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The effects of the 21st century depression on the positive achievements of 20th century educational reforms in Greece

Abstract

The great depression that began to afflict western societies in 2008 reached crisis point in Greece in 2010 and continues to worsen. A wealth of educational goods that were secured by the educational reforms of the twentieth century were squeezed or abolished by a series of legislative acts aimed at “saving money”.

This paper presents an analytical critique of the present situation. The methodology includes the collection, classification and evaluation of information appearing in the print and electronic media and the qualitative analysis of data gathered in 2012 from (a) 35 telephone interviews with primary-school teachers in nine regions of the country, (b) personal interviews with 21 professors from three universities and opinions submitted by e-mail by seven professors from three universities, and (c) texts written by 120 students at the Democritus University of Thrace which reveal the image they have of educational situation and their desires for the future. Because some texts presented contradictions, four interviews were also held with representatives of the students who take part in administrative decision-taking procedures.

The results suggest that the depression has created many problems in the functioning of schools (mergers of schools, reduction in the number of teachers, problems with the provision of free benefits to pupils). Meanwhile institutions established by major educational reforms, such as remedial coaching, ‘second chance’ schools for adults, and so on, have been abolished or undercut. Evaluation of the data shows that most students are aware of the magnitude of the effects of the depression on the workplace and on incomes, but not on education. Schoolteachers and university professors, by contrast, are living with the negative effects of the inactivation or abolition of laws and practices benefiting education by new legislation that appears necessary because of the depression. However, there are positive effects of the crisis. Greek society as a whole and education as an institution return progressively to the social values of the past, such as respect, patience, love to the country more than love for the profit. Also, the cheerful temperament of the Greeks and their ability to survive over time counterbalance the ineffectualness of the political figures who have determined the course of daily life in Greece since the early '90s.

Key words: depression, educational policy, educational reform

The Depression

The great depression already beginning to afflict western societies in 2008 reached crisis point in Greece in 2010, and continues to worsen. The recession began in the United States and spread like the plague. In Europe the first country to be hit by the

crisis and later resort to the International Monetary Fund was Iceland, followed by Hungary, Romania, Latvia, Ireland, Portugal and Greece.

The great economic crisis in Greece did not take long to materialise. Government efforts to regain credibility in international markets and reduce interest rates led to expenditure-reducing measures, which however did not prove capable of reversing the negative climate. Greece was forced to appeal to the stability mechanism jointly established by the International Monetary Fund, the European Union and the European Central Bank. The necessity of resorting to the European Financial Stability Mechanism (EFSM) was announced on 23 April 2010.

Progressively the economic crisis in Europe became a political and social one. Western societies face extreme separation between the state and social life, which is very obvious in Europe, as the economies and cultures of its nations have become transnational¹. In nowadays Germany is playing an informal sovereign role in the EU and enforces austerity measures to Greece and other countries of the European South that deepens recession, raises unemployment and increases taxes paid by ordinary European citizens. The middle and the lower classes in countries such as Greece, Portugal and Spain, but increasingly also throughout Europe, suffer the most. The eurocrisis has turned to an existential crisis that threatens to derail not just monetary union but the whole Europe an integration project².

In Greece the first severe austerity measures were announced in May 2010. Over the next two years unemployment skyrocketed. According to Eurostat statistics on unemployment in peripheral regions of the European Union, in 2010 unemployment in Greece reached 12.5 % compared to 9.5% in 2009. Worst affected were the young people of Northern Greece, particularly in Eastern Macedonia and Thrace, where youth unemployment (16-25 years of age) reached 40.7%, the highest unemployment rate in Greece in recent years³.

Over these two years the social state deteriorated significantly. Schools were closed or merged, and established institutions such as remedial coaching, professional orientation, all-day schools, 'second chance' schools for adults and others were cut back. Public education was hit by a series of new laws curtailing or even abolishing labour rights and privileges essential to the functioning of institutions of learning that had been acquired through the education reforms of the previous century.

