

Sociological Dimensions of School Failure: The Views of Educators and Students of Educational Schools

Panagiotis Giavrimis*

Efstratios Papanis**

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to record the beliefs/views of educators of all levels, on the social dimensions of school failure. The facts of this research are part of a wider research concerning student's social adequacy having used a questionnaire and the viability of the educational system. The sample used for this research was 377 educators of all levels (80.4% of the sample) from towns, cities and rural areas of Greece and of 74 university students (19.6% of the sample). The results show that both educators and students differentiate between sociological and psychological factors when it comes to teaching. However, we noticed that the views of current or future educators were stereotypical and that could cause problems during teaching. Finally, students and younger teachers attribute school failure more to lack of knowledge on their part and to parents'

* Lecturer, Sociology Department, University of the Aegean, 17 Pamfilis , 81100 Mytilene, Lesvos. pgiavrim@otenet.gr

** Assistant Professor, Sociology Department, University of the Aegean, 5 Theofilou Hatzimichail, 81100 Mytilene, Lesvos. papanis@papanis.com

excessive demands and less to the relationship between educator and the parents' low socio-economic status.

Key Words: School failure, Greek educational system.

Introduction

In a wider sense, learning is a permanent change of behaviour and formal education aims at transmitting cultural and social values of the dominant ideology to students. Students are evaluated through standardized methods, which include cognitive, emotional and social measurements. According to Bourdieu (1994), the degree of conformity to those pre-determined criteria segregate students between high and low achievers.

The large number of research on education conducted in Greece and elsewhere depicts the interest of society and other governmental departments in pinpointing the interrelating factors within education and in creating programmes aiming at improving teaching.

School performance is of complex and multi-dimensional signification (Walberg & Tsai, 1985). Tzani (1988) defines school performance as a cluster of maneuvers attempting to integrate the student to the schooling system and the student's efficiency towards lessons. School performance can also be defined as a continuation in a ladder, where success is on the one end and failure on the other, bilateral differences are obvious

(Paraskevopoulos, 1985). However, few researchers have outlined the qualitative elements responsible for student differentiation.

The school success or failure refers to what degree the student has fulfilled (fully or partially) teaching goals (Kalogridi, 1995. Dimou, 1997). Success is believed to be the lack of problems and the student's achievement of high standards, while failure is characterized by difficulties and an inability to reach the desired goals. It is also accompanied by a variety of other problems (behavioural etc.) which often associated with school failure. (Kupersmidt & Coie, 1990).

Esland (1971) believes that success and failure depend on the evaluation system applied by an educator, and the criteria are thus subjective. If the criteria were shifted, success and failure would also differ, as it would not go against children of a low socio-economic status, since it would not depend on "cultural inadequacy" but on "cultural differences".

The definition of school failure can be ambiguous, since it not only entails the student's failure, but also that of the educational system as it has not successfully met the student needs (Papadopoulos, 1990).

The problem of school failure is of great importance, as it affects mostly poor students and becomes an obstacle to a large part of this segment vulnerable population from making full use of their educational opportunities to improve their social status. As a result, human resources are not adequately used, a fact that has a negative impact on the economic mobility of society. School failure sometimes leads to alienation and social exclusion thus putting social cohesion at risk. The consequences of school failure are economic, social, professional, educational and cultural. People who have difficulties at school find it hard to join and be competitive in the labour market and end up doing menial jobs with no specific specialization.

Educational difficulties, failure and drop-out are connected to adverse reaction on the part of young. It has been proven that children with learning difficulties, who cannot follow teaching techniques get together with similar peers who have the same learning abilities and behaviour and make groups gangs. This increases the risk of marginalization (Ary *et al.*, 1995) and anti-social behaviour (Patterson *et. al.*, 1989). What is more important is that the wrong use of educational techniques forms a particular way of thought, characterized by lack of perspective, withdrawal and school indifference (Vazsomyi & Flannery, 1997).

Fighting against school failure demands not just the application of “therapeutic” methods at schools, but rather the participation of society as a whole.

Theoretical approaches to school failure

There are several theoretical explanations for school failure based on theories of intelligence, cultural deprivation, material deprivation, culture and interaction.

