# Spaces and prospects for student empowerment in the debt-ridden Greek education system. Future possibilities for change according to student's views

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## Abstract

*This paper presents a research project that was conducted in Athens, Greece in 2018 and 2019. The main objective of this project was to address students' views on Greek society and education in the context of the socio-economic crisis, their prospects, and their aspirations for educational and social transformation. The paper concentrates on students' views on education and discusses the role of schools in creating democratic societies. It provides a closer insight into possible ways of thinking about education, and food for thought for any attempts to deconstruct or initiate radical change in the education system. It looks at the potentialities and possibilities of deploying critical pedagogy as a mode of resistance for transformative and empowering education within the Greek education system. It concludes that during times of multiple crises, critical pedagogy is clearly relevant and has a responsibility to rethink its views and practices, build active resistance and engage in fostering educational and social change that can lead to a more just, equal and fair society.*

**Keywords:** *Student empowerment, Critical pedagogy, Habitus, Greek education system, multiple crises*

## Introduction

In this paper, I discuss the multiple crises – such as neoliberal reforms, the socio-economic crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic – which challenge the education sector. Then, I present a research project that was conducted in Athens, Greece in 2018 and 2019. The main objective of this project was to address students' views on Greek society and education in the context of the socio-economic crisis, their prospects, and their aspirations for educational and social transformation. A research study which focuses on the education system in Greece and the potential role of students in the transformation of school and society can hold lessons for all who undertake a quest for meaning within, against and beyond the horizons of current arrangements in education and society. Many countries around the world might find this study informative regarding their own struggles in this era of multiple crises.

The global socio-economic crisis that began in 2008 was the by-product of deep flaws in the worldwide governing norms that followed the crisis of the 1970s and underpinned the neoliberal hegemony of the past 30 years (Gamble, 2009). The impact on many economies around the world has been so strong that it has even superseded the Great Depression of the 1930s in terms of severity (ibid). These conditions shaped both the national and the global context within which educational change took place in the following years. In a short period of time, the crisis affected the educational domain in both direct and indirect ways. This was unavoidable, as the educational system is not exempt from the consequences of crisis; such institutions are constrained and threatened by it (Chalari, 2020). The impact of the crisis was catalysed or exacerbated by the same coherent ideology – that of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism strove to transform education into a commodity and contributed to a dramatic deterioration in quality and to a serious rise in educational inequalities. The

many cuts to public education funding have gravely hindered the ability of the Greek education system to function.

The COVID-19 pandemic appeared in the aftermath of the socio-economic crisis, revealing not just health and medical deficiencies in many countries, but also the consequences of years of under-investment in the public sector. This was exacerbated by the adoption of neoliberal policies: the lack of social services, and the fact that the new neoliberal agenda had, for example, exhausted all the reserves of resources that would otherwise have existed for cases of emergency (Kapola et al., 2020). Moreover, the pandemic brought to the forefront existing inequalities in wealth, income and power and, of course, education. Education systems in many countries were already mired in a protracted state of lack of resources, infrastructure, and human capital, among others, before the appearance of COVID-19. This unprecedented health crisis and the prevention measures imposed in several countries around the world (such as social distancing, strict lockdowns, home isolation and the suspension of all educational institutions), undoubtedly reinforced existing issues, such as inequalities in schools. Such disparities further revealed the diverse challenges that students, parents and educators faced (Chalari &Atta, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic intensified pre-existing invisible inequalities and injustices and strikingly revealed that the endemic issues in education, unmasked by the 2008 economic collapse, remained unaddressed (Kapola et al., 2020).

The aforementioned crises have contributed to a dramatic deterioration in the quality of education and a rise in educational inequalities in Greece. This impact poses a serious threat to students, teachers and their families, and to the future of Greek society (Zambeta and Kolofousi, 2014). Educational inequality in socially excluded communities – namely, the unequal distribution of academic resources such as school funding, qualified and experienced teachers, books,

and technologies – leads to major differences in educational success. These communities tend to be historically disadvantaged and oppressed. Today more than ever, Greece needs to address the issues in question more closely, to ensure that the education system of the future enables students to confront and question structures, processes of domination and specific social constructions of reality. Greek society should aim to promote the equal participation of all in economic, social and cultural life to invoke social and economic mobility (Sianou, 2014; Askouni, 2013).

