



FEATURE

Teachers' experiences of and responses to the recent socio-economic crisis in Greece and the new challenges that have stemmed from it.

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26203/24c5-9z83>

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To cite this article: [CHALARI, M. (2016) Teachers' experiences of and responses to the recent socio-economic crisis in Greece and the new challenges that have stemmed from it. *Education in the North* 23(2), pp.154-160.]



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Teachers' experiences of and responses to the recent socio-economic crisis in Greece and the new challenges that have stemmed from it.

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Synopsis

The purpose of the study was to give sixteen teachers the space to share their experiences of, and responses to, the recent political and economic changes in Greece and the new challenges that have stemmed from these. My study was based on an epistemology and standpoint of hope, over, and against, the dire and self-defeating discourse of despair which dominates the current context of Greek education and public life. It is not a final account but rather a set of starting points and openings, a set of partial views and temporary possibilities for thought and action. In this feature article, I present a very brief summary of teachers' concerns, anxieties, commitments, and some traces, glimpses, and possibilities of hope that were found in the data.

Keywords: Greek socio-economic crisis; Education; Teachers; Hope

Introduction

In the last few years, major political and economic changes have swept through Greece. The country is facing a severe economic crisis and is being driven deeper and deeper into recession with every passing day. It is also facing a serious xenophobic crisis, a crisis of values, and an identity crisis. All of these have contributed to the generation of an increasingly complex society, uncertainty among Greek people and a sense of the unpredictability of the future.

Aside from the huge difficulties and severe problems that it has created, the current social and economic situation has also revealed new tendencies and possibilities in society. We may succeed in becoming aware of these, but only if we manage to sidestep the situation's negative implications, and try to embrace a different way of thinking.

In my study I take a deliberate and systematic stance of hopefulness and I see this crisis as a one-of-a-kind opportunity to redefine our life goals. We are living in crucial times, and we need to replace the ethos of survival that we have adopted over the past years with the belief in the possibility of a decent life and the promise of a real democracy. To survive crises, financial or otherwise, new stories must emerge (Bussey, 2012); one can postulate that the education system is well placed to offer such stories.

My main area of interest is education, particularly the Greek education system and its need to respond to the challenging and ever-changing circumstances of Greece's socio-economic crisis. Greece, at this present time of financial crisis and its accompanying social uncertainty, is a fascinating place in which to study the evolution and nature of the challenges faced by the education system and its teachers. It is also an important context in which to rethink education as a process of self-awareness and empowerment.

In the aforementioned context, the purpose of my study was to give sixteen teachers the space to share their experiences of and responses to the recent political and economic changes in Greece and the new challenges that have stemmed from these. My study has concentrated on understanding how we arrived at the current situation, where we seem to be going, and what we might want to do about this, as well as on discussing the purpose of education and the role it should play in preparing young people for this social, cultural and economic transition. It has also explored how we can build on the strengths of the present education system in order to create a system to suit the current major societal changes and face the challenging circumstances.

In this feature article I present a very brief summary of teachers' concerns, anxieties, commitments, and some traces, glimpses, and possibilities of hope that were found in the data. My study based on a standpoint epistemology, a standpoint of hope, over and against the dire and self-defeating discourse of despair which dominates the current context of Greek education and public life, is not a final account but rather a set of starting points and openings, a set of partial views and temporary possibilities for thought and action.

The impact of the socio-economic crisis on Greek society

In their attempts to discuss the impact of the crisis on Greek society, the teachers interviewed offered two narratives, two versions of the crisis: one with an absence of future and hope, the second with a possibility of a different and better future.

In the vivid narration of the version of the crisis of endings, teachers outlined their despair over the breakdown of the fundamental economic, moral and social bases of society, of social relations, and of basic human relationships and ways of being. Greece is currently in the eighth year of a deep recession, and the impact of the crisis and the government's austerity measures, as teachers perceived it, has materialised as huge economic difficulties, changes to individual lifestyles, and a dramatic fall in living standards. In particular, teachers highlighted high levels of unemployment, job insecurity, income reduction, increased poverty, the restriction of democratic freedoms and the deterioration of institutional solidarity constructed in welfare state policies. Teachers explained anxiously that there was no room for dreams anymore, that they saw only dead ends ahead of them, and that they felt trapped in a

tunnel with no light at the end. These strong images of their despair illustrate the breakdown of their ways of being.

