Attainment Gap – The Teacher Perspective

GALATIA THEODOSIOU-ZIPITI, MEL WEST

Abstract

Differential attainment between ethnic minority and homeland students has been described in many countries. Lately, this has also been confirmed in Cyprus, a recent member of the European Union. This qualitative study aims to investigate the perceptions of teachers as regards the reasons behind the low academic achievement of ethnic minorities in Cyprus. It further hopes to provide clues for the lower attainment observed in theoretical subjects. Interviews were conducted with teachers from four secondary schools in different cities of Cyprus. A variety of factors relating to the child, parents, home environment, teachers, schools and society were identified as relevant by the participants, in agreement with findings from both the international and the limited local literature. Interrelationship of the findings suggests that the socio-economic status of the family and characteristics of the Cypriot educational system are the main influences on attainment levels.

Keywords: ethnic minorities; attainment gap; interview-study; Cyprus

Introduction

The disparity in achievement among different ethnic groups has been discussed in the international educational literature for decades. The general trend is for ethnic minorities to do worse than their majority counterparts. For example, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Black students in the UK (Demie, 2001); Black (Rumberger and Palardy, 2005), Hispanic (Fryer and Levitt, 2004) and Mexican students (Ream, 2005) in the US; Turkish and Moroccan students in the Netherlands (Driessen, 1995); many ethnic minority groups in China (Zhou, 2001); Albanian students in Greece (Korilaki, 2004), and Georgian students in Cyprus (Theodosiou-Zipiti, West, and Lamprianou, 2011). This lower attainment of ethnic minorities compared to majority students has been coined the 'attainment gap' (Olszewski-Kubilius, 2006). Schools are nonetheless expected to offer a sound education to all students and also to equip them to live their lives fully within a well-functioning society. It is, therefore, imperative that we know whether and for what reasons some minorities underachieve, as this can help us tackle the problem.

The international literature refers to many studies that attempt to explain the reasons behind the attainment gap observed in different countries, and factors pertinent to individual children have been suggested as possible influences on attainment. These include aspects such as ethnic origin (Asanova, 2005), low motivation or effort (O'Connor, 1999; Uhlenberg and Brown, 2002), confused or unrealistic aspirations and inappropriate coping strategies (Reis *et al.*, 1995). Other suggested possibilities include high absenteeism (Rumberger and Larson, 1998), low proficiency

or fluency in the dominant language (Demie, 2001), fear of acting white (Fryer, 2006), and negative peer group pressure (Haynes *et al.*, 2006).

Factors relating to the parents and home environment have also been put forward. Low parental educational level (Uhlenberg and Brown, 2002), limited interest in school performance and minimal monitoring, guidance and involvement in school (Demie, 2005; Lee and Bowen, 2006) are some of these. Additionally, low expectations (Goyette and Xie, 1999; Reis *et al.*, 1995), parenting techniques, i.e. discipline style, interaction (Uhlenberg and Brown, 2002), low family socio-economic status (Reis *et al.*, 1995), stress, or home problems (Villalba *et al.*, 2007), and major life issues or events in the home (Hayes and Clay, 2007) are other such examples.

It has also been suggested that the attributes of certain teachers can potentially affect the performance of minority students. For instance, low expectations (Haynes *et al.*, 2006; Uhlenberg and Brown, 2002), racist/biased behaviour (Lucas, 2000) and negative interactions with minority students (Reis *et al.*, 1995) have been highlighted as important. Similarly, inappropriate or insufficient education and training for teachers (Warikoo, 2004) as well as an inability on their part to cater for the learning needs of a diverse classroom population (Tengtragul, 2006) have been identified as relevant.

Some school characteristics such as racial composition (Crosnoe, 2005), irrelevant curriculum (Glazier and Seo, 2005), problematic assessment (Li, 2004) or testing bias (Villalba *et al.*, 2007) have also been proposed as potentially important elements. Other points such as school size (Rumberger and Palardy, 2005), large class size (Uhlenberg and Brown, 2002), inadequate use of students' first language (Bartley *et al.*, 1999), the degree of prejudice against minority students (Reis *et al.*, 1995), and poor communication with home (Bartley *et al.*, 1999; Li, 2004; Villalba *et al.*, 2007) have also been emphasised as significant.

Finally, societal ethnic stereotyping and oppression (Rubie *et al.*, 2004), discrimination (Birman and Trickett, 2001) and racism (Codjoe, 2001) have all been identified as influential.

