

Senior High School Undergraduate Students' Viewpoints About the Knowledge Provided at Greek Schools: A Sociological Approach

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Abstract – The present paper is concerned with the Senior High School undergraduate students' viewpoints. The research was conducted in Greece throughout 2012-2013 in the 2nd Educational District of Attica, in an urban centre where different social classes and the families' corresponding economic, educational capital is fully represented. In these schools, the percentage of students who succeed in the exams for Tertiary Education corresponds to the average of students succeeding across Greece. It is important that the research was conducted during the period of experiencing the economic crisis as a permanent condition in our country (MEMORANDUM 2009 until today).

Semi-constructed interviews provided the opportunity to study the students' viewpoints about the content of knowledge provided at schools, the possibility of its implementation, the manner of its dissemination, its association with classroom instruction as well as their everyday interaction with teachers in and out of the classroom. This way, the focus of attention is placed on the manner by which students, as research subjects and acting entities of the school institution give meaning and interpret both the knowledge provided and the existing conditions in education.

According to the research students disapprove the educational system. They regard knowledge merely as a tool to help them pass their exams and not as a factor for further development. They are found entrapped within an ineffective system in which the juvenile culture, contact with true knowledge and entrance in the labor market are not taken into account. Senior High School focuses on exams to enter the University. In this respect, students combine school subjects with individual or group tutorials off the school environment in order to achieve their objective. Moreover, there is no collaboration between teachers and students resulting in a formal and fruitless procedure which takes place at school.

Keywords – School Knowledge, Meaning, Subject, Acting Entity.

I. INTRODUCTION

The present research aims to study and understand students' attitudes about the knowledge offered in schools and it was carried out during the economic crisis era when systems and structures are obviously affected by it. Concentration was placed on Senior High School undergraduate students being in a course of preparing for university exams. Moreover, the fact that the crisis has impact on their living standards and career plans was taken into consideration since unemployment dominates among young adults, leading to uncertainty and insecurity [1]. According to the findings of significant surveys and official statistics, the unemployment rate among young adults is ongoing and undergraduates – participants of the

present research are particularly preoccupied with the developments in education and society.

This paper deals with students' attitudes about the knowledge offered in schools and the meaning attributed to this kind of knowledge. The extent to which the specific knowledge affects their interests and its contribution to intellectual and professional pursuit are explored. A distinction was made between instrumental knowledge, a prerequisite for university exams, and general knowledge related to political socialization, social class, personal objectives fulfillment and involvement with humanistic activities [2]. According to the interviews [3], Senior High School undergraduate students potentially judge the institution of school and articulate their standpoints for a functional school which better corresponds to their needs. This is more intense on the grounds that they experience the economic crisis on personal, family and social level, school merging, teachers' having been redundant, increasing number of students in the classrooms and decreased material infrastructure [4].

Juvenile concerns are part of juvenile culture [5] since they realize, this way, social inequality [6] [7] change in labor rights, unequal access to knowledge which form a new system of individuals' articulation about the domination of the market through the deregulation of social and political construction. Their concerns arguably are conducive to redefining their position in the values system. The students' beliefs and concerns about the school being experienced and their proposals about a different school are particularly fruitful for both sides in the sense that they are given the opportunity to talk about their concerns (through the interview) and researchers are given the opportunity to study this discourse.

II. RESEARCH ASSUMPTION AND METHODOLOGY

The qualitative research [8] was carried out throughout 2012-2013 in 20 Senior High School undergraduates who experience multiple economic and social problems due to the crisis. Interest is placed on studying their viewpoints about the knowledge offered in Secondary Education schools.

Senior High School undergraduate students were chosen to comprise the sample because they have been provided necessary information about the organization and operation of education due to their twelve-year attendance in school. As a result, they have formed a viewpoint about educational issues. In terms of age and shifting from Secondary to Tertiary Education, students are enabled to evaluate their actions in combination to educational issues.

When they are shifted from Secondary to Tertiary Education, social subjects are capable to reflect upon their presence in the educational procedure. At the same time they are liberated and ready to express their own views and standpoints without fear. Most of them stated that they are not confined in Secondary Education as “it is a door which has definitely been closed behind”.