Methodology

This paper presents a critical analysis of the impact of the economic crisis on education. The methodology includes the collection, classification and evaluation of information that appeared in print and in electronic media and the qualitative analysis of data gathered in 2012 from (a) 35 telephone interviews with primary-school teachers in

¹ Alain Touraine, "Two Interpretations of Contemporary Social Change" in Haferkamp, Hans and Smelser, Neil J. (Ed.), *Social Change and Modernity* (University of California Press, 1992), 58.

² Corporate Europe Observatory (CEO) "The eurocrisis and the crisis of neoliberal Europe: dilemmas for Europe's transnational corporate elite". Corporate Europe Observatory (CEO), 2012, accessed 20 August 2014, <http://corporateeurope.org/2012/04/eurocrisis-and-crisis-neoliberal-europe-dilemmas-europe-transnational-corporate-elite>.

³ Eurostat: Highest unemployment rate in Greece for youth in Eastern Macedonia and Thrace!" *Website iNews*, 24 November 2011, accessed 4 December 2011, <http://www.inews.gr/178/Eurostat-protoi-stin-anageria-stin-ellada-oi-neoi-tis-anat-makedonias-thrakis.htm>.

nine regions of the country, most of whom also sent paper-positions by e-mail, (b) personal interviews with 21 professors from three universities and opinions submitted by e-mail by seven professors from three universities, and (c) texts written by 120 students at the Democritus University of Thrace, which reveal student opinion on the situation in education and their aspirations for the future. Because some texts presented contradictions, four interviews were also held with student representatives who take part in administrative decision-making procedures.

Results

The research results were generated by qualitative analysis of positions reaching data saturation. This approach rests on the evidence that persons exposed to common conditions tend, up to a point, to repeat in the interviews the same feelings and reactions in the face of the experiences concerned, a phenomenon dubbed saturation process.

It has to be mentioned that most of the teachers reacted according to what E. Atkinson refers as postmodern thinking "(...) postmodernism offers a powerful force for social change, through the acceptance of uncertainty, the acknowledge of diversity and the refusal to see concepts such as 'justice' or 'society' as fixed, or as governed by unassailable 'truths'".⁴

Primary-School Teachers

In this presentation priority was given to teacher views considered representative of Greek public opinion. The reason for this has as much to do with the geographical distribution of work localities (Orestiada, Alexandroupolis, Komotini, Xanthi, Kavala, Drama, Thessaloniki, Athens, Chania), as to the spread of ages (35-54 years). The subjects are primary-school teachers and primary school English and physical education teachers.

Map of Greece
Work localities of primary-school teachers



⁴ Elizabeth Atkinson, "The Responsible Anarchist: Postmodernism and social change", *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 23: 1 (2002): 73.

The most important negative effects of the recession and of the severe austerity measures imposed can be divided into four categories:

1. Curtailing education expenditure to the point of threatening the operation of the school system.

The following statement is representative:

"Not only has all progress come to a standstill with regard to investment, building maintenance, training, technical and material infrastructures and innovative activities using modern teaching aids, but the large cuts in school expenditure make the day-to-day functioning of schools increasingly difficult, particularly with regard to the main outlay, which is heating. A typical example of the situation occurred during the current school year, 2011-2012, where the delay in buying paper resulted in schools remaining without schoolbooks for months".

2. Acute psychological pressure and insecurity felt by teachers due to dramatic cuts in their salaries and unbearable tax burdens.

The following statement is representative:

"The cuts in teachers' salaries, particularly for newly-assigned teachers, has an impact first on a psychological level and then on the essentials of daily life. On the one hand, permanent teachers have families and more responsibilities (children, education costs, loans), on the other newly-assigned teachers are finding it hard to cope, because most often they are located away from home and are burdened by rent and living costs. The psychological pressure created by not knowing what tomorrow will bring is an additional burden that can be countered only by an intense love for teaching and for children, so that it does not have a negative effect on teacher-pupil relationships."

