

Educational reform in Greece: Central concepts and a critique

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Abstract: The case of Greece as the most recent neoliberal experiment can provide valuable insights not only about a generalized attack on the welfare state and the public good, but also about the radical changes in public education that are altering its public mission, vision, and goals. In this paper first we trace the educational landscape in Greece as it emerges both from the reform in primary and secondary education and from the new law 4009 on higher education. The ongoing government discourse on education is shaped and constructed along the lines of a market-driven society and unapologetically espouses the neoliberal dogma that aims to convert education into training, universities into corporations, knowledge into a service or commodity, and students into clients. We further examine the official public discourse as illustrated in government documentation in an attempt to map out the marked shift from the university as a public good to the university as corporate entity, and highlight the particular ways in which this is done. The new educational legislation sets the stage for an education where the individual will thrive through relentless competition, where collectivity is abolished, where only “useful” knowledge counts and where “quality” and “excellence” serve as the excuse for a corporate standardization of the university and the academic life and thought.

Key words: neoliberalism, Greece, crisis, higher education, education reform, curriculum, critical discourse analysis

Introduction

Amidst an ongoing economic, political and social crisis globally, in May of 2010 it was Greece’s turn to receive “help” from the International Monetary Fund and the European Central Bank, as the only projected solution for fiscal sustainability and “rescue” from “national bankruptcy.” In exchange, Greece was to become fertile ground for investing massively accumulated capital in the form of loans and other financial products and consequently, an unprecedented sociopolitical and financial experiment for the implementation of neoliberal policies and ideologies in the context of the Eurozone.

This unapologetic and radical turn to neoliberal policies has been in the works for almost twenty years now, but during the last two years, under the guidance of IMF officials, the European Central Bank and the European Union, and abiding to unprecedented loan terms, the Greek social and welfare state has been collapsing through what is known in the neoliberal discourse as “austerity measures.” This translates into draconian cuts in wages and pensions, the violation of vested rights, of labor laws, and of collective bargaining; massive layoffs and expansion of flexible labor as a contemporary form of slavery; and exhaustive taxation that mostly affects the middle and lower class but leaves the wealthy classes untouched. This financial domination has produced the collapse of the public healthcare system, the degradation of any type of welfare services (provisions for the elderly, mental health and drug rehabilitation centers, state support for the most vulnerable strata of the population in the form of allowances), increasing poverty and dehumanizing living conditions for the majority of Greeks, deepening inequalities, rampant unemployment, and loss of any job-related benefits, national depression, and, of course, stagnation of any type of real economic growth and development.

In the context of a generalized war on the public good, public education could not escape the wave of neoliberalization that came under the label of “reform,” “reorganization,” “restructuring,” “rationalization,” and cleaning up of a “dysfunctional system.” These are terms typically used in the neoliberal discourse in order to rationalize the destruction and privatization of a given national economy.

The “educational reform” in Greece, in the context of a new educational vision and set of values that are now shaping policy, started with the reform of primary and secondary education labeled “The New School” and, in many parts, modeled after the largely failed American “No Child Left Behind” Act (NCLB). For the record, NCLB is a punitive and highly prescriptive law that has enacted a truly reactionary conservative agenda where school is a sifter for labor division and social stratification. After eleven years of implementation in the United States, the law has not only failed to improve U.S. public education, but every one of fifty states has introduced legislation rejecting all or part of NCLB and over ten states have received a waiver from meeting NCLB provisions.

Next, it was the turn of Higher Education with law 4009/2011, a law that is altering the core public mission, vision and goals of the Greek university. Essentially, the new law, in a clear technocratic turn, opens the door to standardization (in line with the general EU guidelines and practices), the privatization of the Greek public university, and the commodification of knowledge through a series of new policies such as the reduction

of the already small state funding¹ that forces universities to seek alternate sources of money in the private sector and the business world; the reorganization of curricula on the basis of an instrumentalist approach, so that students gain skills and competences to fill necessary positions in the job market but also in the prescribed social stratification; the introduction of tuition in what historically has been free and public education for all; and the establishment of an oligarchic management of institutions of higher education with the participation of members outside the academic community that abolishes the democratic self-governed character of the institution.

