

The Curricula of Primary Education and Neoliberal Educational Policy in Greece : A Critical Analysis

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Abstract: The purpose of this article is to contribute to a critical approach to analysing the new curricula and to outline student-centric approaches through an examination of legislation on educational policy applied by the Greek government in the last five years. After twenty years from the last curricula (2003), the new curricula were published in a period when the government was introducing new legislation and promoting assessment in education. The curricula for primary education, according to the authors, focus on a student-centric approach but this is not confirmed in the content and objectives, as the analysis of the curricula in this article shows. The critical analysis in this article is conducted from the perspective of critical pedagogy and contributes to the highlights on the control mechanism and the neoconservative politics on education as a control mechanism.

Keywords: curricula, primary education, neoliberalism, educational policy, critical pedagogy.

Introduction

In order to understand the educational policy that has been implemented in Greece in the last five years, reference should first be made to the context that shaped the conditions that have influenced the country's policy. This article focuses on the period between 2019 and 2024, i.e., when the government of the liberal-conservative party of 'Nea Demokratia/New Democracy' assumed office, and it presents the core of the legislation concerning educational reform during this period, consisting of Act

4623/2019, Act 4692/2020, Act 4777/2021, Act 4823/2021, Act 5094/2024. The current education policy in Greece is based on a neoliberal and neoconservative approach to restructuring of education, which is being applied in the wider context worldwide and is faithfully being followed in Greece as well. Through this legislation, it is possible to clearly see how neoliberal policy and the neoconservative nature of the government are devaluing the public character of education, devaluing of educators, and transforming students into customers.

According to Benjamin, 'the tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule' (Benjamin, 1990). After eight years of financial support from the European Commission (EC), the European Central Bank (ECB), and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Greece is still under surveillance. Greece's economic disadvantage led the government to legislate on the basis of an emergency, and it pushed educational policy legislation in the direction dictated by the global market and the forces of capital.

The main directions of this legislation concern regulations at the three levels of education (primary, secondary, and tertiary), which deal with financing, administrative control, the evaluation of pupils, students, professors, and teachers, the evaluation of the educational work, the strict targeting of curricula and measurable performance, the privatisation of education, the operation of educational units, and other important issues.

When the laws were passed the new curricula for the school were published, and in this article I will focus on primary school curricula. The content of the curricula will be analysed and the individual objectives put forward will be highlighted. The results highlight the inclusion of the curricula in the neoliberal context of the general policy implemented by the government and alignment with the directives and guidelines of the EU and the OECD. Simultaneously, a critical analysis is attempted from a critical pedagogy perspective in order to draw substantial conclusions.

Specifically, I approach the curricula through a discourse analysis, as identified in the methods of qualitative text analysis and critical pedagogy, with the aim of delineating the explicit and implicit assumptions made, as well as the ideology that runs through the text of the curricula and concerns the child in the classroom as an elementary student, and is identified by the authors as student-centred, but also with the aim of identifying the expectations that the programme raises for the child in the future after the child comes of age. In particular, I investigate the objectives of each teaching

subject and the individual knowledge and abilities that the students are to develop in a student-centred approach.

The analytical categories I use for the critical investigation of the subject are the curricula and critical pedagogy.

A curriculum is a critical pedagogical text of political theory that expresses specific ideological assumptions, as it connects knowledge with social practices that legitimise the dominant cultural norms. This establishes a specific picture of the world that the student is called upon to understand through a dialectical relationship with it (Au 2012, 29). Therefore, a curriculum is a structural element of the educational process (Zachou & Sounoglou, in press).

The new curricula (Institute of Educational Policy I.E.P., 2023) are part of social efficiency programmes. These programmes were originally founded by John F. Bobbitt, who introduced the Taylorist model of scientific management from factory production into education (Au 2020, p. 61). His vision for education was based on 'social effectiveness' and is expressed in two main axes: firstly, defining inviolable goals and methodological guidelines in the syllabi, and secondly, creating a distinct category of executives in education who are capable of choosing these goals and supervising their implementation in schools. The Tyler model evolved out of Bobbit's social efficiency programmes and was combined with Dewey's child-centred model (Grollios & Gounari, 2016, p. 139). According to this combination, students must be prepared for a specific and intended role in society, and school is the means by which to direct the future workforce by equipping students with the knowledge that will be useful in the work they will be assigned, while the assessment of abilities and behaviours should be done with evidentiary means (Zachou & Sounoglou, in press).