My objective in this paper is to address students' views on Greek society and education in the context of the socio-economic crisis. Moreover, it is to address their aspirations for educational and social transformation within the changing world situations in which we live. Specifically, I seek to recover students' 'subjugated knowledges', developing a language through which we can understand their (historically) constructed needs and competencies, and understand how to bring about change. 'Subjugated knowledges' is a term invented by Michel Foucault to describe knowledge and ways of knowing that are left out, opposed or ignored by the mainstreams of a dominant culture, and which are often located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity (Foucault, 2003). Denzin & Lincoln, as well as Freire, also engage with the importance of 'subjugated knowledges' and with bringing voices from the margins to the centre. According to them, the displacement of teachers, students, the minority, and the oppressed as a source of knowledge generates illuminating critical questions that do not arise in thought that begins from dominant groups (Freire, 2000; Denzin and Lincoln, 2005).

## Theoretical-Conceptual Framework

This study is based on theoretical perspectives drawn from the academic movement of critical pedagogy, embodied by such names as Freire, Giroux, Apple and McLaren. Critical pedagogy sees education as central to overcoming dogmatism and to thinking critically about the social transformations of human society, and has been widely characterised as a crucial construct in challenging the inequalities that have evolved in the context of schooling (Jennings and Lynn, 2005).

The origins of critical pedagogy are within critical theory. Critical theory refers specifically to a school of thought practised by the Frankfurt School theoreticians (Marcuse, Adorno, Benjamin, Fromm, Horkheimer). It calls for furthering social change through the emancipation of the oppressed, and regards education as a political practice that should be used to accelerate democratic ideals and to end oppression (Giroux, 2011a). Critical pedagogy is widely defined as a 'critical theory of education'. It has emerged in the last forty years as a radical theory of education that aims to play an important role in creating opportunities for social mobility. Since its inception, the movement constitutes a small minority within the academic community and public-school teaching. It has maintained an important component of educational research and inquiry and it presents a growing and challenging presence in both arenas (MacLaren, 2016). Critical educational theory owes a profound debt to European intellectual traditions, but also draws on a uniquely American tradition. Many critical educational theorists continue to draw inspiration from the work of the Frankfurt School of critical theory (ibid).

The theoretical foundations of critical pedagogy are based on Karl Marx's economic theory and Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, which emphasise the roles class and culture play in the schooling process. As a tool to

critique schooling and inequality, critical pedagogy lies on the philosophical premise that schools are more than just institutions of academic learning; they are socialising mechanisms that reflect the current cultural values of the middle and upper classes (Bowles and Gintis, 1976). Critical pedagogy explores this idea through the following theoretical and analytical strands of thought: (1) Social Reproduction Theory, (2) Cultural Reproduction Theory, and (3) Theories of Resistance (Jennings and Lynn, 2005).

Critical pedagogy is a cross-disciplinary field that frames the school as both a site of an oppressive force that preserves inequality, and as an institution for self and social empowerment (Hooks, 2003; Gay, 1995). Critical pedagogy does not constitute a homogeneous set of ideas but is as diverse as its many adherents. It represents an approach to schooling that shares some common characteristics, constructs and objectives that unite its theorists. Critical educational theorists are concerned with the centrality of politics and power in the understanding of how schools work, and they have produced critiques of the political economy of schooling. Furthermore, they consider how such institutions are linked to the state and education, the representation of texts, and the construction of student subjectivity (McLaren, 2016).

Social Reproduction Theory, which demonstrates how schools can systematically reproduce the inequalities, values and privileges of existing elites through administrative and instructional practices, is an important starting point for critical pedagogy. It serves, perhaps, as the foundation upon which many critical pedagogy theorists build their commitment to doing progressive work that attempts to change the nature of teaching and learning and deconstruct social reproduction (see for example Jaime-Diaz & Méndez-Negrete, 2020). Cultural Reproduction Theory, on the other hand, serves as an illustration of the important ways in which schools reproduce the privileged cultures in the wider

education system (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). In contrast, Theories of Resistance provide insight into how students actively fight against forms of dehumanisation that are inherent to systems. More importantly, Theories of Resistance provide an important space for discussions about critical work that aim to transform social relations in some fundamental way (Jennings and Lynn, 2005).

