THE PITFALLS OF DISSEMINATING BEST PRACTICE IN QUALITY EDUCATION. PUBLIC DISCOURSE ON THE “FINNISH MODEL” IN GREECE

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Abstract

During the last two years Greek educationists and the wider public have been pondering over the Finnish education system in an attempt to understand it and to find out what made the fifteen year old Finnish pupils so successful in PISA 2000 and 2003, in contrast with their Greek counterparts. Several explanations –followed by recommendations as to what should be done in Greece– were put forward, mainly by policy makers and by people of self-styled wisdom and authority and of easy access to the mass media.

The paper examines in comparative perspective three of the more popular explanations, namely high state investment in education, high quality teacher education and the decentralization of the education system in Finland. It identifies the pitfalls –quite common everywhere under similar circumstances– that the misuse of the comparative argument in this public debate in Greece entails, only to underline the obligation of comparativists to be always on the alert; to be actively involved through their academic work and through their critical stance in policy making.

Over the last couple of years Greek educationists and the wider public discovered Finland. For decades Finland had remained an obscure place, unfamiliar even to the Greek emigrants who, during the difficult years in the 50s and the 60s, were traveling upnorth to make a living. Even more recently Finland was still only known for its Nokia mobile phones and perhaps for some of its famous Formula I drivers. And all of a sudden, sometime in 2004 things changed. The PISA results became known in the country and the new minister of education spoke favourably of the Finnish system of education. She praised its impressive
achievements and declared that it could and that it should be very well taken as a model for Greek education. It was a statement that triggered widespread interest in and public debate about the Finnish education in Greece. Articles in the press, TV programmes, speeches in the parliament and conferences became the order of the day. As one would have anticipated under similar circumstances public discourse was flooded with enthusiastic or negative remarks, deficient and piecemeal information and unsubstantiated generalizations. In an attempt to put thinks right and bring the comparative perspective into the picture, the Greek Comparative Education Society and our University of Athens Centre of Comparative Education felt obliged to organize an academic conference that was attended by an audience of more than 500 people, teachers, students and policy makers in their majority.

This is not certainly the first time that a foreign system of education arouses such a great interest; the Swedish comprehensive school debate in the 60s constitutes a well known example. If this is generally true for all countries it is even more so for the Greek society with its long-standing admiration for all European accomplishments. After all it should be remembered that the Greek system of education was built in mid 1830s in the image of the German/Bavarian model with some strokes of institutional borrowing from France and that ever since, at least up to the early 1970s, education developments in those countries had persistently arrested public attention in Greece. In addition, during this long period, the majority of education academics and of the intelligentsia were graduates of mainly German universities and hence admirers of the German culture and education. In their capacity as policy makers themselves or as regular advisors to the education ministers they had contributed in retaining people’s keen interest in education abroad and in Germany more specifically.
This state of affairs had relaxed since mid 70s. Public interest had shrunk for a number of reasons. In the first place the development of education sciences in Greek universities and a new generation of academics of an Anglo-Saxon cultural influence had exposed the limitations of educational borrowing. In the second place Germany and France were not any more appreciated as being in the forefront of education developments, while at the same time Thatcherian educational reforms were looked on, to say the least, with mistrust. Finally the accession to power in the early 80s of a socialist party had brought with it a distrust for the capitalist west, a distrust that echoed the old Latin warning “timeo Danaos et dona ferentes”.

Yet, the tide turned again after the aforementioned ministerial statement. Under a quite different political, social and economic international climate politicians, educationists and the wider public were this time all in search for a new orientation and for best practices in education. In this sense the publicity given to the Finnish system of education could not be more timely. So, as if to verify the popular dictum “two Greeks three opinions” public discourse livened up. The adherents of neo-liberal and reformist policies saw in the Finnish 15year old pupils’ success in PISA, yet another verification of the rightness of their proposals. The left and all those who continue to “timeo Danaos” recognized in recent reforms in Finland the much averted right turn in education i.e. managerialism, privatization, quasi-markets, parental choice and involvement and so on. In between the two camps there were all those well meant people who were wondering why the Finns came first in the PISA reading literacy tests and the Greeks, with their long literary tradition, occupied only the twenty-sixth place and who would expect their politicians to learn something of practical value from the Finnish example.
As one would expect, all sorts of explanations for the Finnish success were provided and a plethora of relevant recommendations were offered to the Greek government, some of which by people of self-styled academic authority and wisdom. Most commentators tend to agree that Finnish success should be attributed to the country’s heavy investment in education which runs contrary to Greece’s poor investment. The arithmetic of the argument is obviously right. 6.3% and 3.9% of GNP are obviously different figures. More money certainly means more education facilities and better infrastructure. Yet, the relationship between investment and performance in education is never as linear as it may look. Other factors are involved, some of which are by no means of a fiscal character. Let me site only one example. Finland’s success was explained by many with reference to its dense network of public and school libraries that was made possible through sufficient funding. By contrast, lack of such libraries in Greece, and hence low performance in education, was attributed to insufficient funding. Yet, this tells only part of the story. It conceals the impact of the long-standing Greek education culture which discourages independent investigation and project work on the part of students, which leaves no free time in the school time-table for library work and which applauds the use of a single school textbook per subject. The fact that many among the over 500 school libraries recently established remain practically out of use is a reasonably good proof of the limitations existing in the funding-performance explanation, especially when it comes to policy borrowing.

A second explanation for the Finnish success provided by many in Greece, and by implication a recommendation to the Greek government, is related to the high quality of teacher education in Finland. The Finnish pupils came first in PISA, so the argument goes, because all Finnish teachers are MA graduates. Had the comparative argument been less
simplistic, other very important aspects of this allegedly causal relationship would have been revealed. In the first place, factual misunderstandings would have been avoided. For example, it would have been clearer that four years of study lead to a BA degree in Greece and may lead to an MA degree in Finland, where courses are organized on a credit and not on a semester basis. This clarification obviously undermines the validity of professional qualifications as an explanatory factor for the Finnish success. On the other hand, a closer comparative study on teacher training and on teacher status in the two countries would have further undermined the explanatory validity of this factor. Primary school teachers for one are selected among the best university candidates in both countries and teachers for the other enjoy equally high public recognition for their work, although their actual work in the classroom may substantially differ. Obviously, lack of comparative sensitivity and training has prevented the proponents of such explanations from recognizing and detecting the pitfalls of common sense comparisons.

Finally, the third more popular in the Greek context explanatory factor of the Finnish success relates to the decentralization of its education system. Fed up over the years with state bureaucracy and strict central control, proponents of decentralization in Greece were only too prompt to recognize its merits; its flexibility and its responsiveness to societal and economic needs. They have failed however to acknowledge significant differences between the two administrative and cultural contexts. The long living tradition of community life in the thinly populated Finland and the existing infrastructure of local government in it; the two very important elements of successful decentralized control which can be hardly found in Greece.

The Greek case of renewed interest in a foreign system of education I have just outlined does not certainly add something new to what we
already know about the misuse of comparison in policy making. The old vices and pitfalls so clearly identified by comparativists are as present and fearsome as ever. Politicians and the wider public continue to seek simplistic, one dimensional causal explanations that fit their preconceived notions and/or ideological preferences of what constitutes the proper policies, the successful way ahead. They will probably continue to do so with even greater momentum in response to the demands of globalization that envisages and encourages the dissemination of best practices and of effective policies. If there is something of significance in the Greek case, and in other similar cases, this has to do with the increased obligation on the part of comparativists to get more deeply and substantially involved through their academic work and their critical stance in policy making. As Thucydides, the ancient Greek historian, has said, “Times cannot wait”.