Educational Inequalities and School Dropout in Greece

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Abstract

This paper reviews the research pertaining to school termination or "dropping out" of school in Greece. This work provides information on the state of educational policies in Greece dealing with issues of social inequalities and focusing on the increasing phenomenon of school drop out in the country. Educational inequality, as this is expressed in terms of school dropout, seems to persist in Greek education. It seems to be related to the specific characteristics of various regions. We could safely argue therefore, that there is a regional dimension in educational inequality in Greece. For the classification of the 54 regional units in Greece, based on the phenomenon of school drop out, we used the hierarchical cluster analysis with the criterion of Ward for the creation of the clusters that been characterized by the smallest loss of information and the squared Euclidean distance as distance measure between the observations.

Keywords: School drop out, Educational inequalities, Greek educational system

1. Entering the field

Education is often perceived to be the great equalizer in an otherwise unjust society. For many years the belief that education can increase social equality and promote social justice, has been predominant. Yet, that belief has been challenged in both theoretical and empirical grounds. In the Greek public discourse, as in other western countries, education has been considered as the main vehicle for the promotion of social equality and social mobility. Taking into account the positive relationship between education and income, many policy makers consider education as an efficient instrument for promoting growth and reducing inequality, especially through the improvement of the qualifications of the least educated segments of the population. Nevertheless, in Greece relatively limited empirical research has been carried out so far in comparison with most other European countries, by either economists or sociologists on the precise channels through which education influences inequality (Tsakloglou & Cholezas, 2005; Fotopoulos & Koniordos, 2010).

The beginning of the 21st century signals the symbolic starting point for a new Greek comprehensive discourse era with respect to educational policy and practice. Until the early 1990s, Greece was a relatively homogenous society, in terms of cultural and ethnic characteristics of the population and homogeneity was seen as a positive feature of Greek society. However, in the 1990s Greece transformed from an emigration country to a reception country; without having previous experience in dealing with such phenomena (Kiprianos, Balias & Passas, 2003; Spinthourakis, Karatzia-Stavlioti, Lempesi, & Papadimitriou, 2008) Nowadays, Greek society consists of many social groups, which face the risk of social marginalisation and exclusion and are considered as minorities. Despite this fact, the state denies such connotation (minority) for some social groups like Roma and immigrants, and officially acknowledges the existence of only one minority, Muslims of Thrace, which was recognised through international treaties of the early 20th century. As expected, that transformation had significant effects in the society as a whole. What is interesting for our discussion is that according to the 2001 Greek Census data, almost 1 million individuals of the nearly 10.9 million of population hadn't completed compulsory education. Functional illiteracy is most obvious in rural agricultural regions of the country and it is related to a wide range of age groups. It is however also found to a lesser degree across the country. The groups that are most prone to being identified as functionally illiterate are minorities such as Roma, repatriates, immigrants and members of the Muslim Minority of Thrace. Although these social groups are not officially recognised as minorities, the fact that many educational projects focus on their difficulties in the educational setting, proves that they are considered as socially disadvantaged groups {Spinthourakis, et. al., 2008). As D' Ambrosio, Papadopoulos and Tsakloglou (2002) note, social exclusion mainly deals with the inability of an individual to take part in the basic political, economic and social functions of the society in which he/she lives.

The Lisbon agenda includes several quantitative targets for education and training systems in Europe. One specific goal is reducing the share of early school leavers – i.e. 18-24 years-old with at most a lower secondary education qualification and not in further education – to less than 10% by 2010. Reducing the rate at which youths drop out of high school is considered