My study is also informed by Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical concept of habitus. Habitus is a complex and enigmatic concept that Bourdieu developed to demonstrate not only the ways in which 'the body (is) in the social world, but also the ways in which the social world is in the body' (Reay 2004, 432). Habitus could be defined as a gendered, simultaneously rigid and dynamic resource that individuals possess and use as they engage in emotional practice, and as a system of durable, transposable dispositions, bodily beliefs, passions and drives (Bourdieu, 1990). According to Bourdieu, habitus is a socialised body; a structured body, 'a body which has incorporated the immanent structures of a world or of a particular sector of that world – a field - and which structures the perception of that world as well as action in that world' (Bourdieu, 1998, 81). Thus, habitus is historical, a product of all biographical experience (Steinmetz, 2006), embodied and expressed through durable ways of standing, speaking, walking, and thereby of feeling and thinking.
In summary, through a bottom-up approach drawn from critical pedagogy and Boudieu's concept of habitus, I attempt to explain, analyse and develop a holistic understanding of students' views on education in contemporary Greece.

## Research questions

This paper focuses on the following research question and sub-questions:
- How do students view and describe education in the era of multiple crises in Greece?

- What are students' views on ethnic diversity and racism?
- What changes in Greek education do they suggest?

## Methodology

This paper is based on a qualitative study. The material of the study was collected in two secondary schools in Athens, which constituted suitable venues because of their student composition. School A was located close to the city centre and contained large percentages of students from immigrant and working-class Greek families. School B was located in a southern suburb of Athens, and catered mostly to students from middle-class Greek families, with a small percentage of immigrant students. I conducted focus group interviews with a small number of students so as to approach the research questions of the study in an open way (Krueger and Casey, 2000). My intention in the current research study was to ensure access to a sufficient number of research participants whose views would capture diversity of experience and would help me classify key issues for future development. Thus, employing the 'purposeful sample' technique (Patton, 2002), I chose randomly from the two schools sixteen participants, eight from each school on the basis of gender and age (eight girls and eight boys). The students were between 13-15 years old (the 2nd and 3rd years of lower secondary school).

The study complied with European and Greek legislation and fundamental ethical principles, including those reflected in the Charter for Fundamental Rights of the European Union, the European Convention on Human Rights and its Supplementary Protocols, and the GDPR). Moreover, the study was guided by BERA – The Revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2011) and The Statement of Ethical Practice of the British Sociological Association (2002). Before the focus groups were conducted, ethical approval was sought and secured from the relevant public authorities. Moreover, voluntary informed

consent was obtained from all students involved, as well as from their parents or guardians. The informed consent procedures focused on maximum transparency to ensure that consent is fully informed. However, I kept in mind that it was difficult to obtain fully informed consent because I would not be able to anticipate the events that would emerge in the field and fully inform the participants of these. For this reason, I tried to take a critical look at the processes through which I sought the informed consent (Malone, 2003) and I tried to achieve a reflexive approach to the study. This involved stepping back from time to time, thinking critically about the purpose, intention, stance and claims, and reflecting on what I was doing, what kinds of knowledge were being produced, which concepts were too rigid and which frameworks hid more than they revealed (Bourdieu, 2004).

All the focus groups were conducted at the schools by mutual agreement. I took great care over the selection and phrasing of the questions, to ensure that their meaning was both purposeful and clear to students and did not entail any leading or bias. When analysing the data, I paid careful attention to the respondents' other characteristics, which could co-determine students' views (e.g. race, class). Namely, the research project relied also on an intersectional approach (Choo and Ferree, 2010).

Students constitute a vulnerable group, but within this group are other vulnerable and marginalised individuals. In this study, I aimed to select participants from a wide range of different social groups in order to ensure heterogeneity and give these groups the opportunity to be represented and heard. Moreover, I aimed to minimise the risk of enhancing any of the students' possible vulnerabilities or stigmatisations. Thus, I tried to foster and promote student participation by providing a safe and comfortable environment, allowing them to freely express their opinions, beliefs, cultures and identities, and to be

treated with confidentiality.

I analysed the data employing the technique of qualitative content analysis. The analysis began early in the research process and it was subject to continuous review and revision. The process of analysis was reflective and cyclical in that it was directed to reveal themes as they emerged from the original research questions (Rapley, 2001). Both critical pedagogy, as well as habitus, provided me with a theoretical framework to interpret my data and shed light on the ways in which students view education in the era of multiple crises in Greece.

## Findings: Students' views on Greek society and education in the era of multiple crises in Greece

### *Refugee crisis and racism*

The refugee crisis that started in 2013 has reached extreme rates, with millions of people being forced to abandon their countries and homes because of war and political violence: it has resulted in journeys of despair to and throughout Europe and around the world. Over the period of 2015 and 2016, 2.68 million refugees arrived in Europe (UNHCR). Most of them, in their attempt to seek a safer life, entered the European Union by land and sea, risking their lives. The year of 2016 was the deadliest for refugees, with 5096 deaths occurring during sea crossings (UNHCR).