Following collaboration with teachers, the snowball method was selected to form the sample which is representative with regard to gender, social, economic and educational capital of the family, their performance, nationality etc. The snowball method provided the possibility to address individuals willing to talk and unfold moments of their personal lives within the educational environment. However, it has been realized from the first moment that it was difficult to shape a sample with pre-defined prerequisites due to the lacking culture of research processes in Greece. Thus, it is difficult to form a sample with people willing to contribute to a research which is beneficial only to participatory process and the course of research work. It is well understood that in order to perceive the benefit corresponding values should be cultivated in the educational process. Moreover, due to the examinations system students are primarily concerned with their preparation and their attending school and tutorials. The lacking research culture is also associated with teachers. At this point, it should be noted that the present research was also based on the teachers' collaboration as they were supposed to help form the sample since they know their students and could contribute to lead the research to the right direction. However, only a small number of them collaborated and contributed to the research. The teachers – contributors were determinant to the development of the research. Otherwise, the educational work would not be realized.

As foretold, semi-constructed interviews were carried out to study the participants' discourse. Semi-structured interviews provided the opportunity to form thematic units for investigation which were gradually modeled in questionnaires. This is a procedure in which social subjects – interviewees are engaged and conducive to enriching these units. At the same time, they provide responses to the reformed questionnaire. Open questions provide interviewees the possibility to unfold their viewpoints, present their considerations in an active and interactive model in which textual discourse is combined with expression of feelings. Consequently, the research is enriched with viewpoints, standpoints and argumentation which reflect rational thinking and, at the same time, emotional states stemming from individual experiences.

The participants' age ranged between 17 and 18 years old. Thus, there is further information about the juvenile culture of this group whose viewpoints are tied to the way they define the given situation on different levels, so that knowledge is associated to the broader objectives set by this age group both collectively and individually. The students of the sample were happy to participate in the research as they were given the opportunity to express their viewpoints and articulate spontaneously and voluntarily their beliefs. Each interview with a different

student lasted about four hours and they were recorded upon students' consent. These students attend schools in the 2nd Educational Region of Attica which is representative of all social strata and of students with different national backgrounds. In the particular region there are schools with various extra-curricular activities and schools with the same program. Therefore, they are representative of the overall schools in Greece.

Students as future citizens are preoccupied with their future, being affected by an uncertain and insecure situation. They are about to complete their formal education and enter university. Their viewpoints about the knowledge offered in schools at the end of their school course are of particular interest. Emphasis is placed on similar issues about organizing different subjects, teachers' role, competitive or supplementary environment which is formed and exists between schools and tutorials as well as conceptualizations such as instrumental knowledge, theoretical knowledge and standardized knowledge to enter university.

III. SOME EXTRACTS WITH STUDENTS' VIEWPOINTS ABOUT THE KNOWLEDGE OFFERED IN SCHOOL

As it is the case in many researches, girls are apparently more analytical, placing emphasis on descriptions. On the contrary, boys articulate a brief discourse with reference to issues of their primary concern. The family high educational capital plays a crucial role to students' socialization since school culture is identical to family culture. Conversations held in the family shape their interests so that they are interested in all subjects and not only in those ones necessary to prepare for university exams. Students of a high educational capital are encouraged by their families to read books of various contents and prepare themselves to enter the society of knowledge. They are more positively predisposed to school environment. Despite regarding it as a necessity or not, they believe it is necessary to assist them in their endeavor to integrate in the political, social and economic system, in beneficial terms. It is noteworthy that both their involvement with school subjects and extra-curricular activities are conducive to modeling a high educational capital [9].

“I do not think school is boring. Perhaps this is due to the fact that I have learnt to trace beauty behind anything and love education. For example, subjects like Sociology, which is not one of the major subjects, offers a lot. And I liked that we talked with the teacher; it was helpful in essay writing, too”.

“There are things that we as children say....why do we learn these things, what for! But, at some point in our life, they will be useful. I have heard many of my friends. Like...in the case of History, we learn things and they say “I do not care who did what” and I think to myself that ok, this is.... What your ancestors did....and everything, ok, you should know about it. But some guys do not see it this way. They have different perspective”.

“Literature is my favorite subject. I have always loved it much more than other subjects both attending the class and reading at home”.

