
School and Young People in Greece at Times of Crisis: the repercussions of Memorandum policies

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ABSTRACT Greece constitutes, in many respects, an indicative case of implementing neoliberal policies in Europe in the main sectors of politics and economy, as much as in the more specific sector of education. This article starts from a number of significant issues Greek public education has been facing in recent decades. Next, it focuses on analysing the impact of the policy enforced in Greece during the Memorandum era along two basic axes, given their direct interrelation: the educational institutions and the ages of childhood and adolescence. In light of recent developments, the study concludes by formulating final thoughts and concerns.

We feel we are getting lost; we are afraid we might get lost inside our own country. We want to have a future here; we want to have a future in our country, Greece.
(Danae F., high school student [in an award ceremony])

Introduction

Greece today constitutes, in many respects, an indicative and well-known case of implementing neoliberal policies in Europe in the main sectors of politics and economy, as much as in the more specific sector of education. Just a few years earlier, in the decades of the 1990s and 2000s, indications hinting at the rapid developments that were about to follow went mostly unnoticed. The politics embraced by the two dominant political parties alternating in power at the time, namely the conservative New Democracy (ND) and the socio-liberal PASOK, were moving apparently along a neoliberal path, but the actual implementation of neoliberal measures was met with severe opposition all the way and often resulted in their cancellation. Towards the end of the 2000s, and more

specifically following the outbreak of the global economic crisis that hit Europe also, the pace of enforcing neoliberal measures in all sectors of Greek society, including education, became overwhelming. Greece has entered the era of the Memorandum.

The term 'guinea pig', which has often been used to describe the Greek case since then, indicates in essence a conscious attempt on the part of the 'experimenters' to place Greek society in the position of an experimental object, to which a certain medical treatment of neoliberal conception is applied in order to study its reactions. In the Greek case, however, it seems that the experimentation process has exceeded the limits and the standards set by the designers. The political change that occurred with the national elections in January 2015 has signalled the beginning of the process of disengagement from recession policies that the so-called 'troika' (the European Union [EU], the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund) has systematically imposed upon Greece and the Greek education system. At the same time, it fuelled a number of political developments which, as is becoming evident, includes the possibility not only to cancel the institutional pillars of this policy, but even to reverse the terms of the experiment, placing under experimental control the endurance and the cohesion of the neoliberal policies themselves, and thus paving the way for a democratic reform. Such an 'experimental' view may turn out to be far more interesting and useful in the future to all those involved in the field of education.

This last point, in particular, goes beyond the scope of our present study, but it seems that it can be a research objective for our future work. Hence, our study sets out to discuss a number of significant issues that Greek public education has been facing in recent decades, as well as to illustrate how these issues have been dealt with or used by the authorities to erode trust in the public school and stage its undermining. Next, it focuses on analysing the impact of the policy enforced in Greece during the Memorandum era along two basic axes, given their direct interrelation: the educational institutions, on one hand, focusing on general education (early childhood, primary, secondary) and the ages of childhood and adolescence, on the other. In light of recent developments, the study concludes by formulating final thoughts and concerns.

From Public School Problems to Undermining

The promotion and reinforcement of neoliberal beliefs and practices within Greek society have a long-standing tradition, and they cannot obviously be traced back only to the crisis period. Systematic and laborious efforts were put together by governments in recent decades to erode society's trust in public educational institutions and subsequently curb resistance to the imposition of neoliberal measures; in fact, to this effect, the contribution of the majority and most powerful mass media, including both printed and electronic, was particularly noteworthy.

The negative image about Greek public education that was methodically cultivated in recent decades rested upon a selective presentation of certain problematic situations that were not far from reality. They were presented, however, in such a way that one could draw the conclusion that they were not due to the policies implemented, but they were innate rather to the public character of the educational system. In consequence, the only possible solution was the abolition of public education, handing it over to business enterprises.

What spearheaded this vicious criticism was a popular media topic focusing on the increased amount the average Greek family had to pay towards their children's tuition fees in all kinds of after-school classes (better preparation to tackle high-stakes examinations, foreign language classes, information technology classes, etc.).[1] As a result, the students attending regular public school in the morning also sought to attend afternoon classes privately in order either to redo the learning material presented in their school curriculum in the morning or to acquire further knowledge, as the public school was not meeting this requirement in the context of its typical operation. In the eyes of the students and their parents, public school was gradually losing its educational role and its significance, since success in the examinations seemed to rely on the effectiveness of private classes and tutoring. In the meantime, a number of public school teachers themselves were offering private home tutoring for a fee despite existing prohibitions. This fact nurtured the practice of generally incriminating teachers, as well as streaming down accountability to the entire teacher community.

