

Private Lessons between Social Inclusion and Active Citizenship

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Abstract

Across the panorama of education throughout the world, the phenomenon of private lessons is joined to an increase in mass schooling and educating towards distinctive qualities so as to gain a place on an increasingly competitive labour market. Countries are examined in which private lessons are quite widespread and appeal to the expectations of success by children born into middle and upper-middle class families. In Cyprus and in Greece, excessive private lessons encroach on the monthly family income. It is taken for granted that the work done in school is insufficient to learn enough. The school seems not to be able to assure the level of excellence and the success of the entrance examination. The private lessons are functioning as process of inclusion in the society of knowledge insofar as they are providing the necessary competences to deal with the academic achievement. Moreover, the private lessons have the result of providing children with intellectual and instrumental tools useful to exercise the active citizenship. We discuss the contradiction between the concept of democracy which should give consistency to the public school system and the concept of private tuition which means failure to pursue the target of equal opportunity for all in the state educational system. A kind of double schooling with an education, parallel to official standard, is emerging also in Italy where families are slowly moving towards the Cypriot and Greek model of private lessons at home. Problematic discussion consider the critical situation of school as context in which on principle all students can find good conditions of learning and in practice many students are unsatisfied with the teaching methods.

Keywords: Private tuition, Inclusion, Citizenship, Democracy, Double-schooling, Social Selection, Educational Disadvantage

Introduction

Emerging from the scenario of education throughout the world is the phenomenon of private lessons taken by public school students and given by teachers working from their own homes. Mass schooling and the requirement for increasingly higher educational standards, defined as skills, are creating an intense contradiction in the knowledge society. On one hand, national and world policies on education emphasise the importance of across-the-board education and follow the motto of Comenius: *omnesomniamino*; that is, that everyone studies everything in-depth (Pánek, 1991). On the other hand, the competition on the labour market is rising and pushing aside those who do not have a command of innovations and changes. One effect of this contradiction is the rise in request for private lessons by families of primary and secondary school pupils. Families are searching for success for their children and are even willing to make economic sacrifices. Despite the evangelic saying “the last shall be first”, no mother or father wants to see their children among the last at school and in society. The search for success in studies is equivalent to the social and professional affirmation of the person and identification of a good citizen. This perspective includes the question of school evaluation of the competences (De Landsheere, 1988). The educational system has opened the doors to everyone, by providing for different directional paths in order to meet the various development requirements of the person. And yet, parents understand that their children need private teachers to follow them individually and enable them to reach the levels that society requires for professional success and career achievement. The best, most satisfying and highest paid job is the one a person can obtain by leaving school with top marks. School reports are important for the best social insertion. However, persons choosing private lessons believe that schools are not satisfactorily preparing young people, despite its being the school that assesses and issues educational qualifications. For young people to be good at school and citizens capable of doing their jobs well, it is indispensable for them to have recourse to private lessons.

This is the moral revealed by the phenomenon we are studying and which interests, most of all, middle to upper-middle class families. The contribution being presented here examines the results of a survey carried out in three Mediterranean countries: Cyprus, Greece and Italy, where the phenomenon emerges in different proportions. The research is aimed at understanding the reasons for private lessons from the points of view of both students and teachers. Private lessons are a social reply to the search for scholastic success by young people and a deterrent to those who might decide to quit school, if left without support. Our initial hypothesis is that private lessons, as such, represent a failure of the modern idea of democracy of education (Dewey, 1916) which should be confirmed in state schools through the realisation of equal opportunity and, consequently the inclusion of everyone, so that each person receives an education in values and the intellectual tools that permit the best exercise of active citizenship.