Most of the aforementioned factors have been recognised through quantitative studies. Nonetheless, it is widely accepted that quantitative and qualitative studies are complementary to each other. When used together, they can give a fuller picture, not only of the overall incidence and statistics, but also of the underlying processes and perceptions of people. There are some qualitative studies which aspire to investigate the circumstances behind the poorer achievement of minority students, but most of them concentrate on the effects of a single aspect or a few closely related factors. There are very few studies whose aim is to examine a broad range of contributory influences that might be responsible for the attainment gap (e.g., Haynes *et al.*, 2006; Li, 2004; Reis *et al.*, 1995; Tengtragul, 2006; Uhlenberg and Brown, 2002; Villalba *et al.*, 2007). Although these studies might be useful in providing us with some information about what happens in other specific setups they do not go far enough to answer our research questions, and in some instances only deal with primary school education (Tengtragul, 2006; Villalba *et al.*, 2007). Also, there are elements that might render some of these studies vulnerable to bias. The low number of schools used in some of these studies: one in Bartley *et al.* (1999), Reis *et al.* (1995), and Tengtragul (2006);

two in Villalba *et al.* (2007); the handful of participants in Li (2004) with only two Chinese-Canadian students; or in Tengtragul (2006) with just five teachers, are such examples. Furthermore, Uhlenberg and Brown (2002) used a forced-choice items survey that could lead to bias by not identifying other important considerations that the participants might offer, if allowed. Moreover, some studies focused on specific school subjects, for instance, English literacy in Li (2004), whilst other studies did not exclusively concentrate on the achievement of minority students (Reis *et al.*, 1995).

Cyprus, which joined the European Union in 2004, has seen its population become increasingly diverse during the past decade (Oikonomidou, 2003) due to the settlement of waves of immigrants. This change in demographics has also affected school populations. Data supplied by the Ministry of Education and Culture of Cyprus, for the academic year 2004-2005, shows that only eleven out of sixty-seven gymnasia (secondary schools) had no minority students, while other schools admitted up to 50% of their students from minority groups. Apart from Greek Cypriots, the population of the island also includes Turkish-Cypriots, plus people from three 'religious groups' – Maronites, Armenians and Latins – and Greek people from the mainland. It also includes groups who more recently arrived on the island from a number of countries such as Georgia, Britain, Russia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey. Georgians, known locally as 'Rossopontioi' or 'Ellinopontioi', form the largest ethnic minority group nationally, while immigrants from the other countries make up smaller numbers which are often grouped together under one category called 'Others' (Theodosiou-Zipiti, West, and Lamprianou, 2011). The Ministry of Education and Culture is currently working on educational reform which aims to implement educational measures and policies that will facilitate the smooth integration of children from different cultural backgrounds (Annual Report, 2010). For secondary schools, however, (which forms the basis of this study) with a low percentage of ethnic minority students the measures thus far have been limited mainly to language support.

Two quantitative studies have examined the attainment of ethnic minority students in Cyprus (Theodosiou-Zipiti, West, and Lamprianou, 2011; Theodosiou-Zipiti *et al.,* 2011). They have both shown that students from ethnic minority groups have appreciably lower attainment than their native[1] counterparts in a number of school subjects – Modern Greek, Mathematics, History, and Physics. Few studies have examined the determinants responsible for the above achievement gap in the island. Theodosiou-Zipiti, West, and Lamprianou (2011) and Theodosiou-Zipiti *et al.* (2011) suggest that low attendance rates, together with low levels of parental education, unskilled parental occupations, being a first-generation minority student and being a male student, significantly impact negatively on student attainment. There is also a single focus group study that

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[1] Natives are 'those whose parents had both been born in Cyprus. For practical reasons, a very small number of students from Greece were also included in the native category; this was felt appropriate in view of the similarities in language, religion and culture' (Theodosiou-Zipiti, West, and Lamprianou, 2011, p. 127).

specifically looks at the reasons behind the poor attainment of ethnic minority students in secondary schools in Cyprus (Theodosiou-Zipiti, West, and Muijs, 2010). The authors conclude that the socio-economic status of minority families and the monocultural character of the current educational system are the main influences behind the disparity in attainment between native and ethnic minority students. Having said that, this study was based on the perceptions of a limited number of teachers in a highly homogeneous group – all young, female, classics teachers with similar teaching experience in multiethnic classrooms – that could predispose it to bias.

Useful points can be extracted from other studies dealing with multicultural issues in Cyprus; it should be emphasised that these studies were not carried out specifically to look at the reasons behind the attainment gap. Martidou-Forsier (2003) advocates that fluency in the Greek language as well as acceptance by native students and teachers, parental interest in their children's learning, and students' educational aspirations and efforts are perceived to be important for ethnic minority attainment levels. Panayiotopoulos and Nicolaidou (2007) indicate that language problems are the most important cause of low academic performance.