The ongoing refugee crisis has forced many countries to deal with the large number of considerable political, economic, social, and health dimensions of this humanitarian crisis (Blitz et al., 2017). However, the distribution of these challenges is highly uneven across the European Union, as most of the refugees who arrived in the EU entered from Greece. Greece has been struggling to cope with the refugee crisis while being at the same time in the middle of a severe

economic crisis – a fact that greatly reduces the possibility of refugees finding opportunities for employment that could promise financial stability and integration into their new country (Pajic et al., 2018). The poor living conditions in Greece because of the socio-economic crisis, as well as the consequences of the refugee crisis, have contributed to the vulnerabilities of both natives and migrants.

Moreover, this situation has created new conditions that call for education to respond to its important role and act as a dominant tool for the smooth integration of migrant and refugee children, as well as a tool for mitigating social inequalities. Access to education is a non-negotiable right of every child, making its defense of vital importance. According to the Greek Ministry of Education and Article 9 PD 220/2007, children aged between 6 and 15, living in dispersed urban settings (such as relocation accommodation, squats, apartments, hotels, and reception centres), may go to schools near their place of residence. They may enrol in the morning classes alongside Greek children, in schools identified by the Ministry of Education.

Greece has pledged to help all refugee and migrant children in the country attend school; however, the education sector faces pressing problems and challenges regarding this. A gap persists in meeting the needs of youngsters who have missed years of schooling due to conflict or displacement. There are roughly 20,300 children of school age in Greece, and less than half are enrolled in formal Greek schools (Amnesty International 2016; UNHCR). The fact that the EU-funded programme has been mired in delays, together with the chronic problems of the Greek education system, has made this problem more intense.

In this context, students in the focus group interviews were prompted to discuss ethnic diversity, racist incidents between students as well as between teachers,

students, and parents, and inequalities in education. The majority of students initially expressed politically correct views. At the beginning of the discussion, most students stated that they did not witness xenophobia or racism in the teachers in their schools. Some reported that Greek teachers' behaviour towards immigrant and refugee students had changed; teachers no longer spoke derogatively of immigrant students as they used to in the past. The majority of students also argued that there were few, if any, incidents of racist behaviour between students in their school. Initially, only a student from Albania stated that he had experienced racist incidents at school. However, as the discussion moved forward, more students seemed to move away from their politically correct speech to describe racist incidents between students. They reported that Greek students sometimes communicated negative opinions about immigrant students in the classroom and schoolyard - they might, for example, call an immigrant student by their nationality and tell them to go back to their country. They did state, however, that this mostly occurred among younger students. It is important to note at this point that the dynamics developed in the focus groups were such that students felt able to come forward and admit the existence of racist practices.

> '…only in primary school, where the children are tougher without realising it …this incident didn't happen to me but to another student who is from another country… they were saying to him 'you are from another country', 'go to your country' …but they were very young and they couldn't understand what they were saying.' (Gerasimos-B)

The racist incidents that students described were framed as occurrences that happened outside their immediate environment. Gerasimos, for example, as Goffman (1984) would say, takes the stance of a narrator, not that of a participant, in his attempt to describe students' attitudes towards diversity.

While discussing racial violence, some students put forward that, during this period of crises, immigrants and refugees served as scapegoats, providing a distraction from the real causes of the situation and presenting easy targets for bullying. Moreover, some students acknowledged that racist incidents towards refugees and immigrants had increased, because of the rise in their numbers both in schools and in Greece in general. These students presented racist incidents as inevitable – a simple matter of proportions – and they described the extent of the phenomenon, but did not question the cause.

> 'Usually, when there is some kind of a crisis, feelings such as these [xenophobia, racism] become stronger…'
> (Gerasimos-B)
> 'There are more refugees in the country, more refugees in the schools, so the racist incidents have increased…'
> (Marileni-B)

Some students suggested that the increase in racist incidents was a result of the way that people from other countries are treated by Greek society as a whole. They stated that, although Greek society is regarded as being fairly open to diversity, in reality it is a non-inclusive, racist society. They expressed the opinion that Greeks were racist before the economic crisis but had no reason to express it; now that they had lost their jobs and their quality of life, they had many reasons to do so. Students reported that some people, having internalised the dominant narratives (Fisher, 2009) about immigrants and refugees, believed that they had reduced opportunities for school places, jobs and housing. According to such people, if immigrants and refugees were sent away, native Greeks would have more access to resources.