Reasons for the Phenomenon and Processes of Social Differentiation

Daily newspapers on Cyprus and in Greece sometimes complain that private lessons are “excessive” and have a heavy impact on monthly family incomes. There are no scientific surveys available because private lessons are illegal, a fact which may deter a study of the social problem at the root of the phenomenon. It is preferable not to study a problem which is understood as impossible to resolve and presents itself as a *perverse effect of the knowledge society*. We say perverse effect because it was unexpected that the worldwide request for preparation towards exercising competences, education towards democracy, expansion of compulsory education and reduction of the rate of quitting school would lead to parents racing to keep their children from being unsuccessful. Families fear social exclusion. The fear and shame of failure in the university entrance examinations are syndromes that assail the parents more than the children. Teachers and parents share the urgency for higher preparation of the young people, who, to a large extent, do not oppose private lessons.

The mechanism takes hold and propagates. Schools do not sufficiently prepare for social inclusion, do not ensure skills and, alone, do not guarantee getting through exams and studying towards a better paid professional career. The result is that private lessons are the only possible solution, guaranteed by years of experience. We are witnessing the forming of a double-schooling channel: one public and the other private. The public channel is underestimated and is not much appreciated by local social contexts; it is judged inadequate for the best preparation of young people and adolescents and unable to create trust in families. The private channel is chosen by well-off families who can pay a teacher at home. Thus, pupils have to receive additional teaching outside the classroom. In doing so, learning setbacks can be recovered and they are not left behind with the school programme or can reach the higher marks expected by their parents.

Five processes of social differentiation take shape that can be defined as:

- Double-schooling characterised by the co-existence of public and private instruction;
- Social selection characterised by the discrimination between who can and who cannot pay for private lessons;
- Creation of the learning method alternative to public and state teaching;
- legitimating of the alternative learning model of private lessons that appears to be the only accredited solution that replies to the quality objective of education fixed for the best participation in the knowledge society;
- Depreciation of teachers at public schools and over-appreciation of teachers of private lessons.

Research Method

The survey being carried out is quantitative and may be considered explorative for qualitative examination of more substantial proportion. We collected some qualitative considerations about the phenomenon from Greek teachers willing to collaborate with the research group. The field of survey was limited to private lessons. Interviews were done with students and teachers, who make use of private lessons. Two questionnaires, set up with closed questions, were used. The questionnaires were in Italian and were given to Greek students from Cyprus and Greece, who were attending the second-level *Master's in Pedagogy for the person, organisation and society* at the University Roma Tre, Italy. Following translations of the questionnaires into Greek, they were given to persons in Larnaca and Athens in March 2011. A sample group in Perugia, Italy, was given the questionnaire in Italian. The survey points out the proportion and characteristics of the phenomenon in the three countries, but limited to the sample groups contacted that were composed of adolescents aged 12-18 and teachers aged 18-57. As we can see, age 18 is the year of passage: one person of this age may be a student taking private lessons and another, of the same age, may be giving private lessons.

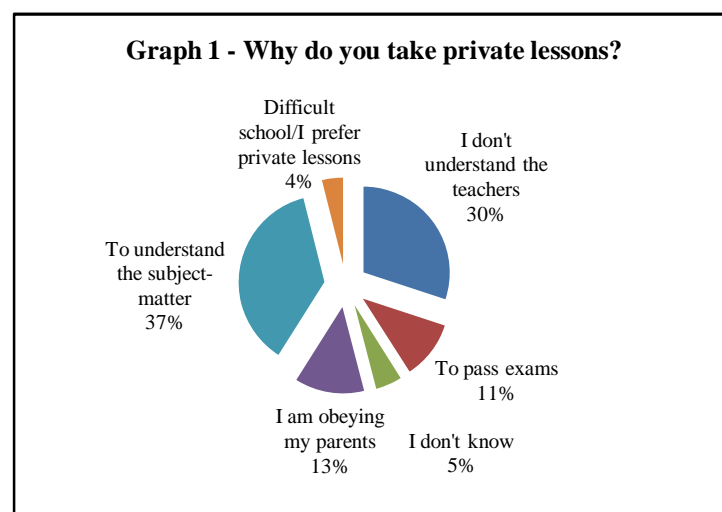
In general, in Italy one can observe how recourse to private lessons represents a marginal portion of the school population compared to what was noted in the other due countries, where private lessons make up a structural, organic condition of the national, educational physiognomy. In Italy, recourse to private lessons is not as widespread as on Cyprus or in Greece and trust in the learning processes offered by public institutions appears to be higher in Italy.