Another significant disadvantage of public school was its inability to tackle efficiently poor performance, school failure and illiteracy. Certain relevant programmes attempted occasionally by public authorities within the public school system, namely 'additional teaching support' and 'remedial courses', appeared to have serious weaknesses both in their design and in their implementation, while their funding was erratic and insufficient. The same weaknesses were evidenced to a larger extent in the programmes addressed to immigrant children, to children with special needs and disabilities, as well as to the children of displaced groups. It is a fact that the number of immigrants has significantly increased in the last twenty years. While the press often referred to the difficulties immigrant children were facing in using the Greek language and attending school regularly, they failed to note public authorities' insensitivity to implement a comprehensive and effective plan for their education. Thus, these children were portrayed as being a 'hindrance' to the progress of others and the ground was paved for policies of discrimination and social exclusion.

The regular publication of Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) ranking tables, where Greece steadily occupied one of the last places regarding the school performance of 15-year-olds, gave rise to media campaigns pointing at the ineffectiveness of public schools, for which the primary accountability rested with the teaching staff, as a rule. Rarely did the media make mention of the insufficient education budget (Figure 1), which placed Greece steadily among the last in Europe, nor of the problematic school

curricula and teaching materials, or the serious lack of technology infrastructure and the serious shortage of teachers in school units.

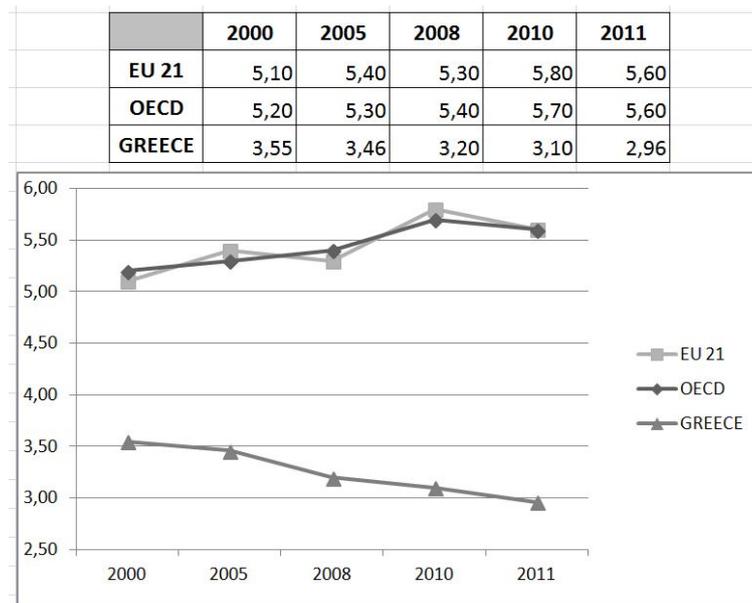


Figure 1. Public expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP.

Accordingly, in the picture of an anachronistic, exceptionally large, extremely costly and ineffective public sector, which was systematically presented by most media agencies, a similar educational structure sharing basically the same features made a matching complement.

The School of Crisis

Upon the implementation of the Memorandum policy (2010), Greek education has dramatically deteriorated at all levels. The Greek public school, caged within the policy of the Memorandum, suffers from a constant financial bleeding that has nailed public spending for education to the lowest rankings in Europe, whereas predictions for the following years, based on the troika's indicators, are equally ominous (Figure 2). Schools can hardly perform their basic functions under the circumstances. It is a very common phenomenon that instruction in some school subjects, including those that are thought of as 'core subjects', is not taking place in some schools, even when they are halfway through the year, as there is an insufficient number of teachers necessary to teach them.