The teaching methodology and organisation of the contents of a curriculum are determined by the objectives of a curriculum. The educational goals that are expressed and incorporated in a curriculum aim to cultivate a series of specific abilities related to the modification of students' behaviour in specific social functions, which are sometimes implied and sometimes explicitly described, and are to be served through them with the consolidation and which they are to serve through the acquisition of habits and desired reactions in specific situations (Grollios 2011, pp. 25–56). For this reason, the authors of a curriculum plan the appropriate daily experiences to which students are exposed. Social functions are transferred through the daily practice of teaching in the form

of daily teaching objectives, whereby the social relations that prevail in society are transferred to students (Zachou 2022, p. 318).

Critical pedagogy analyses the mechanisms of social inequalities as they are expressed in the classroom in order to overcome social inequalities and the school's role in reproducing inequalities. It is linked to qualitative research and discourse analysis. The outcome of curriculum-based teaching represents, as McLaren points out, the introduction to a particular form of life that ultimately serves to prepare students for dominant and subordinate positions in the existing society (Gounari & Grollios 2010, p. 281).

In a Benjaminian framework, the focus on a method-centric approach, wherein structures and everyone involved in the education process are ranked, form the basis of the control mechanism and the means for the promotion of neoconservative policies.

In a Benjaminian perspective that questions an approach in which education is tailored to predetermined goals and the method is seen as the most effective means of achieving goals, a different model of education providing control and means of experience is proposed. Experience can be the answer to and a proposition for critical education in this voracious capitalist system that strips the pedagogical process of its essential function and assigns it a factory-type reproductive function that feeds the capital system and the market with students as prospective customers and workers.

Contemporary right-wing politics seeks to utilise education to achieve its neoliberal goals. Its main aim is the top-down imposition of its views and its bottom-up legitimisation by appealing to authority. Critical pedagogy should take a stand against this trend, resist assimilation by the right, and put forward a progressive anti-capitalist front.

Neoliberalism and Educational Policy

The sociopolitical and economic crises plaguing public schools worldwide is affecting the curricula as well. In Greece, after a long-term economic adjustment programme from the 'troika' of the European Commission (EC), the European Central Bank (ECB), and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), implementation of the third community support programme for the economy was completed in August 2018, moving on to in a form of post-Memorandum supervision after which Greece moved on to a post-memorandum period of supervision. The Greek government and specifically

the Greek Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs introduced the following laws:

Act 4623/2019 (Government Gazette A' 134/09.08.2019), 'Office regulations, digital governance provisions, pension regulations and other urgent matters';

Act 4692/2020 (Government Gazette A 111 – 12.06.2020), 'School upgrading and other provisions';

Act 4777/2021 (Government Gazette A 25 – 17.02.2021), 'Admission to higher education, protection of academic freedom, upgrading of the academic environment and other provisions';

Act 4823/2021 (Government Gazette A 136 – 03.08.2021), 'School upgrading, teacher empowerment and other provisions';

Act 4957/2022 (Government Gazette A 141 – 21.07.2022), 'New horizons in higher education institutions: strengthening the quality' of the functionality and connection of A.E.I. with society and other provisions';

Act 5094/2024 (Government Gazette A 39/13.03.2024), 'Strengthening the public university – framework for the operation of non-profit branches of foreign universities'.

The scope and purpose of these laws are presented below:

Act 4623/2019, Article 63, on arrangements for model and experimental schools;

Act 4692/2020, with provisions on primary and secondary education and lifelong learning, primary and secondary education action entitled 'Skills Workshops' for the development of soft skills, life skills, and technology and science skills in students;

Article 20, on teacher evaluation and the external evaluation of school units in terms of their educational work;

Act 4777/2021, on an introduction to higher education, the protection of academic freedom, upgrading the academic environment, and other provisions;

Act 4823/2021, on the organisation of structures and the selection of education executives, the evaluation of executives and teachers with the introduction of a statutory, integrated, and effective monitoring and control framework for the evaluation process, the creation of a framework for strengthening the autonomy of primary and secondary schools and

upgrading educational work, and the establishment of regulations to deal with more specific issues. The purpose of this legislation is to upgrade the quality of public education through the substantial rearrangement of the institutional configuration of education structures and the provision of merit-based procedures for the selection of education executives; through the continuous and systematic evaluation of executives, teachers, and their work in order to promote, improve, and implement educational projects that are of good quality and at the same time effective, and in order to strengthen the autonomy of primary and secondary school units; and to upgrade educational work through the provision of greater freedom in the organisation of teaching, the strengthening of the role of the director/head of the school unit and teachers in positions of responsibility, and the establishment of a framework of increased transparency and accountability in order to resolve individual issues that have arisen at all levels of education;

Act 5094/2024, on strengthening the public university and providing a framework for the operation of non-profit branches of foreign universities.