3. Large and complicated problems ensuing from the changes in the legislative framework of teacher assignments and transfers.

The following statement is representative and was cited as the most important problem faced by all teachers under 40 years of age:

"Fewer permanent and substitute teachers are being hired. School mergers mean that staff positions are being terminated, with the result that teachers cannot find positions near their prefecture. Secondments and transfers are being cut back, making it difficult for teachers to transfer to other prefectures."

4. Family financial problems affect school life dramatically in two ways. The first has to do with the low birth rate of the Greek population and the second with the difficulty of families to meet even the minimal financial requirements of public schools.

The following three statements are representative:

"Our country's population is ageing, and now the large numbers of unemployed young people and the very low salaries of young people in work deter them from starting families and thus having children to fill the schools. The consequence being that the number of school children is continuously declining, schools are being merged or closed and staff positions are being cut back".

"I could never have imagined that during my lifetime I would see children in this country coming to school without having eaten breakfast and that I wouldn't be able to help them".

"The financial crisis affects parents, who see their income shrinking and sometimes reduced to nothing. On the one hand they have to cope with their own problems and on the other with enabling their child to keep up with the others as regards school needs, such as daily meals, clothing and participation in school activities, excursions or programmes, solidarity activities. This also affects the options teachers have in organising school activities and in whether or not their school will be able to participate. The example of a 3rd grade pupil is typical: we needed to contact the child's parents but no one was answering the telephone; when we asked the boy he told us that "Daddy doesn't answer the phone, because the banks are looking for him and he owes them money.""

Incongruously, almost all the e-mails ended with the phrase *"it's a crisis, it will pass"* and stressed that *"the financial crisis and the uncertainty about tomorrow both oblige and push us to think twice about everything, which gives us a chance to deal with things more effectively"*. They also referred to the *"the good things the crisis brought to our lives"*.

"The positive effects of the crisis" fall into three categories:

1. Return to humanitarian social values.

The following statement is representative:

"The role of the teacher has been enhanced. For so many years we only provided knowledge. Now we have started again to see the pupil, his family, the community as people with whom we share the same problems. We need each other. We teach social values, such as respect, solidarity, patience, whether they appear in the books or not. We have power because the role of the parent has been enhanced too. The god of "money" has been unseated and with him the tormenting need to show off material possessions. Our children are slowly learning that profiteering does not lead to happiness."

2. Ecological activities

The following statements are representative:

"Saving energy in heating fuels by limiting the hours of consumption in relation to real needs. Limiting heat loss from windows and doors".

"Reducing consumption of electricity by limiting unnecessary waste of electricity. Other means of producing electricity by utilizing roof-space for photovoltaic panels".

"Limiting the consumption of paper, for example using both sides of the page when making photocopies or creating digital archives for information where teachers can select the files they need to print. Better and more efficient use and utilization of cardboard for arts and crafts".

3. Strengthening the collaboration between school and family

The following statement is representative:

"Increased need for cooperation among teachers and with parent associations in order to meet school requirements and to deal with the difficult situation that teachers and parents must face together for the benefit of the pupils".

Students

The project received input from 120 students from the Department of Primary Level Education of the Democritus University of Thrace. The only criterion for the selection of students was that they were in their final year of studies, so that they would have some experience of the effects the social changes of the last two years have had on the University and also would be as near as possible to entering the job market. The students submitted written texts of 1-2 pages, in which they described and analysed the functions of education as an institution, as these are experienced by students, and their future aspirations in the field of education and in the professional arena.

The main student position is expressed by the statement *"I don't want things to get worse"*. The demands that are expressed by the overwhelming majority fall into the following two categories:

1. Education-related

Many subject-specific demands were formulated regarding the professor-student relationship and the programme of studies. Almost all the students pointed out that one consequence of the crisis was the lack of heating for months, something that they had never experienced before either in school or in university. The following statements are characteristic of their demands:

"Things must go back to being as they were. Education cutbacks must stop".