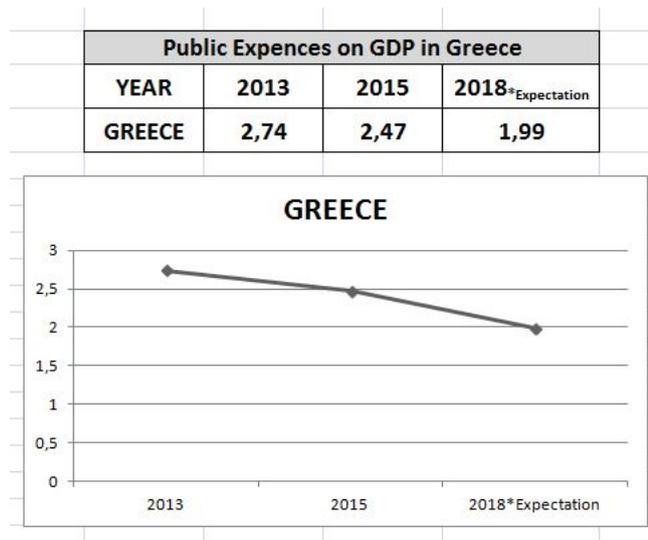


Figure 2. Public expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP in Greece.

At the same time, the public schools are stripped of the structures and services that could be efficiently developed under different circumstances to enhance their quality and reduce educational inequities. The basic programmes supporting students with learning difficulties sometimes do not operate at all or they operate improperly for a minimum period of time. The school libraries introduced in a limited number of schools with funding from the National Strategic Reference Framework funding are not working or operate minimally because of the lack of the required support personnel. A large number of Centres for Environmental Education have closed down, others operate at a rudimentary level and most interschool leagues have been discontinued due to insufficient funding. Further, in some distant schools, students' commuting to and from school, which was the corollary of a number of unjustified school mergers, is at stake and parents are often called upon to undertake also the cost of transport. It is notable that within a period of four years the number of schools dropped to 12,734 in the school year 2013-14 from 14,435 in 2009-10 (a 12% reduction based on the data obtained by the Greek Statistical Office, processed by the Greek Federation of Secondary Education State School Teachers – OLME).

The situation is even more problematic for the students with special needs or disabilities, who in addition to their commuting difficulties are confronted with a serious shortage in specialised teaching staff. Additionally, because of a series of vital organisational and operational problems, schools are deprived of the oxygen pertinent to their operation. Specifically, while many teachers retire every year, new teachers are not being appointed to a permanent post. For

example, the number of teachers in secondary education has dropped by 27.1% (from 104,043 in 2010 to 75,849 in 2014, as shown in the data released by the Ministry of Education and processed by OLME). There is no provision for the teachers' professional training and the need for continuous professional development despite the fact that the teaching staff in secondary education is aging. Meanwhile, teachers' working conditions are constantly deteriorating within a school and social environment that becomes literally unbearable.

It is worth mentioning, however, some problematic situations which are less obvious. The educational system is organised and functions in a way that often fails to respect students' natural rate of development. An excessively competitive ethos that now dominates education globally is one of the most typical examples. Based on this notion, the New Lyceum and the 'Test Bank' have been adopted in the recent reform of 2013 (Law 4186/2013). In an attempt to limit the number of Lyceum graduates heading towards higher education and increase the competition between students and teachers as well, the government introduced a mixed system of in-school and national examinations for all three grades in Lyceum, both of the general and technological type. This system relied on the creation of a 'Test Bank'. For each grade in Lyceum, half of the examination questions were drawn from the 'Test Bank', while the rest were assigned by the teachers at a school level. This resulted in forcing students and teachers into a cut-throat game where they are seeking personal success and distinction, which intensifies stress, undermines solidarity and cooperation inside school, and easily leads to lack of fulfilment, frustration and to abandoning of effort.

In the same vein, the Ministry of Education attempted to create a special category of schools for students of excellence within primary and secondary education, renaming the so-called 'Experimental' schools 'Experimental/Model' schools and establishing at the same time entrance examinations for admission to this type of school as early as straight after graduation from primary institutions. This practice generated an increase in this type of schools and encouraged their growth throughout the country, yet, it was met with severe opposition since it was believed to undermine the basic principles of the democratic school and to increase social inequalities in the field of education.

This dark picture of the current situation is complemented by the systematic violation of labour rights as far as the teaching staff and the other education employees are concerned, which is characterised by the constant reinforcement of authoritarianism and repression. An extreme example of this policy that does not pay respect to children's right to education, nor to teachers' right to work, was the abolition by law, totally unnecessarily from a pedagogic and social viewpoint, of approximately 50 teacher specialities from the section of Vocational Education and Training; this was also followed by the compulsory suspension of teachers, while about 2000 of them had to come to terms with the possibility of an irrevocable dismissal in August 2013. Some of the specialities that were terminated under the pretext of the low demand included some very popular career choices, such as Nursing and Graphic Arts.