an important social goal. It is well documented that dropouts have lower earnings and more likely to engage in antisocial behaviours. However, the factors that cause youths to drop out school would seem to be diverse (Eckstein & Wolpin, 1999). Although the rate of high school completion has increased over the past century, this trend reversed in the 1970s, and dropout rates began to rise in many countries (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). Most research has focused on the personal characteristics of the dropout. Major studies of this type include Bachman, Green, and Wirtanen (1971), Rumberger (1983), Pallas (1984) and Coombs and Cooley (1986). Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, and Rock (1987) provide the most comprehensive and current information. In these studies, background characteristics of students are strongly related to dropping out of school. Lower socioeconomic status (SES) students and students from households with few educational resources are considered to be most likely to drop out (Bryk & Thum, 1989). Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD (2002)] defines a "dropout" as a student who leaves a specific level of education system without achieving first qualification. According to UNESCO, "dropping out" or "early school leaving" is understood as leaving school education without completing the started cycle or program. Among the most well-known definitions is the one given by Morrow (1986): *A dropout is any student previously enrolled in a school, who is no longer actively enrolled as indicated by fifteen days of consecutive unexcused absences, who has not satisfied local standards for graduation, and for whom no formal request has been received signifying enrolment in another state-licensed educational institution. A student death is not tallied as a dropout*. Young people who drop out of high school have a much greater probability of experiencing unemployment (Feldstein & Ellwood, 1982) and much lower earnings over the life course than those who graduate (Morgan, 1984). Dropping out of school is a major problem, especially in large metropolitan school systems (Hammack, 1986; Mensch & Kandel, 1988). Research into dropping out can be categorized into one of three areas: dropout, pullout, or pushout (Nielsen, 1986). Research that utilizes a dropout perspective places explanatory emphasis on students' individual attributes. Pullout theories, on the other hand, assume that students engage in an economic cost-benefit analysis when deciding whether to stay in school or not. Pushout theories, which provide the theoretical framework for this paper, focus on school and community contexts (Van Dorn, Bowen, & Blau, 2006). Dropping out is the culmination of a long-term process of academic disengagement, and connections from the primary grades to dropout have been documented for personality traits and deportment in school; performance measures; and some school experiences, such as retention in grade and absences (see Barrington & Hendricks 1989; Cairns, Cairns & Neckerman 1989; Ensminger & Slusarcick, 1992; Alexander, Entwisle & Horsey, 1997). Some perspectives on dropout emphasize the family context (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Rumberger, Ghatak, Poulos, Ritter & Dornbusch, 1990) and others, the situation at school (Finn, 1989; Wehlage & Rutter, 1989), but children integrate their experiences across the multiple contexts that frame their development (Alexander et.al., 1997). The work trajectories of school dropouts and other disadvantaged groups are variously described as disorderly (Hogan, 1981), floundering (Osterman, 1989), turbulent (W.T.Grant Foundation, 1988), or milling about (Klerman & Karoly, 1994). For many of these students, access to dominant forms of cultural capital is frequently limited to time at schools. We know that exposure to the educative

effects of the cultural capital of dominant groups is necessary for success at school (Bourdieu, 1997). Paradoxically, those who are most in need of time in school to accumulate the dominant cultural capital - as they are less likely to acquire it from their homes and communities - are also those who are least likely to be free from the urgency of economic necessities. The reality is that time in school is a luxury and/or an irrelevance for many poor, ethnic minority students. Such overall descriptions, however, hide patterns with many understandable elements that are obscured when researchers study life events or outcomes only one at a time (Mills & Gale, 2004).

2. Methodology

For the classification of the 54 regional units in Greece, based on the phenomenon of school drop out, we used the hierarchical cluster analysis with the criterion of Ward for the creation of the clusters that been characterized by the smallest loss of information (Bartholomew, Steele, Moustaki, & Galbraith, 2002) and the squared Euclidean distance as distance measure between the observations (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2006). We evaluated the options of cluster analysis with 3, 4, 5 and 6 clusters, and ultimately selected as the most appropriate solution that with the 6 clusters, which gives a clearer classification of regional units based on the school drop out. In addition in order to validate the 6 clusters solution we used the technique of One Way ANOVA, which showed statistically significant differences between the 6 clusters ($F_{5, 48} = 183.551$, $p < 0.001$) in terms of school drop out. It is emphasized that the differences shown by the ANOVA with the 6-cluster solution were more powerful than the solutions of 3, 4 and 5 clusters.

