


Chapter 9


Parental Impact on Emergent Bilingualism: A Case of the Muslim Minority of Thrace, Greece

Evangelia Koufou

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0529-9446>

Democritus University of Thrace, Greece

Lydia Mitits

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7348-5967>

Democritus University of Thrace, Greece

ABSTRACT

This chapter explores how parents perceive and support their children's bilingualism. Namely, it explores the perceptions of Muslim minority parents in Thrace, Greece, with respect to the emergent bilingualism of their children aged 4-6 and documents practices they implement in order to help their bilingual development. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 parents and the data were analyzed thematically using NVivo software. The findings show that parents seem to view bilingualism as an advantage. They want their children to be bilingual and able to make use of their bilingual skills. The practices that parents use to support their children include reading books in Greek, watching Greek television programs, speaking Greek at home, and seeking opportunities for their children to interact with peers who speak the Greek language. We believe that the insights gained have significance beyond this specific context, providing valuable evidence and guiding principles for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers engaged in early childhood multilingual education worldwide.

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INTRODUCTION

In the twenty-first century, probably more than half of the world's population is bilingual (Grosjean, 2014) and given the fact that the linguistic diversity of societies is constantly increasing, understanding the concept of bilingualism is particularly important. According to Butler and Hakuta (2006), bilingualism is a psychosocial state of linguistic interaction where two or more languages (or dialects) are used for communication between individuals or groups. In recent years, the term *emergent bilingualism* has been proposed to describe the process through which an individual acquires and begins to use a second language. So, bilingualism generally refers to the use of two or more languages, whereas emergent bilingualism focuses on the process of acquiring and initially using a second language (Mastrothanasis, 2023). As a result, all emergent bilinguals fall under the broader category of bilingual individuals but are in a specific stage of their linguistic development, during which they acquire and integrate the second language (Birdsong, 2014; Yow & Li, 2015). Therefore, bilingualism and emergent bilingualism are interconnected, characterized by continuity and progression.

Below are some of the definitions that have been proposed for emergent bilinguals. Graham et al. (2022) argue that an emergent bilingual is a person who uses at least one additional linguistic code to meet their essential communicative needs or belongs to a linguistic minority. This concept emphasizes the dynamic and evolving nature of bilingualism. As García and Kleifgen (2018) emphasize, the term emergent bilingual most accurately describes the students that are focusing on learning a language, those whose bilingual abilities are still in the process of developing. According to their perspective, when students are recognized, and recognize themselves, as emergent bilinguals rather than being labeled as majority language learners or defined by perceived deficiencies, they are much more likely to take pride in their linguistic abilities instead of feeling devalued by deficit-oriented terms. It is preferred because it is believed that any educational inequality that may exist arises from ignoring the fact that an education with proper content will not simply teach the student one language but will transform them into a bilingual or multilingual individual. Moreover, Reyes (2006) adopts the term emergent bilinguals to refer to young children (ages three to five) who speak a language other than English (or the majority language of the host country) and are in the active process of developing bilingual and biliterate abilities (in the context of the U.S. in English and Spanish), with the support of their families, schools, and communities.

Specifically, in early childhood education in the U.S., for the identification of the emergent bilingual student, the NYS Board of Regents (BOR) approved the "Emergent Multilingual Learners Language Profile Protocol" (EMLLPP) (2017), a tool designed to support state-funded prekindergarten programs in two key areas:

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