The intelligence theory is based on IQ scores. However, people of a lower socio-economic level had worse results in comparison with those from an upper level.

The supporters of this theory concluded that intelligence is something that can be inherited. However, this theory was heavily criticized by sociologists, who believe that genetics and environmental influences interrelate (as in poverty and education, etc). Furthermore, IQ tests have been criticized as culturally biased. In other words, IQ tests are not objective,

since the researcher sets the standards of what he considers to be important and that usually reflects middle class knowledge.

The theory of cultural deprivation relates school success to the ability to communicate. According to this theory, middle class children learn to make use of communication skills at a younger age than those of the labour class. As a result, middle-class children have a more elaborated verbal code and are more familiarized with the way of thought prevailing at schools (which is made out for the middle class), a fact which is of vital importance of school success. The connection between socio-economic factors and linguistic performance of a child is based on Bernstein's theories. The linguistic weakness of the lower class is the phenomenon which Bernstein calls "a limited verbal code of communication", something which has adverse effect on both the way a child expresses himself/herself and on his/her education (Vrizas, 1992).

Wedge and Prosser (1973), supporters of the materialistic deprivation theory, have connected poverty to school performance. They emphasize that children from poor backgrounds are more prone to illnesses, they have more accidents and present learning and speaking problems more often than children from other classes. Poverty creates a very difficult environment for the family, which also entails lack of learning opportunities for the children, (Herbert, 1996).

Pierre Bourdieu (1994) believes that the educational system underestimates knowledge, skills, experience and, subsequently, the culture of the labour class children. This might not necessarily be done on purpose, as it is a result of the way education is organized. Bourdieu believes that education enforces a certain type of culture, that of the predominant class, creating a sort of "symbolic violence". He also supports that middle class

children join the educational system at a more advantageous position and succeed because their background is similar to that of the predominant class, i.e. their mentality coincides with that of their educators. Bourdieu considers this to be “a cultural investment”. Labour class children cannot succeed, as their knowledge and background are considered to be of lower standard and cannot fit within school in general.

In the theory of interaction, Keddie (1973) supports that educational failure is vastly due to facts attributed to the abilities and intellect an educator has. The beliefs and evaluation criteria of an educator are not objective; they are rather based entirely on his cultural background. These beliefs are standardized by educators when it comes to teaching behaviour, a stereotype connected with social class and race. Research has proven that educators have a clear-cut opinion of how a student should talk, react and appear, and there are instances where these attributes are even considered more important than learning. An ideal student’s attributes coincide with those of the middle class children, placing labour class children at the most unfavourable position.

Family

Family environment is defined as something with a complex meaning. Many educators agree that, while school exerts a very strong influence on most children, family is actually the most determinant factor of the way a child is going to evolve (Jimerson et.al., 1999).

Many researchers have come to the conclusion that socio-economic status has a lot to do with the child’s performance at school (Slaughter & Epps 1987. Tzani 1988. Tsiantis 1991. Vrizas 1992. Goros 1992. Hinshaw

1992. Motti-Stefanidi, Tsiantis, & Richardson 1993. Hickman, Greenwood & Miller 1995. Herbert 1996).

Hickman *et al* (1995) comments that low-income families do not get involved in their children's education to the extent upper class parents usually do. However, Scott-Jones (1984) disagrees, stating that these families have an active role in their children's education.

There is also a positive connection between school performance and family income, as there is also a connection between school achievements and the father's profession. The child's performance varies depending on the father's job (scientist, farmer, worker etc) (Katsikas, 1995).

Other researchers believe that a low social background and poverty do not always lead to school failure. They stress that what is most important in school performance are parents' cultural values and their family lifestyle as well as the importance attributed to education by them.

According to recent research carried out, many young people have dropped out of school in the Greek rural areas. The percentage reaches a staggering 12% and has a rising tendency with older ages (Lariou-Drettaki, 1993. Drettakis, 2004). In certain provinces of Greece (Voudaskis, 1996, Mylonas, 1998), there seems to be a connection between the number of early school droppers and their social background, since in the majority of cases these are children of a low socio-economic status, coming either from smaller towns or from rural areas.

Nevertheless, there have been people who have a low income and managed to break away and excel. Yet, these are exceptional cases, especially in comparison to those of the middle or higher class (Goros, 1992).