3. Results

3.1 Overview of the clusters

Table 1 shows the descriptive measures of the school dropout recorded in each of the 6 clusters which may be registered in Greece and described in order, starting from the cluster with the smallest leak. In the first cluster, where there is recorded less leakage (<1%) are the regional units of Drama (0.26%) Grevena (0.49%), Kozani (0.79%) and Kastoria (0.93%). The second cluster, at which school dropout varies from 1.28% to 2.46% are 20 regional sections: Trikala (1.28%), Preveza (1.3%), Arta (1.36%), Florina (1.59%), Chios (1.61%) Thesprotia (1.64%), Cyclades (1.74%), Arcadia (1.82%), Larissa (1.94%), Kilkis (1.95%), Pieria (1.97%), Lesvos (2.16%), Boeotia (2.17%), Ioannina (2.19%), Phocis (2.24%), Fthiotida (2.29%), Cephalonia (2.35%), Pella (2.36%), Argolida (2.40%) and Evia (2.46%). The third cluster, where the leakage rate is between 2.73% to 4.14% consists of 18 regional sections: Serres (2.73%) Aitoloakarnania (2.87%), Samos (2.90%), Chalkidiki (2.90%), Magnesia (2.93%), Chania (3.17%), Kavala (3.21%), eastern Attica (3.26%), Achaia (3.31%), Thessaloniki (3.32%), Laconia (3.38%), Athens (3.51%), Corfu (3.53%) Zakynthos (3.66%), Corinth (3.83%), Piraeus (3.93%), Imathia (4.05%) and Messinia (4.14%). The fourth cluster, in which the school dropout is leaking from 4.58% to 5.41% consists of 7 regional sections: the Dodecanese (4.58%), Evros (4.68%), Lasithi (4.84%), Rethymno (4.9%), Ilia (5.16%), Heraklion (5.22%) and Karditsa (5.41%). The fifth cluster, at which school drop out varies from 5.91% to 6.79% are 4 regional sections: Evritania (5.91%), Xanthi (5.91%), Rodopi

(6.47%), Lefkada (6.79%). Finally, the sixth cluster consists only of the regional section of West Attica, where there was the higher school dropout percentage (7.89%) of the country and is separated from the rest of all the solutions of the cluster analysis.
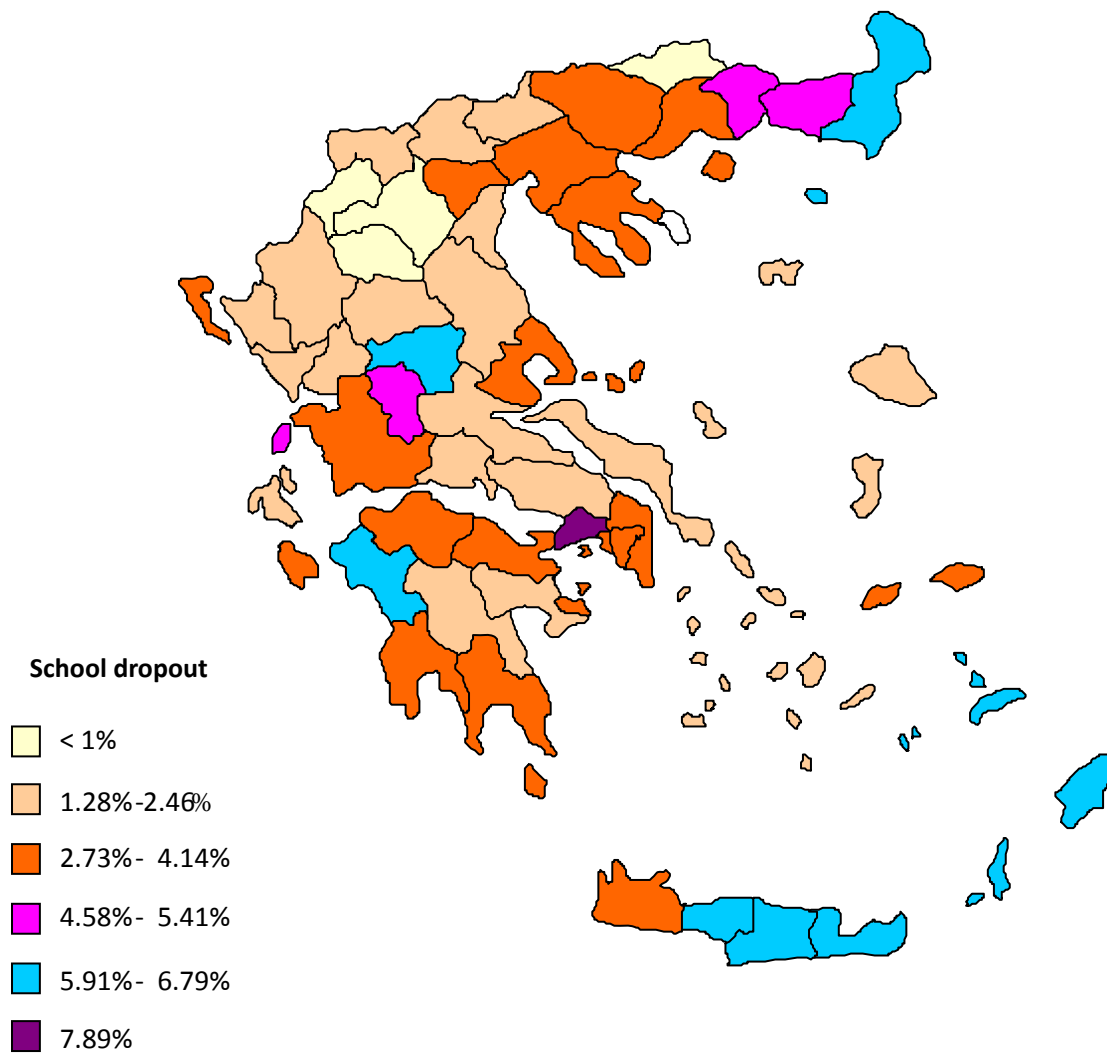