The educational reform, currently under way, is articulated on multiple levels. First, the vision of public education as a public good, a national priority and a responsibility of the state to its citizens is profoundly changing. Along these lines, there is a clear attempt at linking education with the economy and this link seems to be at the core of the reform. The current discourse on public education is taking shape along the lines of a developing market-driven society and seems to unapologetically espouse a neoliberal dogma that turns education into training and schools into training sites where students acquire skills and competences; universities are on their way to privatization while more authoritarianism finds its way in; knowledge turns into service or commodity, and students into clients. Finally, curricula are reorganized on the basis of “excellence” and “quality” that resonate with the “social efficiency” movement of the late 1800 in the United States (Apple, 1990; Grollios, 2011; Rees, 2001) as well as with more recent neoliberal educational reforms. All of the above is taking place following the usual tactic of what David Harvey (2005) calls “creative destruction” in the process of neoliberalization: it translates into allowing to degenerate and destroying, for example, a public education system, in order to prove that it can operate successfully only when it is run by the private sector and when its curricula are dictated by the market. The ongoing assault on Greek public education should be seen in the framework of developing a market society in a country where the public good was left to deteriorate beyond repair so it can be easily transferred to the hands of the private sector.

In this paper, we outline the central concepts of the ongoing educational reform in Greece as discursive constructions on which the new educational system is built, that signals an emerging neoliberal educational turn. This turn is illustrated as much in the proposed policies and educational practices, as it is in the public discourse, as well as in the Ministry of Education literature about the “New School,” the text of the new Higher Education law

¹ Public funding for Higher Education for 2004-2005 was 1.22% of the GDP which really translates into 4,160 Euros per student compared with the average 7,890 Euros per student in the European Union.

4009 and the records of the designated session on the law in the Greek Parliament.² We draw on data from these official texts and public discussions as they are produced and used within political economies. These documents reflect, produce and articulate broader ideological interests, emerging social formations and movements in different fields of educational practice. Institutions, particularly dominant, have specific meanings and values that are expressed in language in systematic ways (Wodak, 2001), and therefore, from a discursive point of view, it is important to identify those patterns in the texts that contribute to the creation of new power relations or to the shift of power, and give shape to a new reality in the educational arena, signaling new practices that are not necessarily openly spelled out.

Discursive Construction of the Educational Reform

In studying the texts, we observed that the proposed “changes” are promoted as a response to an old system thought to be underpinned by a “crisis of values,” “introverted” and “mediocre” with “inherent pathologies,” “dysfunctional,” “obsolete,” and full of “drama”, all of which need to be eclipsed. The picture painted by government members and supporters of the new reform is grim:

All of us who monitor or have been related to the public university these past years, have unfortunately witnessed its decadence and fall into discredit [...]: degrees without value, instructors who won't show up for class, exchange between students and professors, a never-ending exam period, and classes between exam periods and occupations-whenver we remember to teach-and thousands of young people studying abroad. It takes a simple walk around the campuses and the sight of neglect helps us understand that changes must be grand and in-depth. (Simos Kedikoglou, Greek Parliament Record of Proceedings, 2011)

Along the same lines, Sophia Giannaka, sponsor of the new law states:

We need to confront the crisis of values from which the Greek Higher Education system suffers and also confront obsolete structures after 30 years of functioning of a system. [...] Unfortu-

² “From Today to The New School putting the Student First” Greek Ministry of Education, [<http://www.minedu.gov.gr/apo-to-simera-sto-neo-sxoleio-me-prota-ton-mathiti/oles-oi-seλιδes.html>] Accessed 7/20/2012, “Organization of higher education, and Independent Quality Assurance and Accreditation Agency (HQA) in Higher Education” (Draft of Law, 7/17/2011) and Record of Proceedings of the Greek Parliament 8/23/2011.

nately today...in many universities the equation tends to weigh on the downside. Instead of seeking excellence, introversion and lack of dialogue with the international community reigns, resulting in inability for the structure as a whole to make strategic decisions. (Giannaka, Proceedings)

A similar image is promoted in the “New School” reform for primary and secondary education:

