions of intercultural education and intercultural policy goals that were proposed by the interviewees.

In trying to establish the trustworthiness of the data, we examined and triangulated our data from multiple angles and different perspectives, continually looking for alternative possibilities and different explanations, trying to develop a richer understanding of them (Creswell 2003).

**Educational responses to immigration in Cyprus**

Drawing upon the previously described data collection and analysis, we firstly identified the discourses of intercultural education in the Greek-Cypriot context. The themes emerging in response to this question were: intercultural education and inclusion; language learning; and the Zone of Educational Priority. Thereafter, we identified the challenges to the development and implementation of policies regarding intercultural education. In the following sections, we analyse the themes that emerged from our analysis and substantiate them with data.

**Intercultural education and inclusion**

The state and particularly the MEC appeared to adopt the rhetoric of intercultural education and inclusion as the preferable educational responses to immigration. They deployed the discourse of intercultural education as the establishment of a democratic school which includes and does not exclude, meaning the provision of equal educational opportunities for access, participation and success for all students. The MEC seemed to envision the creation of an education system which respects diversity and cultural, linguistic and religious pluralism. Thus, it claimed to provide the right of all immigrant families to enrol their children at their neighbouring school, despite their legal or illegal status of immigration in the country:

> The MEC’s objectives regarding intercultural education entail the smooth inclusion of all other-language-speaking pupils in the Cypriot education system. No distinction should be made for any group (MEC 2003, 1).

Human rights that are discussed in Part II of the Cypriot Constitution, including the right to education confirmed by Article 20, are not delimited to the citizens of the Republic but are conferred on immigrants (MEC 2002, 4).
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Drawing upon the above extract, the MEC seemed to argue that intercultural education should become a process which enables the inclusion of all students. Inclusion, in turn, focuses on the re-conceptualisation of educational norms in order to meet all students’ individual needs such as their different starting points, interests and learning styles. Accordingly, the school system should become conducive to the success of all students despite their socio-cultural, linguistic or religious diversity. The MEC declared its willingness to promote a social justice agenda while eradicating stereotypes and prejudices.

However, all the policy-makers participating in the current study argued that the elimination of stereotypes and prejudices is merely becoming rhetoric expressed by the MEC, which is poorly implemented in practice, meaning in schools and classrooms:

"We should ask ourselves to what extent the declared policy is turning into practice. At this moment, we need an ambulance to save us. There is an official rhetoric but there is a gap between the official rhetoric of the state and its implementation at a practical level. The gap between rhetoric and practice leads to a bipolar policy, according to which the label syndrome is expanded to each different group (PM4)."

"We have developed some intercultural policies but, in my own opinion, they are just rhetoric. They are not a firm framework of reference within which schools may develop a series of measures (PM5)."

Most of the participant policy-makers appeared to contend that the lack of change in the attitudes of Cypriot society entailed a barrier to putting the MEC’s rhetoric into practice. PM4 explained that the existence of monolithic blocs based on ethnocentrism has perpetuated stereotypes and prejudices; for example “all Muslims just breed children” or “all Cypriots are Greek Orthodox”. In this context, PM2 claimed that “restructuring” the education system cannot promote intercultural education by itself. Therefore, he called for “reculturing” the stakeholders and actors involved in the implementation process such as head-teachers, teachers and pupils. To this extent, some of the interviewees suggested that the ongoing educational reform including the development and implementation of the ‘new’ national curriculum could “set a different ideological framework” within which these stakeholders could potentially operate (PM1). The educational reform could potentially bridge the gap between policy and practice and therefore promote intercultural education (i.e. PM1 and PM3).

On the other hand, Cypriot researchers are not only concerned about the lack of a clear implementation plan but caution about the absence of an integral policy on the part of the MEC (e.g. Trimikliniotis and Fulias-Souroulla 2006, Hajisoteriou 2010). They assert that, although the MEC has developed innovative measures in order to address ethnic diversity, it has failed to introduce these initiatives in all primary schools. The MEC’s policy appears to be oriented to transformation of the education system into a genuine intercultural system. Nevertheless, previous research in the field shows that the process of educational reform is relatively slow and contradictory.
due to the generality of the policy goals, the contradiction between the concept of intercultural education and the ethnocentric character of Cypriot education, and the lack of policy implementation (Papamichael 2008, Hajisoteriou 2009). It is therefore crucial to examine whether the ethnocentric character of Cypriot education has affected the policies and practices for Greek-language learning (targeting immigrant students), which are discussed in the section below.