School dropout

- ☐ < 1%
- ☐ 1.28%-2.46%
- ☐ 2.73%- 4.14%
- ☐ 4.58%- 5.41%
- ☐ 5.91%- 6.79%
- ☐ 7.89%

Figure 1. The map of Greece with the levels of school dropout

3.2 Characteristics of clusters

3.2.1 Economic characteristics

Concerning the economic profile of each of the 6 clusters we observe:

- The regional units of the first cluster, that with the lower school dropout (<1%) are in the areas with the highest unemployment rate in the country (23.84%), with relatively high rate of income (81.92%), with high rates of deposits (83.98%) and with moderate, compared with other clusters, living standards, which represents the 72.08% of per capita GDP.

- The areas of the second cluster (school dropout from 1.28% to 2.46%) present a low unemployment rate (18.08%), high income (85.43%), relatively high savings rate (81.14%) and high living standards (79.52% per capita GDP).

- The regional sections of the third cluster (school dropout from 2.73% to 4.14%) are characterized by an unemployment rate around national average (19.66%), high levels of income (84.48%) and deposits (84.24%) and by the highest living standard level than the other clusters (82.33% per capita GDP).

- In the fourth cluster (school dropout from 4.58% to 5.41%) is observed a slightly higher than the national average unemployment rate (21.88%), the highest income in the whole country (85.53%), a relatively low savings rate (72.85%) and relatively high living standards (77.42% per capita GDP).

- The fifth cluster (school dropout from 5.91% to 6.79%) is characterized by relatively high unemployment rate (22.64%), fairly high income rate (82.11%), low savings rate (68.11%) and the lowest standard of living of the country (62.69% per capita GDP).

- Finally, the sixth cluster, namely the western Attica, presents the highest school drop out rate in the country (7.89%) has the lowest unemployment rate (15.21%), the lowest income (76%) and deposits rates (51.20%) and low living standards (64.38% per capita GDP).