School today resembles to a hard labor site where there is no joy for learning, for research and exploration, for creation. Schools have been debased from the demands of dry knowledge, overloaded schedule, that, particularly for lower grades, fills up students backpacks with additional weight and, in higher grades, it imposes an exhaustive schedule....As a result, the Greek Education system not only maintains and reproduces inequalities, but also it is not competitive in the European Union and internationally. (New School, 2010)

While we do not want to defend the existing system, that admittedly has many shortcomings and could definitely be improved on many levels, we need to stress that this generalized attack on primary, secondary and higher education alike, is done without any prior evaluation of the existing structures, tools, teaching practices and outcomes so far. The Greek Ministry of Education, policy makers and law sponsors rely on general aphorisms and vague statements about what they think is the problem with Greek public education. In the general context of devaluing everything public, the Ministry of Education has demonized Professors and Universities alike. Among the arguments put forth by the Greek Ministry of Education have been the following: funding is not been used properly; there is no accountability or transparency; and professors are corrupt and squander money. This ignores the fact that publications by Greek academics are on the rise with Greece having the highest increase rate among EU countries. In 2007 Greece ranked seventeenth among the country members of OECD, and the Greek Polytechnic School of Athens ranked seventeenth among the top 100 best research institutions in Europe. The selected terms that characterize public education (‘pathology’, ‘dysfunctional’, ‘drama’, and so forth) are clichés and part of a debasing discourse on public education that has been used for years to discredit the role of the public, to insult educators and to open the door to privatization. However, policymakers have not undertaken the important and necessary task of conducting an in-depth and systematic evaluation on the function of the existing system in the past years or even commission a

report with detailed data from experts in the field. Ironically, the reformed education they propose places assessment at the core of the educational practice since, according to them, it “consists of a unique process of finding out the positive or negative trajectory of a process” (New School, 2010). For the government, assessment is necessary and mandated for educators and schools, but there is a double standard since policy makers who have been working on the reform have not evaluated the existing curricula (the responsibility of the State) before abolishing it (Grollios, 2010).

The policy discourse we have presented so far sketches the picture of “creative destruction” mentioned earlier. In the face of such an ill system, radical changes in the character and mission of education seem inevitable, “common sense.” However these changes do not come without an ideological and political agenda, even though they are promoted as “self-evident” vis-à-vis such a dysfunctional structure.

This is where “upgrading” comes into play as inevitable. But in which direction? The counter-discourse builds on the concepts of *quality* and *excellence*, echoing the Bologna Process, but also on *effectiveness*, *skills acquisition*, *training*, and measurable and observable outcomes of the education process. There is a clear intention on the part of policy makers at standardizing curricula across the board and at implementing strict assessment that further defines funding and support. These are the proposed “remedies” of an ill “pathological” system. The general consensus, both among sponsors of the law 4009 for Higher Education and policy makers for the New School, is that this failing picture of public education will be fixed if we make radical changes in the direction of upgrading the entire educational system:

The most secure and safe way to the success of the new school is for society to claim “yes, I care!” Our education is “upgradable.” But we also need “upgraders”. (New School)

[F]rom the beginning there was agreement on one thing, that is, if our country needs to organize the difficult task of restarting the development process in conditions of recession, then, only knowledge could be the key for development, only knowledge could be at the core of changing the developmental model in Greece. We all agreed that if this is the role that the Greek educational system should assume, then it is urgent that we upgrade it, so it becomes a vehicle of change towards the economy and the society of knowledge, so that it does not remain a simple mechanism of diploma awarding. (Sophia Giannaka, Greek Parliament Proceedings)

We will move forward with a creative connection of education, content of studies, research direction with the country's necessary growth priorities for diplomas that meet the needs of today and tomorrow and make the diploma holders, not typically but substantially "people of knowledge" who will move society forward. (Vassilis Kegeroglou, Greek Parliament Proceedings)

[Greece] needs institutions of higher education that are competitive, extrovert, functionally in touch with the market that will serve the production of contemporary knowledge but also of innovation; Institutions that leave space for free movement/circulation of ideas, political questions, but not petty political expediency and special interests. (Dimitris Kouselas, Greek Parliament Proceedings)

The way [children] will be equipped [at school] will serve as future opportunities for social progress and success. And this concerns all children without any social, economic, educational, religious or cultural distinctions and inequalities. (Sophia Gianaka, Greek Parliament Proceedings)

