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**Abstract:**

Social justice is a key concept in current research in sociology of education. Embedded in the discourse on social justice are the notions of meritocracy and the welfare state.

Embedded in current discourse in Greece is the view that in a knowledge society a country's investment in education maximizes human capital, promotes equality of opportunities and social inclusion.

Despite official rhetoric, however, research findings show that state secondary schools fail to provide students, and especially those from less advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, with adequate knowledge of the English language. This has given rise to a widely spread system of out of school support, in the form of organized language courses, or private English language tuition, operating in parallel with state schools.

The empirical research uses both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection in order to investigate a) the effect of out of school support on the teaching of English as a foreign language in state secondary schools, and b) the reasons for the massive resort to out of school support, although English is taught as a foreign language in state schools.

Research findings show that the privatization of "free" state education means that the family's cultural, economic and social capital, rather than student ability and effort, impacts on students' performance. Given that there is an interconnection among the various forms of capital, there is strong evidence that existing social inequalities are reproduced and legitimized through schooling.

Implications for policy makers are clear. First, there is an urgent need for the restructuring of the teaching of English as a foreign language in state secondary schools. In addition, the provision of equal opportunities for all students means that social class inequality, which so far have not been effectively dealt with within schooling, should be at the epicenter of policies geared towards meritocratic and effective state schooling.

**Title:**

Who learns English? An investigation of the relationship between parental socioeconomic status and students' performance in English as a foreign language in Greek state secondary schools

**1. Introduction**

Social justice is a key concept in current research in sociology of education and many qualitative studies examine educational policy and factors impacting on educational attainment. Embedded in the broad term social justice are the notions of meritocracy and the welfare state.

Meritocracy means that individuals are rewarded based on merit, and thus traditional sources of privilege such as inheritance, property, or inherited markers such as race, ethnicity, or gender are not strong determinants of economic advantage (Bills, 2004:39). In a meritocratic society, the allocation of financial or symbolic rewards is on the basis of achievement, not on the basis of social class background, gender, or race. The educational system in a meritocratic society is structured in such a way that it provides all children with equal opportunities for fulfilling their full potential, regardless of social class origin. According to meritocratic ideology, educational success should be determined by ability and effort, "not social background and other social characteristics" (Marks and McMillan, 2003:453).

Of course, there is not a society anywhere in the world that is purely meritocratic, one that provides equal opportunities (Kelpandis, 2002:307), but the degree to which societies can be described as meritocratic varies. Despite educational reforms in the postwar period in many countries, students from working class backgrounds had lower performance than their middle class counterparts and were underrepresented in higher education.

Welfare state refers to a type of state in which political power intervenes, "through policy and administration" in the mechanisms of the market, in order to "modify the play of market forces" (Briggs, 1961, 2000), in at least three ways. First, by guaranteeing individuals and families of minimum income, regardless of "the market value of their work", second by reducing social insecurity, and the provision of security, including providing individuals and their families with resources to deal with "social contingencies", such as sickness, inability to work due to old age, or unemployment, and third by ensuring that all citizens, regardless of socioeconomic background, are offered certain agreed social services at the highest standard (e.g. education, medical care, and social services. Von Hayek (2000:90) states that the term "welfare state" is sometimes used to describe a state which is concerned with "problems other than those of the maintenance of law and order".

In this context, education is now considered as a significant component and a basic pillar of the welfare state (Tomlinson, 2001). In Greece, Article 16 of the Constitution declares that education constitutes a basic mission for the state, and considers the provision of education as the basic mission of the state and establishes the freedom of research, science and teaching, the academic freedom and free access to education at all levels. According to the Greek Constitution the State has the responsibility to provide free education at all levels from pre-school to university. Education constitutes a basic mission for the state and shall aim at the moral, intellectual, professional and physical training of Greeks, the development of national and religious consciousness and at their formation as free and responsible citizens.

However, it has not always been so. In most countries, before World War II, free state education was limited to primary education. For example, in Great Britain, while free elementary education was introduced in 1870, it was only in 1944 that secondary schools stopped to be fee-paying, after the Education Act (1944). As a result, access to post compulsory education was very limited, and dominated by students from privileged socioeconomic backgrounds. After World War II, most countries witnessed fundamental changes in education, which meant that the state assumed responsibility for education, apart from elementary education. Changes in many countries were

twofold (Kelpanidis, 2002). First there was an increase in the years of compulsory schooling, and second, the state received the cost for post compulsory and higher education. This redistribution of financial resources towards people for disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds was largely built around the main conceptual and ideas of human capital theory (Shultz 1961; Becker 1993). Underpinning the human capital model is the idea of a “clear, direct and linear relationship between the expansion of educational credentials and economic development” (Tomlinson, 2008:50), with both individuals and the state benefiting from the widening of participation in education, and mainly, higher education. More specifically, human capital theory views participation in education as an investment with both social and private benefits (Ashton and Green 1996). The social benefits involve a highly skilled, flexible workforce, which increases the national economic output. The private returns include higher individual earnings, and more opportunities for occupational progression.

