

Changes in the Cypriot Public Secondary Education System and Their Impact on Students

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Fine Art Media and Education

Year 3

Table of Content

Introduction	2
Successful Student	3
Factors that Stunt Success	6
Who Made The Decision?	8
What Changes Were Implemented?	10
Do the Changes Actually Work?	13
Conclusion	14
Works Cited	16

Introduction

Public schools are incredibly important in educating a society's youth and a crucial guide for them into adulthood. "Concentrated in the first years of one's lifetime, [formal education] is designed to affect the course of a person's entire life" and will determine their level of intelligence and success as adults (Abowitz, 2018, p36). The main goal of public schools is to provide the students with "credentials that enable future employment" and the required "skills for social interaction and engaged citizenship" (Abowitz, 2018, p35). This is accomplished through the teaching of important basic skills such as reading, writing and mathematics in primary school and more complicated concepts such as critical thinking and problem solving in secondary school. Alterations in the courses the students take and the methods of which they are taught is a recurring and essential part of the education system. The purpose of such modifications is to encourage a more inclusive environment for different types of learners and to better prepare the students for their future as productive members of society. These changes, no matter how big or small, have "an intimate relation to the community and the government" because those are the people responsible for making these crucial decisions (Harris, 1953, p243). However, such changes might not necessarily be made after careful consideration of the youth's needs and are not always in their best interest. In 2015 a decision was made by the ministry of education in Cyprus that would change the way in which students could pick their subjects in secondary school and how they would be taught in general. In this essay we will determine if the students' engagement, wellbeing and success will be influenced by the changes in the secondary schools implemented in 2016. Therefore, we will examine how these changes have impacted the children currently and how it might affect their success as functional members of the society.

Successful Student

Firstly, in order to answer this question we need to establish what a 'successful student' means and how it can be seen short term and long term. The most basic thing that students need is sufficient sleep in order to be more engaged with their daily lessons. That way, they are well rested during school hours and are thus more able to perform better on their formative and summative assessments. However, more sleep is not always more beneficial because children need an "optimal amount of sleep, motivated by the notion that test scores might be lowered by too much or too little sleep" (Eide, 2012, p517). Overall, for the students' general wellbeing, they need to have recovered sufficiently, through sleep, to be more successful in their classes.

According to Abraham Maslow, this along with nutritious food, are physiological needs which are part of the deficiency needs that must be met so that the students are motivated to move on to the growth needs. The deficiency needs are the

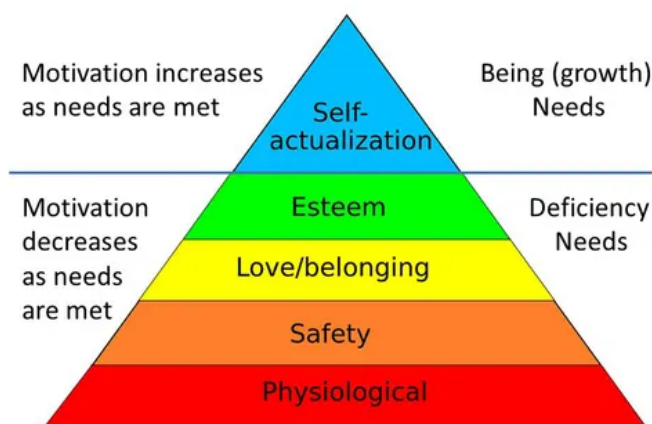


Fig. 1, McLeod, S. A. *Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs*, 2018

first four levels of Maslow's hierarchy of needs which give us an indication of how humans, and all species in general, are motivated. The first needs that must be met are the physiological needs which "are biological requirements for human survival" such as sleep, food, drink and clothing to name a few (McLeod, 2018, p4). Only when the students have these needs met can they motivate themselves to engage in activities that aren't as essential to their physical survival.

Additionally, in order for students to be interested in their subject they need to be taught through the use of multiple different methods. The key here is to keep the student's attention levels high through "tasks that are hands-on, collaborative, and fun" which will leave them with a lasting impression on the topics covered. The knowledge skills and attitudes that are molded through out of class activities such as "field expeditions, internships, experiments, and projects in video or other media" is more likely to be retained and transferred to more complex and demanding tasks in the students' futures (Cushman, 2014, p20). This also allows them to be well equipped with unique experiences which makes them more desirable by universities and employers and they are thus more prone to success.