**Greek-language learning**

It is noteworthy that in all the analysed policy documents, children of minority or immigrant origin are exclusively referred to as *other-language-speaking pupils*. The MEC deployed the term αλλόγλωσσοι μαθητές “other-language-speaking pupils” in all the circulars it sent to schools, which replaced the previously used term ξενόγλωσσοι μαθητές “foreign-language-speaking pupils”. It thus placed an increased emphasis upon Greek-language learning in order to promote immigrant pupils’ inclusion in Greek-Cypriot society:

Language teaching is necessary in order to maintain the inclusion of other-language-speaking pupils. Pupils are evaluated in order to be grouped together for the purposes of language teaching (MEC 2006, 1).

The problems faced by immigrant pupils are usually bounded to their lack of proficiency in the Greek language. For the purposes of language teaching to other-language-speaking pupils, pupils should be divided into two levels: beginners and non-beginners. The programme should be completed in two years (MEC 2009, 1).

The MEC appeared to discuss language proficiency as a precursor to greater inclusion. It argued that immigrant pupils could overcome any barriers to their inclusion through Greek-language learning. The teaching of Greek as a second language has taken the form of support classes which take place within mainstream schooling. Although language learners co-attend classrooms with local Greek-speaking students, they attend separate Greek-language classes for some hours of the week. However, literature suggests that a purely language-barrier approach to immigrant pupils’ education is inadequate for establishing inclusive environments (Banks and McGee Banks 2009). Educational policy should also take into consideration cultural elements other than language. International research suggests that cultural norms and expectations, the cultural situation of the family and individual learning styles (Banks and McGee Banks 2009) are factors that should be acknowledged in educational policies.

Similarly, almost all the policy-makers who participated in the current study seemed to perceive diversity as a ‘linguistic problem’ located within the immigrant pupils. They attributed the problematic situation caused by the immigrant pupils’ presence in the Cypriot schools to the immigrant pupils’ inadequate knowledge of the Greek language, which causes behaviour and learning disorders.
When they come to our schools they have huge communication problems, and therefore they usually have adjustment and behaviour problems too (PM2).

Their presence holds negative implications for our schools as these children bring with them their adjustment problems and their learning problems which are bounded to their language inadequacies (PM5).

Drawing upon the above quotes, it is striking that most of the interviewees appeared to conceptualise language difference as a deficit that resembles learning difficulties and/or special needs. We may argue that most policy-makers’ observations were grounded in a cultural-deficit perspective that stemmed from monoculturalism and blamed immigrant students for the (perceived) ‘problematic’ situation in which they found themselves.

It is worth mentioning that previous research in the field criticises the language policy developed by the MEC as monocultural since it again forces the dominant linguistic norms upon non-Greek-speaking pupils (e.g. Gregoriou 2010, Hajisoteriou 2012). Such a type of language policy promotes cultural assimilation via a linguistic homogenising project. In addition, in their study of Greek-Cypriot teachers’ perceptions of Greek-language support teaching Elia et al. (2008), were critical of the implementation of support teaching in practice. They asserted that teachers responsible for support teaching are not properly trained, nor do they have the necessary experience. In addition, they argued that the lack of time and the absence of appropriate teaching materials constrain implementation of the programme.

To sum up, most of the analysed policy documents, but also most of the participant policy-makers, argued that the primary goal of schooling should be to immerse newcomers in the Greek language. It is notable that none of the documents or the participants referred to the teaching of minority and/or immigrant languages. On the other hand, in examining the overlap between language teaching and intercultural education, Chamberlin-Quinlisk and Senyshyn (2012, 15) “question language practices that exclude or downplay the benefits of developing students’ heritage languages while learning additional languages”. They therefore urge teachers to promote the native speaker identity by avoiding narrow perceptions of language ownership.

**The Zone of Educational Priority**

The Zone of Educational Priority (ZEP) is a further policy adopted by the MEC which aims to eliminate social marginalisation through positive discrimination towards ‘disadvantaged’ pupils. The Permanent Work Team for the Promotion of Literacy and School Success ascribes particular schools to ZEPs according to the following criteria: geographical location, socio-economic background of the families, presence of immigrant students, school dropouts and the percentage of students with special needs (MEC 2012, 1). Networks of Educational Priority are created on the basis of these criteria. Each of these networks includes one high school, the main primary schools
of the area and the pre-schools linked to those primary schools. According to official documentation, the MEC ought to provide ZEP schools with additional means and resources, such as extra time for Greek-language teaching and increased funding, on the basis of the principle of positive discrimination:

The policy of the Zones of Educational Priority draws upon the principle of positive discrimination, meaning the unequal treatment of inequality based on the priority needs of children. We provide more to those who are at greatest risk of leaving school early (MEC 2012, 4).