> '…we are racists towards the people who come from other countries, and this happens because we think that we are better than them and that they are inferior to us. But this

> doesn't happen because of the crisis but, in general, we think that Greece is the best country because of the history we have learnt…'
> (Vassilis-A)
> 'Some people believe that the refugees have taken all the jobs… but this is not true, the refugees do jobs that the Greeks do not want to do…'
> (Mateo-A)

All these aforementioned factors have contributed to a serious increase in violence and intimidation directed at Greece's immigrants. In a recent report, Human Rights Watch (2018) warned that xenophobic violence in Greece had reached 'alarming proportions' and accused Greek authorities of doing nothing to stop the attacks. Moreover, the economic crisis has given rise to a dangerous new form of nationalism. Golden Dawn, the once-marginal extremist party, won 18 parliamentary seats in Greece's 2012 general elections by campaigning against austerity measures and immigration and by blaming undocumented migrants for the economic crisis.

After discussing ethnic diversity in Greece, students reported that they believed the country had a responsibility to help immigrants and refugees as much as possible.

> 'They make a whole new beginning, new home, new job, everything is new to them... they start from the beginning; they have lost everything.'
> (Maria-A)

Students' replies suggest that the crisis has not only caused serious disruptions to the social and political web of Greece, but has also inspired the formation of various local movements. To some extent and for some people, new forms of groups and collectivities have begun to emerge. As Zambeta and Kolofousi (2014) argue, this crisis may have some creative effect towards the development

of new solidarities and 'new spaces of hybrid social practices' (2014, 69). Each of these new solidarities may be linked to alternative political options that fight neoliberalism, state authority and representative democracy.

Since the beginning of the socio-economic crisis, many Greeks, especially young people, held out against neoliberalism and state authority in various ways. They found new ways of political participation in society and aimed to become socially useful. They experimented and elaborated strategies to access educational and professional opportunities in a spirit of cooperation (Pechtelidis, 2016a, 2016b).

***Students' suggestions for changes in the Greek education system***

In the views of the students interviewed, Greek schools have been hit hard by extreme cuts. Using examples from their own experience, students described a material crisis with implications for their schools, and detailed some of the challenges they faced because of it: a serious shortage of teaching materials, and a lack of funding available for basic requirements.

> '…fewer teachers, fewer books, less equipment… we don't have balls and other materials for the PE, we don't have equipment such as projectors, computers...' (Gerasimos-B)
>
> '...our classrooms do not have the basics: fans, chairs, lamps, heating...' (Paul-A)

The impact of the crisis on schooling as students describe is not simply one of perspective and perception. Since the socio-economic crisis broke out in Greece, and since the implementation of the policies of the memorandum, there have been drastic cuts in the public sector and the entire education system. Public education expenditure in Greece has always been particularly low compared to other EU countries (between 3-3.6% of GDP in the last two

decades). In the years following the socio-economic crisis, spending on education was reduced even further, placing Greece third from bottom in education spending in the European Union (OECD, 2019). The current education budget is insufficient and, as a result, not only is there a serious shortage of teaching materials, but also a lack of funding available for basic requirements. Under these circumstances, as students reported, many schools have become scarcely able to function properly (Traianou, 2013).

According to some students, the socio-economic crisis has had a severe and destructive impact on the access to free education for all, and on the quality of that education. For example, many students reported that some classmates were unable to participate in school activities because they could not afford the cost.

> '…sometimes, when we go on excursions, many children cannot come because their families have financial problems and cannot pay for the tickets.'
> (Maria-A)

The students under study suggested that there should be changes to the ways Greek schools function, in order to meet the new challenges brought about by this time of multiple crises in the country. Greek schools, according to the students, need better buildings, libraries and books, new technology infrastructure, and more teaching staff – although, given the current economic policies of austerity, these are unlikely to be priorities for the government.

> 'Schools should be more organised... they should have the money to get the classrooms repaired, to get them painted, to buy fans... to clean them.'
> (Maria-A)

It can be argued that the students dreamt of a better education within a self-evident limiting framework; they highlighted material shortcomings, they

suggested changes to infrastructure and equipment, and spoke in terms of training and preparation for the labour market rather than in terms of pedagogy. By 'changes', these students seemed to mean looking at schools through a different lens, as well as changes merely to the organisation of schools, to the professional development of teachers, or to the curriculum – changes which mainstream approaches in policy and practice set out to implement. Reforms and reorganisations in these domains induce a mode of pedagogy and set of social arrangements that uses education to produce consumer-based notions of agency in the service of war, profits, power, and violence while at the same time instrumentalising all forms of knowledge (Giroux, 2013). In my opinion, these reforms would only succeed in refreshing and refining the processes of alienation and subjection that led to the current multiple crises in Greece.

