Social justice and leadership in education within the post truth era: The case of Greek secondary education[1]

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Abstract

The Greek education system in terms of organization, administration and the content of studies is centralized. However, the framework of action of a school leader may include actions of an activist nature, which consists, among other things, of promoting ethical practices that assist students develop critical capacity by linking knowledge to social and political reality. The prolonged economic and social crisis experienced by the Greeks is a fertile ground for the development of populist political discourse, and in this sense the promotion of "active citizenship" through education becomes necessary. Awareness of the political, social and economic deadlock requires the activation of citizens in the public space and their participation in social processes.

In our paper, we argue that education for social justice is closely linked to the redefinition of the identity and the role of citizens in modern societies, as well as to the practices followed in education systems. This is of greater value if we take into consideration that the concept of justice in modern globalized frameworks is constantly being redesigned while political rhetoric attempts to "construct" a new way of thinking and is based on a fake version of reality where facts do not exist as realistic data.

This study explores the perceptions of school leaders regarding their political and social role in terms of promoting social justice. It is based on the qualitative analysis of 12 (twelve) interviews of school leaders in secondary education in the city of Corinth and focuses on three axes: a) school unit, b) educational system and c) school leadership. The expected results of the survey aim to highlight the role of education in promoting social justice and preparing citizens who will meet the requirements of modern times and the role of school leaders.

Key Words

school leadership, social justice, citizenship, post – truth

Modern political framework and educational environment

Ways of implementing many educational policies integrate various hypotheses regarding what is considered a socially fair educational system and what barriers prevent its implementation. The educational reason in western societies is prevailed by the neoliberalism which seeks to maintain the status quo and turn schools into enterprises according to performance, where human asset must acquire the appropriate skills to effectively compete in the job market (Apple, 2006 as cited in Hoffman, 2009). Democracy is formed within this political framework as an economical concept and at the same time the administrative logic that has led to a serious degradation of the analytical programs is developed (Lipman, 2004 as cited in Hoffman, 2009). This simplified and oriented towards the market process makes it difficult to serve the needs of those who have smaller financial, social and political power.

Within this political framework, equality becomes unattainable and the improvement of the educational work becomes a false perception (Smyth et al. 2009), since the focus of the effect, accountability and production creates an educational system that procreates inequalities by functioning against social justice, cooperation and democratic participation. It is necessary to make clear that the reformation of justice within the frameworks of a globalized society and education creates a vague scenery where the function of inequality is not observable, and concepts such as representation and identity are interweaved with a simplifying logic.

The role of education in shaping active citizens

Schools constitute a mechanism for the procreation of social inequalities while at the same time they play a crucial role in the process of socialization and politicization of the young people (McLaren, 2007). Modern educational systems give priority to citizenship in education, whose dimensions regard the integration (cultural justice), the legal status (judicial justice), the rights (social justice) and the participation (political justice) and they reflect relationships based on interest and political differences (Stokke, 2017). The accommodation of those needs became the basis for the application of similar policies of redistribution (social rights), recognition (capacity of member) and representation (political participation) which lead to the promotion of a transformative democratic policy (Stokke & Tornquist, 2013).

The paradox lies in the fact that, on the one hand, the goals of the curricula are compliant with the economy of the market seeking the emergence of a nation state and the creation of a type of citizen – consumer with a particular (national, cultural, social) identity, while on the other hand, the factual reality demands citizens – members of a society of citizens and a focus on the cosmopolitan citizenship (Canivez, 1995). The philosophy regarding the integration of the

curricula is affected by the challenges of the globalized society and the focus regards the promotion of free thought and democratic conscience, the development of skills for an active and equal participation in democratic processes, the emergence of universal values and virtues through the promotion of social justice, solidarity and respect for the human rights (European Commission, 2000). Moreover, lifelong education has gained great importance in concepts (e.g., democracy, justice, equality, respect) and there is a need to reevaluate the concept of democracy and the participation of the citizen in it, a redefinition of his/her identity (exercise of responsibilities – virtues, challenging the political authority, participation in public discussion) as well as a restatement of the context of education.

Post-truth politics, populism and education

In the modern era, a charged social and political speech prevails and through it the post-truth politics is expressed. The wide use of the social media as a source of news, the lack of argumentation and inspection of the facts, the increasing disbelief in facts that are promoted by the status quo and the undermining of the ability for ethical thought and recognition of the truth lead to the encouragement of a perceived interpretation of the truth by appealing to the emotion of the receiver. D. Trump's tactic reflects clearly this politics where the consistent repetition of fake "news" of medium size, which functions as a channel of propaganda, gradually leads to the inactivation of the Media ("Big Lie" technique).