Socio-Demographic Data on the Students

Interviews were done on 71 students, taking private lessons in Larnaca, Athens and Perugia. The major portion of the sample groups was that of Cyprus (75%), while a less substantial part was from Italy. Over half of the interviewees were female (55%). By age, the sample groups were mostly composed of young people aged 16 to 18 (74%). Only 6% of the interviewees stated having been failed at school; the remaining 94% had not failed in their studies. The young people being accompanied to private lessons by their parents amounted to 51%, while those who went on their own amounted to 44%. Private lessons as a *family experience* amounted to 38% of the sample groups, i.e. that one or more siblings use the same recovery method. From a professional point of view, 40% of the fathers of the persons interviewed work in the services sector, 25% are professional people and 20% are employees, followed by artisans (8%) and teachers (7%). As regards the work of the mothers, they are prevalently housewives and women working in the services sector (54%), 28% are employees, 10% are teachers and 8% professional people. The ascent in the career pyramid is more substantial for men, while the marked presence in the services sector shows that, in general, parents belong to the middle class. The upper-middle class, of professional people, concerns one-fourth of the fathers and only a marginal portion of the mothers.

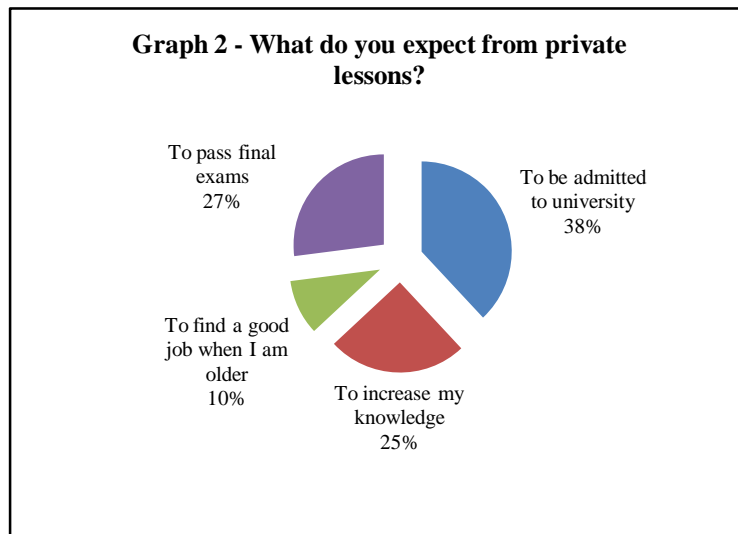
How Students Judge Private Lessons

The majority of the persons interviewed stated going to private lesson to “understand the subject-matter better” (37%) (see graph 1). In general, the young people complained about not understanding the explanations of the teachers (30%) and preferred taking private lessons, since they found school difficult (4%). Only 13% were obeying their parents and a smaller portion (11%) reported needing help to pass exams. The percentage results point out how worrying about exams and, thus, future plans, are scantily perceived by the young people, whereas the alarming fact of the incapacity of schools to make the subject-matter understood shows the proportion of the phenomenon. Also emerging from the results is one of the reasons for quitting school of those who cannot follow the pace at school and do not have recourse to private lessons. Notable is the absence of reply to the item “because Greek is not my mother tongue”. This item points out that, at least in our sample groups, persons going to private lessons do not come from families who have migrated. The relationship that could exist between scholastic difficulties and situations of migration probably do not surface in the sample groups due to the higher social standing of those taking advantage of private lessons. It would be reasonable to assume that students, who are children of immigrants, do not have recourse to private lessons, even if they are having difficulties at school. This fact opens the argument of socio-economic discrimination of resources available for learning.