However, despite the fact that universal access to primary and secondary education has been achieved in many countries in the Western world (Shavit, Arum, and Gamoran, 2007:1), this has not led to equal opportunities for students from different socioeconomic backgrounds.

## **2. Education and social inequalities**

In the last decades the sociology of education has focused on the complicity of educational practices in reproducing social inequalities (Bates, 2006). The Coleman report (1966) concluded that despite school reform, educational advantage existed for students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. Similarly, Jencks argued that, even if all schools were made equal, this would not lead to a reduction of socio-economic inequalities (Jencks, 1972). Bowles and Gintis (1976) pointed to the role of education systems in transmitting social inequality and privilege. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) argue that the fact that children from higher socioeconomic backgrounds have better educational outcomes is attributed to their higher levels of capital, be it economic, cultural, or social.

More recently, research studies also document a close relationship between social background and educational attainment in most industrialized countries. Examining social inequalities in French secondary schools, Duru-Bellat (1996:342) finds that “The main factor that accounts for the variety of pupils' school careers is the social economic status (SES) of the family”. In an edited volume, Shavit and Blossfeld (1993) analyze data from 13 countries and argue that, the relationship between social background and educational attainment has remained the same in most industrialized countries, apart from Sweden and the Netherlands.

Socioeconomic inequalities in education have also been examined in relation to material, social, and cultural resources.

As far as material resources are concerned, differential access to material resources account for differences in educational outcomes. For example, upper middle class families can afford costly out-of-school support for their children, thus guaranteeing better performance. Sianou-Kyrgiou (2006) examines the performance of students from different social classes and concludes that students from upper social classes have better performance in the university entrance examinations. This is due to the fact that they receive more out-of-school support and the fact that their families are in better position to “buy” educational commodities. One outcome of the indirect “privatisation” of access to higher education is the fact that despite policies for the widening of participation in higher education, social class inequalities exist. Various studies show that the increase in participation in higher education has benefited mainly the middle classes and “the most privileged students” and that class inequalities have been persistent (Metcalf, 1997; Reid, 1998: 183; Pugsley, 1998:85; Machin and Vignoles, 2004: 126; Iannelli, 2007:326). Students from more privileged socioeconomic backgrounds dominate more prestigious university departments (e.g. medical school). In contrast, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are enrolled to less

prestigious departments leading to less ambitious occupational trajectories with less material and symbolic benefits.

Social capital has also been linked to educational success. Social capital is defined as the "aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu, 1986: 248). Social capital takes the form of the family's social networks and connections with educationally significant individuals. Social capital has been linked both to academic performance, and to access to information sources that enable the best possible choice.

Bourdieu's theoretical framework highlights the influence of different forms of cultural, social and economic capital and habitus on choice about higher education (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). He argues that there is a connection between the unequally distributed cultural capital according to social class and educational achievement. Middle class families are endowed with cultural capital and because the dominant culture is the culture of the school, middle class students perform better at school. Pupils of less advantaged social backgrounds perform less well because they lack the resources that bring familiarity with the dominant culture. Similarly, examining the impact of cultural capital on academic performance, Hansen and Mastekaasa (2006) argue that there is a link between class origin and academic performance, and that students who originate in classes that score high in terms of cultural capital tend to receive the highest grades.

The relationship between these different forms of capital is important. According to Lynch and Baker (2005), economic capital is easily converted into the kind of cultural capital that schools require of students and "go on to value and accredit" (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). They conclude that those lacking in the cultural capital that schooling demands, and who lack the resources and social capital (networks) to acquire it, will experience relative educational failure. Research has revealed the impact of social and cultural capital, as well as habitus on attainment at "multiple locations in the educational system" (Walpole, 2003).