“To my mind, no subject should be excluded. There should be general education in all grades of Senior High School. Therefore, despite downgrading we should not be indifferent to any subject”.

Male and female students of disadvantageous socio-cultural background apparently do not give meaning to school in the same way. They disapprove structures of the educational system, implying that their teachers are part of this system which is not favorable to all students. The particular students highlight issues of unequal treat of students. Thus, they point to their teachers collaborating with some of their peers who have to advantageous socio-cultural background. Even though the previous group is concentrated on acquiring more knowledge and is in line with the school culture, in this group fragmented attitudes and preoccupations are prevailing resulting in lack of coordination instead of benefit which affects all students who wish to achieve their objectives. The latter are mostly students with low scores and limited possibilities of succeeding in state exams for University.

“I mean that teachers sometimes are not able to understand a student’s needs, hm... how can I explain that...hmm... For example, a student may not understand something and the teacher has to tell him two or three times. Teachers regard this student...stupid, let’s say, I do not bother or they do not bother with students of low performance and are engaged with a couple of students of high performance”.

They also underline that their compulsory attendance in the school is particularly tiring for some subjects. Students of high educational capital, boys mainly, are rather negative towards the content and mode of teaching. Yet, they do not lose their focus since they do not rely exclusively on school regarding their preparation. They attend tutorials in order to meet their needs or they are made to do so as they are committed to their objective, namely to enter University. On the other hand, students of low educational capital strongly disapprove the educational content and are concurrently entrapped in these views since most of them do not have the possibility to attend tutorials resulting in their failure in the state exams.

“Actually, many times in subjects in which I am not interested, in other subjects, let’s say Maths...and everything Physics, Chemistry and the like which are part of my interests, no, I attended, no problem”.

Some students’ comments in which they unite in one category both teachers and students is of special interest, since both of them are regarded as victims of the system, being entrapped in a fruitless educational process. The afore-mentioned remarks become more intense when male and female students are engaged in political parties of the left or far right. These people interpret the situation primarily in political terms. Consequently, both the educational community and students are presented as victims. Yet, they are apparently weak in proposing solutions to this ambiguous situation.

“I think both of them because when conditions are not pleasant, students are bored and teachers regard teaching as drudgery after some time. Despite students’ low participation and effort....teachers teach just because they have to and not to help students learn something practical”.

As regards creation of interest in the knowledge offered in schools, students pinpoint that their teachers have no command of useful knowledge in teaching methodology, pedagogy and psychology. More than that material infrastructure is absent in schools. This way, the specific students find it difficult to familiarize with cognitive themes and actively participate in the learning process. The aspect of communication in education is necessary for students as they are impressed by their teachers’ external features, their communicative discourse, knowledge and preparation. As regards communicative features, according to the research, their essential criteria for the suitable teacher are identical to the suitable performer. Thus, the educational process changes into performance.

“I think it is the manner in which teachers teach. I mean that if only it were more interesting for students, with more advanced methods, in relation to technology, for example, or with some different boards in combination with computers, it would be more...hmmm...teachers should try to stimulate students’ interests, moving away from old teaching fashions as this makes students feel bored and with fatigue”.

“School is boring in the form of duty. Teachers and not subjects make me feel bored. If, for example, a teacher teaches a subject, like History, in which I am not interested, and he engages himself in long monologues, this is boring”.

One could get the sense that students desire a different type of school in which the content of knowledge does not focus on subjects only but on other cognitive fields. They expect their teachers to assume different roles and not just the one of transferring school knowledge as it is foreseen by the curriculum just in order to complete a particular course towards preparation for university exams. They expect their teachers to assume roles in which their work will be extended to building knowledge to students beyond the strict framework of the curriculum. The research shows that, despite the fact that students of higher social strata and higher educational capital are able to fill their cognitive gaps, they suggest that the “new school” should be one in which the offered objects of studies, content of subjects and instruction should be definitely reformed. Female students, in particular, are more analytical in proposing a school which would create and meet a variety of interests and broaden all cognitive fields.

Other students point to the fact that in subjects like Literature which paves the path for further study and involvement they are not taught something more that what is foreseen by the curriculum. Their knowledge is enriched by their personal effort to read without being encouraged by their teachers to trigger the topic for further knowledge.

“Literature, no, no, usual...hmmm...only the material which has been introduced to us from novels...and the like”.

