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## Curricula, Public Education and Neoliberal Politics in Greece

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### Abstract

The state of public education in Greece can be seen through the legislation implemented by the neoliberal government which continues unabated the policy opposed to public education. This article contains the enumeration of the main points of the Laws and aims to reveal their meaning in the field of public education: L. 4623/2019, L. 4692/2020, L. 4777/2021, L. 4823/2021, L. 4957/2022, L. 5094/2024. The choice of methodological analysis tool was based on content analysis and the study was conducted within the framework of critical pedagogy. From the analysis of the Laws, it appears that the innovations promoted as a panacea in the context of education are reflected by the terms that are used. The targeted changes, as they are called "innovations", in schools, in vocational education and training (VET) and in universities are made for: "merit", "excellence", "professionalism", "assessment", "reward", "improvement", and "quality". The Minimum Admission Base for General High School Graduates, it turns out, is a measure imposed on public education to promote graduates to private colleges and universities with high tuition fees. In addition, in schools the curricula of primary and secondary education are organized with skill toolkits and in VET are organized with skills for the labor market as promoted by the European Commission (2011). The Greek government is trying to privatize the activity of the public sector and from the above Laws it appears that the public nature of education is targeted. From kindergarten to university the public nature of education has come under attack across the board. The strategic choice to align with the choices of the European Union and the OECD for education is clear, the "commercialization" of education and the preparation for the wholesale privatization of schools, vocational training and universities. As a consequence, this affects the school, the curriculum and the lives of teachers and students. The economy of education in recent decades has seen citizen formation subordinated to a new economic mission. The conclusions show how the demands of the neoliberal policy and the scope of the European Union have affected public education in Greece and it is examined what the alternative goals could be.

**Keywords:** *Neoliberalism, Greece, public education, curricula, critical pedagogy.*

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## **Introduction**

Neoliberalism with the application of market principles in education has been evident since the 1970s (Harvey, 2005). The use of concepts and terms in Laws such as "quality", "freedom", "public" and in Curricula such as "solidarity", "democracy", "meritocracy" is the rhetoric that neoliberal politics uses to its advantage (Rinekso, Pertiwi & Yanda, 2022). The concepts and notions "social justice", "social action", "social interaction", "social participation", "critical thinking" as they are mentioned in the latest Greek Curricula for school education (I.E.P., 2023) indicate a framework of a socio-centric approach that will activate the students in real action through inquiry learning for critical awareness, where it will assimilate concepts and theories derived from progressive and radical models of education and society and take them to another level of possibility (Freire, 1977; Grollios, 2011). However, the aforementioned notions, distorted from their real meaning, are exploited in a new non-pedagogical context and serve the neoliberal purpose, which ultimately end up being nothing. As Peters (2021) refers:

Deconstructing neoliberal discourse in general terms, the commitment to the free market involves two sets of claims: (i) claims to the efficiency of the market as a superior allocative mechanism for distributing scarce public resources; and, (ii) claims for the market as a morally superior form of political economy (Peters, 2021).

Regarding education, the discourse of neoliberalism reduces education to a commodity rather than a public good so that it can follow the laws of the market and respond to the interests of consumers. Hence it is argued that there is no system of accountability and evaluation, and that is why, as we will see below, the Laws passed as their main purpose have evaluation, accountability and surveillance.

In Greece the government's dominant perception about the public school and more specifically the evaluation of the teacher and the school unit, the Curricula, the admission for Higher Education, and the operation framework for Universities is based on a neoliberal policy. The Greek Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, through

the Laws, expresses the conservative, hegemonic concept of punitive evaluation and the creation of a control system and "unmeritocracy" for the skill evaluation of the students and also of the teachers. It supports the need to evaluate the work of teachers and create a system for evaluating their work in a strict frame (Sounoglou, 2023a) to evaluate the skills of the students as potential workers but also the evaluation of the operation of universities, not in a logic of improvement but of quantification and measurable results based on financial gain at the expense of the quality of the pedagogical process. Below it has been analyzed how this coordinated process is expressed through the Laws in the last five years. The Laws that are referred in the specific period are:

