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# School Health Education in Greek secondary schools: Searching for a place in the National Curriculum

A School health education (SHE) curriculum has been introduced to Greek schools since 1991 but it is still in a state of "unstable equilibrium", balancing between progress and failure. This article provides a short historical overview of the origins, developments, attempted reforms and the current state of the SHE curriculum in Greek secondary education and discusses the prospects of integration into the formal curriculum.

### Conceptualizing the school curriculum

The concept of the school curriculum is elusive and multifaceted (Goodson 1994), and many different approaches to define it can be found in the literature. Kelly's (2004) useful typology will be reiterated below to describe the Greek SHE curriculum:

**The educational curriculum** focuses not only on how the curriculum is planned to be applied, but also on what it is that will ensure that the curriculum is justifiable in educational terms (educational and moral principles).

**The total curriculum** denotes not the content of a particular subject or area of study but the total programme of an educational institution.

**The hidden curriculum** embraces all the forms of learning that goes on in schools whether they are overtly planned or they are by-products of planning and practice.

**The planned (or official)** and the **received (or actual)** curriculum suggest

the distinction between what has been officially planned and what is actually practiced in school.

**The formal and informal curricula** refer to formal activities for which the timetable allocates specific periods of teaching time and informal activities that accompany the educational practice, usually on a voluntary and non-compulsory basis.

Accordingly, the SHE curriculum in Greece is *informal* as a non-compulsory activity attracting students on a voluntary basis. It is officially *planned* by the Ministry of Education (MoE) and its consulting body (the Pedagogical Institute) and the *actual* curriculum that operates in the school. The *hidden* curriculum of the SHE curriculum does reveal its overt values and the hidden political agenda. This article considers the *planned informal* and *hidden* dimensions of the SHE curriculum.

### School health education in Greece: a brief overview

The *planned curriculum*, whether it is the national *formal* or *informal* (e.g. SHE) curriculum in Greece, is centrally organised for all the schools of the country by the Ministry of Education (MoE). It is usually the product of the collaboration between the MoE with the Pedagogical Institute (its consulting body). The State, through the MoE, formulates and adopts educational policy so that the Greek school curriculum is national and compulsory (Ifanti 2007). Only extracurricular school activities (ExSAC)

operate on a non-compulsory basis. SHE is part of the extracurricular activities spectrum (including environmental education, Olympic education, etc). Extracurricular activities, in this case, are school-based activities delivered outside teaching hours, i.e. outside the national compulsory curriculum in Greek secondary schools, but basically within school premises. In sum, the SHE curriculum in Greek secondary education is centrally planned as non-compulsory extracurricular school activities.

The inapplicability of the extracurricular form of the SHE curriculum must have been observed by Greek policymakers, who attempted to integrate the ExSAC into the national compulsory curriculum as a cross-curricular subject. Indeed, an EU funded project was piloted widely to test the applicability of the new cross-curricular subjects (e.g. SHE, environmental education) into the national compulsory curriculum.

However the pilot implementation largely failed to the extent that the SHE curriculum returned to its initial form, i.e. that of extracurricular school activities.

What were the reasons behind this failure? No adequate official explanation can be found either in media coverage or academic publications (Alahiotis & Karatzia-Stavlioti 2006). This independent academic research, funded from the Greek Foundation of Scholarships, sought to explore this trend of failure.

### Highlighting problems of the curriculum enactment

A single case study was conducted in a large urban school in Greece, using on-site observation, tape-recorded individual interviews and focus groups to investigate the barriers and facilitators of the SHE curriculum enactment. Head teachers, teachers, students, health professionals and local authorities constituted the sample

population. The initial research agenda aimed to focus on a school exemplar of running effectively the SHE curriculum. Thus the "criterion of excellence" was invented to extract an exemplar school. If everything had gone to plan, data from "good practice" would have been collected.

However, along with a number of facilitators to the implementation of the SHE curriculum, major problems were discovered, through grounded theory coding and interpretative analysis of verbal and written (textual) data. Explicit trends of failure to apply the SHE curriculum as either cross-thematic or extracurricular were observed, summarised below:

- a) The initial extracurricular form of the SHE curriculum received limited attention from the school community, so that the SHE curriculum under-functioned for a number of years (1991-1995).
- b) A boost to the SHE curriculum was given after in-service training was promoted and the position of the health education officer was established for each region, as a key post in the co-ordinating mechanism (from 1996-2000). However the extracurricularity of the SHE curriculum was still identified as a problem.
- c) So, an attempt was made to integrate the SHE curriculum into the national compulsory curriculum. The "Flexible Zone" pilot implementation of cross-curricular subjects failed, though.
- d) The SHE curriculum returned to its original form, i.e. that of extracurricular school activities.

### Interpreting the patterns of failure

The following theoretical framework is suggested to interpret the patterns of failure:

- a. **The modernisation politics**
- b. **The reoccurrence of resistance-to-change**
- c. **The particularities of secondary education schools**

**The modernisation politics** are of

paramount importance for the Greek educational system. For the last two decades, a series of educational reforms have been suggested in order to help the traditional, typical Greek school to respond to the demands of a highly competitive global market. The rise of an entrepreneurial culture has been evident in various segments of educational policy, despite the supposed public character of the Greek education system (Zambeta 2000). Most of the funding for the modernization of Greek education emanates from European Union resources. From the official perspective, the main arguments for modernizing Greek public schools are the enhancement of the quality of education, prevention and remedy of social exclusion and the formation of an integrated European educational area and quality employment (Gouvias 2006). The SHE curriculum mirrors and it is part of the modernization politics.