The MEC declared that the operation of ZEPs should adhere to a holistic approach, recognising the fact that marginalisation, school failure and early school leaving are associated both with that occurs inside and outside school (i.e. the socio-economic environment). Further, the MEC claimed to operate the ZEP schools according to the principle of partnership, meaning that ZEP schools should become “learning communities, involving and engaging the school staff, pupils, parents, the local community and other social partners” (MEC 2012, 4).

In contrast, the policy-makers who participated in this study cautioned that ZEP schools are experiencing the ‘flight’ of their Cypriot pupils to other schools. They pointed out that Cypriot parents are concerned about the quality of education provided by ZEP schools because of the high shares of immigrant pupils. Thus, they suggest that ZEP schools have become physically segregated settings within mainstream education:

Cypriot parents did not approve of the ZEP-status that was ascribed to some schools. They did not want immigrant pupils in their schools. Although they were not allowed, they were transferring their children away from ZEPs in case that more immigrants enrolled. Some of these schools became ghettos (PM3).

More than 90% of the pupils in ZEPs are immigrants. When some schools became ZEPs, Cypriots moved their children out of these schools. They believed that educational provision became inadequate in ZEPs because of the increased immigrant presence (PM4).

In Cyprus, all pupils are obliged to attend their neighbouring schools according to particular catchment areas defined by the MEC. Nevertheless, the MEC appeared to ‘tolerate’ Cypriot pupils’ ‘flight’ away from ZEP schools. As a result, non-ZEP schools could remain relatively homogenous, satisfying Cypriot parents’ demands. The rationale seems to lie in the MEC’s definition of intercultural education as a procedure that solely benefits immigrant pupils:

Intercultural education is a special educational procedure that substantially advantages children who belong to cultural minorities, while it is marginally advantageous for the majority (MEC 2004, 1-2).

On the basis of the aforementioned definition, the MEC appeared to conceptualise intercultural education as a compensatory measure for the immigrant pupils’ increased
presence in the ZEP schools. However, PM1 and PM4 argued that, in mainstream education, intercultural education was left at the discretion of schools and their personnel. The ZEP policy may be characterised as multicultural (and not intercultural) as it singularly targets immigrant students, while it is not concerned with combatting the stereotypes of the majority. On the other hand, literature in the field contends that intercultural education should target all students by promoting their intellectual and personal development (e.g. Banks and McGee Banks 2009, Hajisoteriou 2011). Similarly, Luchtenberg (2005) argues that intercultural education should aim to provide both local and immigrant students with the competencies to meet hybridism within cultural identities and within individuals. We may then argue that the educational policy suggested by the MEC was far from an intercultural approach.

**Challenges to intercultural education in Cyprus**

In the interview data, we identified a series of structural barriers appearing to impede the development and implementation of intercultural education in Cyprus. It is worth mentioning that none of the analysed documents referred to any challenges to the development and implementation of policy for intercultural education. In addition, we could not identify any evaluation of the policy per se, and/or its implementation. First and foremost, most of the interviewees argued that the highly-centralised character of the education system has added to the slowdown of intercultural policy change. The quote below echoes the policy-makers’ concerns regarding the centralisation of Cypriot education:

> We still have a long way to go. Our progress regarding intercultural education is slow but steady. These are the drawbacks of our centralised system. Decisions have to be taken centrally at the level of the Ministry. Schools are obliged to follow our decisions (PM3).

> Because of the centralised character of our education system, change cannot occur unless generic educational reforms are launched by the MEC. This happened in the case of intercultural education. For this reason there was such a big delay (PM4).

The interviewees argued that, since Cyprus is a power-concentrated state with a centralised education system, the most influential voices are those of policy-makers. The MEC and its officials bear the responsibility for educational provision and regulation. Thus teachers ought to comply with the MEC’s guidelines as there are control mechanisms monitoring teachers’ work, such as school inspection and evaluation procedures. However, PM2 clarified that as the school-based curriculum is quite weak in Cyprus intercultural policies have to be introduced by the central stakeholder, thus the central state, through a top-down approach. Similarly, PM3 explained that the centralisation of Greek-Cypriot education presupposes the centralised design and top-down implementation of intercultural policies. Accordingly, the MEC has to explicitly communicate the know-how to grass-roots implementers, including teachers.
Previous research in the field has indicated that decentralisation increases the number of decision-making gatekeepers administering the induction of innovative ideas, such as intercultural education, into the policy system (Bleich 1998). Therefore, “a greater number of gatekeepers may lead to an increased likelihood of policy change” (ibid., 81). On the other hand, in centralised systems with a single gatekeeper an innovative idea would be dismissed if that gatekeeper’s values and interests are hostile to change.