"Improvement of technical infrastructure and study conditions".

"The system of free subsistence and free books must remain in place".

2. Work-related

A feeling of insecurity as to immediate professional establishment was evident. The following statement is characteristic:

"I want everyone to find work equivalent to their studies. I want teachers to continue to be assigned so I can find a job in a school. When I was admitted to University I wasn't afraid that I'd be unemployed".

The last significant reform in the Greek education system occurred in 2011 with Law 4009, which minimised student participation in university government. Since 1982, on the basis of Law 1268, there had been significant and determinant student participation in the governance of the universities, for example, in the election of university authorities, where the student vote was equal to 80% of the faculty vote. The student position-papers were surprising, in that only two of them mentioned the new law on the operation of universities in Greece as a problem. This was unexpected, given the massive student demonstrations opposing the law. It was deemed necessary to hold personal interviews with four of the student representatives on the Department council. The interviews were not structured but more of an exchange of opinions. The students used the "wooden" language of some well-known Greek politicians. It is obvious that students are much more preoccupied with everyday life and do not have personal convictions about the consequences of implementing the particular law.

University Professors

Personal interviews were held with 21 professors from three universities (Democritus University of Thrace, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, University of Crete), and another seven professors from two universities (University of Ioannina, University of Western Macedonia and Panteion University) responded by e-mail. The question they were asked was: *"-What is your opinion of the latest reform in education?"*

Map of Greece

The Chairs of the University Departments represented in the study



As previously mentioned, Law 4009/2011 represents the latest significant reform in education. It minimises student participation in university administration, opens

high administrative positions to persons outside the university community, and promotes evaluation as the ultimate value.

The responses suggest two trends, one for and one against the Law. The first issue, i.e. whether or not students should have a voice in university governance, expresses different ideologies and is unrelated to the recession. However, the decision to include in the administration of institutions of higher education persons who are prominent in society but have no relation to the university community is indicative of the government's aim to have managers rather than scientists or intellectuals in administrative positions. The object once again is self-government in relation to saving money. Similarly, the question arises "-Evaluation by whom? Is it possible for evaluators to be appointed by an administration formed of non-academics?" The following passage is one that no one can disagree with:

"The University is a closed social system. It is extremely difficult for any outsider to comprehend the workings of the system and even more so to modify them. In the name of saving money it would be easy for a "businessman" to propose distance learning for all courses, thus terminating the student-professor relationship and effectively destroying the fundamental role of the University as a place for the dissemination of ideas, and thus a place for social interaction. How do you define evaluation? Are we not evaluated every day at the University, one of the most competitive of all work environments? Do not all readers of our work become our evaluators?"

The sole educational reform of the 21st century does not seem to have an auspicious future. The beneficial effects of significant 20th-century reforms in education have been eaten away or completely erased by the harsh austerity measures.

Conclusion

The results suggest that the depression has created many problems in the functioning of schools (school mergers, decreased staff levels, problems with the provision of free benefits to pupils). Meanwhile institutions established by major educational reforms, such as remedial coaching, 'second chance' schools for adults, and so on, have been abolished or cut back. Evaluation of the data shows that most students are aware of the magnitude of the effects of the depression on the workplace and on incomes, but not on education. Schoolteachers and university professors, by contrast, are living with the negative effects of the inactivation or abolition of laws and practices benefiting education by new legislation that appears necessary because of the depression. However, there are positive effects of the crisis. Greek society as a whole and education as an institution return progressively to the social values of the past, such as respect, patience, love to the country more than love for the profit. Also, the cheerful temperament of the Greeks and their ability to survive over time counterbalance the ineffectualness of the political figures who have determined the course of daily life in Greece since the early '90s.