Lastly, in order to ensure that the students acquire all the required knowledge and skills they need in order to become more successful in their future university studies and career, they must be taught knowledge and skills that can be transferable along multiple subjects and practices. It is important to note that the "transfer of knowledge from school to work is not just taking the skills from one context and using them in a new one" and it is not a simple task for teachers to always provide such knowledge to the students (Benander, 2018, p20). It is crucial however to integrate some form of "school and workplace collaborations [...] so that in the context of the social collaboration, skills from school can be conceptualised and revised to fit the new situation in which they are used" while at the same time providing the students with a form of work experience (Benander, 2018, p20). Through activities such as these, the students get a better idea of how the taught curriculum is then utilized in a more advanced setting and how they must adapt in order to excel in their new tasks. It gives them a task to look forward to and gratification when they see their hard work bear successful results.

All of these factors are essential in moulding successful students both within an academic context, such as school and university and within a professional context, such as their future careers. These are not only habits the students need to implement in their life, like sleeping for an adequate amount of hours for example, but also knowledge and attitudes the educators need to teach their students for a more successful future, such as engaging activities and transferable skills. This will provide us a blueprint for analysing whether the educational reform in Cyprus would be beneficial to the students both long and short term. However, it is crucial that we also examine how the students' potential could be stunted due to the educational system and determine if the reform has any of those qualities.

Factors that Stunt Success

There are many things that can be implemented in schools that will aid students to lead more successful and productive lives as adults. However, there are many more factors that could stunt this potential for success and inhibit the children's overall enthusiasm for learning. In this section we will be focusing solely on how formal education and the institution and curriculum itself could impact the students negatively even though it must be acknowledged that biological, social and economical factors also play a role.

As was previously mentioned, teachers must make an effort to provide knowledge, skills and attitudes that can be easily transferable so that students can apply their abilities to different practices. Unfortunately this is not always promoted in schools due to the presence of a dense and wide curriculum that must be taught in a short period of time. This “curriculum overload has been identified as a problem as disciplines become more complex and specialised” and do not allow the students to take more time to understand important concepts and apply them practically (Benander, 2018, p19). Due to this issue, oftentimes students are encouraged by educators or revert on their own volition to simply memorising the material being taught in the classroom and this “rote memorisation has been shown to not be conducive to transfer” (Benander, 2018, p19). That is why the curriculum should be more concise so that teachers can focus their effort into teaching the students how to learn more efficiently and how to apply said knowledge rather than simply feeding them information that they will have to regurgitate in an exam and forget the next year.

The second aspect of formal education that must be avoided is the lack of inclusivity and specifically to those with learning disabilities. An “inclusive education [would mean] making basic education accessible to all children regardless of background, race, ethnicity, religion, or disability” (Darathtey, 2020, p80). This would allow all children to thrive in the

formal education system and in their future as well. Firstly, a classroom that does not take into account the different types of learners will stunt the progress of the majority of the class since all students learn differently. Teachers must be properly trained to teach visual, auditory and kinesthetic learners as well as students with learning disabilities such as dyslexia, attention deficit/ hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyscalculia, dysgraphia and other processing deficits. Integrating new teaching methods within the classroom in order to account for all types of learners is essential in nurturing successful students and productive members of society. That is because not only would the students manage to learn more efficiently and effectively, but they would also feel included and taken care of by their teachers and other members of the school. It goes back to Maslow's hierarchy of needs which suggests that "the need for interpersonal relationships motivates behavior" so students would be more inclined to participate in the classroom if they feel loved by their teachers (McLeod, 2018, p4). If such teaching methods are not always possible in each lesson then the school should be required to provide further aid to the students who might struggle the most and suggest extra help during school hours so as to not tire out the students even further. Otherwise, a school that ignores such needs will produce people who struggle to learn because they do not know the best methods for themselves, but also members of society that do not feel seen or accommodated within their social groups and work spaces.

Who Made The Decision?

After understanding what aspects of formal education benefit and which one stunt student's success short and long term, now we must apply this information to the educational reform in Cypriot public secondary schools. We must examine how this decision came about, what changes were implemented, and how the students were impacted so far. It is important to note that these changes to the education system were only implemented in the public schools in Cyprus and not in the private schools. The main difference between them is how they get funded and what the main language is across all subjects. The public schools are funded by the government so the students do not pay any fees and "offer secondary education conducted in Greek" for most of the taught subjects (Nuffic, 2020, p7). The majority of children in Cyprus go to the public schools and aim to enroll in universities in Cyprus, Greece or England after completing the Pancyprian examinations. The private schools are not funded by the government so the students pay annual fees and the predominant language is English. However, some private schools conduct their teaching in Greek and some of them "strictly follow the existing curriculum of public schools" while others "follow the public schools for 2/3rd of the specialisation subjects and common core subjects, in content and duration" (Nuffic, 2020, p9). Even though some private schools have a similar curriculum to the public schools, they are not required by the government to follow any changes they implement through the ministry of education. This will give us more insight on which students will be impacted the most by these changes.