To our knowledge, no study, either locally or internationally, has employed a methodology capable of detecting factors that would explain the differential attainment of ethnic minority students between the theoretical and practical subjects. This could be important given the larger gaps in theoretical compared to practical school subjects (e.g., Cook and Evans, 2000; Theodosiou-Zipiti, West, and Lamprianou, 2011; Theodosiou-Zipiti *et al.,* 2011).

Our research plan is to identify those contributory factors responsible for the low academic attainment of ethnic minority students in secondary schools in Cyprus through a review of the perceptions of teachers. We also aim to see how the teachers themselves explain the differential attainment between theoretical and practical subjects.

Methodology

Semi-structured interviews were used. These were carried out in four of the secondary schools used in the larger quantitative study on the attainment of ethnic minority students in Cyprus conducted by Theodosiou-Zipiti *et al.* (2011). Two schools with a low ethnic minority concentration (about 10%) and two with a high concentration (about 50%) were selected for the study. The schools selected were chosen from three different cities of Cyprus (urban schools) and were of variable size. We decided to interview teachers because they are the ones directly responsible for the education of students. Specifically, sixteen teachers (i.e. four head-teachers, five deputy head-teachers, and seven teachers) of which seven were male and nine were female, of different ages and years of experience, who were appointed to the participating schools during the academic year 2006-2007, were included. In order to detect influences that explain the differential attainment patterns of ethnic minority students in the theoretical (Modern Greek and History) and practical subjects (Mathematics and Physics) as described by Theodosiou-Zipiti *et al.* (2011), only those teaching in these subject areas were interviewed. All interviewees, except head teachers,

were a convenience sample; at the time of the interviewer's visit, the first available teachers who consented to take part were included. The head-teachers were approached at a pre-determined time by appointment.

An 'interview schedule' (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994, p. 88) with a number of issues and questions was prepared in advance, based predominantly on the findings of the study by Theodosiou-Zipiti *et al.* (2011). The main issues raised with the participants were:

- Attainment levels of ethnic minority students
- Attainment gap between different school subjects (theoretical and practical)
- Gender differences in attainment
- Student absenteeism
- Factors influencing the attainment levels of minority students
- Effect of ethnic minority concentration on student attainment
- Teacher preparation/training
- Relationships between teachers and minority students
- Relationships between native and minority students
- Relationships between teachers/school and minority families

Ethical issues raised by the study were considered and appropriate steps taken to ensure the proper conduct of this study. That is to say, participation was entirely voluntary. Each participant was informed in relation to the nature of the research by one of the researchers (Maurice, 1998; Robson, 1995), and was offered the right to withdraw at any stage of the interview or to refuse to answer particular questions (Mason, 1998). The participants were assured that the interviews were confidential and that their privacy and identity would be protected. Their verbal consent to participate was obtained, as well as their permission to tape-record the interviews (Cohen *et al.,* 2004; Maurice, 1998; Robson, 1995). The specific city of each of the selected schools was not named because, despite the researcher's best efforts, this would possibly allow those with substantial knowledge of school demographics to identify the schools in question.

The interviews were tape-recorded and soon afterwards transcribed. All discussion was conducted in Greek and all relevant quotes were then translated into English. A person uninvolved in this study, but who is fluent in both Greek and English, verified the translation. To ensure anonymity and non-identification of schools or participants, the schools are represented by letters and the teachers by numbers.

For the data analysis, when initially going through the transcripts a number of times, the researchers noticed some common themes and patterns. A coding process was followed for the transcripts of all the participants, identifying themes/factors and developing five general categories. These categories were related to the child, the family, teachers, school and society. It was observed that some aspects overlapped one another or fitted into more than one category; but the above general categories were kept for practical purposes. The segments of data that were relevant to each category were gathered together. Statements of participants were compared with one another and

different pieces of data were related to each other in order to check for similarities and differences (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Taylor and Bogdan, 1984). To begin with, some generalisations relating to each theme appeared. However, looking at the interrelationship of different aspects led the researchers 'from description to interpretation and theory' (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984, p. 133). The whole analysis procedure was refined to ensure that no important data relating to the identified themes was discarded and that 'the codes fitted the data and not vice versa' (*ibid.*, p. 137).

Findings

Child-related Factors

Teachers pointed out that moving to another country was a difficult, traumatic experience: 'Children, whose families decided to emigrate, were greatly distressed by the move' (B3); 'Parents and children lived in agony ... Children had to change schools, friends, and environment' (B3); 'Georgians, in particular, whose parents are economic immigrants, were uprooted from their home-country' (B1); 'Minorities have to adapt to a new attitude, a new culture' (C2); and, 'It is a culture shock for the newcomers' (A2). Teachers also thought that this experience had an impact on their school performance. As one teacher said: 'All this moving around, the insecurity, the change of culture and environment have a negative effect on children, and especially their school performance' (B3).