Populism and post-truth are inextricably linked since the facts that are constructed on relationships of power and they complement political narrations and predetermined political visions that lead to the conflict of the popular and the elitist interests (Waisbord, 2018). Since any allegation regarding the truth may become public we find ourselves in the dual thought, the destruction of communication and finally in the indifference regarding the common good. Populism is based on fiction, on polarized communication and on propaganda opposing the principles of democratic communication (discussion, justification, tolerance, solidarity). As a result, we notice a lack of conditions of definition and verification of the truth in connection to reality. This is completely at odds with the meaning of the ancient Greek word "parrisía" which as a concept relates to the speech that is characterized by an accurate agreement of the belief and the truth.

In the post-truth era, particular importance is given to digital education and data systems both regarding the administration and teaching and research. At the same time narrow perceptions are developed regarding the standard and state approved convenient pedagogies that are followed by attacks on the professional autonomy and identity of the educators as intermediaries of the truth – variables that are also affected by the role that a society gives them (Pantic, 2015). The

equalization of education with vocational training without any wider citizenship agenda for a participatory democracy has led to the downfall of social democracy and the growth of the populist demagogic political and racist parties. We need to comprehend the wider impacts of the post-truth politics on science and education and to develop as an operational strategy the fight against the "governments of lie" and the comprehension of the global society.

The activist school leader. Activist ethics and teaching.

In the current neoliberalistic social and political climate, the neutrality of educational policies is impossible and thus the educators must "comprehend the competitive political, economical and social powers in education, in order to acquire more confidence and to resist the dominant discourses in order to support those who are usually marginalized and powerless" (Hoffman, 2009). Embracing activism requires acknowledging the political dimension of leadership, supporting publically selective practices, networking and developing communities, publishing new knowledge regarding the social problems and opening the active subjects to the world (Ospina, 2005, as cited in Hoffman, 2009). The activist action of the school leaders differs significantly from the traditional activism as they constitute an inextricable part of the institutions against whom they might have to protest and the selection of the actions should be carried out mindfully so that it will not come against the general legal and administrative framework (Ryan, 2016). Therefore, activism must not include visibly controversial activities but it should be implicit or indirect activism (Loder – Jackson, 2011; Zembylas, 2013). A "device" that they could follow is to carefully cover the typical bureaucratic demands of the system (Ryan, 2016). This way it promotes multiculturalism in the educational act and critical pedagogy in the classroom, which seeks the participation of everyone in decision and policymaking and maintains a contact with trade unions (Lopez, 2011; Picower, 2012; Ryan, 2012).

The activist action of a school leader should have a strategic character (Ryan, 2015), which demands the deeper comprehension and inspection of the conditions of the social and economic framework of the unit. This requires the comprehension of the school culture and the dynamic of the school society, while at the same time it takes into consideration the wider idiosyncrasies of the educational system (Ryan, 2010) – which is linked to higher levels of emotional intelligence (Ryan, 2015) and calls for alliances with other school leaders and acquaintances with important people in the institutional hierarchy (Ryan, 2015). Activist school leaders must remain devoted to their vision to fight against the current school inequality and the forms of its procreation, and, thus, it is important that they are surrounded by activist educators (Picower, 2012).

Educators should not limit the independent thought of the students or forbid the access to multiple perspectives, they should not deliberately distort alternative

views, treat them unfairly due to their social place, exclude marginalized students or discourage them deliberately. By seeking to develop ethical "interpersonal" relationships, they must decide about the means and the methods in which they teach and create a classroom environment that supports the pursued results. Reflective humility involves a constant self-reflection, a permanent self-questioning, the amplification of personal choices and beliefs from different points of views, the dialogue with other people and the openness to see ourselves through their eyes (Hytten K., 2009). Such an open spiritual perception identifies "the possibility for an error even at the beliefs that are very familiar to us" (Dewey, 1933 as cited in Hytten, 2009) via listening to multiple perspectives, events and alternative interpretations. Educators must identify the limits of their own knowledge, they must transfer to students the notion that all knowledge is temporary, they must seek alternative views and they must follow new ideas in their fields, they must draw attention to the controversial nature of particular points of view, they must read widely and they must accept different perspectives, they must set genuine questions and not just raise questions just to evoke a desired answer, they must listen with respect to the questions of the students without relying on prepared answers (Hare, 2007 as cited in Hytten, 2009). Caring for students might work in many different ways according to the culture, the environment and their needs through an experiential relationship (Noddings, 2002 as cited in Hytten, 2009) by developing emotions of solidarity and by creating an atmosphere of support between them (Castro Samayoa & Nocolazzo, 2017). By showing a sympathetic attention they attempt to comprehend the experiences as well as the potentially problematic beliefs of the students. They ought to show the socially structured and limited character of the attitudes and behaviors, they ought to be concerned regarding their own highly confident and strict approaches within the classroom and to have good intentions given the fact that we are all capable of developing.