-Law 4623/2019, (Government Gazette A 134/09.08.2019) "Office regulations, digital governance provisions, pension regulations and other urgent matters"

-Law 4692/2020, (Government Gazette A 111 - 12.06.2020) "School Upgrading and other provisions"

-Law 4777/2021, (Government Gazette A 25 - 17.02.2021) "Admission to Higher Education, protection of academic freedom, upgrading of the academic environment and other provisions"

-Law 4823/2021, (Government Gazette A 136 - 03.08.2021) "School upgrading, teacher empowerment and other provisions"

-Law 4957/ 2022, (Government Gazette A 141 - 21.07.2022) "New Horizons in Higher Education Institutions: Strengthening the quality of the functionality and connection of Universities with society and other provisions"

-Law 5094/2024, (Government Gazette A 39/13.03.2024) "Strengthening the Public University - Framework for the operation of non-profit branches of foreign Universities.

### **Methodology**

For the qualitative analysis of the Laws, techniques of content analysis and constant comparison of content were combined. The qualitative content analysis is classified under the qualitative descriptive design. The key characteristic is the systematic process of examining meaning and provision of a description (Zhang & Wildemuth,

2009; Vaismoradi, Jones, Turunen & Snelgrove, 2016). The choice of methodological analysis tool was based on the content analysis of the Laws. With this particular method, the text is systematically explored and then the content units are identified and categorized. With the method of thematic analysis (Robson, 2010) first the recording is done, then the coding and finally the classification of the content into themes. The analysis shows the need for in-depth and critical analysis with the methodological tool critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995) in order to explore the deeper semantic references based on the researched concepts. Analytical concepts were drawn from the field of discourse analysis and critical pedagogy (Gounari & Grollios, 2012).

### **Analysis of the Main Points of the Laws**

Below it is presented the main points of the Laws that were investigated regarding the neoliberalism references.

**Law 4623/2019**, (Government Gazette A 134/09.08.2019) “Office regulations, digital governance provisions, pension regulations and other urgent matters”

**Article 63** - *Arrangements for Model and Experimental Schools.*

**Article 64** - *Higher Education academic freedoms upgrading the quality of the academic environment. In Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs), academic freedom in research and teaching is guaranteed and protected, which is an institutional guarantee of unbound and inviolable scientific thinking, research and teaching. Academic freedom, as well as the free expression and circulation of ideas, are protected.*

**Law 4692/2020**, (Government Gazette A 111 - 12.06.2020) “School Upgrading and other provisions”

*Provisions on primary, secondary education and lifelong learning, Primary and Secondary education action entitled "Skills Workshops", to enhance the cultivation of soft skills, life skills and technology and science skills in students.*

**Article 20**, *Teacher evaluation, External evaluation of school units in terms of their educational work. Teaching staff are assessed on a documented four-point descriptive scale, in which their work is graded from unsatisfactory, to satisfactory, very good or excellent.*

**Law 4777/2021**, (Government Gazette A 25 - 17.02.2021) “Admission to Higher Education, protection of academic freedom, upgrading of the academic environment and other provisions”

*Introduction to Higher Education, protection of academic freedom, upgrading the academic environment and other provisions.*

**Article 1**, *Minimum basis for admission to higher education for graduates of General Lyceum, responsibility and establishing a framework of increased transparency and accountability, to resolve individual issues that have arisen at all levels of education.*

**Law 4823/2021**, (Government Gazette A 136 - 03.08.2021) “School upgrading, teacher empowerment and other provisions”

*Object: the organization of structures and the selection of education executives, the evaluation of executives and teachers with the introduction of a statutory, integrated and effective monitoring and control framework for the evaluation process, to establish a framework for strengthening the autonomy of Primary and Secondary schools and upgrading the educational work, to establish regulations to deal with more specific issues.*