Interviewees were unanimous that the most important problem for minority students is their lack of proficiency in the dominant language: 'Some of them do not know a single word in Greek' (C1). They were also convinced that 'language is a major obstacle to their attainment. Many students are not able to follow what goes on in the class, because of language deficiencies' (A1). 'They may read an instruction in their book or handouts but they do not really understand it' (D3). This lack of Greek language was perceived to affect both theoretical and practical subjects: In a 'theoretical' or 'language dependent' (B1, B2) subject, such as Modern Greek, 'students do not understand what they are taught and they are unable to comment, analyse or expand and describe something in detail' (C2). At the same time, 'more practical subjects' or those felt to be 'easier in terms of language' (D4), such as Mathematics, 'which deal more with numbers and symbols' (D4) were also heavily affected by limited language skills: 'When students cannot understand the instructions for an exercise, the meaning of a question, then ... they cannot answer, they cannot complete the exercise' (D1).

Generation status was also felt to have an important influence on academic achievement: 'Second-generation students have been born here; they have been through the local primary educational system just like the Cypriot children' (C3). 'They have a much better grasp of the Greek language and their attainment is consequently much higher' (B3). 'They are more likely to succeed academically' (B2) compared to 'minorities of first generation, who came to Cyprus when they were much older, have only partly or not at all attended primary education here and transferred directly into secondary schools with serious language problems' (D1).

Some of the teachers noticed that 'minority children, especially those from poorer families, such as the majority of Georgians, are assigned responsibilities at home at a very young age as their parents work very long hours' (C2), and 'the older children have to help and look after younger siblings' (C2). It was also mentioned that many minority children were in paid employment: 'many minority students … especially Georgians … work evenings and nights in order to supplement the family income. They come to school sleepless and tired. Having a job has a serious impact on the attainment levels of these students' (C2). Some teachers felt that there are parents and students who are not concerned by this '… just as long as they make money' (D3). The low priority given to education and low educational expectations were also highlighted: 'What is important for many of the minority students is not their learning, or further studies … their priority is to get a job that will get them an income' (D3).

Teachers perceived that gender also has a role to play in terms of student attainment. A different tendency was described for male and female students. On the one hand, they argued that 'female students mature earlier than males' (F1, T2), and as such 'they become aware of their role as students more quickly than males' (F1). They are 'more mindful' (L2), 'consistent' (P1, P2) and 'restrained' (F3). 'They work harder than males and as such they achieve higher [attainment]' (P1). A head teacher pointed out that 'girls love and care more about learning compared to boys' (L2). On the other hand, participants suggested that 'boys mature later than girls' (T2). 'They get bored easily during lessons' (T2), and 'they are careless' (P2). Also, they are 'energetic and disobedient' (T2). 'Their priority, at this age, is still playing rather than studying' (P1, F3). 'They do not spend much time on their school work' (P1).

A lack of interest and effort on the part of some minority students was also suggested as a potential explanation for the attainment gap: 'They make no effort to learn' (C2). 'I see that they do not concern themselves … they do not try … they do not make use of the special classes offered to those with deficiencies in the Greek language. Opportunities for learning are there … but there is no interest from their part' (C3). Other teachers, however, pointed out the lack of opportunities for some minority students: 'not all minority students have the same opportunities for learning outside the school' (A2). This inequality was at least partly associated with the socio-economic status of the family: 'We know that wealthy families help their children by offering them extra support with private lessons. This is very helpful to them … it can also impact on their language abilities' (C2). At the same time, 'we see that poor students, particularly Georgians, do not benefit from private tuition' (B2), and 'they cannot afford it' (C4).

Interviewees agreed that some minority students are absent from school quite often and that their low attendance might be another consideration which affects their performance: 'Minority students make more absences than native ones … It is logical, [and] to be expected, that students with higher absenteeism will have a lower attainment' (C4). It was also felt that 'those with the highest levels of absenteeism tended to be the ones least interested in their education. As such, they are unlikely to ask for help from their teachers or fellow students to make up for lost ground' (C4).

Family-related Factors

'Low socio-economic status' was believed to 'affect most of minority families and impact on the school life of their children' (B3). The financial hardship of those from Georgia was highlighted most frequently: 'Georgian families are very poor. They work all day long' (A2), and still 'struggle to make ends meet' (C2). 'Regardless of [their] level of education and skills they are usually blue-collar workers' (C1) and will 'do any job in order to put food on their plates' (B3). Parents from other ethnic groups 'are mostly white-collar workers' (A2). 'They are better off financially than Georgians' (C1).