In this article I mainly focus on and analyse Act 4823/2021 given the launching of the new curricula for primary education. The government's dominant perception of public school and of curricula specifically and the evaluation of teachers, students, and school units are based on neoliberal policy. Through this law the Greek Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs expresses the hegemonic conservative concept of punitive evaluation and creates a control system and un-meritocracy for the evaluation of the work of teachers. The ministry is thus introducing a strict framework for evaluating the work of teachers (Sounoglou, 2024).

Recent research has shown that the gluttony of capitalism promotes greed and greater profit by promoting competition not only among the teachers but also among the students, pushing them into the pursuit of qualifications and individualism under the label of meritocracy, professionalism, and the development of their identity (Houser, 2023). This can be seen from the scope of the curricula analysed below. The more appropriate the skills the students have are, the more qualified and responsible they will be as citizens.

A strong anti-union environment is being formed and fuelled by neoliberalism in order to weaken collectivity and solidarity. However, teachers are also resisting and organising to push back the neoliberal

agenda of political reform (Au, 2012; Au, 2021; Close, Amrein-Beardsley, & Collins, 2020; Owens, 2022).

As Gounari & Grollios point out:

‘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, schools into corporations, knowledge into a service or commodity, and students into clients.’ (Gounari & Grollios, 2012, p. 303)

Methodology

The research data are drawn from the texts of the primary education curricula. Once the data were recorded and organised, the purposes of the study programmes were analysed using the proposed methodology of content analysis. Then, a critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995) of the results was carried out, which highlighted contradictions and shortcomings in relation to the general principles of the curricula.

The research question posed is how the curricula reflect a student-centred approach and whether it such an approach is confirmed by the philosophical framework in which the curricula were developed.

Results

The Scope of the 2023 Curricula (Institute of Educational Policy I.E.P., 2023)

The teaching subjects in a single type of all-day primary school are presented below and there is a focus on methods, skills, and approaches:

1. Religious Education: *‘to acquire the appropriate skills in order to coexist harmoniously with all people and with religious “others”’* (p. 2); *‘the emphasis moves from the subject, the teachers, and the teaching process to the students (student-centred) and the results’* (p. 7).
2. Language: *‘The ultimate goal of language teaching is for all students to broaden their scope of thinking and to be able to express themselves in spoken and written language with fluency, accuracy, and factual appropriateness, in order to convey ideas and their evaluations in their environment and actively communicate through the production and*

intake of speech’ (p. 2); ‘the student is at the centre of the educational process and determines both the beginning (the purpose) and the end (the achievement) of each teaching plan’ (p. 10).

3. Mathematics: *‘to establish a solid conceptual basis in mathematics, which will allow students to utilise their knowledge and develop academically’ (p. 3); ‘The mathematics study programme supports a cognitive-individual (student-centred) and a socio-cultural-participatory approach’ (p. 8).*
4. History: *‘the cultivation of students’ historical consciousness. The development of historical thinking involves knowledge of important historical events, phenomena, and developments and an understanding of the changes that human societies undergo with the evolution of time’ (p. 2); ‘teachers organise a student-centred environment with strong teacher-student and inter-student relationships’ (p. 6).*
5. Study of the Environment Studies: *‘the formation of a modern, active, responsible citizen, with personal fulfilment and development, who, in addition, will acquire the values and adequate skills for a good quality of life (knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values)’ (p. 2); ‘learning environments are adapted and organised so as to focus on the students’ (p. 4).*
6. Geography: *‘acquire knowledge transfer skills’ (p. 5); ‘constructive teaching is based on student-centred standards’ (p. 5).*
7. Natural Sciences: *‘literacy in the natural sciences for all students’ (p. 2); ‘the emphasis of the teaching process moves from the subject and the teachers to the students, to a strongly student-centred approach under the guidance of the teacher’ (p. 2).*
8. Civics Education: *‘the development of values, knowledge, skills, and attitudes in students so that they become active democratic citizens with critical capacity and participatory action’ (p. 2); ‘At the centre is the student who is encouraged to learn and apply knowledge and skills... Project-based learning contrasts with traditional teaching in which a linear path of knowledge is followed’ (p. 12).*
9. Arts Education (Visual Arts, Music, Drama): *‘includes general objectives – expected results (knowledge, skills, attitudes)’ (p. 1); ‘make choices, make decisions, reflect, synthesise, think analytically and abstractly, invent, investigate, and even think critically’ (p. 1); ‘This is a student-centred teaching method, the application of which enables students to acquire knowledge and skills’ (p. 12); ‘responding to the individualised needs of students and consolidation of the*

methodological possibilities offered by the integration of ICT into art courses for student-centred approaches' (p. 5).