In Greece, various such injustices have been investigated in the literature on education. There is also evidence that school is not "neutral", reproduces social inequalities, and does not provide equal opportunities for success to all students. Educational injustices due to geographical constraints were explored by Mylonas (1982), who found that during transition from primary to secondary education, students from working class backgrounds who live in rural areas have lower performance and very often they do not continue their studies to secondary education. He concludes that the class differentiated educational outcomes question the so called "democratization" of secondary education. Fraggoudaki (1985:182) argues that social class background determines success at school and opportunities for studies in higher education. More recently, Kelpanidis (2002) provides data that show the underrepresentation of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds in higher education, although to lesser extent than in other countries. Sianou (2006) examines the impact of resort to out-of-school support (frontistiria and private tuition), and social class on school performance and finds that there is a strong correlation between students' socioeconomic background and performance in the nationwide university entrance exams. She further argues that students from upper social classes dominate high status university departments, such as medical and law school, which lead to occupational trajectories with higher material and symbolic benefits. Maloutas (2007) argues that drop-out rates from secondary school are greater for children of immigrants who did not finish elementary school. He adds that "unequal educational attainment among different social groups in Athens shows that the unequal resources they possess are transformed into advantages or disadvantages and eventually to differential social mobility". Kyritsis (2008) studies the educational performance of students in the third grade of upper secondary education (Lykeio), and also documents the strong influence of families on their children's school performance.

In general, there is consensus on the fact that processes of exclusion are maintained, in relation to geographical constraints, differences in performance between advantaged and disadvantaged groups, educational attainment and access to and distribution within the stratified higher education sector.

### **3. The value of education in the Greek society**

In Greece there is a widely spread ideology and practice of “familial educational investment” established in a number of studies (Tsoukalas, 1977: 270). Families undergo sacrifices in order to lead their children to higher education which is associated with high status desirable occupational positions and thus the university becomes the “bright object of desire” Noutsos (1986:64). This view of education as a form of investment is closely connected with the perceptions of people from all social backgrounds regarding social mobility. In Greece most people actually believe that they have the opportunity for upward social mobility, which is considered a feasible goal. The students’ confidence in overcoming labour market difficulties and moving upwards socially reflects a deeply rooted ideology of “success and upward social mobility through one’s abilities and devotion” that permeates the Greek society (Lambiri-Dimaki, 1983). In Greece, in contrast with other developed countries, families do not simply hope for their children’s upward social mobility, but truly believe in it and go to great lengths to “program” it (Tsoukalas, 1977: 268). In a similar vein, Fragoudaki (1985: 214) mentions the ideology of “individual progress” which views upward mobility on the “social ladder through schooling”.

### **4. The research**

Within this framework, my aim was to investigate the ‘primary’ effects in the creation of class differentials in educational attainment among students in state secondary schools in Greece (Boudon, 1974). It investigates the relationship between parental socioeconomic characteristics (economic, cultural, social capital, familial habitus and parental education) and students’ performance in the subject of English as a foreign language. The choice of English as a foreign language in state secondary schools was determined by three factors.

First, while some important work has been carried out in relation to inequalities in the Greek education system, most of them focus on the inequalities during the transition from secondary to higher education, and the role of nationwide exams for entry in higher education institutions. Little attention has been paid to the class differentiated performance in the English language as measured from certificates of knowledge of the English language gained. In Greece, sociology has yet been slow to incorporate differential performance in foreign languages into its theoretical treatments of social inequality.

The second reason is concerned with the importance of mastering the English language. For over thirty years language teaching has been considered as a priority by the European Commission. The importance attached to foreign language learning is reflected both in the 1995 European Commission White Paper on education and training, which aimed at promoting the learning of at least two Community foreign languages by all young people, and in the 2002 Barcelona European Council’s call for a sustained effort ‘to improve the mastery of basic skills, in particular by teaching two foreign languages from a very early age’. It is argued that in present-day Europe the need for communication, understanding, and tolerance between people from different countries, together with the realization of the importance of foreign languages for the personal and professional development of individuals renders the acquisition of foreign language a matter of primary importance.

In Greece, embedded in current government discourse is the view that in a knowledge society a country’s educational achievements impact strongly on its competitiveness and that a country’s investment in education maximizes human capital (Shultz 1961; Becker 1993), and promotes equality of opportunities and social inclusion. In the emerging “knowledge society”, in which the key for nations to survive in the international competition is education and knowledge which will lead to a highly qualified workforce (Clancy and Goastellec, 2007, Duru-Bellat, 2008), the knowledge of foreign languages is of paramount importance. A major concern of the official rhetoric in Greece is to increase levels of performance in the English language in secondary schools.

More specifically, official rhetoric and policy supports the view that all students graduating from secondary education should reach level B2 on the proficiency scale in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (established by the Council of Europe in 2001, providing a tool for objectively assessing the outcomes of foreign language learning in an internationally comparable way).