Limited parental involvement in, or supervision of, minority children's learning has been mentioned as a potential contributory factor impacting on attainment: 'These children lack even basic attention and support from their parents' (B1). 'Many minority parents are never at home ... There are children who wake up in the morning and go to sleep at night without seeing their parents' (B3). 'There is nobody to help, supervise, or offer advice to them' (C1). Limited parental expectations are also thought to be important: 'for these parents, whose priority is to survive and provide food for the family, everything else, including their children's education, is of much lesser importance' (C4). Finally, limited involvement with the school on the part of minority parents is also mentioned: 'they do not have time to devote to their children's education' (B2). 'They do not come to ask how their children are doing in school' (C1), and 'do not come to the meetings with teachers' (D1). However, participants understand that 'it is difficult for parents to leave their job and come to school ... Many are afraid of losing their jobs' (B3).

Teacher-related Factors

All the interviewees agreed that they were appointed to schools with minority students without being trained or prepared to deal with multicultural issues: 'We have had no guidance, preparation, or scientific grounding' (D1), 'no help from the Ministry' (B1), and 'no relevant training' (B2) on how to work in a multicultural environment. Some teachers said that 'seminars organised from time to time were very philosophical and theoretical' and indicated that 'training in practical skills relevant to this situation is needed' (B2). Others expressed their frustrations: 'My love for children, my consciousness, and my goodwill are the only tools I have in this job' (D3). 'This is unacceptable from the part of the Ministry. It is like giving you a new airplane full of people to pilot, without any training or guidance' (B2).

Even though the relationship between teachers and minority students has been described as generally good, there have been some indications of a biased or racist attitude on the part of some teachers: 'In our school there are a couple of teachers whose racist attitude is apparent, even though they try to hide it ... They tend to be more lenient with Cypriots and stricter with minority students. Some students might feel that they are being treated unfairly' (B3). 'It is a matter of mentality. Some colleagues might continue to say "this Georgian student did this" ... or "this Georgian student said that" ... even after they have worked in a multicultural environment for a

significant amount of time. Their attitude has not changed' (B3). Participants argued that a positive attitude on the part of teachers might have an upbeat effect on student performance, as 'minorities make more of an effort in class in order to repay you' (B2).

School-related Factors

The national curriculum which many feel remains essentially monocultural might also have an effect on the performance of minority students. The interviewees agreed that 'the national curriculum is not suited to a multicultural student population' (D1), and it was even suggested that 'it should change completely' (B1).

Some teachers referred to particular school subjects, such as History, as being difficult for minorities. One of them said: 'minorities do not understand what I teach them. They are not familiar with the subject and really these things have no meaning or relevance to them. I have, on many occasions, received completely blank test papers in History' (D3). Nonetheless, another teacher argued that 'some particular topics in History attract enormous interest on the part of minorities ... topics related to their country of origin or something that they are familiar with' (C1). The same person expressed the belief that 'if the syllabus was somehow changed to make it more relevant to these students as well, then they would pay more attention' (C1). Somebody else offered an example that demonstrates this point: 'I had a female student who was always completely impervious to everything in the class, but the day we talked about how the Russians were introduced to Christianity, she was concentrating so hard ... and participating ... When we had a mini test on the particular subject she was the most knowledgeable ... The transformation was unbelievable' (D3).

A high concentration of ethnic minority students in a school was argued to influence student attainment. This opinion was particularly prevalent among teachers from schools with high proportions of ethnic minority students. Several interviewees indicated that having a high number of minority students compared to the rest of the student body in a school creates a favourable environment: 'In our school Cypriots and minorities are about half and half ... Children from different cultures coexist, grow up, play, and learn together ... this helps in the acceptance of ethnic minority students by other minority groups and especially, by native students' (F1). Also, a school minority concentration was thought to be related to the teachers' sense of responsibility for the learning of their students. A deputy head-teacher said: 'As minority students represent about one-half of the student population in our school, we cannot ignore their presence and deal with Cypriots only. Their large number forces us to take them seriously and work with them every day' (F4). On the contrary, in schools with small numbers of minorities, teachers are thought to have a lower sense of responsibility for minorities' learning: 'when a teacher has a class of thirty students, of which only four or five are minorities, he cannot pay much attention to those four or five who might not understand what is going on in the class ... He will concentrate his efforts on the other twenty-five students' (L2).

Several other teachers highlighted the negative effect of minority concentration on student attainment for all students. One said: 'the proportion of minorities in a class affects the way the lesson is delivered in the classroom. The presence of a large number of minority students with language difficulties in a class dictates the need for a lower quality [of] teaching in terms of [the] language used on the part of teachers, so that more of the minorities are able to understand what is being said' (F2). The same teacher pointed out the consequences of low-quality teaching for high-achieving students. She said: 'under these circumstances, it is up to the teacher to provide the right ammunition to these high-flyers so that they can continue to achieve at the highest level' (F2). A deputy head-teacher mentioned another negative aspect of having a high percentage of minority students in a single school in relation to the use of the local language on the part of minority students. She said that 'when the proportion of minorities in a school is high, minorities tend to hang out mainly with children from their own ethnic background and talk in their own language. This way, they do not practise the local language. We have noticed that minority children learn Greek better and more quickly when they hang out with local students' (F4).