At first glance these statements look promising. Who would oppose a "better" educational system? However, what is at stake is how different groups with different interests define "better" because there are distinct political agendas about the social and financial organization of education institutions. There is a number of issues arising from the above statements. First of all, there is a connection between the university and the economy, a connection not clearly spelled out. Economic rationality is used as a referent for change, even though education has not caused the "crisis" nor can it "fix" it alone by promoting particular kinds of knowledge. As Apple (1990) has noted, neoliberalism wants education policy to be centered around the economy, performance objectives, and closer connections between schooling and paid work. At this particular historical juncture in Greece, the main new educational goal seems to be the connection of education with the job market and the economic sector. This connection with the economy is, for instance, illustrated in the text of the Law 4007 where there is an obvious focus on aligning university provision with the needs of the job market. Any language about collective solidarity is abandoned, and "scientific, social, cultural and political consciousness" found in the old 1268 Law are now replaced by "responsible citizens capable of meeting the demands on all fields of human life with scientific and professional adequacy [...]." Higher

education here seems to be redefined as a “business” whose goal is “training” for the job market and the demands of a technologically advanced society that is informed through the principles of “accountability,” “excellence,” and “quality assurance.” However the standards and goals for these are not listed; they are instead used as catchphrases that sell a “good” product.

Second, the proposed “upgrade” in primary, secondary and higher education remains a vague exhortation to build a skills-based education with bigger emphasis on “effectiveness” while at the same time neglecting those goals that resonate with liberal education reforms, such as a certain balance between humanities/social sciences and science/technology and equal learning opportunities to all students.

A third important remark has to do with the perception of knowledge and the concept of “knowledge societies.” New educational policies in Greece have been contextualized in the framework of the demands of a “new modern era.” If we were to define it using the Greek Ministry of Education’s discourse, we would say that we live in a competitive modern world, where new technologies and new knowledge largely define the future life as we know it. Our world is made up of “knowledge societies” that interestingly enough don’t have material existence, or at least, this materiality is not made explicit in the official discourse. In these societies, knowledge is transparent and neutral and it is particularly important as it equips individuals with the skills and competences they need to operate in professional, cultural, and social contexts. This knowledge can take many different forms including e-learning or lifelong learning but it has to be applicable and practical, that is, connected with the needs of the market, a type of a-historical knowledge; that is “by nature” useful. The term “knowledge society” is used to refer to societies that are founded on “knowledge” as opposed to particular relations of production, thus obscuring the real character of modern developed countries, namely their capitalist character. Missing from this discourse is any evidence on who decides what constitutes important knowledge and why this particular “knowledge” is deemed useful as opposed to, say, more “theoretical” or “philosophical” knowledge or even possibly a more critical subversive knowledge. In this context, “knowledge is privileged as a form of investment in the economy, but appears to have little value in terms of self-definition, social responsibility, or the capacities of individuals to expand the scope of freedom, justice, and democracy” (Giroux & Searls-Giroux, 2004, p. 263).

One of the most striking discursive patterns both in the New School discourse, as well as in the 4009 Law, is the constant reiteration of “quality” and “excellence.” These are projected in the counter-balance of a failed system but they are as flawed and empty as the previous concepts discussed. However, this demand for “excellence,” according to Aronowitz and Giroux,

usually means that educational institutions “should offer more rigorous science and math curriculum—a notion in keeping with the conservative idea that the mastery of techniques is equivalent to progress. Their language of “achievement,” “excellence,” “discipline” and “goal orientation” really means vocational education or, in their most traditional mode, a return to the authoritarian classroom armed with the three Rs curriculum” (1985, p. 2).