10. ICT: *'enhancing learning and the continuous development of students and preparing them to participate in the Knowledge Society by cultivating life skills'* (p. 3); *'Learning planning emphasises the overall activity of the class or group of students'* (p. 5).

Analysis

The scope of a curriculum is defined first before the teaching methodology and the organisation of the contents. The educational goals expressed and incorporated in the curricula aim to cultivate a series of specific abilities related to the modification of the student's behaviour in specific social functions, which are sometimes implied and sometimes explicitly described, and are to be served through them with the consolidation of habits and desired reactions in specific situations (Grollios 2011, pp. 25–56).

Although the curricula are described as student-centred by the editors, they are nevertheless closed-type programmes that have predetermined goals and teaching methods. In the formulation of the 2003, 2021, 2023 programmes in the last 20 years in Greece, the influence of Bobbit (1918), Tyler (1949) is evident.

According to Bobbit, targeting of each activity should be detailed and precise in the curricula. The purpose is the formation of students to prepare them for introduction into society through conformity to the circumstances at hand and not deviance. The learning specifics and needs and the socio-cultural background of each child are not taken into account. What matters is student compliance under the social efficacy framework.^t

From the above it is possible to see the technocratic and conservative framework of the curricula, even though the introductory notes and the content of the curricula advocate and claim that the curricula are open and student-centric. It is clear that they are in line with the same generally stifling and controlling approach applied in the legislation. We can see that the scope of the curricula in each case focuses on the appropriate skills that students should cultivate in order to be an adequate/a good citizen and worker. The scope of the curricula are determined by the scope of the laws that confirm the frame of skills, to cultivate the soft skills, life skills, and technology and science skills in students.

Here a connection can also be made with Benjamin, where he states that the method-centric approach is precisely the approach that creates the best conditions for controlling the entire educational process, from the basic foundation of a programme to the participants.

There are general objectives to measure the effective compliance of the child in the existing context, without taking into account the particular characteristics of each student.

Through the curriculum, children are adapted and integrated into the current social reality, and students are prepared to become potential workers, which leads to the shrinking of childhood and its special characteristics. Market needs prevail over a democratic progressive education system (Aubrey & Riley, 2020)

The internal development of the child is promoted according to the new curricula through inter-curricular relationships and not through the interactions the children have with the society. Teachers organise the teacher-student and inter-student relationships. The special quality of student relationships that develop within the context of the classroom through the teaching practices proposed and the learning experiences the students are exposed to are individual-centred, responsibility-centred, and competitive (Cabanas & Illuz 2020, pp. 86–133). Programmes are strictly aligned with an individual-centred approach and regulate children's relationships with each other and their relationship with the teacher accordingly. On the one hand, 'reduces social facts and phenomena to non-social ones, i.e., to individual and psychological ones' (Grollios, 2022a; 2022b) The goal is to cultivate skills and knowledge with the ultimate goal being the personal fulfilment and development of students as future active citizens for their smooth integration into society as a potential workforce.

As a consequence there is a connection between the laws and the curricula. It is clear that the structure and philosophy of the curricula are predetermined by the law. Through the curricula, the detailed objectives for each desired result in the student's learning path are listed so that there is homogeneity and compliance of students according to the imperatives of neoliberal policy.

The contribution of this particular study lies in the fact that it focuses on primary school curricula and relates them to the legislative framework, whereby it highlights the co-optation with by the more general conservative policy imposed by the OECD, the EU, and the capitalist order.

Discussion

An interpretation of the laws shows that universal control through assessment is in the genome of the current government, which is forcing a non-meritorious internal and external forms of assessment that leads to the complete discrediting of teachers and students. The whole framework of the laws and the curricula is based on a technocratic notion of assessment. These curricula are based on behaviourism, where a goal is formulated and the student complies according to it (Ioannidou-Koutselini, 2013). Thus, the teacher is allowed to be in control of the results. However, they need curricula that respond to the diverse needs of students and not to predetermined programme requirements.