In her research Tzani (1988) points out that the percentage of middle-class and upper class children who get good marks is 54% and 48% respectively. On the other hand, the corresponding rates for children of lower status or labour class background are 27% and 20% respectively. Research has also shown that if parents are of the same educational level, the economic factor is not important. However, children of wealthy background seem to be influenced by that factor when it comes to their education (Fragoudaki, 1985).

At all levels of education, labour class students are low achievers in comparison to their middle class peers (their parents do not do labour work but office work).

Labour class children:

- Are less likely to go to kindergarten
- Might start school without knowing how to read
- Might lag behind when it comes to reading, writing and numeracy
- Might get low marks
- Might drop out of school by the age of 16
- Have less chances of going to university

In contrast to labour class middle-class children have triple opportunities to find a respectful job than those of the labour class.

According to Baslis (1998), Greek middle-class children have an advantage of those children whose parents had a lower level of education or a menial job (e.g. labour work), when it comes to lexical use of the language.

School

The complex environment of a school (social, cultural, natural, technology) demands a certain way of reacting, feeling, thinking and socializing (Gerou, 1991). Competency is achieved when the framework has realistic goals, is concise and provides feedback (Connell, 1991). Autonomy is gained when the framework is accepted, if it offers the opportunity to the children to choose and to move about independently (Deci, Eghari, Leone & Leone, 1994). Consistency develops through co-operation and interest in communication (Connell, 1991). Social framework can hinder all the above if it becomes inconsistent, chaotic, stressful or indifferent (Skinner & Wellborn, 1994).

Ames (1992) claims that classroom environment encourages students either towards mastery or towards performance. Children orientated towards mastery strive towards competency and failure or a negative performance provides them with valuable feedback, making them strive to do more or to change their strategy. Contrary to the former, the latter who are orientated towards performance try to perform well. Students develop better learning strategies and motives when their class framework directs them towards mastery (Ames & Archer, 1988).

Peers can also have a positive impact on schoolwork, since they are the strongest influence children receive on a daily basis at school (Steinberg, Durnbusch & Brown, 1992. Hymel, Comfort, Schonerl-Reichl &

McDougall, 1996). Research has also proven that peers influence the quality of schoolwork (Dishon 1990, Frenzt, Gresham & Elliot, 1991. Wentzel, 1991. Bandura, Barbamelli, Caprara & Pastorelli 1996).

Educators vary in the way they monitor students (Ryan & Grolnick, 1986). However, each style is more or less the same throughout the school year (Deci, *et.al.*, 1981). Students perform much better with teachers who control them than with supportive and encouraging teachers. (Ryan & Grolnick, 1986) The first type of teacher provides them with motivation (Deci, Nezelek & Sheinman, 1981), creativity (Koestner, Ryan, Bernieri & Holt, 1984), motivation towards mastery (Ryan & Grolnick, 1986), better comprehension of concepts (Boggiano, Flink, Shields & Barrett, 1993), positive feelings (Williams, Weiner, Martakis Reeve & Deci, 1994) and fewer possibilities of dropping out (Vallerand Fortier & Guay, 1997).

Certain condition, such as too much homework, unrealistic demands of success on behalf of society and a highly competitive educational system leads to a diversity of results. In his book “Schools without Failure”, the American psychologist Glasser (1975) points out certain weaknesses in the educational system, which he considers to be responsible for the failure of students. He supports that the average school has been “designed for failure”, due to its traditional educating ideas, which block out active participation of children when it comes to learning and thinking.

The main priority seems to be high marks, while education is of minor importance, as is also the case of personal development and satisfaction derived from teaching and learning (Husen, 1992) This creates a climate of tough competition and students in the classroom are classified in terms of their good or poor performance. The classification reflects children’s ability not only at school but in society as well, as school does not

prepare them for the role and responsibilities they will have to take on later in their life (Husen, 1992).

This type of education does not help student with learning difficulties. It is not flexible and does not provide equal opportunities in learning, so that groups are formed with children of the same abilities. Furthermore, each class has too many children ranging from the least (15) to the most (35) (Christakis, 1994).