As noted by a highschool teacher of photography, this reform in the education system "was not a matter of vote" and "the competitiveness between the parties [that were in power in Cyprus at the time] prevailed instead of the interest of the children" (Miltiades, 2021). This already gives the impression that these changes were not carefully considered for the benefit

of the students but rather to please adults and what they believe is right for their children. Additionally, it was discussed that there was already a different proposition called "Curricula for the Public Schools of the Republic of Cyprus' [which was] the result of many months of work of several hundred teachers, who worked voluntarily" (Siammas, 2010, p3). The newly elected government at the time was said to have "wanted to implement the [proposed] education reform but saw the cost of the plan, saw that financially it could not support it and rejected it" and created a new proposition that would be cheaper (Miltiades, 2021). Without having analysed the proposal itself and the changes that were implemented in 2016, it is evident that the Ministry of Education in Cyprus placed more focus on how much the reform would cost and how it will benefit their political party instead of the students and their futures. This skewed focus and lack of direction is most likely not going to benefit the children and their educational needs especially considering that there was a proposed plan already in place -which was supported by most educators- that was rejected purely because of the funds needed to put it in effect. Now we must consider the changes themselves and how they impacted the formal education system and the student's schedule.

What Changes Were Implemented?

In this section we will analyse some of the changes that were introduced in the education system and determine if they would aid in the student’s development and lead to their future success. One thing that has changed is the way in which highschool students get

to choose their subjects. Rather than choosing a specific lesson from every subject -such as maths, sciences, arts, language, etc- “a child, or his parents, decides which branch they will enter. They have the common core courses which are done by all the students and the specialty courses that give more emphasis to the courses of the branch chosen by the student” as seen in figure 2 (Miltiades, 2021). This means that they have no room for optional lessons such as art, theatre, music and photography since their

curriculum is so vast as it is. They are required to specialize in such a young age and aren’t given the freedom to choose subjects that peak their interest. Additionally, due to this vast curriculum students are often enrolling in after school classes to catch up on the material. This is common practice in Cyprus and parents often feel pressured to send their children to such after school programs so that they can keep up with all their classmates who are already enrolled. What started off as “a supportive and enhancing tool for children with learning disabilities, deficiencies and gaps [has now become] the substitute for school” (Koumasta,

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			6	ΚΑΛΩΝ ΤΕΧΝΩΝ

ΑΛΛΗ ΞΕΝΗ ΓΛΩΣΣΑ: ΓΕΡΜΑΝΙΚΑ, ΙΣΠΑΝΙΚΑ, ΙΤΑΛΙΚΑ, ΡΩΣΙΚΑ, ΤΟΥΡΚΙΚΑ

Fig. 2, *Directions for Highschool Students, 2015*

2019). As a result, students are overworked on a daily basis, and are therefore not getting enough sleep which is one of the basic physiological needs that must be met in order for them to be motivated to participate in school.

This method of choosing subjects does not only impact the amount of time students are required to spend in school or in after school lessons but also the way in which they study for their assessments. “Students simply bend over in a book and read over and over again to go and write some exams” instead of participating in engaging activities or working on interesting projects that would allow them to not only learn the required material but also apply them in different scenarios (Miltiades, 2021). This way of studying and this habit of trying to learn a subject only through reading from a textbook is often a result of such a vast curriculum. It is not an effective method of learning because students are not playing up to their individual strengths, they are not adapting their learning methods to fill specific and individual gaps in their knowledge, and as a result, are not able to apply their knowledge in scenarios outside of the context of their formal education. Therefore, instead of focusing solely on exam results and on assessments of learning, students should be taught through various teaching methods and assessed in a way that allows them to learn from their mistakes and progress more efficiently. This is supported by psychologists such as Howard Gardner and his Multiple Intelligence Theory. Multiple Intelligence Theory supports the belief that there are different types of intelligences such as logical, linguistic, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, interpersonal etc. and that children respond differently within the classroom based on their strengths in one of these intelligences. It is important to note that “studies have shown that those who score high in one area, like verbal intelligence, also tend to score highly in other areas, like spatial reasoning” (Khan Academy, 2015). This theory was brought forth by Charles Spearman who called this phenomenon general intelligence or the ‘G’ factor.