In 1991 the Conservative government proposed an educational reform to modernize Greek education. However the strong reaction of the school community led to the withdrawal of the proposed reform and to the Minister's resignation. The controversial points were then removed and some of the parts of the initial proposal were finally enacted. The ExSAC was among the elements that survived the reform's redesign.

**The reoccurrence of resistance-to-change** concept will be helpful to understand two aspects of the problem. On the one hand, the trend of failure towards the establishment of the SHE curriculum calls for some explanation. On the other hand, this trend of failure will be located into the wider pattern of abortive educational reforms. As mentioned above, the SHE curriculum is but a minor reflection of the wider modernization politics.

However modernization of public education (at all levels) is far from welcome in Greece. Quite the contrary, a series of

resistance episodes are observed when educational reforms are proposed. The reoccurrence of resistance-to-change movement is manifested through violent demonstrations, building occupations, prolonged teachers' strikes and so on. Paradoxically enough, the resistance to change is also manifested by schools who declare committed to modernization politics and policies but refuse to respond to the demands of the modernizing policies in practice. For example, it has been observed that schools in favour of modernization are hampered by the practicalities involved in enacting the SHE curriculum so they finally shy away from complying with the new curriculum agenda demands. Therefore, irrespective of a school's political affiliations (in favour or against modernization politics) a clear trend against practising what modernization involves was gathered.

**The particularities of the secondary education** in Greece should be also seen as a major barrier to the successful enactment of the SHE curriculum. It is the contextual particularities, which behave as an underlying layer in the enactment of the curriculum, in favour or against its success. As such the special features which constitute, and possibly surround, the public secondary school cannot be dismissed from our discussion. The particularities of each educational context could be either compatible with the "innovative curriculum" or adversely act as significant barriers to its implementation.

Three examples of what it is meant by contextual particularities are cited below:

1. **The phenomenon of "phrontistiria"**
2. **The part-time teachers ("anaplirotes")**
3. **The absence of an "all-day" school to accommodate the ExSAC effectively**

**The phenomenon of "phrontistiria"** refers to a widespread phenomenon across the country. "Phrontistiria" are private supplementary courses which take place

after school hours and range from foreign languages, arts, sports to school subjects. It has been argued that this phenomenon fills in the quality gaps of education. It stems from the inadequate provision of services by the public sector that result in "indirect privatisation" (Mouzelis & Pagoulatos 2002). This case study, for example, showed that 100% of the students attend evening classes, which may be taken as an indication of a pandemic phenomenon. Why does this phenomenon act against the establishment of the SHE curriculum? To respond to this question, one may take under consideration the nature of the SHE curriculum: it is designed to take place outside teaching hours, i.e. after school subjects are over for the day. How could that ever be possible when the vast majority of students attend afternoon classes? How can they remain at school to work on health education projects when they have scheduled other after school classes? How can the teacher arrange a slot for extracurricular SHE when other subjects occupy the time? Due to those reasons, the phenomenon of "phrontistiria" is a significant barrier to the ExSAC, including SHE.

**The phenomenon of part-time temporary ("oromisthioi" and "anaplirotes") teachers** paid on an hourly basis should count as an additional obstacle to the enactment of the SHE curriculum. Greek public education depends largely on the contribution of this category of teachers who are obliged to work in different school units across a given region resembling nomads moving from one school to another. The stress caused by this unfortunate situation is sometimes alleviated for the part-time teacher if she chooses to deliver any subject of the ExSAC curriculum. In this case, she has a good chance of completing her working hours in just one school unit.

Although there is a good prospect for teachers in temporary positions like these to deliver the SHE curriculum, different scenarios occur in reality. One head teacher

and the health education officer, of the region in the case study area, reported that temporary teachers often see the ExSAC as a good opportunity to get paid and to complete their time-scales without really working for them. It was claimed they sometimes deceive the school authorities by filling in fake time-shifts. This rather alarming piece of data indicates the marginal status of the SHE curriculum, which is not properly managed by schools. Instead of accusing teachers of mismanagement, one needs to consider the underlying factors causing this action. The lack of organized activity around the SHE curriculum, to protect it from abuse, would be one of the factors. But most importantly, the opportunity for abuse indicates the infeasibility of the extracurricular nature of SHE in Greece, so that schools may shy away from implementing the programme. It might also signify the demoralising effects of the Greek State (as the civil servants' employer) that prompts young teachers to lead a nomadic and exhausting professional life.

**The absence of an "all-day" school** - the fact that secondary schools in Greece operate on a type of part-time basis provides one more plausible explanation of the unfeasibility of the extracurricular nature of the SHE curriculum. On-site observations gathered the following typical image of the Greek school: the school opens at 8.00 am and closes at 13.30 or 14.00 pm at the latest. During this time, only the national compulsory curriculum subjects are taught. After the school is over for the day, teaching, secretarial staff as well as pupils leave the building. The cleaning staff assume work and soon the security staff lock the main entrance for the rest of the day. Under these circumstances it is no wonder why the ExSAC appears unsuitable for the Greek secondary school.

By contrast, the Greek primary education, which has recently converted to an "all-day school" basis, has more room to

accommodate non-compulsory subjects, such as health education.

## Conclusion

The Greek SHE curriculum is in a state of unstable equilibrium, searching for a place in the national curriculum. The extracurricular form is ineffective due to a number of reasons explained above. The cross-curricular pilot, on the other hand, failed. Currently the SHE curriculum has no clear place in the national curriculum and faces the risk of exclusion from both the national compulsory and non-compulsory curricula. Further research may provide a basis for future curricular developments.

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