The Greek educational system is:

- a) Collective
- b) It does not supply teachers with knowledge on the psychological world of a child
- c) Educators have very few chances of further training
- d) There is no psychological or counselling department in every school for student's support
- e) The school curriculum is so demanding that children have no time for sports or other activities (Tsiantis, Mardikian, Sipitanou & Tata-Stamatopoulou, 1982)

We come to the conclusion that schools play a decisive role, since they transform social and economic differences into inadequacy of ability. The evaluation system applied to school legitimizes segregation, becoming thus part of a wider social segregation and exclusion (Fragoudaki, 1985). Education does not only reflect social relationships but also an output in production. Students are equipped with knowledge, which can be used later on the workplace. Due to the fact, though, that the middle class has a great influence on the educational system (school curriculum, books, teaching

methods) and the children of that level are more favoured than the others. Unnecessary knowledge and skills do not become part of the teaching curriculum. Furthermore, educators cannot bridge the gap between education and social inequality, which is a major part of the system.

Education social determinism should be considered as part of the macro and micro sociological area. A person should be an interactive part of hi/her own society (Mylonas, 1998). Therefore, school should be “a place which systematically teaches all its student the abilities one obtains from this privileged environment” (Fragoudaki, 1985). It should take into consideration the different socioeconomic background of student and try to even out differences among them.

Aim of this research

The aim of this research is to record on a questionnaire, the beliefs of educators of all educational levels, in the social dimensions of school failure. The facts presented are part of a wider research which explores the social repercussions and student’s social competency in terms of the educational system.

The facts and results can be used to enhance the Greek educational system as a whole.

Methodology

Sample

The sample used consists of 377 educators (80.4% of the sample) of all levels from cities, towns and rural areas of Greece and of 75 educational students (19.6% of the sample). Men were 177 (46.9%) and women 200 (53.1%). The age groups were as follows: 91 persons aged up to 25 years (24.1%), 139 persons between 26-41years old (36.9%), 83 persons aged between 42-49 years (22%) and 64 people above 50 years old (17%). 77 educators (20.4%) had no teaching experience, 129 (34.2%) had 11 years experience, 101 (26.8%) had between 12-23 years experience and 70 educators (18.6%) had 24-35 years experience.

Methodological tools

The participants filled in a questionnaire, which was compiled after profound research in relevant international bibliography. The questionnaire had four sections and the answers were pre-set. The first two sections referred to the student's social attributes that did either well or badly at school. The third section included questions evaluating education, educational policies, educators' perceptions when it comes to success or failure, to the social students' attributes (that are considered either good or bad), to teachers' training which they had received during their education, whether it was a simple introductory seminar at the beginning of their career or lifelong education, according to the European policy. The fourth and last part had to do with demographic data. The answers were based on the Likert Scale, from 1 to 5, where 1 stood for "I strongly disagree" and 5 for "I strongly agree".

The part used for this article were the questions which had to do with school failure and the sociological characteristics associated (Table 1)

Table 1: Questions analysed in this project

“Bad” students come from low educational level families

“Bad” students come from single parent families

“Bad” students have no professional scope

“Good” students have more chances to succeed in life

School failure is a result of the inadequacy of the educational system

School failure is a result of the educator’ lack of knowledge

School failure is a result of unreasonable demands the parents make on their children

School failure can be attributed to the child’s character

Statistical methods

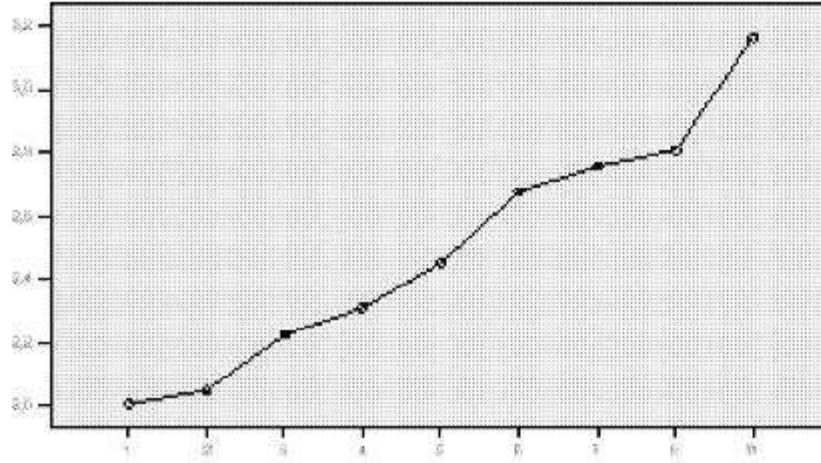
Non-parametric tests were applied to the analysis of the collected data, as the distribution of the sample was not normal and the scale used was ordinal. Multivariable criteria of fluctuation were used and test re-test was applied, so that a reliable average result could be reached. Moreover, thw analysis took into account demographic factors such as sex, age, educational experience.