*Purpose: to upgrade the quality of public education through the substantial rearrangement of the institutional construction of education structures and the provision of merit-based procedures for the selection of education executives, continuous and systematic evaluation of executives, teachers and their work in order to promote, improve and implement a quality and at the same time effective educational project, to strengthen the autonomy of primary and secondary school units and to upgrade the educational work through the provision of greater freedom in the organization of teaching, the strengthening of the role of the Director/Head of the school unit and teachers in positions of responsibility and establishing a framework of increased transparency and accountability, to resolve individual issues that have arisen at all levels of education.*

**Law 4957/2022**, (Government Gazette A 141 - 21.07.2022) “New Horizons in Higher Education Institutions: Strengthening the quality, organization and operation of the Universities with society and other provisions”

*New Horizons in Higher Education Institutions: Strengthening the quality, Organization and operation of higher educational institutes.*

**Article 2**, *enhancing the quality, excellence, efficiency, transparency and self-governing nature, and on the one hand, maximizing the contribution to the implementation of national strategies and priorities for the development of the country's economy. The introduction of a new governance model, which ensures transparency and accountability, the establishment of a modern and flexible framework for the organization and operation of study programs. The implementation of an internal control system and the implementation of development tools and plans for strategic planning, digital transformation.*

**Law 5094/2024**, (Government Gazette A 39/13.03.2024) “Strengthening the Public University - Framework for the operation of non-profit branches of foreign Universities”

**Article 37**, *Strengthening self-government, financial and administrative autonomy, the extroversion of public universities, the simplification and flexibility of the operation of administrative bodies in the exercise of their responsibilities, as well as the promotion of digital transformation and the more effective utilization of their assets.*

Table 1. *References in Laws*

Laws	References in Laws regarding to neoliberal policy
L.4623/2019	Arrangements for Model and Experimental Schools, In Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs), academic freedom in research and teaching is guaranteed and protected, institutional guarantee of unbound and inviolable scientific thinking, research and teaching Academic freedom, as well as the free expression and circulation of ideas, are protected.

Laws	References in Laws regarding to neoliberal policy
L.4692/20 20	<p>"Skills Workshops", to enhance the cultivation of soft skills, life skills and technology and science skills in students.</p> <p>External evaluation of school units in terms of their educational work.</p> <p>assessment of Teaching staff as unsatisfactory, satisfactory, very good or excellent.</p>
L.4777/20 21	<p>protection of academic freedom,</p> <p>upgrading the academic environment and other provisions,</p> <p>minimum basis for admission to higher education,</p> <p>establishing a framework of increased transparency and accountability</p>
L.4823/20 21	<p>evaluation of executives and teachers</p> <p>effective monitoring and control framework for the evaluation process</p> <p>strengthening the autonomy of Primary and Secondary schools</p> <p>upgrading the educational work</p> <p>systematic evaluation of executives, teachers</p> <p>effective educational project</p> <p>greater freedom in the organization of teaching</p> <p>strengthening of the role of the Director/Head</p> <p>establishing a framework of increased transparency and accountability</p>
L.4957/20 22	<p>enhancing the quality, excellence, efficiency, transparency and self-governing nature</p> <p>maximizing the contribution to the implementation of national strategies</p> <p>priorities for the development of the country's economy</p> <p>transparency</p> <p>accountability</p> <p>flexible framework for the organization and operation of study programs</p> <p>digital transformation</p> <p>internal control system</p>

Laws	References in Laws regarding to neoliberal policy
L.5094/2024	non-profit branches of foreign Universities Strengthening self-government financial and administrative autonomy flexibility of the operation of administrative bodies digital transformation effective utilization of assets

Table 2. *The Emerging Themes from the Content Analysis of the Laws*

Laws	Themes
L. 4623/2019, L. 4692/2020, L. 4777/2021, L. 4823/2021, L. 4957/2022, L. 5094/2024	Accountability Admission Assessment Autonomy Control system Digital transformation Efficiency Evaluation Excellence Flexibility Freedom Monitoring Non-profit branch Quality Self-governing Strengthening director's role Skills Transparency



## **Discussion**

As it emerged from the analysis the terms and notions used for educational policy are linked to the concepts of economy and economism and are harmonized with the requirements of the labor market (Rikowski, 2001, 2019 & 2020). According to the content of the legislation, from the scope of Laws it seems that public education is being redefined from a market perspective. The market becomes the defining characteristic of the student and the teacher to manage his own resources and make rational decisions that are supposed to lead to personal gain. As the European Commission's Communication refers:

Easy outsourcing in the globalizing world increases the dynamics of the labor market, and employees should invest in their (transferable) skills development to enhance their chances of keeping their job or finding a new one easily. Neither the private nor the public sectors can be fully responsible for an individual's employability. Personal responsibility and self-development are important, they are responsible for their own skills development (European Commission, 2011, p.9-28).