However, there were some students who had the insight that education is not simply about knowledge, and these suggested an overall change to the learning system and to the purpose of education. A new system should, these students suggested, be more flexible and responsive to students' capabilities and interests and replace rote learning with active and meaningful learning. Schools should be open for fewer hours, especially during the warmer months, and should provide vocational guidance and counselling for students.

> 'Teachers should not discriminate against their students, and they should not put labels on them.'
> (Mateo-A)
> '...teachers should care about what is happening in their students' families... maybe a student is hungry and his[i] family has financial problems – that is why he cannot study...'
> (Aris-A)

Students also stated that teachers and parents should not focus on marks but should reward each student's efforts to learn.

> '[Getting] high marks is the wrong motivation... students should not try to learn just to get high marks, they should do it for themselves.'
> (Efi-A)
> 'This is also the parents' fault, when they say to their children, "If you get under 18, I will not get you a mobile...'
> (Lucia-A)

The Greek education system has a steadfast commitment to testing and grading. This commitment persists despite research and theory revealing the caustic consequences of both in an education system designed to support human agency and democratic principles (Bolton and Elmore, 2013). While the stated aim of testing and grading in schools is to raise achievement, these procedures have powerful emotional consequences - e.g. anxiety and discomfort - for all students, but especially for students from the lower classes (Reay, 2005). Research uncovers the failure of assessment procedures, and so do students.

Some students reckoned that, in today's rapidly changing society, it was important for students to learn skills, attitudes and values. They noted that school should encourage critical thinking, creativity and imagination. They also asserted that more attention should be given to learning how to learn. Students also suggested that the education system should allocate more time for them to discuss school and social issues with their teachers. They recommended teachers letting them take initiative, further encouraging teamwork, and promoting values. Students described school as though it were outside society – a workshop they had to attend before entering real society and real life.

> ‘I think the role of education is to prepare us to go out into society, to become able to act in difficult situations. Right now, education concentrates only on knowledge, on particular subjects, exams, marks, but not on real life…’
> (Afroditi-B)
> ‘I believe that our school provides us with the knowledge we need, but it would be great if we could talk and discuss things at school like the things that we’re discussing now with you. The school should give us more things… for example, we are told that things out there are difficult, but no one explains to us what this means… No one tells us how life outside school is…. Schools should prepare us for real life.’
> (Litsa-B)

Furthermore, students recommended more free time for their hobbies and their interests. For this to happen, they suggested less time at school, at ‘frontistiria’, or at language schools. ‘Frontistiria’ are private preparatory schools, designed for students who plan on taking national higher education entrance examinations (Traianou, 2013), but also for students who want to learn a foreign language or practise arts and other extra-curricular activities.

> ‘… it would be nice not to have to go to frontistiria after school; it would be nice to have the day free after school...’
> (Nikos-B)
> ‘It would be nice to do activities at school in the afternoon – theatre, hobbies, etc. – like many schools abroad, and after the activities to be free to do what I want…’
> (Efi-A)

According to the students, ‘frontistiria’ should be abolished, as they cost students their precious free time, and their families large amounts of money. Private spending in the sector of shadow education (‘frontistiria’, lessons in foreign languages, art education and extra-curricular activities) is unusually high in Greece (3.3% of the average household budget) compared to in other EU countries (Zambeta, 2014). As Zambeta (2014) argues, the main reason that

Greek families turn to 'frontistiria' is that they do not trust formal education to equip students with the crucial skills needed for university entrance examinations.

Students continued by suggesting that school should aim to broaden students' horizons, help them build well-rounded personalities and characters, and learn how to behave. Knowledge should come second to personality and character.

> '...school should teach us more useful things, such as how to save money; things that we will need in our life, not arts, music, things that we will never use.'
> (Vassilis-A)
> **'**The aims of the education system should be to make students want to seek knowledge and not to feel that they are compelled to learn.'
> (Michalis-B)

In the view of several students, teachers should be subject to a system of evaluation and assessment. This evaluation would help them improve their work and would have positive results for students.