Student Expectations and Satisfaction

Of the students, 38% expect to be accepted at university and 27% wish to pass their final exams (see graph 2). This fact would seem to contradict the previous one, in which it was mainly stated that the reason for going to private lessons was because the explanations of the teachers were not understood. In reality, the reason of incomprehensible explanations is the cause for recourse to private lessons, while the expectation of passing exams represents the result of the choice that would seem compelled by the ineffectiveness of the teaching at school.



Increase in knowledge (25%) and work prospects (10%) are the choices preferred by a minority of the sample groups. Derived from this is a certain weakness in considering the overall educational value of private lessons that are an *instrument of social ascent*, according to the parameters posted by the national academic world. Of the students, 66% stated being satisfied with private lessons, against 25% who are only partially satisfied. Considering the great flow to private lessons, one would expect a larger percentage of positive opinions.

The Perception of School and Teachers

School is decisively perceived as positive by most of the interviewees, from the friendship side, “I like to go to school because of the friends I meet” (39%) and as the general idea of accrued knowledge, “I like to learn a lot of new and interesting things” (32%). The disquieting percentage is that of 29% of those who propose complete replacement of the school with private lessons (13%) and find school unpleasant and difficult (16%). A slight minority express a more political, managerial thought, by proposing to change the school and organise it better. Of relevance is the opinion about possibly avoiding private lessons. The prevailing consideration is that teachers should be “better at school” (32%), which could also mean that they should give higher marks and be more “lenient” depending on the difficulty of the subject-matter (21%). Part of the sample groups is a bit self-critical, saying that individual study and attention at school should be intensified (26%). However, the institutional question concerning simplifying the final exam is agreed to by 15% of the interviewees. A small minority (6%) wish to leave school to get married, go abroad, or just have fun. About half of the sample groups find that there should be more engagement at school, without private lessons, and that the teachers are not in favour of private lessons. A scenario of conflict arises that places the school against private lessons.

Daily Life, Spare Time, the Economic Issue

Half of the sample groups study at home alone for one or two hours per day and about one-quarter of the interviewees dedicate less than an hour per day to studying. This time is used for doing homework from school and from the private lessons. When they do not go to private lessons, about half of the young people in the groups prefer to rest and about half of them play at sports or attend cultural activities. In general, the young people show a certain distance from the economic issue. They realise that both of their parents face sacrifices to pay for private lessons, and they feel to have an obligation imposed by the family. Lessons are a necessary, inevitable expense for reaching individual success and the social prestige of the family.

By analysing this fact against that of the professional occupations of the parents, one understands how, in most situations, the parents have to make considerable economic efforts to enable their children to take private lessons. In fact, belonging to the middle class does not mean families have excess income easily allocated to this purpose. Despite the economic crisis that has mainly affected Greece and Italy, the item of private lessons continues to be present in the monthly family budget as an economic asset of foremost necessity.

Traces of Active Citizenship

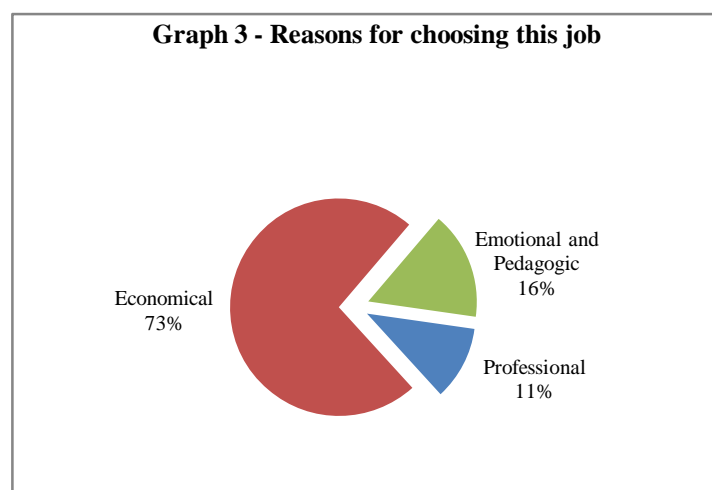
The results concerning the students who took private lessons, relative to the sample groups interviewed, emphasise the concern about exams as well as the critical distance against an educational system that could be organised differently in order to avoid recourse to this practice. Schools should have teachers who are better prepared and students should be more engaged during school hours. The analyses concern a bare half of the sample groups and do not appear to have much substance. The absence of an intervention aimed at strengthening educational strategies weakens the effectiveness of institutional lessons and reinforces the need for private lessons. Students clearly perceive that schools do not succeed in their educational purpose, even though they have the potential for it, and reforming the training of teachers is the most realistic, reasonable solution to the best acquisition of knowledge required for social mobility.