The other version of the crisis that teachers presented is the one which is composed of new beginnings, possibilities for a different future, and which includes the existence of hope. According to the teachers that presented this version, the crisis has brought an impetus for reflection and change, and it constitutes an opportunity to redefine life goals, 'normality' and behaviour, as well as approaches to personal economics. The responses of these teachers suggest that, regardless of the severe distress this crisis has caused, there is a possibility of something good emerging from the ruins of Greece. Although the majority of Greek people feel that there is no future in Greece, there are some who have, in a sense, been made more serious and mature by the difficulties of the crisis; they have learnt how to cut down on expenses and live with less, and they have started to hope for a different, better, and more secure future.

The social and political problems behind the socio-economic crisis in Greece

The social and political problems behind the socio-economic crisis in Greece according to the teachers could be summed up as the following: successive governments, nepotism, clientelism, the absence of meritocracy, the corruption of both the Greek political system and a large proportion of ordinary Greek citizens, the decline in the values, moral principles and traditions of Greek people, and, finally, global capitalism and the exploitation of Greece by foreign powers.

The fact that teachers do not assign blame to a particular sphere, do not accuse specific individuals or groups, but see in the crisis a complex reality with a large number of interacting components (agents, processes, etc) whose aggregate activity is non-linear, is very positive; it is another way of thinking, and one that might enable them to develop an in-depth understanding of this reality, acknowledge the problems behind it, and work towards overcoming them (Jörg, 2011). Moreover, another encouraging outcome can be taken from the teachers' responses: teachers do not only see themselves as victims of the crisis; they admit that they are also agents of it. Teachers as interactive agents may become more capable of creating new possibilities and initiating change.

The impact of the socio-economic crisis on Greek education

Since the socio-economic crisis broke out in Greece, and since the implementation of the policies of the Memorandum of Economic and Financial Policies (IMF, 2010) there have been drastic cuts in the public sector and the entire education system. In the view of the teachers interviewed, Greek schools have been hit hard by these cuts. In particular, the crisis has had

a devastating impact on school funding at all levels and in all sectors. The current education budget is insufficient and, as a result, there is not only a serious shortage of teaching materials, but also a lack of funding available for basic requirements such as heating educational facilities, maintaining libraries, or even hiring teachers. Under these circumstances, teachers reported, many schools have become scarcely able to function, and have consequently closed or merged with others resulting in a huge rise in the number of students per class.

Additionally, all the teachers interviewed declared that the economic crisis was having a dramatic impact on their daily lives. They expressed disappointment that they no longer felt able to provide their families with a decent quality of life. They reiterated the idea that things were getting worse and worse every day, and that it was becoming very hard for them to make ends meet; their salaries have been cut by a total of 40%, and they have very little to live on each month. According to the teachers, the socio-economic crisis has caused them serious personal hardship and mental distress such as burnout.

In addition to the issues mentioned above, the majority of the teachers argued that the socio-economic crisis and the implementation of the memorandum policies had affected students' lives and well-being in many ways. There had been, they declared, a whole range of collateral effects on students' behaviour and their conduct in the classroom. Teachers described how the frequent changes to the school curriculum and the inconsistencies in the teaching programme, mostly compounded by changes in government and ministers, have left students feeling insecure and uncertain. Teachers gave accounts of students suffering from personal anxiety, lack of confidence and pessimism, and an awareness that their future would be very difficult. Furthermore, teachers feel that the younger generation has been ruined, and has become a lost generation that doesn't have much to dream about apart from a future of austerity and anxiety – a generation that can't really believe in anything concrete.