The competition promoted in students and in teachers for individual excellence and the acquisition of qualifications to be a better "product" derives from the basic pursuits of capitalism promoting greed for the greatest possible profit (Houser, 2023). With the right skills they will become the potential worker. (Sounoglou, 2023b). They will be evaluated based on the requirements of the market and if they do not "match" them they will be useless. So, neoliberalism has not only involved new attempts by governments to govern populations in line with market-based ideas and practices, it has also generated new "conditions of possibility" for how individuals imagine and govern themselves (Savage, 2017, p.149). The creation and destruction of jobs in various sectors have important repercussions for the types of education and skill sets demanded in the labor market (Fasih, 2008). This is a priority in Law 4692/2020 and introduces in Curricula (Institute of Educational Policy- I.E.P., 2023) the "Skills Workshops", to enhance the cultivation of soft skills, life skills and technology and science skills in students.

The "economisation" of education in recent decades has seen the formation of citizens subordinated to a new economic mission (Savage, 2017, p. 151). Brown (2015 as it cited in Savage, 2017, p.160) has also argued that the impact of neoliberalism on

education has resulted in "knowledge, thought and training" being valued and desired almost exclusively for their contribution to capital enhancement, rather than for developing the capacities of citizens, sustaining culture, knowing the world or envisioning and crafting different ways of life in common.

The new orthodoxy in accountability not only offers false promises of school improvement and increased academic achievement, but violates the fundamental right of students to an authentic and meaningful education, and as such, deprives them of the freedom to choose their own existence. To defend public education, and the rights of students, we must begin the long and arduous task of reconstituting the discourse of accountability, and ourselves, while engaging in political struggles to realize a new regime of truth in education (Ambrosio, 2013). From the Law 4957/2022 the priorities are the development of the country's economy, and accountability.

The discourse of the Laws reproduces capitalist logic (Au, 2021, p.125). As Gounari indicates: "Capitalism sets as a priority a different type of education that aims at mechanization, automation, and quantification of the educational process, and imposes a new regime of oppression, authoritarianism, and loss of autonomy for both students and teachers" (Gounari, 2021, p.114). This is clear in Law 4692/2022 that refers the external evaluation of school units in terms of their educational work and the assessment of teaching staff and categorizing them as unsatisfactory, satisfactory, very good or excellent. Also, in Law 4823/2021 the strengthening of the role of the Director/Head leads to an authoritarian frame for the teachers.

It is important to mention that the directives of the European Commission related to the cultivation of transversal skills in all students are taken into account and an evaluation framework is organized that students should comply with in order to be evaluated for their abilities, which reflect the labor market requirements (European Commission, 2012, 2014, 2016). As it referred:

The public sector (sometimes in cooperation with educators) is usually responsible for the development of forecasting tools for skills needed at national or regional levels, but those systems tend to cover occupational groups rather than specific occupations or even skills. These are (in most cases) developed by research institutions in the private sector or in education. National skills frameworks are being established in many countries, and they are developed in close cooperation with employers and/or professional associations. Many countries invest in improving the systems for skills analysis and forecasting and

linking them more closely to educational provision. Both employers and the public sector often see future skills requirements as a question of "more of the same". This means that trends identified in the previous period are expected to continue to shape the labor market in the future. ICT skills take precedence, because technological development will facilitate their efficient use in a growing number of occupations, tasks and areas. Other future trends identified include business and management skills, even in middle- and low-level occupations. This will be connected with a growing need for inter-sector knowledge. Language and cross-cultural requirements will grow in importance. Some employers also mention process management, skills related to teleworking (autonomy, ability to work and solve problems independently) and some soft skills. It is interesting that moral values like ethics and loyalty were often mentioned by employers as important "competencies". In response to the changing demand for skills, many employers are working on improving their human resources development systems (European Commission, 2011, p. 52).