Socio-Demographic Data about the Teachers

The sample groups of teachers are made up of 17% interviewees in Larnaca, 33% in Athens and 50% in Perugia, half of whom are aged 18-33 and the other half are aged 33 to 57. Women make up 60% of the teachers giving private lessons and men make up the remaining 40%. Private lessons are mostly given at the homes of the teachers (85%) and a small part at private schools (15%). The teachers contacted are generally employed (70%) or unemployed (30%).

The Job of Private Lessons

A good 70% of the persons interviewed began this job over five years ago. It is a real job that represents an alternative to unemployment. It's being illegal does not discourage the experience. The reasons for the choice of giving private lessons as a daily job are mainly economical under the expressions "it's the only job I could find", unemployment, a way of earning and living better (73%), emotional and pedagogic with the sentence "I love to work with young people" (16%) and to a lesser extent, professional reasons were mentioned, such as "to prepare me for teaching at a public school" (11%) (see graph 3).

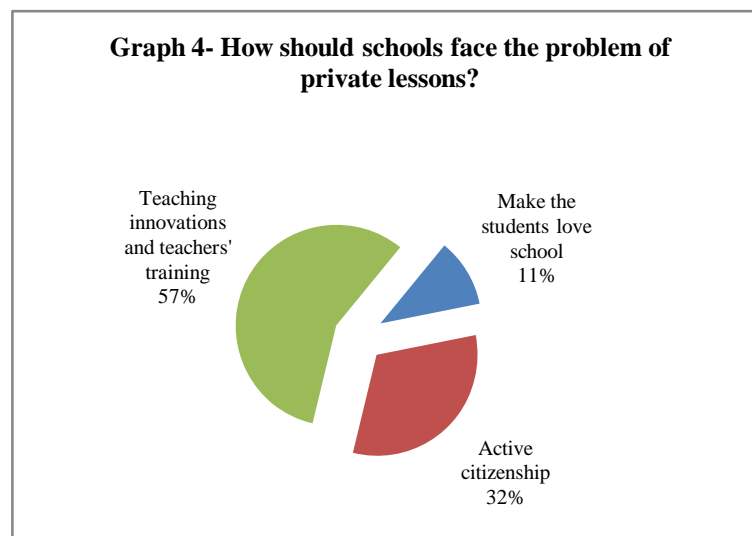


On the subject of expectations, teachers chiefly agree on the professional aspects: to learn to best carry out their jobs at school, since they might be hired on the permanent staff (40%) and "to get teaching experience" (35%); these aspects far exceed the prospect of earnings. "To make money" as satisfactory compensation for this job is indicated by a minority of the sample groups (25%). Work as an employee or teacher is carried about by 70%, while 30% state being unemployed, a sign that earnings from private lessons help raise an income that is probably insufficient for the person and family.

Those who do not find this job “stable and secure” amount to 40%, while 28% of the interviewees state that private lessons will also be a future occupation and 32% do not express a definite purpose and they are doubtful about carrying out this job in coming years.

Assessment of Schools

Of the sample groups, 50% sustain that the practice of private lessons “shows problems in the school system”, in addition to being a way to solve the unemployment of teachers (33%). The reference to “illegal” practices is cited by 5% of the sample groups. Finally, 10% find that private lessons are a “good practice for the students”. Worthy of note is that only 2% of the interviewees suggested officialising private lessons in order that they be considered legal. Teaching innovations and teachers’ training are the best ways of preventing the phenomenon (57%), while interventions of active citizenship, such as observance of legal regulations, promotion of student participation in the educational process, dialogue between teachers and students, promotion of equal opportunity in education and preparation for entering the working world concern 32% of the choices of the sample groups (see graph 4).