Generally, poor knowledge of the English language restricts life-chances and excludes from occupational trajectories with high material and symbolic benefits. Educational skills such as knowledge of foreign languages are necessary to achieve success in present-day society. Not knowing a foreign language is associated with low-skilled work or unemployment.

Finally, my graduate and postgraduate studies, along with my occupation as a teacher of English in primary and recently in secondary education made me aware of a host of educational problems. The most important of these problems relates to the inability of the public school to provide students with adequate knowledge and certification of the English language. In the last two decades many opinions have been expressed to account for the fact that the public school fails to offer sufficient knowledge of the English language to graduates, despite the fact that students study English at school for nine years, from the third grade of primary school to graduation from Lykeio. Official rhetoric seems to ignore the fact that the public school is not socially neutral. It does not provide students with the knowledge it should provide, and as a result students resort to out-of-school support. In this way, free public secondary education reproduces social inequalities and exerts symbolic violence on students from disadvantaged social backgrounds (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979).

#### *4.1 English in Greek state primary and secondary education*

Education in Greece is provided on the following levels: a) primary education, including kindergarten and primary school, which has six grades, b) secondary education, including lower secondary school, and upper secondary school, each lasting three years, c) post secondary education, and d) higher education. Studying in primary and lower secondary education is compulsory.

English is taught as a foreign language from the third grade of primary school for three hours per week. In lower and in most upper secondary schools English is taught for three hours per week in the first grade, and two hours per week in the second and third grade.

#### *4.2 Research questions*

The research questions are:

- 1) What is the reason why the vast majority of students resort to out of school support despite the fact that English is taught as a foreign language in state schools?
- 2) How many years do Greek students attend out of school support, and what is the financial cost?
- 3) Is there a relationship between type of out of school support, money spent on it and students' social class background?
- 4) What is the effect of the parallel system of out-of-school supportive lessons on the teaching of English in state secondary schools?
- 5) Is there a relationship between performance in the subject of English as a foreign language at school and students' socioeconomic status?

#### *4.3 Sample and methodology*

The sample includes first year students from all the schools/faculties and departments in the University of Ioannina. First year students are the focus of the enquiry, because they are closer to

upper secondary education, so they can provide useful insights into the teaching of English. Both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection were used. So far, about 500 questionnaires have been completed, and 10 semi-structured interviews have been conducted. Semi-structured interviews were used for three main reasons. First, semi-structured interviews are helpful in assessing preferences, values and attitudes because of their strength for in-depth, detailed data collection compared to other methods (Cohen and Manion 1994). According to Patton (2002) the advantage of such interviews is that “it keeps the interactions focused while allowing individual perspectives and experiences to emerge”. Second, semi-structured interviews enabled us to investigate the participants’ opinions by giving them the opportunity to provide authentic accounts. Collecting data in this way helped us understand the different realities lived by participants, uncover the wealth of their attitudes and perceptions and focus on “the meanings that key players attach to various acts” (Pugsley, 2004). Finally, in semi-structured interviews respondents answer the same questions, so they are ideal for comparing replies (Patton, 2002: 346), which is consistent with the aim of the study.

## 5. Findings

As regards the reasons for resorting to out-of school support, despite receiving English tuition at school, most students replied that it was mainly due to two reasons. The first reason is because it was felt that the quality of teaching at school was insufficient. Most participants mentioned large number of students per classroom, insufficient time, repetition of the language content, and lack of equipment as the major problems. The second reason, which was also expressed by the vast majority of participants relates to the fact that they wanted to obtain qualification in the English language, since English, being a lingua franca, is an indispensable qualification. The major problem here was the inability of the school to prepare students adequately for participation in exams for the acquisition of English language certificates. Also and connectedly, students’ discourse revealed the predominance of reading and writing skills in school instruction, to the detriment of speaking and listening skills.

In relation to the second research question, the majority of students, regardless of university department, responded that they attended out of school support for an average of six to seven years during their studies in primary and secondary education. Most students reported that they started going to frontisteria (organised language courses) when they attended the fourth grade of primary school, and they finished in the first grade of upper secondary school, when they started preparation for university entrance examinations. As far as financial cost is concerned, most students reported that their parents paid an average of 80 euros per month, and even more when they studied for examinations to get a degree, or for private tuition, which is considered a more effective form of out of school support. Given the fact that students attend lessons for nine months per year, it is estimated that seven years of English lessons cost about 5.000 euros, with the cost increasing if we take into consideration the cost of examination fees, English coursebooks, and other materials.