Finally, the relationship between native and minority students in participating schools was mainly described as 'harmonious' (B2), 'perfect' (B3), with 'no racial problems and antipathy' (B2, B3), and 'no expression of confrontation or violence' (B3). There are, however, some indications of racist attitudes on the part of native students. A deputy head-teacher from one school said that 'there is a conflict between natives and minorities. Native students have not yet learned to accept people with different languages and cultures. It takes time ... many years for this to happen' (C3). A teacher from another school admitted that 'there are some minor racist problems ... There are students with a racist attitude, especially towards students from Iraq or Turkey ... students who are Muslims ... Native students do not accept these students as easily as those from European countries' (A1).

Society-related Factors

It is argued that racism in society permeates schools through the perceptions and attitudes that children pick up from their parents and other adults. One head-teacher said: 'I believe that we, Cypriots, are very racist ... and the way parents talk about people from other ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds encourages racist behaviour in their children' (A2). One of the teachers commented on remarks made by Cypriot parents when realising that there are minority students in a classroom or school: '... look at all these foreigners ... no surprise our children's education is suffering' (B3).

Discussion

The traumatic experience of migration and the need of immigrant children to adapt to their new country are perceived to affect school performance of minority students. Earlier studies note that

'the hardships that surround the migrant lifestyle have a detrimental impact on the educational advancement of students' (Lopez *et al.*, 2001, p. 254). The perceptions of our sample confirm this analysis.

A lack of proficiency in the dominant language is also thought to put minority students at a disadvantaged position academically. The importance of fluency in the dominant language for minority students' academic success has been indicated by earlier studies in Cyprus (Martidou-Forsier, 2003; Panayiotopoulos and Nicolaidou, 2007) as well as elsewhere (Callahan, 2005; Demie, 2001). Schmid (2001) in a review paper on language proficiency and school success argued that poor proficiency in the dominant language limits educational achievement. Additionally, the more serious language problems faced by first-generation as compared to second-generation students might partly explain the lower attainment of first-generation students (Ream, 2005; Theodosiou-Zipiti, West, and Lamprianou, 2011; Theodosiou-Zipiti *et al.*, 2011). Students who have been in the host country for a greater length of time and who participated in the local education system longer have been shown to perform better (Driessen, 1995).

Our findings indicate that the teachers perceive minority students' deficiency in the Greek language to have a serious impact on their performance in all school subjects, and not just those that are more language-dependent. This supports the findings from previous quantitative studies of this issue in Cyprus (Theodosiou-Zipiti, West, and Lamprianou, 2011; Theodosiou-Zipiti *et al.*, 2011). Conversely, it does seem reasonable to assume that the theoretical subjects are more dependent on the use of language and, hence, a lack of language skills would affect these subjects disproportionately.

A number of personal traits attributed to females, such as being conscientious, consistent, mindful, aware of the student role and eager to learn, are perceived to influence attainment positively. All these coincide with Tinklin's (2003) opinion that females take school more seriously than males. That females mature earlier than males was also pointed out as an issue that favours female student attainment and this is consistent with earlier suggestions (Eccles *et al.*, 1993). Regardless, this was thought to influence attainment in general rather than act as a differential component, able to account for the attainment gap observed.

The lower socio-economic status of minority families, and especially that of Georgians, is argued to be a very important aspect that adversely influences the attainment of their children. Due to their financial hardship, minority parents often work extremely long hours in order to provide for their families. Their struggle for survival distracts them from the problems confronting their children as they try to adjust to a new school environment. Parents have little time to supervise their children's learning at home or to become involved in school matters, and do not seem to have high educational expectations for them. The favourable effect of high socio-economic status on minority students' educational attainment has been shown in earlier studies in Cyprus (Theodosiou-Zipiti, West, and Lamprianou, 2011; Theodosiou-Zipiti *et al.*, 2011) as well as elsewhere (Pearce, 2006). Parents' involvement in the form of supervision (Izzo *et al.*, 1999), their expectations (Lee and Bowen, 2006) and involvement in school (Demie, 2005), which are all

facets that have been shown to impact on student learning also emerge from this study as being important.