The traditional theme of “make the students love school” (11%) is certainly without substance and efficacy, due also to this being far from the requirement of competence by a highly competitive society. Teaching to love knowledge and consider studying something culturally important in itself depends on the qualification of the teachers. It follows that the more prepared the teachers, the less students have to resort to private lessons in order to pass exams. Finally, about the description of the personal experience of teaching private lessons, the interviewees appreciate the refinement of their capacities for human communication (45%). Between being an experience for improving professional skills (28%) and judging it as something boring and inadvisable to others, something “difficult”, a “tiring” experience and sometimes even defined as “tragic” (27%), there is no particular discrimination, which is a sign of the uncertainty of the fact of self-training through this practice, staying at home and contributing to reproducing a model that might find alternatives for its substitution and abolition.

Profile of a Teacher of Private Lessons

Briefly, the profile of a teacher of private lessons is the following. A teacher of private lessons is mostly woman aged 26 to 41, who work up to 21 hours per week and have been doing this job for over three years, mainly for financial reasons. She hopes to grow professionally and consider private lessons a means of preparation towards teaching. A job after working hours is a relevant phenomenon. Teacher works a regular job and adds to one’s earnings through private lessons, which is, nonetheless, an uncertain activity generated by the many problems in public schools. Among the principal reasons for the perpetuation of the practice of private lessons arise the incapacity of schools and the State to review and update study programmes, as well as the chronic delay in training teachers who use repetitive teaching methods that are not very appreciated by the young people, whether they are very good or less good at their studies. Below is a comment made by a teacher of private lessons in Greece. In Greece, the phenomenon of private lessons is chronic.

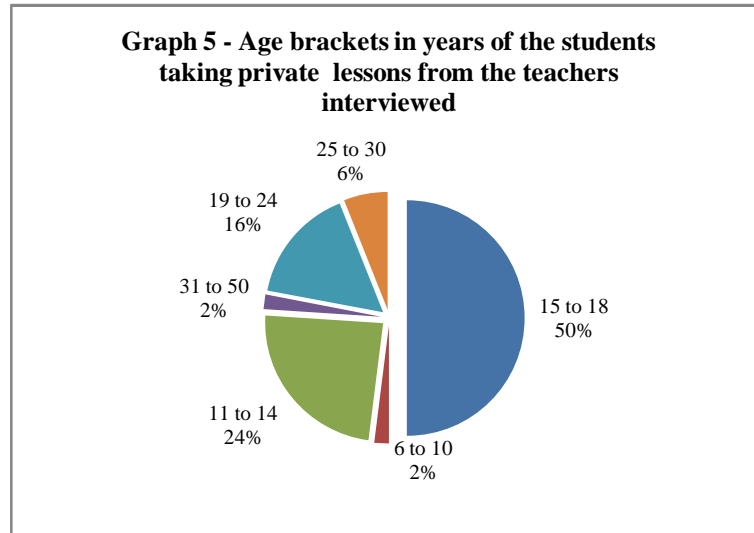
“In our opinion, this is principally due to fundamental factors, concerning the Greek system of education on one hand, and, hence, the debatable educational policy, and, on the other, confused Greek culture, in the sense of collective mentality, according to which every parent wants to have children who have degrees, cost what it may. Over the last years of the modern age, starting from the establishment of Democracy in the country and after the fall of the dictatorship that devastated Greece in all senses, that is, from 1975 onward, one could actually say that no educational reform has managed to eliminate this phenomenon, dramatic as it is from many points of view. Dramatic because it not only shows the ineffectiveness of Greek schools, but also because it is illegal and allows for an enormous evasion of taxes and every family is practically compelled sustain private lessons through sacrifices. *Numerusclausus* for entrance into university renders competition for the best marks among the students truly gruelling. Those aspiring to enter a faculty that may lead to job prospects and a career find themselves forced to turn to private lessons. Greek schools are, unfortunately, far behind the times. There are no new school programmes that reply to current needs; schools do not offer the possibility of sufficient learning of new technologies or foreign languages; they do not help the students discover and cultivate their natural inclinations to any subject and how they are run has never been evaluated. These institutions do not attract students and cannot satisfy the young people’s expectations. They favour whoever manages to memorise the material, place no importance on the method of critique and, thus, do not cultivate the talents of the students. It seems like conditioning exercises to annihilate their persona; consequently, most of the students get discouraged and give up every effort, which is not without negative effects on their personalities. This way they barely make it from one year to the next and have not even learned the minimum concepts, which we adults find obvious. Teachers are not systematically updated or informed about the innovations in their subject fields, but only by accident or if they act on their own and update themselves, but, unfortunately, there are not too many who do.