Results

In order to obtain the best average result, multivariable criteria were used and test re-test was carried out so that the hierarchy of importance could be clarified and the real average could be identified. The results were statistically significant: Hotelling's Trace, $F(8,376) = 80.43$ $p < 0,001$, $n^2 = 0,63$. Comparison between primary functional analysis $EF(1,376) = 608,86$ $p < 0,001, 2=0,61$] and secondary functional analysis [$F(1,376) = 6,79$ $p < 0,001$ $n^2=0,002$]. It was found that the results were statistically significant, but the last one had the lowest statistical significance. As shown in Graph 1, hierarchical order differs significantly, so that three groups separate groups can be formed. The first group includes questions that have to do with school performance and single parent families and bad job perspective. The questions given to second group have to do with parents' exaggerated demands, teachers' lack of training and parents' low economic and educational level. The questions' given to third group have to do with school performance, the child's personality, the inadequate school system along with the possibility to succeed in the labour market later on. Therefore:

a) Educators differ in terms of sociological and psychological factors involved in school performance. b) There is a statistical significance in the belief that failure at school has to do more with the child's personality, the inadequacy of school system, the opportunities offered and the skills required by the labour market and less with single parent families and bad future prospective (Graph 1).

Graph 1 Hierarchical average classification



1. “Bad” students come from single parent families. 2. “Bad” students have no professional scope. 3.School failure is due to parents’ irrational demands. 4.school failure is due to lack of knowledge on the part of educators, 5.“Bad” students come from low educational level families. 6. School failure can be attributed to the child’s character. 7. School failure is due to the inadequacy of the educational system. 8. “Good” students have more chances to succeed in life later on. 9. “Good” students have more chances to succeed in life later on

The influence of “sex” was explored by using the Mann-Whitney Test. The replies to the question “Could school failure be attributed to the inadequate school system?” revealed great statistical significance “(Mann-Whitney – 15515 Z – 2,363. $p < 0,05$ MRM¹=176,66 MRW = 199,93). Moreover, there was statistical significance in the association between school failure and student’s personality (Mann-Whitney = 15344 Z = -2,421 $p < 0,05$ MRM = 202,31 MRW = 177,22) As far as the rest of the questions is concerned, no differentiation was shown among the answers given by male and female participants. Women attribute school failure more to the

¹ MRM: Mean Rank of Men. MRW: Mean Rank of Women.

schooling system (which is statistically significant in contrast to men's attitude) than to a student's personality. The rest of the sociological and psychological attributes do not differ statistically.

Educators and students showed significant differences in the issue of "Attribution" when answering the question. Bad students come from families of a low educational and economic level (Mann-Whitney = 7389,5 $Z = 4,875$ $p < 0,01$ $MRS^2 = 137,36$ $MRT = 201,61$). School failure can be attributed to educators inadequate knowledge (Mann-Whitney = 344 $Z = -5,891$ $p < 0,01$ $MRS 249,74$ $MRT = 174,17$). School failure is also caused by the parents' excessive demands (Mann-Whitney = 15344 $Z = -3,057$ $p < 0,05$ $MRS 221,87$ $MPT = 180,97$). There were no significant differences in the rest of the questions. Students attribute school failure more to the educator's lack of knowledge (in contrast to educators) and to the parents' excessive demands of parents and less to parents' educational level. With regard, the sociological and psychological attributes, the participants seem to agree.