Two important legislative interventions were the peak of this political force. They were both used extensively to control and manipulate the teachers who resisted the attempted reforms. The first initiated a severe system of teacher assessment that was directly tied to their pay and professional advancement and could easily result even in their dismissal (Law 4024/2011, Law 4142/2013, Law 3848/2010, Presidential Decree 152/2013). An indication of the legislator's goals and intentions is the law provision regarding the teachers' advancement to the next professional grade level; hence, this law designates a certain upper limit (ceiling) regarding the number of teachers to be promoted to the next professional grade level each year; this number is getting smaller as teachers move up to a higher grade. The second law introduced a new disciplinary system (Disciplinary Law: Law 4057/2012, Law 4093/2012), according to which teachers may be put on leave and be dismissed even when they exercise union or social action or for matters concerning their personal or family life.

The Young People of Crisis

The repercussions of the crisis for children and young people have been quite similar. As has often been alleged, these two groups constitute essentially the first victims of the massive attack launched by the extreme neoliberal policies that have recently been imposed on Greek society, with regard to quality of life and human rights. Children's own survival was becoming problematic as the overall situation of the Greek economy was constantly being degraded and Greek families were having difficulty in ensuring even the basic means for the survival of their members under the burden of successive austerity measures and rising unemployment. And yet, when recurrent, numerous reports talked about undernourished children in schools and intense conditions of poverty and deprivation by late 2011, some chose to downplay or ignore the issue.[2]

This whole matter incrementally became the topic of discussion among state officials and relevant institutions. In February 2012, a special session convened in the Standing Committee on Social Affairs of the House of Parliament discussed issues of poverty and social exclusion in the crisis conditions (Parliament of Greeks, 2012). As noted in the minutes of the above session, among others, the policy enforced in Greece at this time 'violates children's rights, violates the International Convention on Children's Rights ... as well as Children's Charter of Fundamental Rights that relates to the regulatory framework of the European Union'. In fact, it makes a quite dramatic report stating that 'at least two thousand five hundred children attending primary schools in Athens are undernourished' (p. 165) while 'it is possible that deprivation of material goods in the early years of their lives will negatively affect their development and their future prospects' (p. 32).

Additionally, the Greek National Branch of UNICEF in a recent report (UNICEF – Greek National Committee, 2014) expressed deep concern about the worsening of the conditions for children and young people in Greece in

recent years. This report points out that the policies implemented in Greece ‘not only fail to seriously consider children’s rights, but in many cases children do not receive the attention required on certain basic issues in politics’; for example, ‘in designing the tax policy’ (p. 14). As the writers of the report mention, the existing economic and social situation in Greece is ‘the “last chance” to take action for the children’ since ‘data of 2012 show a rapid decline in all social indicators relating to children, and more particularly in those of poverty or poverty and social exclusion’ (p. 15).

The report draws attention to the fact that based on relevant EU data, the increase in child poverty in Greece (26.9% in 2012) is the largest ever recorded in Europe and signals a considerable divergence from the goal set; that is, a drop to 18% by 2020, as provided for under the ‘Europe 2020’ Strategy (see Figures 3 and 4).

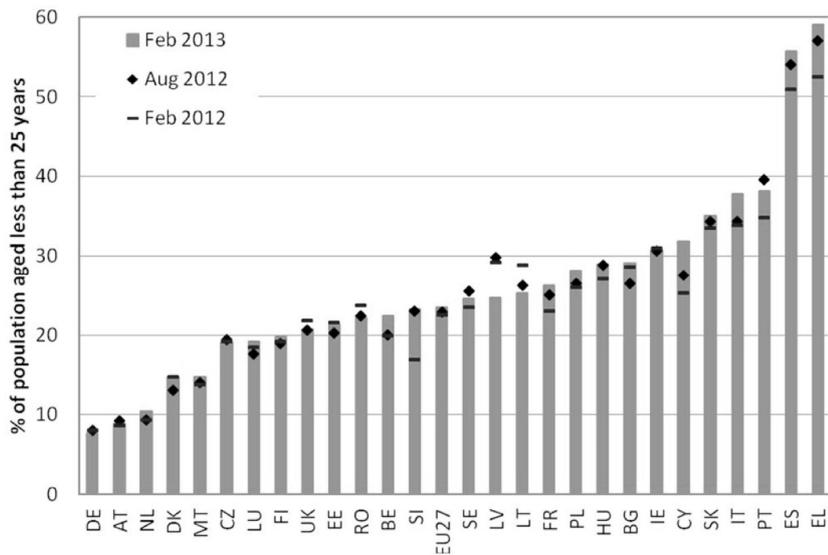


Figure 3. Youth unemployment in the European Union.