> **'**Teachers should be evaluated. Not all the teachers are good at teaching... but I think it is very important to have good teachers, [who are] young, with joy and liveliness.'
> (Aris-A)

Evaluation was viewed by these students as positive and welcome. Students did not go beneath the surface to consider the current neoliberal approaches to evaluation. They seemed to have internalised the neoliberal dominant narratives about evaluation which focus on the implementation of processes that celebrate superficial and measurable results based on a commodified view of what counts as knowledge and what the role of knowledge is in people's lives. The current implementation of school evaluation is missing approaches that emphasise

collaborative and down-top evaluations and it is impoverishing public education (Dahlberg, Moss, Pence, 2013).

According to one student, copying programmes from abroad, from countries that have nothing to do with Greece, should stop.

> '...yes, they will have to change the education system because they try to copy education systems from abroad but they do not succeed...'
> (Michalis-B)

Most of the students believed that they should have the right to make important decisions, such as choosing to study subjects relevant to their chosen future professions.

> **'**In the first grade of secondary school, we could follow and take part in all the subjects, and then we could decide which subjects we want to follow and concentrate on those that we are interested in.'
> (Mateo-A)

It was evident that students placed importance on specialisation. Many students spoke in terms of education and preparation for the labour market, rather than in terms of pedagogy. It seemed that students had sacrificed the value of education for the goal of employability (Williams, 2011). Interestingly, they suggested e.g. not being taught music or art because they would not need them in the future.

One student suggested that he would like for students in secondary education to be able to seek out work experience through internships relevant to their occupational interests. He believed that early work experience would enable students to have better understanding of different available careers, to

understand the breadth of job opportunities across the economy, and to potentially identify realistic career aspirations and make informed choices.

> '...I would like our school to be more practical... we visited another school and there, from the age of 14, students could do some kind of internship; they could work in various jobs for a few months… they could learn how it is to work and get paid…' (Gerasimos-B)

These suggestions could be possible, in the views of several students, if Greek people decided to change. Change is always difficult, because people are reluctant to change habits and aim for something different, even if what is different is much better. From my personal standpoint, only if we change the purpose of education will we allow everything else to change. Any radical change to education should start from the very roots of the education system, from its basic meaning and purpose (Montgomery et al., 2016; De Lissovoy, 2010).

## Discussion: Spaces and prospects for student empowerment

The multiple crises in Greece have been catalysed or exacerbated by the same coherent ideology – that of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism has striven to transform education into a commodity and, when we read students' thoughts on education, we can clearly see this happening in Greece nowadays. It seems that the Greek education system does not cultivate in students the courage to be different or to seek to change their living conditions. However, it can be argued that in students' replies we can also discern traces of critical thinking and autonomy, which could be used as a fertile basis in a critical pedagogical intervention which would aim at re-imagining and working towards a new path for future education.

Some students' views about what needs to be done in Greek schools align with what Fielding and Moss call 'the common school and the school of diversity' – that is: schools committed to 'a recognition of singularity, a resistance to working with pre-defined categories and outcomes, support for the construction of identities and solidarities, and a desire to experiment in learning and other projects' (Ball, 2013, 29). Such schools would be committed to finding new ways of valuing diversity and building inspirational and reflective identities within a pedagogic community (Smyth and Wrigley, 2013).

It is encouraging that there are students in Greece who still consider and suggest possibilities for a different and better education system, despite the fact that they themselves face a material crisis, with implications in both practical and moral terms. We could argue that, in students' replies, we can find traces of thinking against the forms of dehumanisation that are inherent to the Greek education system – traces that the theories of resistance that critical pedagogy lies on would describe as an important space for discussions about critical work that aim to transform education and society in some fundamental way (Jennings and Lynn, 2005).

For example, several students stated that Greek schools need to change the way they assess students. These views are consistent with a multitude of theoretical and philosophical arguments against testing and grading. The existing assessment procedure does not conform with social justice as it is negatively influenced by race, class, and gender, and consolidates and legitimises the reproductive function of the school mechanism – as reflected in the characteristics of the school careers of the offspring of the exploited and dominated classes (Reynolds and Trehan, 2010).

For critical pedagogues, the struggle for a change in assessment is a critical

point for intervention and action in favour of less socially advantaged students and school democratisation in order to, in practice: (a) resist dominant social relations that shape class features in the school, (b) negate the negative school verdicts that act as self-fulfilling prophecies, generate social stigma, but also result in reinforcing the establishment, and (c) create prospects for the application of progressive liberation practices at school (Liambas, 2019).