According to the content of the legislation, the scope of Act 4823/2021 is ‘the evaluation of teachers and schools in order to create better conditions for excellence’. Nevertheless, it is notable that there is no mention of the desired abilities that these teachers should have. The terms ‘evaluation’ and ‘excellence’ there can be interpreted differently, since there is no defined framework for them or for the evaluation criteria. Finally, as Aronowitz and Giroux note, this call for excellence:

‘is often less defined as a substantive call for the development of higher-order forms of criticism, reasoning and behavior of citizens rather than in terms of procedural requirements for stricter ways of screening and evaluating competences’ (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1985, p. 201).

The discourse of the laws reproduces capitalist logic (Au, 2021, p. 125).

The goal of neoliberal-neoconservative politics is a social and political restructuring that, in the case of education, is aimed at shrinking the public character of the school and the social character of the state. This is a direct attack by the forces of capital at an international level through the requirements of the European Union and the OECD (2009), as has already been seen from this article in Greece as in other countries, with the aim of weakening the forces of labour and the trade union movement (Grollios & Liambas, 2021).

Enforcing acceptance of the neoliberal revolution and weakening opposition to it is partly carried out through the importation of ‘new public managerialism’ into the management of schools and education services (Hill, 2001; 2007, p. 207 as cited in Sounoglou 2023). According to Grollios & Liambas:

‘The extent, depth and speed of enforcement of the legislative regulations that promote the neoliberal-neoconservative restructuring of education cannot be interpreted solely on the basis of the corresponding ideological and political physiognomy of the New Democracy, which is a political party that serves the interests of the ruling bourgeoisie and therefore promotes neoliberal-neoconservative restructuring. The neo-liberal and neo-conservative socio-political restructuring is, primarily, an international attack by the forces of capital against the forces of labor with its main feature being the reduction of the social character of the state and the strengthening of its repressive role’ (Grollios & Liambas, 2021, p. 26).

The concept of economy and economism are present throughout the philosophy of legislation and follows the demands of the labour market (Rikowski, 2001, 2019, 2020). Teachers are to be subjected to flexible working arrangements through the assessment of their qualifications, while students are to have the desired skills, as confirmed in the curricula, in order to respond to the demands of the labour market.

There is also a shift of goals in that students are to develop their entrepreneurial skills and this will have an important and decisive impact on their future identity because it will affect their absorption into the labour market.

The process of categorising, sorting, and classifying students based on their effectiveness is presented in the curricula. As Gounari claims:

‘Capitalism sets as a priority a different type of education that aims at mechanization, automation, and quantification of the educational process, and imposes a new regime of oppression, authoritarianism, and loss of autonomy for both students and teachers’ (Gounari, 2021, p. 114).

It is important to mention that the European Commission’s directives relating to the cultivation of transversal skills in all students are taken into account and an evaluation framework is organised that students need to comply with in order to be evaluated for their abilities, which reflect the requirements of the labour market (European Commission, 2016).

The European Commission’s ‘Communication – European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social justice and resilience (2020)’ (European Commission, 2020) aims for every classroom (by 2027) to be digital and this concerns infrastructure, content, practices and teachers’ abilities to respond in these classrooms. Since the digital economy requires digital skills, students should be digitally literate to be able to join the ever-changing work environment and to adapt to it (Ionescu, 2012; Martinez-

Virto, L., & Rodríguez Fernández, J. R. 2018). From the analysis of the discourse of the laws it seems that the innovations are promoted as a panacea in the context of schools based on 'meritocracy' and 'excellence' through 'evaluation'.

The contribution of this paper is that it highlights how public schools become a target of neoliberal politicians through the discourse of legislation and curricula. Neoliberal capitalism has shaped perceptions of the purpose of public education and, as the laws and curricula discussed above clearly show, these perceptions resemble neoconservative views.

The method-centric approach is a means of exercising suffocating control over students. Reducing the autonomy of students serves big interests and completely weakens the pedagogical process. Hierarchy, control, incompetence, and authoritarianism create complex problems in the relations among students and teachers and give rise to a clientelist system and a mechanism of manipulation.

Curricula should not serve the needs of the market, but the needs of the human. For this to be the case, students should not just be preparing for the labour market, but instead need a broad and well-founded education (Goodlad, 2020; Aubrey & Riley, 2020). Noddings (2020; Aubrey & Riley, 2020) has also stated that rigid curricula emphasising on skills, knowledge, and 'accountability' are requirements from capitalist society and instead emphasis should be placed on the personal cultivation of the student.

To conclude, there is clear political expediency for controlling students through curricula. Strict control and punitive evaluation based on criteria unrelated to the pedagogical context are key arguments for resisting a neoliberal policy that is aimed at increasing profits and ignores the pedagogical process and those directly involved in it.

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