For the young individual, the possibility of being unemployed is by itself a source of stress and anxiety about the future. Meanwhile, it may negatively affect their relationship with school and the acquisition of knowledge, with students feeling unmotivated to pursue high educational goals, which, in turn, results in low performance or final school drop-outs. Further, considering the young individuals who are starting their careers, unemployment cancels out the efforts and schoolwork of many years, postpones their economic and social empowerment to a later age, binds them with some type of prolonged dependence on parents or social welfare and charity structures, forces them to

emigrate abroad, drastically limits their chances to actively contribute to the social fabric, and ultimately harms their confidence and dignity.

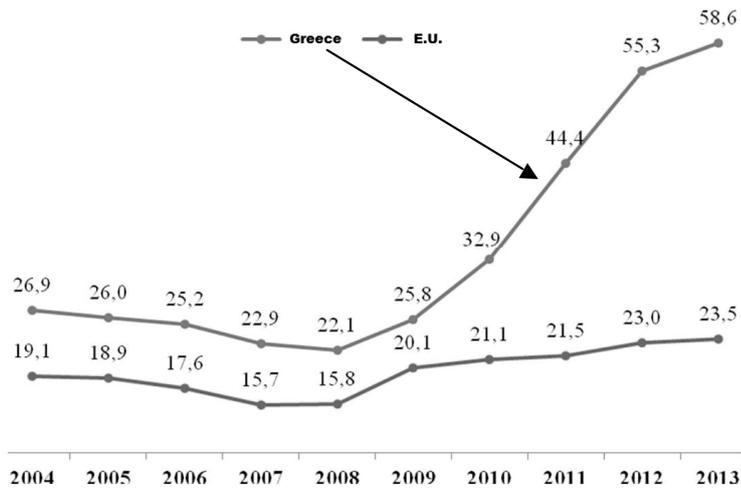


Figure 4. Youth unemployment in Greece and the European Union.

Unemployment rates, particularly for the young, suggest the existence of another pathogenic situation in Greece that threatens to rock the foundations of Greek society (See Figure 5).

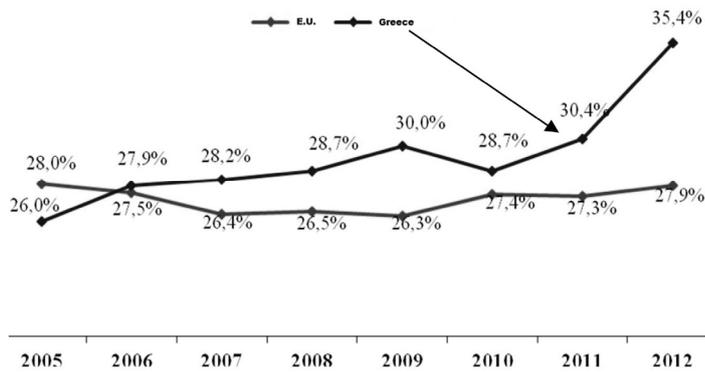


Figure 5. Youth poverty or social exclusion.

To be sure, the impact and intensity of unemployment feel even worse for those coming from a low socio-economic background, who can hardly exploit alternative routes. The long-term consequences of this serious disease spread in Greek society may turn out to be more detrimental and painful, but to date they have not been thoroughly studied yet.

Evidently, these negative developments largely affect society as a whole, beyond the school environment, being the outcomes of the overall recession that Greek society is facing. They become apparent, however, within the school context every day. In fact, since human rights are uniform and indivisible, violations pertaining to some of them directly influence the realisation of other rights. Undernourished children, for instance, are also the same ones who are deprived of proper medical care, cannot afford to purchase basic stationery supplies or to have access to knowledge resources or learning support aids; these children can hardly stay focused on the process of learning. Immigrant children or children belonging to domestic disadvantaged groups, who cannot furnish the necessary vaccination documentation, easily become the target of racist attacks with the ultimate goal to expel them from schools.