Moving a step forward, the participant policy-makers were critical of the provision of adequate intercultural training to teachers. They pointed out the shortage of resources resulting in poor intercultural training for teachers and a lack of guidance for intercultural policy implementation:

Teacher training is a precondition for the successful implementation of intercultural education policies. The Pedagogical Institute is responsible for the organisation of workshops and seminars for teachers. However, they organise seminars for intercultural education only once or twice a year and on a voluntary basis. Teachers are not competent to implement the policies that we develop (PM1).

They rarely organise teacher training programmes focusing on intercultural education. In most cases, whatever teachers know derives from their own experience. They are left alone in the implementation process of intercultural education (PM4).

The participant policy-makers argued that Cypriot teachers themselves do not feel adequately trained to manage diversity within their classrooms. Most teachers do not receive any official training or guidelines on the teaching of Greek as a second language beyond generic seminars organised sporadically by the MEC. In-service teacher training pertains to centralised and not school-based procedures. The Pedagogical Institute, which is a state institution, is responsible for the provision of teachers’ in-service training. Nonetheless, the Institute organises in-service teachers’ training in terms of out-of-school seminars that run on a non-compulsory basis. Training on intercultural education involves no more than two seminars per year, which usually take place only in Nicosia, the capital of the country. On the other hand, literature asserts that teachers’ intercultural skills and, in turn, practices are largely being shaped by teacher training (e.g. Montecinos 2004, Hajisoteriou 2011). McNeal (2005) proposes that teacher training may actually help teachers to develop practical skills (such as time management, management of mixed-group classes, collaboration with parents, and/or teaching in mixed-ability classes) in order to facilitate the implementation process of intercultural policies.

The interviewees’ critiques also encompassed the school level. They particularly referred to the low levels of immigrant parental involvement, while pointing out that the language barrier and immigrant families’ low socio-economic status often inhibit the development of school-family relations:
Partnerships between schools and immigrant parents could promote intercultural education as long as immigrant parents are interested in collaborating with the school. Immigrant parents usually work for many hours and do not have time to visit the school (PM2).

Immigrant parents do not speak the language, they are under-educated or do not have the means to support the work carried out by the school. They are not really involved in the implementation of intercultural education at the school level (PM4).

The participant policy-makers appeared to suggest that immigrant parents seem disinterested in their children’s education, while they adopted deficit-oriented approaches to explain the parents’ lack of on-site presence at school due to their low socio-economic situation, deprived educational background and limited proficiency in the Greek language. Despite their favourable stance on school-parent collaboration, most policy-makers asserted that immigrant parents were often distancing themselves from the school.

Similarly, international research has shown that immigrant parents have lower levels of school involvement compared to local parents (Marschall 2006, Theodorou 2008). Hill et al. (2004) draw an interconnection between low parental involvement and immigrant parents’ income, educational level and ethnicity. They go on to explain that socio-economic difficulties, such as transportation, child-care arrangements and tight work schedules, often inhibit immigrant parental involvement. Moreover, Lareau and Shumar (1996) add other contributory factors such as immigrant parents’ lack of proficiency in the official language, limited cultural knowledge about school rules and lack of higher education. Nevertheless, in their review of literature regarding the importance of family involvement in culturally-diverse school settings Hidalgo et al. (2004, 632), argue that “family practices and involvement activities are more important for helping students succeed in school than are family structure; socioeconomic status; or characteristics, such as race, parent education, family size and age of child”. They suggest that parents’ willingness and determination to support their children may overcome factors such as parents’ formal education, income level, and family culture or language.

Conclusion

Cyprus – as a culturally diverse state – needs to construct its own contextualised political structure within which social policy, in general, and intercultural educational policy, in particular, can emerge. It should therefore deploy educational institutions and curricula in order to respond to the new politics of interculturalism. In this context, Cyprus has initiated an educational reform, including a reform of the national curriculum leading towards a more intercultural orientation. Therefore, since 2008 the state and particularly the MEC have replaced the previously used term of multicultural education with the rhetoric of intercultural education and inclusion as the preferable educational responses to immigration. Papamichael (2008) concludes that the MEC deployed the discourse of intercultural education as the establishment of a school which provides equal educational opportunities for access, participation
and success for all students. According to the new curriculum goals, the MEC envisioned the creation of a “human” and “democratic” school which includes and does not exclude, by respecting diversity and cultural, linguistic and religious pluralism.