Perhaps moments of misalignment and tension in students' lives may give rise to critical thinking about education and social change. As can be noted in Bourdieu's work and, in particular, in *The Weight of the World* (1999), there is a great deal of striving, resistance and action aimed at changing current circumstances; many of the poor and dispossessed, such as those interviewed by Bourdieu and his colleagues, search for ways of changing and transforming their lives. Often, as Bourdieu (1999) argues, the movement of habitus across a new, unfamiliar field may lead to resistance and action. The same, we could argue, may be happening in Greece in this era of multiple crises.

In this paper, I align with critical pedagogy that goes beyond the rational limits of critical social theory, includes complex, affective implications of transformation, and that does not simply attempt to change students' rational understandings through replacing faith with reason and belief with knowledge (Jansen, 2009). Moreover, I view schooling as a form of cultural politics that represents an introduction to, preparation for, and the legitimation of particular forms of social life. Such social stratification is rationalised through the knowledge industry into class-divided tiers that reproduce inequality, racism, sexism and homophobia, and that fragment democratic social relations through an emphasis on competitiveness and cultural ethnocentrism. I see schooling as central to overcoming dogmatism and to thinking critically about the social transformations of human society. Furthermore, I argue that education is both a

political and cultural affair, and that its role, as well as the power dynamics that control its process, should be disclosed and challenged.

Drawing on the above, I propose an inquiry into education that will not simply move in a reformist direction but will oppose subjectivity and the individualistic approach to empowerment and, finally, will recognise the active role of human beings in making their own history. The theoretical tools do exist, but need to be reworked in consideration of evidence and theory generated during the multiple crises in Greece (Gounari and Grollios, 2012).

## Conclusions

My intention in undertaking this research study was to discuss and provide a closer insight into possible ways of thinking about education and to provide food for thought for any attempts to deconstruct or initiate radical change in the education system. My study concentrated on exploring students' views on education, as well as on discussing the possible roles of schools in the process of creating democratic societies. This study was an initial endeavour; however, I believe that, throughout its course, I have managed to address some important issues. I posit that the findings of this study may serve as an indication of the need for further research.

Greece has entered a long period of challenging transition, during which the economic, humanitarian and refugee crises are reshaping the way people think about society and themselves. In this challenging transition, schools need to be sites for and participants in substantive social change, public spaces where projects are undertaken in response to the needs and the desires of the community. Moreover, they should serve as places where young people grow to become adaptable to change and learn to be proactive, developing skills that will help them face challenges, cultivate mutual respect and cooperation, and

build emotional happiness. They need to become places that give students the support they need to blossom in life (Fielding and Moss, 2011). Unfortunately, in this time of multiple crises, education cannot fulfill its role because it is under siege from neoliberal capitalism. It is shrinking, losing its status as a social right, and is projected as a mere commodity for sale while, at the same time, becoming less democratic, de-theorised, and de-critiqued. At such a time, critical pedagogy, as a theory, as a movement, and as praxis, is clearly relevant and more than necessary.

Critical pedagogy is the field of education that does not align with neoliberalism but seeks to overcome its obstacles – those posed by exaggerated technicality and the competitive and individualistic model. Critical pedagogy is committed to the empowering of the powerless (e.g. the students) and to the transformation of existing social inequalities and injustices. It is grounded on a social and educational vision of social justice and equality (Kincheloe, 2008). It is dedicated to the mitigation of human suffering and to addressing and embodying the affective, emotional, and lived dimensions of everyday life (ibid). The theorists of critical pedagogy are especially concerned with those groups and individuals who are suffering, and whose lives are affected by discrimination, inequalities and poverty. They seek out the causes of such suffering in their understandings of power with its ideological, hegemonic, disciplinary, and regulatory dimensions (Smyth, 2011). Moreover, they critique the purpose and function of education as shaped by oppressive external forces, such as neoliberalism, and regard their work as a first step towards forms of political action. Such analysis can redress the injustices found in the field site or constructed in the very act of research itself (McLaren, 2016).

Nowadays, the critical pedagogy movement has a responsibility to rethink its views and practices in light of the multiple crises, to build active resistance to

the aforementioned processes, and engage in fostering educational and social change that could lead to a more just, equal and fair society. We, as teachers, educators and researchers, are the captains of the ship that drives critical pedagogy forward. Through our work, we are tasked to relieve 'the weight of the world' (Bourdieu et al., 1999) which oppresses young people and causes them to suffer in numerous ways, and to 'disclose the possibility of living together differently, with less misery or no misery: the possibility daily withheld, overlooked or unbelieved' (Bauman, 2000, 215).

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**Notes**

[i] All quotations have been translated word-for-word, and have not been edited to use non-sexist language.

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