Also, it is significant to refer that European Commission's Communication "European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social justice and resilience (2020)" (European Commission, 2020) aims for every classroom (by 2027) to be digital and this concerns infrastructure, content, practices and teachers' abilities to respond in these classrooms.

This digital path should be followed by students acquiring digital skills and being digitally literate to be adaptable to the changing digital environment they will have to join (Ionescu, 2012; Martínez & Rodríguez, 2018). As they are referred in Laws 4957/2022 and 5094/2024 promote the digital transformation and the more effective utilization of the assets.

From the analysis of the discourse of the Laws it seems that the innovations, promoted as a panacea in the context of the school of "meritocracy", and "excellence" through the "evaluation". How will meritocracy be achieved if teaching staff are categorized on a four-point rating scale as a one-word designation: "*unsatisfactory, satisfactory, very good or excellent*". Strengthening the role of the school Director/Head will create an additional stifling individual control by a hierarchical administrative mechanism. Essentially, an administrative pyramid is created that will form a systemic framework, instead of giving the possibility of teamwork and mutual support to the teaching staff.

As Savage refers "far from being a dying orthodoxy, neoliberalism is alive and well, reshaping multiple aspects of schooling, curriculum, and the lives of educators and students across the world" (Savage, 2017, p.147). The goal of neoliberal-

neoconservative politics is social and political restructuring in order to shrink the public character of the school and the social character of the state. This is a direct attack by the forces of capital at an international level through the requirements of the European Union and are being strongly bolstered by powerful economic organizations, such as the World Bank and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (OECD, 2009).

It is a fact that democracy is shrinking in educational institutions as a result of the new public managerialism, where capital needs determine the main objectives of education, with the main implementer being the companies that provide the process management model (Hill, 2007, p.207) and seems that it is reorganized the education in line with market ideas and practices (Savage, 2017, p.152). New public managerialism (management methods drawn from private enterprise) can be interpreted as the "businessification" of education (Rikowski, 2001, 2020), the softening up, the preparation for the wholesale privatization of schools, vocational colleges and universities (Hill, 2013, p.4). The commercialization of education is impossible without the imposition of neoconservative doctrines of total ideological-political control of pupils, students and teachers (Grollios & Liambas, 2021, p.19). This is obvious in Law 4777/2021 that introduce the minimum basis for admission to higher education for graduates of General Lyceum are only for the sector public universities and not for the private colleges. So, every student who has an underrate score he can not study in public university but if he can fund the fees he can do it in private college.

Neoliberal reforms have already been promoted during the COVID-19 pandemic and have taken advantage of the circumstances to shrink the public sector. Indeed, such alignments create the pre-conditions for various forms of privatization and commodification of core public services (Ball, 2003, p. 216), such as the creation of educational resources and services by private companies, which have benefited greatly from these changes, through lucrative government contracts that have been a scandal for Greek public education and government spending<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> For the needs of distance learning, private company resources were used and there was even a leak of personal data <https://vouliwatch.gr/news/article/tsipras-skandalo-symvasi-me-cisco>

Also, in Law 4692/2020 it is referred that the school units will have an external evaluation (from private companies) in terms of their educational work.

As Harvey (2005) indicates “if markets do not exist in education, then they must be created, by state action if necessary”. As the European Commission’s Communication refers:

It is quite common that the accreditation/ recognition system is controlled and organized by the state (government) but delivered through private companies. Lack of resources for human capital development in the private sector due to the crisis should be compensated for by public sources, which often reduces the cost of education for employers or even promotes replacing a part of the non-used working time by relevant training (European Commission, 2011, p.13-14).

A free-market system of education requires standardized curricula and assessment to compare and rank schools, and provide parent-consumers with information needed to make decisions in the educational marketplace. However, this convergence of different political agendas requires that the state decentralize the operation of public schools, to promote privatization schemes, while centralizing control over curricula, pedagogy, and assessment (Ambrosio, 2013, p.13).