Private lessons are taken in subjects dealing with humanities and sciences. Those most frequented are mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology and economic, which are the ones that help pass university entrance examinations for ‘prestigious’ departments, such as engineering, medicine and economics; these departments give qualifications with which students hope to find jobs more easily. As regards foreign languages, it could be said that public school only offers courses in English and French and vary rarely a course in German. Even in this sector, however, the courses are organised without a preliminary test to be able to verify the level of knowledge of the language in order to make up the classes according to their linguistic knowledge rather than the age of the students. Since it is difficult learn a foreign language at school, the certain way to do so is private lessons. In wishing to talk about the Greek culture, we cannot but mention the mentality of the majority of Greeks, who underestimate manual occupations or handicrafts. Almost all parents have a dream that their children graduate and become doctors. They cannot understand the limits of each young person and his/her dreams. Good or not good at studies, he or she has to take private lessons, hoping to pass the university entrance exams. Today there is also the phenomenon of listless, bored young people who shrink away from every attempt when faced with the ‘avalanche’ of daily homework. They, too, must take private lessons otherwise they will not even pass the exams for receiving their secondary school certificates. One last thing that we would like to comment on is the high rate of unemployment of teachers in Greece. Since there is nothing else for them to do, they dedicate themselves to this illegal activity. But all governments that have come into power have known about it, because they have tried to eliminate it; they have not had the political volition nor a plan to improve and modernise public schools and consequently closed off this painful aspect of the educational system” (Testimony of a teacher of private lessons, Athens, 7 April 2011).