“Actually, they are not involved that much. Especially the teacher who taught Ancient Greek and History, he just did his lesson and nothing more”.

“Waking up in the morning was definitely tiring as well as a number of teachers who could not stimulate my interest either due to subjects which I did not like or due to the manner of teaching. In many cases they paid more attention to the material which had to be taught rather than the corresponding understanding by students. Their quick tempo and indifference made me feel bored”.

“Hmmm...boring, no, I could not say that. It is just the lack of interest in some subjects especially in the 3rd grade of Senior High School, because we were more interested in the subjects examined in State exams and not in the rest of them. This is because we all wanted to enter university and our focus was placed on them”.

The manner by which students enter university is disapproved by them because concentration only on subjects to be examined is perceived as something negative. Thus, their involvement with other cognitive fields ceases. This observation mainly concerns male and female students of higher educational capital or those ones being engaged in extra-curricular activities. In this respect, they feel that their interests are confined in school. Yet, they are not obstructed in showing discipline which they regard necessary to achieve their objectives.

“It is a pity because at present it would be better to receive a more multifaceted learning, not being obliged by the system to miss all other things so early”.

“Hmm...in these subjects I must have high marks in order to enter university or a Technological Education Institute, it depends hmm...they are particularly practical subjects with no much theory. Indeed, there is some theory but there are calculations, too, and I am good at calculations”.

Other students underline the fact that the organization of school is exclusively tied to teaching and assignments for homework. Thus, young people’s life is centered round the school process. On the other hand, juvenile culture and students’ personal life is overlooked. The participants of the research are essentially concerned about the fact that their juvenile, including free time for themselves to gain satisfaction, joy or happiness, is overlooked by school. They feel rather suppressed in school and not satisfied at all as they mostly focus on the educational work.

“Not unpleasant but...tiring, because we spend many hours there. In addition, there is much material to be studied afterwards at home and extra homework, this is all very tiring”.

Students with an advantageous socio-cultural background also express their viewpoint for a different type of school in which teachers are not confined to their typical roles but are free to form better conditions to encourage overall students’ participation in the educational process. It is noteworthy that these students can afford to attend tutorials and are highly interested in art, cinema, etc.

“It is that many teachers do not care actually...whether one learns or not. They just want to complete the material to be taught in order to meet corresponding requirements

and that’s all. They do not intend to get involved with children or their questions or give them further material which is a thing a teacher should do”.

Even though students are engaged in the process of preparing for the State exams, they wish for an educational environment that would permit both their active participation in the process of constructing knowledge and the possibility to express their considerations and pose questions. Issues about the manner of instruction are also put forward. Students propose an interactive process provided that they are part of it through questions and remarks. Students of higher social strata prefer to be in an environment of consideration in which they will be free to present their knowledge. Eventually, what is done in tutorials or in their everyday reality with their families should be transferred in school.

“He could do the lesson in such a way so that children do not get bored but wish to attend. He could create an environment in which children could pose questions and be willing to...hmm...how could I say that, to ask, seek, learn”.

The interviews show that both teachers and students are concentrated mainly on university exams. Attention is placed on the material provided by the curriculum and students’ assessment is limited to marks which are gained through oral and written tests. In other words, in the existing school environment the focal point is the completion of a certain amount of material which is tied to exams and continuous students’ assessment. Particularly female students of a higher educational capital are concentrated on the exams content. Even though they put forward their considerations about a different form of school and instruction and a different content of knowledge, the cognitive subjects to be studied during this period and prior to state exams, are exclusively the subjects to be examined. They have already realized that success and progress in life is strongly tied to succeeding in exams as this is an issued associated with overall educational values and the choices made by the Greek family.

“OK, one should basically study in order to say something, to participate in the classroom, to have...a good mean. But it is up to that point and nothing more”.

Overall, it could be said that during interviews no difficulty was encountered in the communication between the researcher and students who felt the need to speak. They underlined the fact that this was the first time they were given the opportunity to articulate their viewpoints about the issues which are centre to the present research. They were challenged to unfold parts of their life in a school environment which is pressing to them since their life was confined exclusively to preparing for university exams throughout the three-year attendance of Senior High School.