In relation to the third research question, a correlation among family income and resort to out-of-school support has been found. The vast majority of students received tuition outside of school, regardless of socioeconomic background. This provides further evidence that a sizeable percentage of family resources goes towards achieving upper social mobility goals through education, because they “not only hope about moving upwards socially, but they truly believe in the upward social mobility of their offspring” (Tsoukalas, 1986). Research data reveal that middle class students attended most expensive forms of out-of-school support (e.g private tuition), and reported starting the study of English at an earlier age. Not unsurprisingly, working class students were found to rely on organized language courses (frontisteria).

In relation to the fourth research question, the effect of out-of-school support on the teaching of English in state secondary schools is also significant. For most respondents out-of-school support has a detrimental effect. Students do not pay attention to English lessons at school, either because

they already know what is being taught, or because the few students who do not have out-of-school support, have difficulty keeping up with the rest of the classroom, so they gradually lose motivation to learn. Also and connectedly, when asked where they attribute the acquisition of formal qualifications concerning knowledge of the English language, most students responded that it was due to the out-of-school support. Very few students attributed success in English language to teaching at school. A significant finding also concerns the fact that most students mentioned that the quality of teaching and the knowledge gained was markedly lower in upper secondary education (Lykeio). They reported long hours of out-of-school supportive lessons to prepare for the university entrance exams for paying little attention to the English language lesson at school. Finally, a reason that led to diminished interest in the lesson at school was the fact that it did not lead to formal qualifications, in sharp contrast with teaching in private lessons or frontisteria.

In answer to the last research question, research findings suggest that, students from more privileged socioeconomic backgrounds tend to have higher performance as measured by acquisition of official qualifications. Students from upper middle class most often mentioned that they had acquired qualifications at levels C1 and C2, which are the highest levels on the proficiency scale in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. It is indicative that in high status university departments, dominated by upper middle class students, almost 70% of students reported having qualification at levels C1 or C2, while the percentage fell to 20% for the department of Pre-School Education, in which more lower middle class and working class students are enrolled.

## **6. Discussion and conclusion**

The above findings reveal the inefficiency of state primary and secondary schooling to provide students with adequate knowledge of the English language. This has some major implications.

First, since state schooling fails to provide primary and secondary school students, and especially those from less advantaged social background, with adequate knowledge of the English language. This has given rise to a widely spread system of private tutorial centers (frontisteria) or more costly private English language courses, operating in parallel with state schools. It would not be a hyperbole to say that almost all students have at one time attended a foreign language school. This undermines the role of state school and turns knowledge into a commodity that consumers can buy. The privatization of “free” state education means that the family’s economic and social capital, rather than student ability and effort, impact on students’ performance. Given that there is an interconnection among the various forms of capital (Ball, 2003), existing social inequalities are reproduced and legitimized through schooling (Katsillis and Rubinson, 1990, Sianou-Kyrgiou, 2008). Results show that working class students are at a disadvantage, because they have lower performance and obtain fewer qualifications in relation to middle class students. Since knowledge of the English language is an indispensable qualification in modern day society and a prerequisite for occupational trajectories with increased material and symbolic benefits, knowledge of English becomes a factor that leads to the reproduction of social inequalities.

Second, although the research is still in progress and the findings are provisional, support for Bourdieu’s (1977) theory of cultural reproduction was found. Differential levels of financial, social, and cultural capital lead to differential educational attainment and, in turn, to unequal future symbolic and material benefits, and classed disparities in “advantages and privileges that accrue from education” (Lynch and Baker, 2005).

Implications for policy makers are clear. The provision of equal opportunities for all students as a means towards social justice necessitates that social class inequalities, which have not been effectively dealt with within schooling (Reay, 2006:288), be at the epicenter of policies geared towards meritocratic state schooling.

At a more practical level, significant changes in English instruction at school are necessary. First, there is an urgent need for the restructuring of the teaching of English as a foreign language in state secondary schools. In this framework, there is a need for schools to provide students with

certification of the knowledge obtained at school. In this way, students will be motivated to learn, and state schooling will assume greater importance. Also, teaching materials need to be modernized, and information and communication technologies (ICT) should be incorporated in the teaching methodology. Also and connectedly, contemporary approaches to the teaching of foreign languages (e.g. project-based learning) need to be incorporated in language teaching. Finally, the provision of equal opportunities for all students means that social class inequalities, which so far have not been effectively dealt with within schooling, should be at the epicenter of policies geared towards effective state schooling.

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