Proposed responses to the social and political problems behind the crisis

In many teachers' opinions, a political change is needed in Greece. Greece needs fresh faces in politics to fight the problems that led the country into the current socio-economic crisis. As a matter of fact, in January 2015, two months after the interviews were conducted, the left-wing party SYRIZA (Coalition of the Radical Left) won the general election with the motto 'Hope is on the way'. They thus removed the two parties, PASOK and New Democracy, which had been in power for the last four decades. This political change gave many people hope for a different future.

Aside from the political change, several teachers noted that solidarity, conscientiousness, community spirit, ethos, hard and honest work, and mutual support would help Greek people to address the problems that underlie the socio-economic crisis. According to them, Greek

people have to change the ways they think; they should become more cooperative and more supportive, rather than thinking only about themselves.

Many teachers believe that austerity will not lift Greece out of the crisis. Instead, if we want an alternative future, we need to change our behaviour and our mentality, and we need to resist, protest and fight against austerity measures. Greek society and the Greek economy need not austerity but entrepreneurship and new and innovative ideas (Blyth, 2013). It is now more important than ever, as indeed the teachers stressed, for Greek people – especially Greek youth – to generate new and innovative ideas and to develop the skills needed to pursue their designs successfully.

The role of education in the reconstruction of Greek society

In many teachers' points of view, in the current historical, political and social era in which we live, education could surely play an important role in the reconstruction of Greek society, and many believe that it could certainly redress the problems behind the crisis – but only if the system itself were to undergo significant change. By change, they do not mean looking at schools through a different lens, nor do they mean only the mere changes in the organisation of schools, in the professional development of teachers, or in the curriculum which mainstream approaches in policy and practice set out to implement. Reforms and reorganisations in these domains would only succeed in refreshing and refining the processes of alienation and subjection that led to the current crisis. By change, they mean a radical change that would start from the very roots of the education system, from its basic meaning and purpose (Montgomery, Karagianni, Androutsou, 2016; De Lissovoy, 2010).

The strengths in the Greek education system

According to the teachers, the Greek education system has got a great many strengths, including a number of programmes and seminars, its free and public character and, most importantly, the quality of its students and its teaching staff. As Tyack and Cuban (1995) state, schooling recreates itself all the time, but not inevitably in ways imagined in macro planning. Good teachers recreate the world every day for the students in their classrooms. Therefore, it may be possible to transform the education system in Greece, using its aforementioned strengths as a basis, and harnessing and strengthening the determined and reliable efforts of its teachers.

It is a positive and optimistic sign for the Greek education system and society in general that some teachers, despite being faced daily with the difficulties of resource shortages, 'troublesome' students, increased workloads and diminished salaries, can still maintain a sense of hope, and see that the education system in Greece has got many strengths. If hope

is able to replace naïve and unattainable 'wishful thinking' and the all-too-common negative perceptions of a large proportion of teachers, it may prove to be a positive resource and a crucial asset to teachers in these difficult times (Goleman, 1998; Rotry, 1999; te Riele, 2009). If Greek teachers, rather than admitting defeat in the face of such difficult conditions, manage instead to follow a pedagogy of hope, grounded in an analysis of these conditions, then they will be able to engage with the possibilities of change (Halpin, 2003), and learn to work towards a better future based on pragmatic appraisal of the current conditions (Shade, 2006). The pedagogy of hope is not about putting on rose-tinted glasses and ignoring difficulties; it is about seeing those difficulties as a starting point rather than a concluding one (te Riele, 2009).

What we need to explore now is whether the change in the purpose of education that teachers suggest is possible. The authors of the 2016 book *Reimagining the Purpose of Schools and Educational Organisations* detail the considerable challenge of re-imagining schools today somewhat pessimistically. Ultimately, they argue that we will have to re-imagine ourselves in order to re-imagine the purpose of schools (Montgomery, Karagianni, Androutsou, 2016). Through my study, I have tried to bring together the pessimistic and the optimistic voices, and to begin an important conversation about how we can improve the Greek education system and bring our society out of crisis. This conversation could possibly act as a basis for further research.

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