Relief structures created by parents, teachers and other agents and initiatives comprise another crucial chapter of the Greek crisis and its repercussions. Their action and activity has come to fill in critical slots left open by a state in deficit, underfunded and degraded, whose services are becoming all the more commercialised and where economic and organisational problems are present throughout.

Lastly, special reference should be made to the rise of right-wing extremism, a new phenomenon resulting from the overall social and economic developments. More specifically, the participation of 'The Golden Dawn', a neo-Nazi construct, in the Greek Parliament since the national elections in 2012 has favoured the expansion of their activity inside several schools by forming taskforce groups and developing racist behaviour mainly towards immigrants. Following the murder of a young musician in 2013, 'The Golden Dawn' was officially proclaimed a criminal organisation and its leading figures and many Members of the Parliament representing 'the Golden Dawn' were indicted. This has substantially lessened their influence on young Greeks; yet, dangers are still lurking.

Discussion

The management of the crisis in Greece since late 2009 onwards has diverted from constitutional legality. Under the pretext of handling an emergency situation, some basic labour rights were deferred and the Parliament obtained the right to make decisions notwithstanding established procedures. What followed was an overpowering procedure of imposing a series of measures at the expense of the working people, creating, thus, an atmosphere of panic and confusion. By using the argument of managing the fiscal deficit and reducing public spending, the public sector – and public education for that matter – received continuous blows.

Planning about education, in this context, was sought through different perspectives in compliance with the troika's overall policy. Once again, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) was employed and hence produced a recommendations report about the Greek

educational system (OECD, 2011). This report, along with occasional EU directives, was meant to be the guiding principle for educational policy in Greece in the years to come. Significant legislative texts of that period, including the 'New Lyceum' and the 'Test Bank', as well as all relevant material about the introduction of teacher assessment, were fully aligned with the spirit conveyed in this report.

Overcoming their initial shock and bewilderment, the working people attempted to stand together in opposition to this devastating policy. Some fruitful outcomes of this activity were some movements of the 'I do not pay' type, various support and solidarity structures, and 'the movement of the open squares' with the Syntagma Square being the central meeting point; in addition, there was a powerful strike movement determined to express its opposition and rage under some extremely thorny conditions of police repression and misconduct. In the domain of education, this movement displayed all its facets. The main driving forces were the creation of relief and student support structures (providing the basics to students and families suffering from food deprivation, providing private tutoring free of charge, etc.), as well as financial support to suspended and dismissed teachers.

Soon, some political differentiation appeared, which in the first place was manifested within education and other trade unions and almost simultaneously made its appearance also on the central political stage.

It was made obvious that the troika's procedures not only failed to accomplish a disengagement from the debt even in the long term, but rather the debt was escalating despite all the severe austerity measures taken. The anti-Memorandum union groups acting within the federation of teacher unions were growing over time and on many occasions they gained the majority. At the same time, the outcome of the national elections in 2011 indicated that the anti-Memorandum political parties had gained considerable power and that a more general political change was feasible. Indeed, this change took place in January 2015 when the anti-Memorandum political parties took governance.

The climate has already significantly changed following the most recent political developments. Several measures and practices adopted by Memorandum governments in the context of the constitutional diversion are being withdrawn, including the 'New Lyceum', the 'Test Bank', the illegal and unjustified teacher dismissals, the elitist character of 'Experimental Schools' and so on.

Nevertheless, the implementation of harsh austerity policies and long-term cuts has shaped the current situation in a way that is not readily reversible, and it looks as though for many years ahead Greek education will have to struggle through its multiplicity of problems.

A true realisation of the Greek problem and its handling by the international community should be grounded in the view that the case of Greece is not a single, isolated incident attributed to its idiosyncrasies, but instead it is a symptom of an international problem which challenges critical conquests and working rights and threatens public school and social welfare in

every country, in general. In this realisation process, the teachers are privileged, once again to assist in making it happen.

Acknowledgement

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Notes

- [1] See, for instance, Nesse/European Commission (2011). According to This Research (p. 46), in Greece 'Private Tutoring Was Estimated in 2008 to Consume €952.6 Million, ... Represented 18.6% of All Household Expenditures on Education and 20.1% of the government expenditures on primary and secondary education'.
- [2] The Minister of Education at the time reacted, for example, by stating unscrupulously to the press that these are common overstatements and challenged the accuracy of such reports; see, for instance, the newspapers *Avgi* (p. 11) or *Eleftheros Typos* (p. 18) of 14 December 2012.

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