“Quality” is neither given and self-explanatory, nor a transparent, neutral term. It is situated in specific sociohistorical contexts and defined by the particular mission of education and goals of the educational practice each time. Different stakeholders assign different content and meaning. For instance, for critical educators “quality” would mean connecting the social context to the school, studying the underlying political agenda, supporting students in becoming emancipated, critically thinking human beings who question every authority. This is a radically different notion of “quality” but this term is not used randomly in official documentation. It resonates in the mainstream mind with the vision of a “better” public education so each individual can fill it with meaning that makes sense to them, when the real agenda is neoliberal at its core. The examples below are only some instances of the heavy use of these words:

Bottom line is that if we all agree that we desire to live in a “society of the excellent” and not a “society of the pleasing,” we need to start somewhere in order to achieve this. Common sense dictates that we start where everything starts and ends: the student. (New School, 2010)

I don’t understand why, instead of dealing with the kind of quality of students we produce, we discuss the reproduction system of academics. (Simos Kedikoglou, Proceedings, 2011)

[T]he rest of us should fight to bring the university back where it should be, that is, a place of excellence, a place of learning, a place of knowledge, a place of creating thought that will further create the conditions for the evolution of this country. (Makis Voridis, Proceedings 2011)

We are in essence, in favor of excellence, internationalization, social accountability of institutions of higher education. (Spyros Taliadouros, Proceedings 2011)

Chapter E [...] deals with the evaluation of universities, that is, the unit for quality assurance (MODIP). Every institution of higher education will be responsible for the improvement of the

quality of its educational and research work. In each University we establish this unit with the charge of developing a strategy of improving quality and organize the correct functioning of the university.

Public funding will be done with a report of an independent authority, and part of the funding will depend on meeting the goals set.

We do have a sense of the difficulty of this task but our goals are specific. We want to improve the quality of the universities, to connect them with growth and the job market. (Sophia Giannaka, Proceedings 2011)

Quality and excellence are positioned as the hallmarks of the Greek education reform. Quality education, it is claimed, should be based on “internationally accepted criteria,” as if these are by default appropriate, and the local sociopolitical context seems to be ignored. According to a member of the Committee for Educational Affairs, the goal of the new higher education law should be to “shape new human beings of better quality” (Kremastinos, Committee for Educational Affairs Proceedings). There is no discussion of the particular qualities these humans should have. The term “quality” acquires a transcendental meaning in most policy documents since there is not attempt to define it. Finally, this appeal for excellence “is often defined less in terms of a substantive call for developing higher order forms of critical reasoning and civic behavior than in terms of procedural demands for more stringent modes of competency testing and evaluation” (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1985, p. 201) so that students are prepared to fill necessary job positions and social roles. One would think that, historically, this could be the perfect timing to rethink the national educational vision, if only the same dominant classes behind the wholesale of the country and its national sovereignty were not also the main players shaping the agenda for educational reform.

The push for standardization in the name of a yet-to-be defined “quality” resonates with a general devaluation of public education and is reminiscent of similar times in other educational systems where the push for “quality” and “excellence” hid a more complicated political agenda than simply the will to provide “quality education for all.” In reading and unpacking these official discourses we can draw parallels with similar language found in three other moments in educational policy in the United States: the social effectiveness movement of the late 1800s, the Reagan neoliberal educational reform of the 1980’s with the release of the famous report “A Nation at

Risk” and the more recent George W. Bush’s “No Child Left Behind” Act of 2001. The comparison is useful because it gives us a glimpse on the real agenda behind the current educational reform, despite the proclamations of its main proponents. The timing of these movements/reforms/reports is also important because they have emerged in periods when the existing established social order was threatened in some way, and there were important ramifications for dominant groups. Today in Greece there is a need for a new “social effectiveness” amidst social and economic unrest and calls for a radical overthrow of the current system. Such effectiveness would hold (as it did in the 1800 in the United States) the promise of social stability. Both the “Nation at Risk” report and the NCLB Act mark the advent and later establishment of neoliberalism in education in the United States. In all three aforementioned instances (Social Effectiveness, Nation at Risk and NCLB) there were attempts at presenting schools as failing and calls for a radical reorganization that entailed a standards-based curriculum, continuous assessment and funding on the basis of outcomes, short-term goals, exhaustive new training and qualifications for teachers, and strict control of school systems. That said, the current reform in education in Greece seems more like a step backwards and less as a new innovative solution, since under the verbal gloss we can see a revival of similar reactionary and conservative educational philosophies. We will briefly discuss these in an attempt to make explicit the necessary connections.