Several child-related factors mentioned by the interviewees might also stem from the disadvantaged socio-economic status of minority families. As many parents work all day, children are required to do the chores in the house as well as look after younger siblings. Some take on paid employment in order to supplement the family income. Home responsibilities can take minority students' minds off schoolwork and limit their preparation time for school. It has been reported that working students neglect homework and schoolwork (Yap, 1990) and have lower levels of attentiveness and engagement at school (Garvin and Martin, 1999). Previous research also indicated that work has an adverse effect on academic achievement (Robinson, 1999) and increases the likelihood of dropping out of school (Vickers, 2002). In addition, teachers perceive that students do not have high educational expectations for themselves, arguing that their minds are focused on the need to acquire a job to earn money rather than on studying. This can also be a reason for students' limited interest in their learning and the personal effort they make as well as for their relatively high absentee rates. The low attendance can also be partly explained by the need to rest for those who work nights. Students' low educational expectations (Marjoribanks, 2003), taking a limited interest in learning and making little effort towards learning (Uhlenberg and Brown, 2002) and low school attendance (Rumberger and Larson, 1998; Theodosiou-Zipiti, West, and Lamprianou, 2011) have all been linked to lower academic attainment levels. It has also been suggested that many minority families cannot afford to offer their children extra help in the form of private tuition; in sharp contrast to the majority of native families.

All the above-mentioned elements contribute to the explanations of the different attainment levels previously observed in Cypriot schools (Theodosiou-Zipiti, West, and Lamprianou, 2011; Theodosiou-Zipiti *et al.,* 2011). Georgians, in particular, the poorest of the immigrant groups, tend to do worse; whereas other immigrant groups do better than Georgians and are considered to be better-off financially. Finally, Cypriots do best and are the wealthiest group. The link between socio-economic status and attainment has also been shown elsewhere (Fryer and Levitt, 2004; Pearce, 2006).

Maslow (1943) proposed a theory classifying human needs hierarchically. The more basic needs are at the bottom and must be satisfied first. The needs in ascending order in the lower four layers of the pyramid are physiological needs (e.g. sleep, food, and water), safety needs (e.g. clothing, shelter, justice), social needs (e.g. sense of belonging, the need to love and be loved), and esteem needs (e.g. respect, self-esteem).

Drawing from the above, it appears that minority students are expected to succeed academically when their more basic needs have not even been satisfied. Their priority, as highlighted through some comments, is to work hard and earn money to meet their physiological and safety needs. Their social and esteem needs are not met either, because, in the school environment and in the rest of society they might not feel accepted or loved. Education is part of self-actualisation, which is a much higher point in the pyramid. Even though there are some who

question Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Wahba and Bridgewell, 1976), it appears to offer a template on which a logical argument can be built for the reasons affecting minority attainment.

The teachers' inadequate training and support, alluded to by the interviewees, are other unfavourable factors for minority students' education. The participants acknowledged that they feel unprepared to work in a multicultural school environment and that they need more practical guidance. This has been identified previously (Angelides *et al.*, 2007; Martidou-Forsier, 2003; Panayiotopoulos and Nicolaidou, 2007). In addition, some evidence of teachers' biased or racist attitudes towards minority students has been uncovered in this study. The teachers themselves admit that this can make minorities feel that they are treated differently from native students. A study by Afantiti-Lamprianou *et al.* (2008), found that Cypriot teachers display ethnocentric, biased and even xenophobic characteristics. There is some evidence that negative perceptions of teachers (Gillborn, 1995) or school racism (Codjoe, 2001) might have an impact on the performance of minority students.

In terms of school factors, some teachers have blamed the 'irrelevant' school curriculum that has not been adapted to account for the increasingly diverse student population, for the lack of interest and motivation displayed by minority students in some school subjects. Oikonomidou (2003) pointed out the need to modify the national curriculum to make it more relevant to all and give every child the same opportunity for learning.

With regard to school minority concentration, teachers from schools with high percentages of minority students indicated both the positive and negative effects on student achievement. The high proportion of minority students in a school is seen as conducive to learning by fostering an accepting environment towards minority students and by encouraging teachers to develop a strong sense of responsibility for minorities' learning. In an earlier study in Cyprus (Theodosiou-Zipiti, West, and Muijs, 2010) the character of the school environment and the degree of teachers' sense of responsibility for minorities' learning have been identified as influential in the attainment of ethnic minority students. This finding could partially explain the reported finding of the quantitative study by Theodosiou-Zipiti *et al.*, (2011) that high minority student concentration has a positive effect on student attainment. Nevertheless, having a high proportion of minority students at one school is also argued to be related to lower-quality teaching in terms of the language used in the class (arguably limiting the attainment of native high-achievers rather than minority students) and a higher likelihood that minority students will hang out with other minorities and thus miss out on the opportunity to use the Greek language with their Greek-speaking friends. The negative effect of having a high concentration of minority students, which was identified in the present study, is in agreement with many earlier international studies that found a high proportion of minority students in schools to be related to lower achievement levels for majority and minority students (Schnepf, 2004), or especially for minorities (Goldsmith, 2004; Hoxby, 2002).