Table 1. Economic characteristics of the clusters

	Cluster	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Unemployment rate	1	4	23,84	2,40	20,6	26,4
	2	20	18,07	4,15	12,5	25,1
	3	18	19,66	7,51	8,1	34,3
	4	7	21,88	7,10	14,8	35,3
	5	4	22,64	8,48	15,4	31,3
	6	1	15,21		15,2	15,2
	Total	54	19,81	6,19	8,1	35,3
Income rate	1	4	81,29	12,30	72,2	98,7
	2	20	85,43	6,75	71,5	97,2
	3	18	84,48	14,57	60,3	121,2
	4	7	85,53	7,16	75,2	93,1
	5	4	82,11	3,32	77,5	84,9
	6	1	76,00		76,0	76,0
	Total	54	84,40	10,12	60,3	121,2
Deposits rate	1	4	83,98	10,28	73,5	96,3
	2	20	81,14	24,76	56,0	129,9
	3	18	84,24	22,92	52,9	154,1
	4	7	72,85	18,17	47,1	101,2
	5	4	68,11	20,82	49,3	97,5
	6	1	51,20		51,2	51,2
	Total	54	79,79	22,29	47,1	154,1
Per capita GDP	1	4	72,08	13,98	63,1	92,8
	2	20	79,52	18,86	61,7	143,9
	3	18	82,33	20,60	56,4	143,3
	4	7	77,42	19,31	52,3	100,7
	5	4	62,69	8,18	55,0	73,2
	6	1	64,38		64,4	64,4
	Total	54	78,11	18,75	52,3	143,9

3.2.2 Educational characteristics

Regarding the educational profile of 6 clusters we observe:

- In the areas of the first cluster there are schools with the best level of school facilities in the country (45.09%), the lowest percentage of foreign students (6.08%), the lower rates of unsuccessful students from elementary (0.18%), lower (1.06%) and high schools (1.20%) and the highest rate of admission rates to universities (58.93%).

- The second cluster is below the average level of the country in terms of school facilities (41.76%) and near the national average in terms of the number of foreign students (9.13%). In addition, the second cluster is characterized by low rates of rejected students in primary (0.53%), lower (3.12%) and high schools.

- In the Third cluster are schools facilities (42.77%) near the country average with a relatively high proportion of foreign students (10.72%) with moderate rate of rejected students from elementary (0.62%), relatively high rate from the secondary (5.78%) and moderate from the high schools (2.77%), while the admission rates to universities (54.56%) are near the national average.

- The schools of the fourth cluster have low level of school facilities (41.50%), average percentage of foreign students (7.99%), relatively high percentage of rejected students from elementary schools (1.15%), moderate rate of rejected students from secondary schools (4.93%) and high schools (2.85%), while the rate of admissions to the universities (50.51%) is lowest than the previous three clusters.

- The fifth cluster schools have the shortest logistics equipment (40.61%), low percentage of foreign students (6.50%), relatively low rate of rejected students from elementary schools (0.58%), the highest rate of rejected students from secondary schools (7.95 %) and high schools (5.05%) and a low rate of admission to the universities (49.39%).

- Finally, schools in western Attica, which is itself the sixth cluster have a high level of school facilities (43.51%), a high percentage of foreign students (10.38%), the highest percentage of rejected students from elementary schools (2.44%), significantly high percentage of rejected students from secondary schools (6.53%), while the percentage of students rejected by high schools is low (1.66%). Moreover, the rate of admission to universities is the lowest in the country (48.56%).