In the 1800s in the United States, public schooling aimed at functioning as an instrument of homogenization, social and cultural control, standardization and elimination of diversity. It was a normalizing agency and a sifter for labor division and social stratification that has historically worked parallel with job demands. Some early curriculum theorists, responding to the new industrialization era that the US was entering, adopted procedures of job analysis and presented a curriculum that was based on the differentiation of educational objectives in terms of the particular and narrow functions of the adult life. They stressed the need in adult life for unity, cooperation and an accepting attitude among new specialized workers. Social efficiency as a curriculum perspective “held the promise of social stability at a time when [in the United States] there were pressing demands for radical changes. The central tool for the materialization of the social effectiveness promise was a new conception of science. This conception was based on precise calculation and specific standards” (Grollios, 2011, p. 55). It arose initially from a critique on what was perceived as ineffectiveness of pedagogical knowledge and poor teaching quality in public education in the United States. The remedy proposed built, mainly, on a Taylorist model of industrial efficiency that entailed the breaking down of workers’ labor to separate

elements, the abolition of useless moves and the design of a sequence of moves that would lead to the materialization of productive standards. The heart of scientific administration lied with carefully crafted prescriptions for the mission to be accomplished and with tidying up its elements in the most effective sequence. The design of labor was separated from its execution (Grollios, 2011). This approach constrained individuality and agency, subordinating students to the industrial process and further reinforced the role of social control that public schools played in infusing submission and fighting anti-social tendencies. Curriculum would foster social integration and its social role was that of developing a high degree of normative and cognitive consensus among the elements of society. Schools, instead of sites of intellectual research, exercising curiosity and creative action, were projected as a mechanism where students worked passively to achieve predetermined results, which bore little to no relevance to their own interests and their own personal histories, but possibly equipped them for their future life (Grollios, 2011). The current connection of skills acquired at school with professional success in the future, the disconnect of theory with practice, and the overcelebration of quantification, as well as the lack of any space to think and teach outside the prescribed order in the Greek educational reform, shares a great deal with the social efficiency of the late 1800s. Effectiveness in education has been connected with the political goals of boosting the effectiveness of existing capitalist socio-economic organization and the corresponding educational goal of adapting individuals to this organization.

Let us note here that social efficiency was to be revived many times in the American educational history as in the case of the 1980s. After the Cold War there was a need for social and financial reorganization in order to protect the interests of the dominant groups. These interests were threatened in the 1960s and 1970s both by emerging social movements (civil rights, student and feminist movements, and so forth) as well as by the threat for America to lose its global hegemony. The rhetoric on “excellence” and “quality” as a response to a “failing” educational system was prominent in the U.S. educational report under the title “A Nation at Risk” (1983) submitted to the Reagan administration by the National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE). This was to shape educational policy to date and paved the way for the academic-standards movement. Even though the historical juncture is radically different between the post-cold war United States of the 80’s and contemporary Greece, the discourse used shares some interesting similarities. Very much like the data presented above, the NCEE report claimed that the United States is a nation “at risk” because of the poor quality of the educational system. Using a graphic description of the ills of public education (that reminds us the public discourse on the debasing of Greek public edu-

cation) the report used inflammatory language to claim that the country is suffering from “a rising tide of mediocrity,” committing an act of “unilateral educational disarmament” (A Nation at Risk Report). NCEE proposed that schools and institutions of higher education should adopt more “rigorous and measurable standards,” have higher expectations for student performance and that institutions of higher education raise admissions standards in an effort to promote excellence. But what exactly is “excellence” in the Reagan Administration’s vision? Here is one example:

We define «excellence» to mean several related things. At the level of the individual learner, it means performing on the boundary of individual ability in ways that test and push back personal limits, in school and in the workplace. Excellence characterizes a school or college that sets high expectations and goals for all learners, then tries in every way possible to help students reach them. Excellence characterizes a society that has adopted these policies, for it will then be prepared through the education and skill of its people to respond to the challenges of a rapidly changing world. Our Nation’s people and its schools and colleges must be committed to achieving excellence in all these senses. (A Nation at Risk, 1983)

Here again, we have an instrumentalist, short-sighted and limiting approach to excellence. According to Gabbard (2003) the NCEE tried “to manufacture public consent to the education policies that the Reagan administration sought to enact; namely, returning education to its “traditional role” of providing adequately processed human capital to advanced industry – all at public expense, of course – maintaining the traditional patterns.” Returning to “basics” also meant that curricula were structured on the basis of specific instructional goals, that are clearly described and correspond to particular subdivisions of student behavior and their success is measurable – basically a version of social effectiveness.