The political role of the school leadership

The political role of the school leader regards the constant attempt to satisfy the needs and the expectations of the different groups of the school community and it constitutes the crossover between the expectations and the demands of the educational system and the proper level of emotional care and support for the students, in light of the equality and the administration (or the re-establishment) of social justice, when the system itself promotes inequality within the school society (Niesche, 2013). Furthermore, it regards the process of balancing the tensions in matters that rise from the four principles: educational system – personal perceptions and beliefs – perceptions of the educational personnel – students' needs. Moral C. et al. (2017) believe that a successful leadership is connected to transformational characteristics and they highlight four main dimensions: shaping directions, developing people, developing schools and managing the educational program.

Positioning in matters that relate to social justice in a different way of action and behavior (or mis-behavior) according to the situation, requires the social control that he should carry out, in order to change the longstanding perception of the students and the educational personnel and to create an agenda of high expectations for all students seeking to discompose the current established perceptions of low performances for students from vulnerable social groups. This role of the school leader – public administrator, which is more political, regards a centralized and at the same time a decentralized educational administration (Brewer, 2011), that is based on an ideological framework that includes the school community, the work market and the society of the citizens, by integrating within the educational work the policies regarding the administration of social justice (Dahredorf, 1999 as cited in Brewer, 2011). The role of the leader gains a political tone, when "he reinforces the cooperation of the school unit on the one hand with external political, scientific and social vectors, and on the other hand between all the members of the school society" which in order to be carried out and to positively affect the performance of all students – particularly those that belong to the vulnerable social groups – they demand delicate and sensitive handling as well as politically brilliant actions that will overcome the bureaucratic limits of the educational system (Lugg & Boyd, 1993 as cited in Brewer, 2011). The application of a centralized and decentralized at the same time framework of school administration, considering the reality of the wider political framework, creates tensions, contradictions, paradoxes and tendencies towards malfunction (Boyd & Crowson, 2002 as cited in Brewer, 2011). Hence, these contradictions and paradoxes demand a new form of school leadership, powerful and flexible at the same time, that could comprehend, integrate and interact with the "paradoxes", by widening the limits of the bureaucratic centralized system. This type of powerful flexible leadership is strongly connected to the satisfaction of the needs of the more vulnerable and marginalized students and therefore it forms the demand for a more politically active school leader.

Methodology

The goal of the present paper is to highlight the necessity for the political and social role of educational leadership, through which the proper administrational and pedagogical processes to promote social justice and the embracement of ethical practices for the guidance in the preparation of citizens who will correspond to the demands of the modern era arise.

The research questions that were formed according to the theoretical frameworks and the above raised aim, move within three thematic axes examining the social justice at the level of the school unit, the educational system and the school leader and they are the following: 1. How do the school leaders perceive social justice and the provision of equal educational opportunities? 2. How do school leaders perceive and how do they outline their political role in the

promotion of social justice and the provision of equal educational opportunities? 3. What practices do the school leaders embrace / encourage / serve for the promotion of social justice and the provision of equal educational opportunities?

The role of the school leader that advocates the vision of social justice and promotes its principles is both decisive as well as necessary for a contemporary Greek school environment that wishes to eliminate the educational inequalities. This issue is connected to complex social phenomena and it has a people-centered aspect, which is not suitable for the quantification of the views of the participants. For the deeper comprehension and interpretation of the views of the subjects, the social phenomena, qualitative analysis is suggested (Flick, 2007) and the conceptualization of the research questions led to the choice of the qualitative approach as the most suitable research method in order to draw conclusions.

As a tool for the collection of data in the present research, the individual semi-structured open-end interview (twenty six questions) was used. The collection of the data was carried out in January 2018 and in the research six women and six men participated who hold a leadership position in the secondary education (four in Middle School, four in General High School, two in Vocational High School, one in Special Vocational Middle School and one in Second Chance School). Five of the participants have from eleven to 20 years of experience in total in Secondary Education, six of the participants have 21 – 30 years and one participant has more than 31 years. The experience of the sample at a leadership position is: three participants up to one year, six participants from two to five years and three participants from six to ten years. As regards their scientific background, three participants have fulfilled their studies at a second school too, eleven from the twelve participants have post-graduate studies, while two of them hold a doctorate.

