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Excellence Without Equity? A Policy-Practice Critical Analysis of the Greek Education System

Giannis Themelis¹

¹PhD, English Language Teaching Advisor, Ministry of Education, Greece

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Abstract: This paper investigates the relationship between educational excellence and social justice within the Greek education system. The study argues that true excellence is unattainable in environments marked by inequality. Through a comparative analysis of seven indicators, the paper reveals significant discrepancies between official policy and classroom reality. Findings indicate that systemic issues, such as resource inequality and outdated materials, undermine meritocracy and equal opportunity. The study concludes that for Greece to achieve genuine educational excellence, its policies must be reframed to prioritize justice and equity, ensuring that all students have a fair chance to succeed.

Keywords: educational excellence, social justice, Greek education, inequality, education policy, teacher quality, model schools.



Introduction

In Greece, educational excellence is the subject of multifaceted debate, not only at the level of educational policy but also in terms of social justice. Although the concepts of excellence and justice are often considered independent, they are, in fact, interconnected; true excellence cannot be achieved in environments where inequalities and exclusions prevail. Educational justice, which presupposes equal access to learning opportunities and the removal of barriers linked to socioeconomic, geographical, or cultural factors, is the fundamental foundation for achieving excellence. Addressing these barriers remains a key policy focus in the country's ongoing reform efforts, particularly in the wake of international assessments highlighting persistent equity gaps (OECD, 2021). This study seeks to investigate educational excellence through the prism of justice. It examines the indicators of excellence adopted by the Greek educational system (see Hattie, 2009; Leithwood et al., 2020) and focuses on the deviations between theory and practice, thereby highlighting the inequalities that affect their achievement.

Analysis of Recent Research and Publications

The theoretical framework for this study is built on established research regarding school success and equity. The work of Hattie (2009) provides a synthesis of factors related to student achievement, while Leithwood et al. (2020) identify key claims about successful school leadership. In the Greek context, research highlights persistent challenges. Traditionally, the most popular school type has been the "neighborhood school". However, a school's "reputation" is gaining importance, a factor influenced by evaluation processes and parental choice. This trend can lead to disparities, as international research demonstrates that a school's reputation can significantly impact public perception and educational quality (MacLeod & Urquiola, 2009). In other countries, for example, the publication of evaluation data, such as that by the UK's Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), actively shapes school prestige (Matthews & Smith, 1995). Furthermore, research into school violence and student dissatisfaction points to systemic discontent within the Greek system (Artinopoulou et al., 2016).

Formulation of the Purpose of the Article

The purpose of this article is to critically analyze seven key indicators of educational excellence in Greece: school prestige, curricula and innovation, teacher quality, student quality, resources and facilities, community relations, and leadership. The analysis is based on a combination of data from academic literature, legislation, and practical experience drawn from a sample of 14 secondary schools in diverse areas. By contrasting the stated theoretical goals of the education system with the practical reality, this paper aims to demonstrate that the pursuit of excellence is systematically undermined by a lack of educational justice.

Research Results

Systemic Disparities: School Prestige and Resource Allocation

In theory, educational justice requires equal treatment of all schools, regardless of type or location. However, in reality, a school's prestige is highly variable and often creates inequality. In Greece, this is reflected in the criteria teachers use when seeking transfers or appointments. A prime example is



the institution of "Model Schools" (Πρότυπα), which, despite being positioned as centers of excellence, faced a "devaluation" by many teachers during a 2022 staffing call, where many educators chose to leave these schools even though their positions were secure. These institutions function as "schools of parental choice," where selection is often based on specific factors, such as a student's academic inclination, rather than a holistic view of the educational environment (Nikolopoulou, 2020). This disparity is compounded by an unjust distribution of resources. The abolition of central bodies for school facilities, like the School Buildings Organization (OSK) in 2013, was officially intended to rationalize management but has had controversial effects. Studies continue to highlight significant qualitative and quantitative deficiencies in educational resources and school infrastructure across the country. This creates an environment where schools in remote or economically disadvantaged areas are systematically underserved, reinforcing educational inequality.