The NCEE report also made reference to a “learning society” that should be the goal of educational reform “in a world of ever-accelerating competition and change in the conditions of the workplace, of ever-greater danger, and of ever-larger opportunities for those prepared to meet them.” Again here we can see a parallel with the discourse used in the Greek New School: In this “Learning Society,” “knowledge, learning, information, and skilled intelligence are the new raw materials of international commerce” and “Learning is the indispensable investment required for success in the “information age” we are entering” (A Nation at Risk). To summarize, the central features are the same: vagueness and no real explanation of the sociopolitical

reasons behind the purported “failure” of the educational system; verbose rhetoric instead of real suggestions and solutions; scapegoating schools for economic and social crises; and borrowing practices and discourse from the economic sector to shape school reform.

We will close this comparison by briefly discussing the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, for not only does it bear relevance to the reform language currently used in Greece, but it also seems to be partly the inspiration for the New School reform. The phrase “no child left behind” is used verbatim in the official Greek text as a slogan.

The standards movement, that was borne out in the 1990s, largely inspired by the “Nation at Risk” Report quantified American public education to make every aspect of educational life measurable and, eventually, it gave birth to the No Child Left Behind act that was voted with bi-partisan support under the George W. Bush administration.

NCLB celebrates a “quality” that is observable and measurable; highly qualified teachers, quality standards, solid curricula, succeeding schools, high graduation rates, and so forth. Quality and effectiveness are measured through highly controversial standardized tests. The test scores, in turn, define funding for every school. Teachers teach to the test and students learn to pass the test. High-stakes tests increase student dropout and push struggling students out of school. This way, schools turn into gatekeepers since they promote mechanisms of tracking and sifting students in and out of schools and preparing them to occupy particular job positions. Additionally, NCLB opened the door to private interests with the hiring of commercial testing firms and the production of testing material.

Imposing quantifiable and measurable standards, emphasizing narrow testable skills and blackmailing schools to implement them is a problematic alternative to working hard and honestly to truly improve schools. Test scores are not real indicators of student achievement and it is unfair to make decisions about individuals or schools based on just test scores. In addition, standardized tests have proven to be scientifically unreliable and provide little to no useful information about the learning needs of students. As Karp (2003) of *Rethinking Schools* notes, “beneath the rhetoric, NCLB’s policy framework is toxic, bad for the health of schools and children and driven by ideological political objectives that are arrogantly indifferent to the realities of school life. It makes no commitment to bridging the deep social inequalities reflected in academic achievement gaps, but demands that schools make them disappear (and it demands more of poorer, diverse schools than richer, homogeneous ones). When schools fall short of the impossible, they face punitive sanctions that weaken their ability to serve all students and ultimately increase educational inequality instead of reduce it.”

Conclusion

We cannot know if Greek lawmakers and other individuals involved in the committees are familiar with these texts, but the underlying agenda behind the reform bears many similarities: a) there is a clear emphasis on effectiveness; b) there is a push to the more conservative side of the spectrum by abolishing those elements of the educational process that are more liberal; c) they offer a short-sighted vision for education by reducing it to skills-acquisition and marginalizing the important piece of developing critical, politically thinking, engaged human beings; and d) they try to establish a strong exchange between education and the economy, where curricula are based on the needs of the market and the value of knowledge is redefined by the capitalist organization of labor. This last point is particularly illustrated in the new Law 4009 on Public Higher Education.

The present dominant education discourse in Greece is shifting from the pedagogical to the consumerist, from the public to the private; a quite common trend around the world. As State funding for education is reduced to the bare minimum, institutions of higher education must a) seek and secure funding through business endowments and other “gifts,” and b) exchange research and knowledge produced for this funding. This way, the public and democratic character of the university is undermined, while humanities and social sciences which, by their very nature, cannot attract market interest are marginalized. As a result, and similarly to what has happened in other countries (United States being the best example), research will be driven by what’s more marketable, what kind of knowledge is the best commodity. This will inevitably lead to fragmentation of knowledge into small instrumental, observable and measurable components together with studies and degrees being devalued and research destroyed.

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