Analysis of the results

Social justice and provision of equal educational opportunities at the level of the school unit and the educational system

The participants in the research connect social justice to the provision of equal opportunities (Gewirtz, 1998) between all members of the school unit, regardless of their dissimilarity and the democratic way of managing and handling of the situations. Consequently, they detect the educational inequality in the unequal opportunities of completing their school education due to financial inequalities and due to the lack of opportunities of the students (equality of opportunities – Gewirtz, 1998), in the exclusion or marginalization of students due to their dissimilarity (equality of the result – Gewirtz, 1998) and in the non equal distribution of logistical infrastructures in the school units (distributive justice – Keddie A., 2012).

The vulnerable social groups that were detected were students who face financial problems, students of single-parent families, foreigners and students with learning and mobility difficulties. Low school performance and school dropout were connected with the low educational, social and financial background of the families of the students and with the inability for constant attendance of the educational process, combined with the educational inequalities that originate from the educational system itself. The participants in the research realize that low school performance does not derive merely from the low social and financial environment (Rodriguez & Fabionar, 2010) yet they maintain a critical stance against the environmental factors, understanding that the unequal results arise from the inadequacy of the systemic and managerial educational framework where the appropriate practices have not been applied or analyzed in order to avoid the consequences on the students who do not belong to the category of the average (Marshall & Oliva, 2010). It was highlighted that the equalizing evaluative and inquisitive operations prolong the educational inequality while the Greek educational system is not prepared to face and to reverse the new condition that was inflicted by cultural and social disparity. Moreover, the curriculum is not sufficiently structured and equipped in order to provide solidarity and to respect the cultural background of the students (recognitory justice – Keddie A., 2012) and the concern for the students who belong to vulnerable social groups is deficient.

For an educator who wishes to promote matters of social justice within the classroom, the factors that play a major role are his personal perceptions for a socially fair world, the empathy – comprehension of the existing injustice, reflection – flexibility, personal experiences and the scientific background. He must comprehend the ways in which inequalities and social politics affect the life of the students (Brookfield, 2005; Giroux, 2004 as cited in Jackson, 2015) and he must connect knowledge with the social and political reality (Kraft, 2007) in order to help his students develop, at first, their own perceptions of the existing inequalities and, later on, their skills to deal with these inequalities (Tutak et al., 2011 as cited in Jackson, 2015) and finally he must work with his colleagues, with special professionals, boards, societies outside of the school who could support these students who are usually marginalized and powerless in the society (Hoffman, 2009).

Practices of the school leadership for social justice and provision of equal educational opportunities

The creation or procreation of social inequalities within the school units was linked to the lack of institutional bodies that could repress them. However, their eradication was connected with the efforts that were made by the school unit itself through balancing actions or programs (integration classes, supplementary teaching programs, cooperation with other schools) and their actualization has

positive results for the students (increase in performance), for the work of the educators (recognition of inequalities & capability to deal with them) as well as for the school unit (positive atmosphere, consistency, registration of students). Thus, apart from the detection of the causes that undermine the students of vulnerable social groups, the framework of analyzing social justice expands to researching ways of re-establishing a sense of justice and disrupting the procreation of inequalities (Dantley & Tillman, 2010).

The enhancement of the autonomy of the school unit through the development of a system that would take into consideration the ideas of the educators regarding their roles as carriers of social justice (Pantić et al., 2011), was highlighted as the main way of immediately actualizing the request for equal educational opportunities and would allow the openness to new teaching methods (Gu & Day, 2013) and reflective practice (Thompson & Pascal, 2011) as well as reciprocal teaching, so that the educators will formulate, transfer and use their professional knowledge and experiences (Frost, 2012), re-evaluate their own practices and encourage their colleagues (Lysaker & Furuness, 2011).

The political dimension in the role of the school leader

The school leader, as the link between the educational system and the school unit, is the person who is responsible for the application of the policies that are established centrally. All participants recognized the political dimension in their role and they highlighted that they want to reverse the educational inequalities that originate from the system itself through the creation of an informal institutional framework, equal to the one that was formed centrally, that will promote cooperation, networking and the democratic decision-making, so that the students will develop skills that will make them capable of resisting and dealing with situations of social inequalities (Foucault, 1991).