The main ideological state mechanisms are the capitalist controlled mass media and state education systems. That is why it aims for children to be competitive, individualistic, and encouraged to create businesses, to appreciate money creation and "the spirit of business" (Hill, 2013, p.10). But all this is opposed to the leftist concepts of collectivity, solidarity, public service and public good. It is a great challenge for the public school to resist this gangrene that necrotizes every human value and educational dimension of the educational process. Teachers in Greece resist by striking and abstaining from the assessment and create a protective shield in public school<sup>2</sup>.

The response to the sweeping changes promoted in education through schools and Curricula is the constant struggle for critical awareness. Critical awareness is a social

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.kathimerini.gr/society/563023099/olme-nea-apergia-apochi-ekpaideytikon-apo-tin-axiologisi/>  
[https://www.alfavita.gr/ekpaideysi/461846\\_ekpaideytikoi-enantia-stin-axiologisi-antistasi-stin-epiboli-aytarhikon-politikon](https://www.alfavita.gr/ekpaideysi/461846_ekpaideytikoi-enantia-stin-axiologisi-antistasi-stin-epiboli-aytarhikon-politikon)

act, a group struggle, which does not work individually, but takes place through a focused reality historically and socially. In the process of awareness students gain awareness, not only of the given situation, but also of their ability to change and reshape that reality. By this process the educator creates the framework for criticizing the conditions organized and imposed through the neoliberal spirit and the capitalist system.

It is absolutely essential that students and educators defend their rights to free access to free education with schools as agents of social development and not companies of budding workers with specific skills that only serve the market.

One proposal is the application of non-teacher-centered and non-method-centered approaches but a socio-centered approach where in a dialogic process students and teachers will participate equally and democratically (Freire, 1977).

At the same time another point that educators need to delve into is wondering about the curriculum - "who chose its content and how tightly structured it is?" (Hill, 2016, p.163). Even where the curriculum is very tightly controlled, even where it is very tightly prescribed, and it has been observed that neoliberalism is trying to create an anti-union front to prevent collective organization and reaction, however the solidarity and joint resistance of the educational movement in preventing the implementation of neoliberal educational reforms is evident (Au, 2021; Close, Amrein-Beardsley & Collins, 2020; Owens, 2022). As Hill mention, according to Gramsci, always there are small gaps to penetrate, to use, to colonize (cited in Hill, 2016, p.163). The educators resist, creating fissures that destabilize the bulimic tendencies built into the logics of the capitalist production model. There is room for resistance even within the boundaries set by authority (Au, 2021, p.181).

As Marxist educators suggest (Hill, 2013, p.13), indeed critical educators in general, can, with students, look at the curriculum and ask, "Who do you think wrote this?", "Who do you think decided to include this in the curriculum?", "What do you think should be in the curriculum that is currently missing?", "Why do you think he/she is absent?" "Who do you think benefits and who loses from this curriculum?", "What is the ideology behind this book/course/piece of curriculum?". These questions can be

asked to the children so that critical awareness takes place in the classroom with the students in an active role (Hill, 2016. p.163).

### **Conclusions**

The contribution of this paper is to highlight how through legislation the public school becomes a target of neoliberal government. The neoliberal capitalism has cultivated the perceptions of the purpose of public education and as it was clearly seen from the purposes of Laws that are close to the neoconservative perceptions, the assessment is the mean for the suffocating control of the teacher and the school with the ultimate goal of privatization and customerisation. The shrinking of the public school serves big interests and completely weakens the pedagogical process that takes place in it. Hierarchy, control, incompetence and authoritarianism create complex problems in the public school, and it ends up being a clientelistic system and a mechanism of manipulation.

To conclude, there is a clear political expediency for limiting the public school through the control and evaluation of teachers, the school unit, and curricula. Privatization that will come through strict control and punitive evaluation with criteria unrelated to the pedagogical context is a key argument of resistance to the neoliberal policy that it aims at increasing profits and ignores the pedagogical process and those directly involved in it.

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