However, “the implementation and acceptance of MI theory in the classroom could improve the developmental process in order to give students more opportunities to feel confident about their abilities” and therefore provides a positive environment for all students no matter which type of intelligence they perform highly in (Ellingson, 2017). The idea that only one factor could account for the intelligence of humans, which are such diverse creatures that are impacted and altered due to their genetics but also by their ever changing environment, doesn’t help us get a better understanding of the nuances in our learning. It is merely an attempt to find a pattern of behaviour rather than understanding the roots of said behaviour and how it came to be. Therefore, if teachers were to implement a variety of teaching methods within their classes and taught the students innovative and engaging methods of studying -assuming that each student learns more efficiently under different conditions- then students would not only be able to retain all the knowledge for longer, but they would also be capable of transferring and applying said knowledge into different scenarios. This would be beneficial to them in their future university endeavours or their transition into the workforce.

Do the Changes Actually Work?

Despite our findings in the previous sections, many argue that the new changes implemented in the public secondary schools in Cyprus are in fact extremely effective in creating successful students.

Conclusion

The goal with any changes in the education system is to improve the student's learning experience and better equip them with the skills and knowledge they will need to progress within the academic world but to also lead successful and fulfilling lives. The changes implemented in the Cypriot public education system do not benefit the students in the aforementioned ways and instead, make the children's formal education experience more difficult and more stress inducing. Students are limited in their choices due to the rigid career paths they must choose early on, overworked due to the vast curriculum they have to commit to memory to regurgitate in an exam and unmotivated and generally unenthusiastic to be in school due to the lack of creative elective lessons. Furthermore, what they do end up learning is merely forgotten after one summer because they were never encouraged to apply their knowledge in other disciplines or work experiences for example. As Martin Luther King said, "the function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically" and that can only be achieved once we move away from assessments of learning to assessments for learning. Once the institution's -and therefore the student's- focus shifts from studying to pass an exam to learning to improve one's skill, knowledge and character and ensure a successful future, then children can truly enjoy their time in school. Students should not focus all of their time and energy into merely memorising information and take everything they are taught at face value. They have to be vigorously taught from an early age to question everything they are told and encouraged to dig deeper and search for answers on their own.

Furthermore, the students must be taught essential life skills that could be used outside of a formal education setting along with knowledge that will aid them in their future profession. However, the most important aspect of all is that the students get the opportunity to explore as many different topics as possible as they are young and still full of curiosity.

Teachers and the formal education system itself must nurture that curiosity so that the children are not stuck following a path that they are likely not going to follow for the rest of their lives. They must not be burdened by a decision they made in their early students years as adults. Therefore, they should have the option to take elective classes that inspire creativity and curiosity which will in turn make them enjoy the school day much more but also teach them transferable skills that will aid them in their other subjects. Lessons in art, music, theatre and photography -which were subjects that students could already take in the Cypriot public secondary education system before the new changed were implemented- teach students how to analyse written, audio and visual artefacts and use those techniques to create their own work which is exactly what they should do in all their other subjects as well. In subjects such as maths for example they are taught certain rules, definitions and formulas that they are then asked to use to solve problems. These are the same steps that they have to transfer along all subjects and therefore in their future endeavours. Not to mention that in subjects like science, students are taught and required to take photographs of lab results or draw diagrams of organisms. Therefore, not only do the arts subjects provide the students transferable knowledge and skills, but they also present so much opportunity for collaborative projects between subjects.

In conclusion, the student's need must be placed first when altering the education system. Their wellbeing while they are in school as well as their future success in other formal educational systems, careers and in their day-to-day lives must be considered when making such changes. Short term success or interfering political forces must be taken out of the picture completely. That is the only way we can ensure a bright future for the young generation and thus a bright future for our world in the future.

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Appendix

Christos Miltiades

Photography Teacher

25 October 2021

Mandalena Miltiadi

What is the purpose of the reform voted in 2015?

The purpose of the educational reform voted in 2015 was to change the way of teaching in general the way students are taught. That is, there was the unified high school in which students could choose different subjects in order to be able to enter university faculties. But the unified high school is based on how they will come from high school. So there would be a universal reform of the education system. In fact, the high school was a modern secondary education program for Cyprus. In 2001 it was implemented but arriving after 15 years somewhere there had been some problems and some difficulties. The students had some shortcomings and this was evident when they left school and went to universities.

Was this a problem in specific subjects or were they general problems in students' learning?

It was a general problem. For example, students went to take medical exams and had never taken a biology class. Such was the system that the students were not taught the courses they would need to be in the universities they wanted without difficulty. They did other courses like math and physics but did not do biology. Or for example, they wanted to study as teachers and did not take some literature courses.