Arguably, the turn in the policies of intercultural education in Cyprus seemed to derive from supranational influences, including ‘pressure’ from the EU. Being part of the Southern European bloc along with Greece, Cyprus often models its educational policies on those of Greece on the basis of the two countries’ close cooperation in the education field (Hajisoteriou 2009). In consideration of the historical antecedents of educational policy over the post-independence period, Cypriot education has relied on textbooks, curricula and teachers’ guides freely provided by the Greek state (Trimikliniotis 2001). It is justifiable to assert that this long-standing ‘cooperation’ has reinforced the MEC’s dependence on the Greek Ministry of Education. Arguably, Cyprus’ collaboration with a state such as Greece, which has had a brief experience of immigration, may have impeded the transformation of its intercultural policy. In contrast, national cooperation with other European states which have a longer experience of immigration may potentially become an impetus for the formulation and implementation of more coherent and successful intercultural policies. To this end, we may argue that European countries belonging to the Southern European bloc could start collaborating with central European countries with longer traditions in developing and implementing education policies to address diversity.

Beyond the development of formal policies, the policy-makers participating in the current study asserted that there is a gap between policy rhetoric and practice and between policy intentions and outcomes. For example, they explained that although the ZEP policy aims to promote the further inclusion of immigrant pupils, it has resulted in the creation of ghetto schools. Further, although the official state policy includes humanistic wording about respect for human rights, justice and peace, in practice immigrant pupils are seen as being in need of assimilation in order to overcome their deficiency and disadvantage, which mainly relates to language issues (Gregoriou 2010). Similarly, Cypriot researchers go on to suggest that the MEC has deliberately omitted developing effective initiatives leading towards implementation of the state-derived intercultural policy in order to maintain immigrant pupils’ full assimilation in the Greek-Cypriot culture (e.g. Angelides et al. 2004, Papamichael 2008, Hajisoteriou 2009). Moreover, Hajisoteriou (2010) asserts that the “symbolic” implementation of intercultural education by the MEC is part of its drive towards the nation-building project. In conflict areas such as Cyprus, education is becoming the means for the nation-building project. As education strictly patrols the boundaries of citizenry and belongingness, subordinated groups including immigrants are under-recognised and excluded.

Damanakis (2002) argues that educational policy in Cyprus has been inextricably linked to the nation-building project, mainly because of the unresolved political problem. In this sense, intercultural discourses in Cyprus have been counteractive to monocultural and nationalistic notions of identity. Thus, education in Cyprus still
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maintains its nationalistic character by supporting the perpetuation of a homogenous Greek-Cypriot culture (Trimikliniotis and Fylia-Souroula 2006). This, in turn, raises the question of how intercultural education should develop in an area characterised by ethnic conflict. The discourse of intercultural education in Cyprus excludes the goal of rapprochement between the Greek-Cypriot and Turkish-Cypriot communities, as envisioned by the concept of reconciliation. It is notable that the state exclusively regards intercultural education as an endeavour to provide immigrant children with equal educational opportunities. Although intercultural education policy primarily emerged from attempts to ensure an equality of resources and access; it has not acknowledged the need to reform the systemic and school structures which currently allow for immigrant students’ exclusion within physically integrated settings. The consideration of the socio-political situation in Cyprus indicates the need to develop context-specific discourses of intercultural education.

Further, the current study has drawn attention to the barriers impeding implementation of the intercultural education policy in Cyprus. The participant policy-makers contended that the inadequate implementation of the proposed intercultural initiatives is the outcome of the centralised character of the Cypriot education system. The participants also cited the inadequate teacher training and the absence of collaboration between the schools and the immigrant families as additional impediments to the successful implementation of intercultural policies. The findings of this study suggest that the development of intercultural education requires the re-conceptualisation and re-structuring of the Cypriot education system and schooling. The state should adopt a balanced governance model between school autonomy and centralised management (Hajisotiriou 2010). Consequently, it should communicate coherent policies to schools that allow for clear understandings of intercultural education, while also allowing teachers to bring their experiences into the planning of such policies through the development of intercultural school-based curricula and initiatives. The content of such policies and curricula should reflect upon teaching methodologies within intercultural settings; teaching the language of the host country; bilingual education (Papamichael 2008); and collaborations between schools and immigrant families (Theodorou 2008).

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