The majority of the participants believe that it is achievable to bypass the legal / institutional framework when it creates or procreates inequalities since "there is room for maneuvers as long as the situation has been evaluated correctly and the spirit of the legislator has been comprehended and interpreted fully". As regards the actions of activist, the participants in the research suggest silent or indirect activism –meaning selective actions that do not oppose the general legal and administrative framework and do not include visibly controversial actions that will draw the attention of higher executives of the educational system (Loder – Jackson, 2011; Zembylas, 2013). At the same time, the activist school leader ought to be absolutely consistent as regards the bureaucratic demands of the system in order to avoid the inspection by his superior centrally (Ryan, 2016) while for the majority of the participants their most important "weapon", in order to defend matters of social justice within the school, is the Board of Teachers. Therefore, their main tactic is the creation of strong relationships of cooperation between all members of the unit (Ryan, 2010), as well as the creation of common structures

in decision-making regarding educational policy making (Lopez, 2011; Picower, 2012; Ryan, 2012) – and this tactic helps at the same time with the managing of potential resistance (Ryan, 2016). Finally, it was suggested that there should be cooperation with specialized scientists, alliances with other school leaders (Riehl, 2009; Theoharis, 2007; Oliva, Anderson & Byng, 2010; OECD, 2012), with consultants of pedagogical responsibility as well as with particular institutions, organizations, services (Moral et al., 2017) and acquaintances with important people in the institutional hierarchy (Ryan, 2016).

The main features that outline the profile of a socially fair leader were detected in the creation of a cooperative atmosphere, in empathy and in the perception of injustice, in the democratic perceptions, in the devotion to the vision and the goal to improve the effectiveness of the unit and in the ability to question his existing beliefs (reflection) – answers that are connected to the principles of equality and mainly to the provision of equal educational opportunities. Moreover, the main factors that contribute to the formation of perceptions for the promotion of social justice are the personal / ethical perceptions, knowledge, studies and training on these particular matters as well as the personal experiences.

Conclusion

The role of the school leadership apart from the typical activities also expands to targeted actions on the one hand that promote matters of equality, diversity and inclusion (Koutselini et al., 2004; Lumby & Coleman, 2007) and on the other hand to decisions that aim to the construction of values that will gradually guide to a greater social change towards equality and justice (Oliva et al, 2010).

The most effective response to the needs and matters of social justice lies within a more decentralized attempt of administration of the school unit (Theoharis, 2007) as well as within a process of opening to the local society and the scientific community (Moral et al., 2017). In order to apply the appropriate actions for the treatment of inequalities, the school leader must embrace elements from a fundamentally emotional framework of ethical values of fairness, solidarity and honesty – which originate from the principles that he holds, his actions, knowledge and experience (Rallis et al., 2008).

Along with the abovementioned ways, the role of the school leaders of social justice gains a political tone (Lugg & Boyd 1993 as cited in Brewer, 2011) and the promotion of social justice must become the subject of the cooperative attempt by the Board of Teachers (Burke, A. & Collier, D.R. 2017). A particular emphasis is given to the formation of the appropriate cooperative culture, the knowledge regarding the management of human resources, the formation of a clear vision (Gu & Johansson, 2012) and the promotion of practices of inclusion (Theoharis, 2007) in order to offer possibilities of participation in the decision-making process (Gunter, 2012) and to positively affect the educational work of the teachers by

offering them opportunities for the development of their scientific – pedagogical training (Biesta, Priestley et al., 2015).

The political dimension in the role of the school leader of social justice is detected in the process of balancing the tensions between the educational system and the needs of the students. He must exercise a powerful and flexible at the same time leadership, more politically active with a particular emphasis in dealing with the various mechanisms of manipulation in order to make students capable to distinguish between real and fake news, between the scientific study and advertising promotion (Horsthemke, 2017) and between the operation of populism and post-truth through the filter of critical thinking and insight. Furthermore, it demands an area of doubt and resistance on matters that the system itself promotes inequality (Niesche, 2013) through non-institutional practices that compose an activist strategy, and in order to embrace it, it requires the recognition of the political dimension of the educational leadership (Ospina, 2005 as cited in Hoffman, 2009). Bypassing the institutional – legal framework, when it creates or procreates inequalities, requires the accurate evaluation of the situation and the full comprehension and interpretation of the spirit of the legislator through the investigation of the history of the matter and the factors that created it, the clear image of the social – financial framework, the dynamic and the culture of the school unit (Ryan, 2010 & 2015).

Discussion

The present research examined the perceptions of a small sample of executives of the Greek public secondary education. However, it could also be the motive for future researches such as a comparative study of greater scale and with a wider geographical dispersion on the particular matter or even the conduct of a research regarding the perceptions of the educators of the classroom on social justice compared with the respective perceptions of the executives. The use of the quantitative data for the present study (examination of the results) or even the potential forms of the educational activism in an era in which the educational policy and practice is affected by the post-truth and populism, could also constitute a research proposal.

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