That is, the lessons they learned did not coincide with what they wanted to do in the future.

Yes. It was a general practice of the students. They choose courses in which they would not need to read much and there would be a lower degree of difficulty so that they could get better grades to go to the universities they want. In order to go to university in Cyprus and Greece, you must do well in the exams. However, the courses you took do not have to coincide with the direction you want to take at university. In the unified high school the students could choose some courses, to finish some of them in the high school, and in the entrance exams to be examined in the courses that are easier for them. So, when they went to university, they had big gaps in their knowledge because they were not taught properly in high school.

What inspired this reform? (who voted in this decision)

The education reform was not a matter of vote. All the relevant bodies: the Ministry of Education, the educational organizations, the students, the parents saw the need for a reform because there were these innovations. Many years ago, many teachers wanted to change the system to help students, so they organized into groups to create a new system. Teachers, who have experience and recognize the needs of students, together with scientists and pedagogical experts worked together to create a plan for a more effective education system. They specifically brought in Mr. Tsakalo for a few years and thus created a plan for a complete and universal reform. This decision was 98 percent accepted by all teachers. But the reform was decided by a new government in 2015. When this new government came into power it wanted to implement the education reform but saw the cost of the plan, saw that financially it

could not support it and rejected it. However, this decision was completely non-existent and childish because the additional cost needed was only ten million. The budget for education is almost one billion in Cyprus. That is, you have a billion euros every year from the national gross product that you give to education to make it work and you would simply give another 10 million, which could be found in various ways. They could ask the parliament for this money for a reform that everyone agrees on. The government, however, took 5-6 academics, mathematicians, philologists, etc., and within 6 months they made a new decision. Instead of thinking about the interests of the children, they think about the interests of the party. In other words, the competitiveness between the parties prevailed instead of the interest of the children. Also, there was competition between the teachers because they wanted their own course to dominate. The conclusion was that language is the most important because it is the beginning of a country's culture. Thus began the implementation of the new reform with this in mind. It is as if they put a new mold in a car and left an old engine inside and expect it to be able to run on the new roads.

Did this decision come from a quantitative survey that showed more interest in specific topics from students / parents?

No. The world, the society, wanted the children to have knowledge that would give them access to universities for vocational rehabilitation and to become human. That is, they want children to be cultured, to have critical thinking and yes they are good people in society. This is what is required for a country to have a good education. The reform agreed by all fulfills these demands. However, since this reform was rejected, a small group of individuals, with their own criteria, made a new decision. This decision does not bring the desired result but

fulfills the wishes of the party and makes a financial profit. The financial problem was the pretext for them to make their own decisions. The children had no say in her decisions.

Which courses received the most attention and time? Why?

It is not a matter of less or more. The subject is the way the student is taught. This committee did not at all take into account the student, the human student, the adolescent student, the student child who needs to do and experiment with many things in his life. Life is not just studying. We have created students who go to school in the morning and after, instead of doing sports or having fun, they go and waste their money and time on private lessons. This is because the material in the schools is so large that there is not enough time in the school for the students to be able to learn it. Children are sacrificing their time and parents are sacrificing their money for this upbringing. Thus, children have a single purpose: reading, reading, reading from a very young age.

That is, the material is excessive in relation to the hours of learning.

The material is very much in lessons which this committee believed to be necessary only for the cultivation of a human being. While life has taught us since ancient times that reading is not the only thing that matters. When I say only reading I mean lessons that do not use interdisciplinarity and do not promote critical thinking.

That is, children choose lessons that they will not necessarily need in the future.

A child, or his parents, decides which branch they will enter. They have the common core courses which are done by all the students and the specialty courses that give more emphasis to the courses of the branch chosen by the student. All of these subjects together have huge material and actually burn out the child and that only to do an examination. The material should be smaller so that the students can open their minds and have more time for other activities. They should learn to write, to read, to meditate, and to speak correctly. Instead, students simply bend over in a book and read over and over again to go and write some exams.

That is, they focus on the knowledge instead of the skills they need.

Correct.

How were the students affected by this change from your point of view as a teacher?

Society tells us that you have to read constantly to go to university. Parents constantly ask their children if they have read and make them go to too many tutorials to get good grades. They do not care if they understood the lesson or if they liked it. All they care about is the grades. We do not focus on the substance. We do not ask them what they are interested in and they are interested in it. Children are not given the opportunity to be more curious. They are asked from a young age what they want to become when they grow up and from that moment the specialization begins. They do not give them room to explore. They expect parents to teach their children these things but everyone knows that now both mother and father have to work to support their family. They do not have time to offer them all this knowledge.