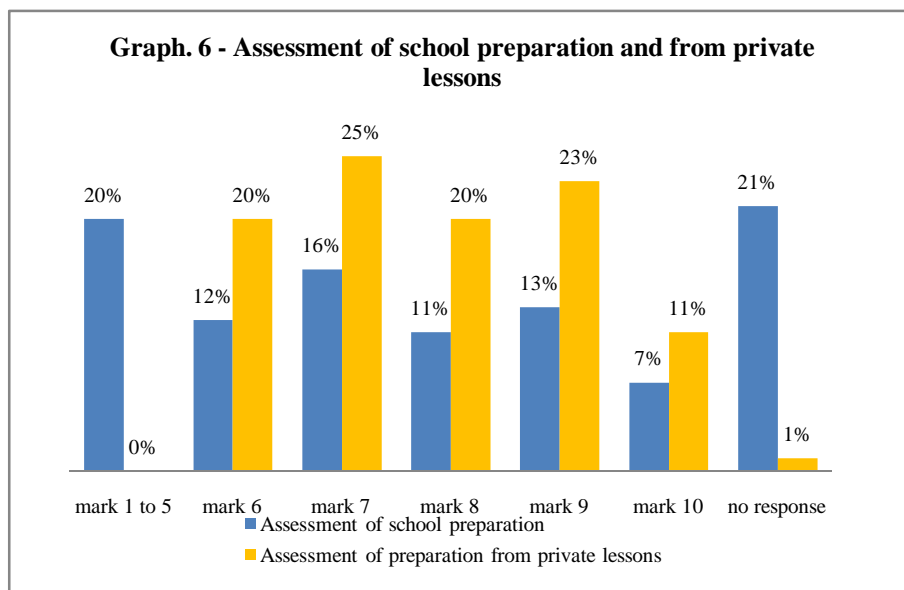
Students of Teachers of Private Lessons

The questionnaire for the teachers included a section for assessing students followed by 40 teachers interviewed who give private lessons. In all there were 174 such students. Each teacher followed from one to 16 students per week. A student pays 15 to 30 Euros per lesson-hour, depending on the number of hours taken, professional experience of the teacher and place where the lessons are given. If the lessons are given at the student’s home, the price goes up. If the teacher follows several students together during the same hour, the price can drop by ten Euro. Some private teachers have a good reputation and, hence, follow numerous students, even working full days. In general, students receive two to four hours of private teaching per week (95%), and only 5% receive five to eight hours of private lessons. Of the students, 67% have been going to the teachers interviewed for at least one year, while the remaining 33% have been going to private lessons with the same teacher for two to five years.

In the sample groups interviewed, 48% of the students were from Cyprus and the remaining from Greece (26%) and Italy (26%). The students followed by the 40 teachers amounted to 50% aged 15-18; 24% aged 11-14; 16% aged 19-24; 6% aged 25-30; 2% aged 6-10 and the remaining 2% were aged 31-50 (see graph 5).



The percentage distribution shows how private lessons are mainly requested on the secondary school level, but also drop into elementary school. Persons who are not of school age mainly go to private lessons to learn foreign languages. In fact, the subjects taught are literature (38%), foreign languages (37%) and scientific subjects such as mathematics, physics and chemistry (25%). As concerns marks, the teachers were asked to give each student a mark for school preparation and preparation from private lessons. As can be seen in graph 6, the situation is reversed with respect to the two assessments: students not doing so well at school improve through private lessons. The school assessment is insufficient for 20% of the students who receive one to five points from the teacher of the private lessons. In private lessons, the percentage is higher for those who receive 9 (23%) and 10 (11%). Considering the range from 6 to 10, in both assessments, 7 is the mark preferred by the teachers.



Conclusive Considerations

The research presented here shows how private lessons represent the opposing trend to quitting school for middle and upper-middle classes. It is forecast that the financial crisis of the Mediterranean countries will impoverish families and make recourse to private lessons increasingly difficult. For this reason, there will be an increase in young people, who cannot pay for private lessons, quitting their studies and a consequent return to a school selection determined by social class.

As regards the less well-off social classes, the impossibility of paying for private lessons could be a further obstacle to recovery and increased social marginalisation and the reproduction of inequality (Bourdieu, P., Passeron, J.-C., 1970). From the standpoint of the financial macro-system, private lessons generate uncontrolled flows of income that permit an increase in apparent unemployment and concealed, unregulated occupation. This double market, of a self-produced job and statistical unemployment, produces the figure of a consumer who invests an income that is officially unknown. As for the school system, private lessons are clear evidence of the incapacity of schools to meet the needs of young people, who aspire to be successful in their studies in order to attain positions of professional prestige, of their own volition or, more often, the volition of their parents. Several studies in Italy showed how important is for an adolescent the support of the family to decide to study in school (Chistolini, 2011). The rhetoric of schools produces learning models that are obsolete and unable to be reformed (OECD, 2008). In this sense, the principle of equal opportunity is not satisfied and the same democratic inspiration of schools in the 21st century vacillates (Holmes, 1992; Domna and Anastasiou, 2010). Teachers do not react to the phenomenon and delegate most of the educational responsibility to their colleagues who give private lessons. The qualification of a public school teacher is understood as a milestone in the exercise of active citizenship (Corradini, 2004; Hadjitheodoulou, Loizidou 2009), since it is an indispensable step towards reforming the schooling method in the public education sector.

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