Finally, racist attitudes on the part of native students might also impact on minority students' learning. There is evidence that racism and discrimination exist at both school and societal level (ECRI, 2011). Social racism in Cyprus (ECRI, 2006; Trimikliniotis and Pantelides, 2003) as well

as the identification of racist and xenophobic attitudes and behaviours within the family (Afantiti-Lamprianou *et al.,* 2008) have been reported previously. Racism towards students of particular ethnic groups or religions, such as Turks or Muslims, might be related to the historical ethnic conflicts between Greeks and Turks and the 1974 Turkish invasion, after which 'each group constructs its ethnic identity through learning to hate the Other' (Zembylas, 2007, p. 183). Sadly, these findings indicate that schools have no policies for tackling racism. On the contrary, the many nationalistic elements of the Cypriot educational system, identified by earlier researchers (Fragoudaki and Dragona, 1997; Philippou, 2007), might encourage racism.

Looking at the factors relevant to teachers, school, and society together, an obvious deficiency within the current educational system is identified. Inadequate teacher training, the limited sense of responsibility teachers have for minorities' education, a curriculum which is mostly irrelevant to minorities, particularly in subjects such as History, the expression of biased or racist attitudes from teachers and native students towards minorities, and the permeation of racism from outside to inside the schools, all suggest that the educational system is not appropriately organised to accept and educate students from different ethnic backgrounds.

Interrelation of those aspects relevant to the child and family would suggest that the low socio-economic status of minority families is a major reason for the low attainment levels of minority students. The concept that the socio-economic status of minority families and the character of the current educational system are the main reasons for the attainment gap between native and ethnic minority students in Cyprus has been previously suggested by Theodosiou-Zipiti, West, and Muijs (2010). That our conclusions agree with those published earlier should increase confidence in our results.

We feel that the findings from this study are useful to education researchers and can help to shape appropriate school policies within the framework of an initiative for educational reform in Cyprus that has been announced recently. Based on the results of this and previous studies, the need for change and improvement in educational practice is imperative. Schools have a responsibility to ensure that all students, both native and minority, are able to achieve their full potential. A number of suggestions can be made.

- Reception classes should be established in which students new to Cyprus are able to increase competency in Greek language through intensive tuition prior to joining mainstream schools.
- Support should be provided to newly-arrived students within the school system to help them understand and adjust to the requirements and expectations of the Cypriot school system.
- Parents should be encouraged to engage more with school and with their children's school life.
- Multicultural and antiracist training programmes should be offered to all teachers as a matter of priority.

- The teachers appointed to schools with a significant number of minority students should initially be selected on a volunteer basis. This might keep teachers with racist feelings away from such schools, until appropriate training has been provided to all.
- Bilingual teachers should be employed and appointed in those schools with a significant proportion of ethnic minority students in order to facilitate communication between teachers and students as well as with parents.
- The national curriculum needs to be modified to accommodate the needs of all students and become more relevant to all learners.
- School policies that respect and care for students from all ethnic backgrounds as well as clear antiracist policies should be implemented in all schools.
- The socio-economic problems of families should be addressed by the state through welfare schemes. The state also has an important role to play in making sure that immigrant children are not exploited through illegal employment.

Findings from this study are based on interviews conducted in a relatively small number of schools. The fact that the results are based on the perceptions of teachers and do not include the views of parents, students and others might mean that a skewed picture of attitudes or circumstances is painted. We believe, however, that a number of points strengthen the validity of our study. To begin with, our results are in agreement with both local and international literature. In addition, the data from this study has been derived from participants of different gender, age, hierarchy, and experience, and from different schools. Nevertheless, all data has come from teachers, and while we feel this study has produced an accurate picture of teachers' views, more research into the perspectives of students themselves or their parents would be useful to further explore the issue.

The conclusions from this study can, firstly, add to the existing research in the island and advise policy makers, teachers and the general public. Secondly, the findings can be used to inform international literature by providing information on ethnic minority groups not met before and also by adding to the debate on aspects responsible for the attainment gap.

Lastly, we have identified in this study a number of influences perceived by teachers to be contributory to the low academic achievement of ethnic minorities in secondary schools in Cyprus. The evidence suggests that the socio-economic status of ethnic minority families, language problems, and the deficiencies of the current educational system are all key elements. Some suggestions for further exploration of the issue are also made, together with proposals that might make it easier for immigrant children to achieve their potential in secondary schools in Cyprus.

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