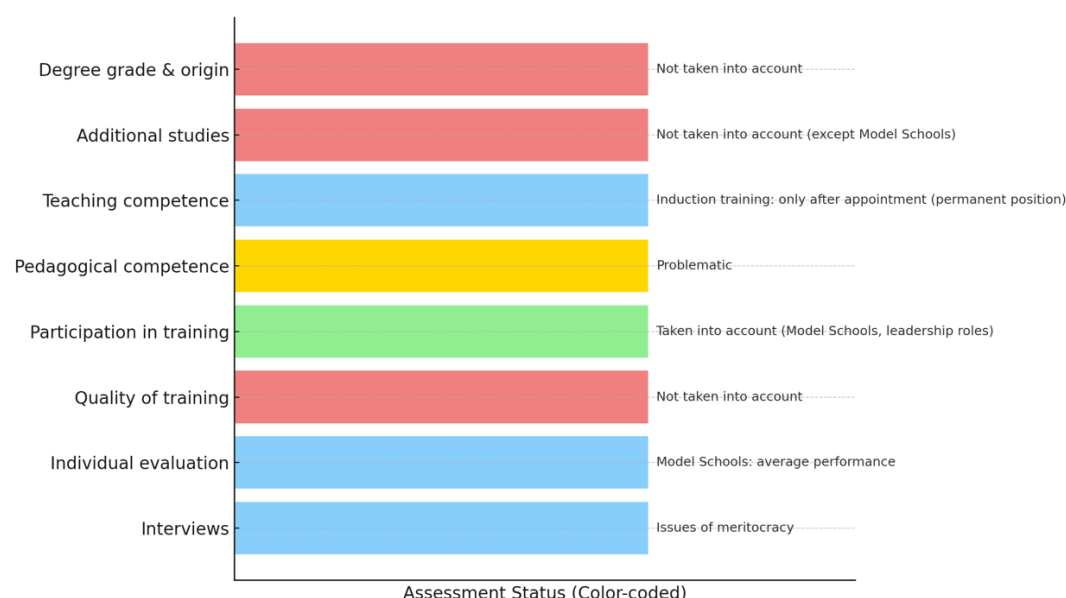
Curricula and Innovation

The curriculum for English language teaching illustrates a major disconnect between theory and practice. While the official 2016 curriculum (ΕΠΣ-ΞΓ) is theoretically modern, it is based on data from 2002 and 2008. The textbooks still in use in primary and junior high schools were published in 2005 and 2009, respectively, based on the even older 2003 curriculum (ΔΕΠΠΣ-ΑΠΣ). This situation is exacerbated by a reduction in weekly teaching hours in junior high from the required three to just two, rendering the official curriculum and textbooks unrealistic and obsolete.

Efforts at innovation have also fallen short. While Model Schools show much higher participation in European programs like eTwinning (an average of 3 programs per year versus 0.2 in other schools, a 15:1 ratio), literature suggests this may be used more as a tool for improving a system's international image rather than a genuine indicator of excellence (Themelis, 2022). Furthermore, the State Certificate of Language Proficiency (ΚΠΓ), promoted by the state as an innovative link between teaching and certification, has failed to attract students. In the studied sample, only two out of 1,921 students participated in recent exams, while participation in private certification exams remains massive, demonstrating the state's failure to establish a credible alternative.

Teacher and Student Quality

While policy presumes that mechanisms are in place to ensure high-quality teachers, the reality is different. Key quality criteria, such as degree grade, are not considered in appointments for General Education; only Model Schools have this exception. A significant percentage of the teaching workforce consists of substitute teachers who may work for over 20 years without receiving introductory training, which is only provided after a permanent appointment. Recent analyses of the new evaluation framework introduced by Law 4823/2021 suggest that, in practice, it has yet to foster a culture of substantive professional development, often being perceived as a bureaucratic exercise (Tsotrou & Tsiolis, 2024). The quality of in-service training itself is not evaluated anywhere, not even in Model Schools.

Figure 1*Teacher Quality Parameters*

Source: author's own development

The system similarly fails to guarantee equal opportunities for all students. The selection of students for Model Schools via examinations represents a distortion of the concept of excellence. It creates a segregated system where the high-achieving student elevates the school, rather than the school elevating the student. For the majority of students, the system remains intensely exam-focused, dominated by structures like the "Theme Bank" and "Panhellenic Exams," which fail to foster critical thinking and essential life skills. This leads to widespread student dissatisfaction, which is a contributing factor to the alarming rise in school violence.

Leadership and Accountability

In theory, the selection of school directors is based on objective and measurable criteria to ensure fairness. However, practice often deviates from this principle. For example, a 2022 call for director positions at Model Schools in the Evia region saw a severe lack of candidates, limiting competition and the ability to select the most suitable leaders. The selection criteria themselves were flawed, emphasizing seniority while not sufficiently evaluating the quality of candidates' academic studies. These systemic flaws are compounded by the significant challenges principals report in implementing new evaluation systems effectively, often citing a lack of support and clear guidance (Gkouskou & Sfakianaki, 2023).

Furthermore, external evaluations of schools fail to show the expected outcomes. Data from the Evia sample revealed no statistically significant performance differences between various school types. This aligns with a broader policy shift towards what some researchers term a 'new managerialism' in Greek education, emphasizing accountability and performance metrics that may not capture holistic school quality (Sianou-Kyrgiou, 2021). It was expected that Model Schools would achieve higher



scores, but this was not observed. At the same time, schools often associated with lower expectations, such as Vocational (ΕΠΑ.Λ.) and Evening (Εσπερινά) schools, did not record lower performance. These findings demonstrate that reality deviates significantly from theory.

Conclusions

The findings of this study demonstrate that the achievement of educational excellence in Greece is inextricably linked to educational justice. Although excellence is often presented as an independent goal, the absence of justice in the distribution of resources, opportunities, and incentives undermines its genuine attainment. The unequal access to quality resources, geographical isolation, and socioeconomic disparities significantly affect the quality of education that students receive.

Justice in education is not limited to equality of opportunity but extends to the fair evaluation of students, teachers, and schools. Meritocracy must be ensured at all levels, and educational policy must strengthen mechanisms that support the equitable participation of all stakeholders. This study concludes that a shift is required from purely administrative approaches to innovative and equitable practices that place social justice at the heart of educational policy. Investing in equal opportunities and promoting transparency and accountability are prerequisites for shaping a system that not only pursues excellence but also ensures a fair and inclusive educational environment for all.

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