Table 2. Educational characteristics of the clusters

	Cluster	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
School facilities	1	4	45,09	6,21	37,86	52,99
	2	20	41,76	3,19	35,40	48,01
	3	18	42,77	4,53	33,92	49,39
	4	7	41,50	3,64	36,35	46,04
	5	4	40,61	4,09	37,34	46,44
	6	1	43,51		43,51	43,51
	Total	54	42,26	3,99	33,92	52,99
Percentage of immigrant students	1	4	6,08	1,54	4,28	7,38
	2	20	9,13	3,53	4,51	16,60
	3	18	10,72	4,11	4,59	20,14
	4	7	7,99	2,83	3,88	12,04
	5	4	6,50	3,87	3,14	12,08
	6	1	10,38		10,38	10,38
	Total	54	9,12	3,75	3,14	20,14
Percentage of rejected students from elementary schools	1	4	0,18	0,13	,0617	,3377
	2	20	0,53	0,34	,1555	1,3464
	3	18	0,62	0,29	,2654	1,4810
	4	7	1,15	1,01	,3806	3,1426
	5	4	0,58	0,62	,0771	1,3978
	6	1	2,44		2,4352	2,4352
	Total	54	0,65	0,57	,0617	3,1426
Percentage of rejected students from secondary schools	1	4	1,06	0,58	,6	1,9
	2	20	3,12	2,65	,1	11,5
	3	18	5,78	1,98	2,1	9,0
	4	7	4,93	2,63	,9	7,7
	5	4	7,95	5,97	2,2	13,9
	6	1	6,53		6,5	6,5
	Total	54	4,51	3,13	,1	13,9
Percentage of rejected students from high schools	1	4	1,20	1,03	,0	2,3
	2	20	2,09	1,50	,4	5,5
	3	18	2,77	0,74	1,3	3,8
	4	7	2,85	1,14	,8	4,0
	5	4	5,05	1,81	3,5	7,6
	6	1	1,66		1,7	1,7
	Total	54	2,56	1,45	,0	7,6
Percentage of admissions to universities	1	4	58,93	7,94	50,9	69,8
	2	20	54,92	8,74	34,6	67,2
	3	18	54,56	10,00	32,8	69,9
	4	7	50,51	7,22	43,6	63,7
	5	4	49,39	12,71	35,8	65,2
	6	1	48,56		48,6	48,6
	Total	54	54,00	9,17	32,8	69,9

4. Discussion

The Greek educational system, traditionally, has been democratic and opened to everyone. Access to the Greek educational system is free and available for all at all levels of education (elementary, secondary and tertiary). From this point of view, undoubtedly, the Greek state and the Greek educational system provide all the means to every person who lives in the country to attend not only compulsory schooling but any level of the education system. The problem with this view of education in Greece, as elsewhere, is that not all students achieve, in practice, equally satisfactory results. From a political and a social point of view, this perhaps wouldn't have been a major problem if the students who fail in school didn't have, in big percentages, some common social characteristics, related to poverty, cultural differentiation, and culturally poor family environment. Moreover, one does not need masses of evidence to prove that these social characteristics co-relate with students that leave school early, dropout rates, low achievement results and school failure. According to the OECD in 2001, the percentage of the enrolments in elementary education was 98.5 percent and in secondary education was 82 percent. These numbers indicate that 2.5 percent of children were never enrolled in the school system. In terms of an overall view of the situation in Greece dropout rates at all educational levels should also be considered (Stamelos, 2002). Educational inequality, as this is expressed in terms of school dropout, seems to persist in Greek education. It seems to be related to the specific characteristics of various regions, as the results of our analysis have indicated. We could safely argue therefore, that there is a regional dimension in educational inequality in Greece. A closer examination of the social, economic, and cultural characteristics in the regions where inequality is more obvious revealed interesting aspects and links. This fact indicates the need for regional, community or even school based policies rather than common national measures towards reducing school dropout and therefore inequalities. It also indicates the need for a more comprehensive approach to educational inequalities, which will take into account the specific characteristics of various regions and communities. It is well documented that we can not fight educational inequality only in and through the educational systems. As educational inequality is related to other social and cultural aspects, it has to be combated in relation to them.

5. Concluding Remarks

One of the main arguments for keeping educational system under strong State control is that centralization prevents inequalities. We have shown that this argument is not valid in the case of Greek education, despite the allegedly democratic and open educational system. The evidence we presented has indicated that inequalities in education persist, proving that in Greece as in other countries, social conditions are reflected and, arguably, reproduced through the educational system. As current policies have been ineffective, in tackling inequalities, it is worth considering diversified, flexible, and locally sensitive policies of positive discrimination as an alternative. However, research, evaluation and careful strategic planning should precede any relevant attempt.

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