Given the above-mentioned remarks, students of higher social strata are the one who “play” with the educational system. In other words, they are focused on their exams, study hard and, at the same time they propose interesting things about a different form of school which meets their desires for activities and various cognitive objects. Girls

are more analytical in their thinking as they understand that, given the existing stereotypes of the Greek society, they should try harder to acquire more qualifications to be distinct. Immigrant students, whose parents hold a higher educational capital, also have interesting proposals to make. They are also focused on succeeding in state exams to enter University in order to fulfill their parents' choices to immigrate [10]. Students coming from a left political environment have many remarks to make about the organization of school. Consequently, the combination of political attitudes and the family's higher educational capital result in negative criticism about the school operation and content of knowledge along with students' concentration on cognitive objects which will enable them to better prepare for the state exams.

IV. CONCLUSION

Students are found particularly preoccupied about the knowledge offered in Secondary Education. In the case of concentrating on using instrumental knowledge to enter Tertiary Education, undergraduates refer to the insufficient system of preparation for State exams. Their preparation has been assigned to tutors or tutorial organizations. Therefore, they attend group classes or students who can afford private tutorials follow this route of preparation. They pinpoint that attending Secondary Education is obligatory.

Otherwise, different choices would have been made. No social knowledge is offered by the educational environment. In other words, they are not assisted to become citizens of the country as issues about democracy, humanism and juvenile problem solving are not included among school subjects [11] [12]. School merely accomplishes a bulk of work whereas provision of knowledge about modern issues like the function of nation – states in a globalized world, changes of the economic paradigm and cognitive fields tied to the organization of juvenile life and formation of preferences and choices are not included in the curriculum. Knowledge, in humanistic terms, should focus on the political issues of development and promotion of democracy during a time period when far right standpoints are put forward and far right political parties obtain power across Greece and Europe. Knowledge will contribute to forming viewpoints towards the reinforcement of critical thinking and democratic organization of societies through active citizen participation, exchange of viewpoints and rejection of far right political parties relevant to the rejection of people and cultures [13] [14].

Students feel entrapped in a school environment in which achievements and progress are tied to meeting the requirements of State exams. At the same time, parts of their life are missing, namely loss of their juvenile culture, juvenile considerations and true social interaction. School becomes a confinement to them by canceling their broader political and economic objectives for innovation and entrepreneurship instead of creating interests and broadening their horizons in the fields of their interest and, consequently, in professional orientation. The

implementation of policies for a school close to developmental objectives of a nation-state in globalized environments is prevented by the irrational function of school.

All in all, according to students, individual objectives are not promoted and interests are not created in schools. On the contrary, they are marginalized resulting in obtaining instrumental knowledge offered by extra-curricular organizations for exams to enter Tertiary Education. Interests are merely students' personal matter. The limited knowledge offered in schools does not meet students' needs. Furthermore, they seem to be isolated in an "institute" far off the social and cultural framework [15].

They regard their teachers entrapped in an administrative procedure. No feedback is provided through the flow of knowledge and no interdisciplinary cross-curricular approaches are carried out. Furthermore, school efforts for integrating into the political life are downgraded or overlooked within an unhindered course in which cognitive fields are rejected as they are deemed ineffective to prepare for Tertiary Education exams. Within a period when individuals are concentrated in the society of knowledge, school operates as a restraint for cognitive fields with concentration on a limited amount of material which is memorized instead of being studied in depth. On the basis on students' remarks engagement with humanitarian studies is limited. According to them there is lack of time and suitable knowledge towards approaching texts, literature, political comments and social articles.

It is estimated that these issues must be triggered by the educational community and become part of drafting a different educational policy about school organization which promotes true knowledge and reinforces processes of integrating into the society of citizens and the society of knowledge. This can be done by stimulating interests and encouraging systematic engagement with scientific domains which promote knowledge and contribute to the association of knowledge, social development and economic progress. Certain criteria should be set to define knowledge which would include the young individual, in the form of a carrier of juvenile social culture, being entitled to develop their personality under humanistic terms. Were concentration to be placed on functional knowledge which could re-direct discussion on knowledge about human happiness, participation and integration into a harmonious society [16], the role of school, carriers and structures should be redefined by re-approaching the relation among school, as a bureaucratic structure, students, cognitive fields and teachers.

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