The use of the Jonckheire-Terpstra Test revealed differences in views expressed by participants of different age groups. Analysis showed a statistical difference in the view on the statement: "Bad students come from a low educational and economic background" (J-T = 30463 Std Dev = 1093,16 $p < 0,01$). "School failure is due to the educators' inadequate knowledge" (J-T = 23602 Std Dev = 1100,77 $p < 0,05$). "School performance does not reflect the demands of the current labour market" (J-T 23697 Std Dev = 1079,95 $p < 0,01$). No significant difference was shown in the rest of the questions.

As seen in Graph. 2, the following conclusions can be reached:

² MRS: Mean Rank of Students. MRT: Mean Rank of Teachers.

a) The older the educators get, the more convinced they become that school performance has to do with the educational and economic status of the family. b) Educators of age up to 25 years old believe that school failure is due to lack of knowledge more than the educators of other age groups and those that believe it less are between 26–41 years old. c) Educators of age up to 25 also believe that failure is due to the parents’ excessive demands to a greater extent than any other age group d) Those up to 41 mostly believe that school performance today does not reflect the needs of the today’s job market. As for the sociological and psychological factors, there seems to be no significant difference among different age groups.

Graph. 2: Comparison of responses according to respondents’ age using the Jonckheere – Terpstra Test

<i>Question</i>	<i>Age (years)</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>MeanRank</i>
“Bad “ students come from low educational level families	up to 25	91	152.18
	26 -41	139	189.99
	42-49	83	207.13
	50- above	64	215.7
School failure is due to educators’ lack of knowledge	up to 25	91	233.05
	26 -41	139	160.90
	42-49	83	182.81
	50- above	64	195.41
School failure is	up to 25	91	211.25

due to parents' excessive demands	26 -41	139	185.59
	42-49	83	170.02
	50- above	64	189.38
School performance has nothing to do with the labour market demands	up to 25	91	198,21
	26 -41	139	198.40
	42-49	83	174,81
	50- above	64	173.88

Furthermore, we will check and see whether there is a statistical difference presented in educators' views in terms of their work experience. Analysis shows a difference in views expressed in the statements "Bad students come from a low educational and economic status" (J-T 31619 Std Dev = 1096,45 $p < 0,01$) and "School failure is due to educators' lack of knowledge" (J-T = 23731 Std Dev = 1104,09 $p < 0,05$). The rest of the replies given to the questions presented no real differentiation.

Graph. 3: Comparison of responses according to respondents' teaching experience, using the Jonckheere-Terpstra Test

Question	Teaching experience in Years	N	MeanRank
"Bad " students	No experience	77	141.65

come from low educational level families	up to 11 years	129	181.05
	12-23 years	101	220.16
	24- above	70	210.78
School failure is due to educators' lack of knowledge	No experience	77	241.00
	up to 11 years	129	165.61
	12-23 years	101	170.53
	24- above	70	201.55

From what has been mentioned above and resulting from Graph 3, the following conclusions can be reached:

a) People with no educational experience believe less that there is a connection between education and educational and economic level than those with experience. b) People with more than 12 years teaching experience believe in the interrelation connection between education and the educational and economic level, especially those with 12-23 years experience. c) Inexperienced people believe the most that teachers' lack of knowledge is the most important factor. d) The group with 11 years experience believes less in the above. As for the sociological and psychological factors, there is no real difference in opinion.

Discussion

School failure is not only an educational problem but also a social one, and it has been connected with many different factors, such as low socio-economic status, educational framework etc, leading to

marginalization and social exclusion. It goes against the basic human rights and does not help social cohesion. Furthermore, the educators' views on the overall quality and outcome of their educational role, equality, the use of financial resources and the involvement in taking the right decisions is crucial, since they shape educational culture and a certain way of thought (Caldwell & Spinks, 1992), having thus, a catalytic effect on students' educational performance.

Research has shown that educators and students' opinions on school performance differ. On the other hand, at the top of the hierarchy of the factors attributed to school failure is student's personality, the inadequacy of the educational system which restricts perspective opportunities. On the other hand, less importance is assigned to single parent families, to the skills demanded by modern labour market and to bad future prospects. The above shows that both educators and students accept the fact that the educational system should be adjusted and offer equal opportunities to all those involve in it. The younger the people are, when entering the educational process, the more they believe in the need for changes and adaptations. The age group of 41 and over basically believes that school performance does not reflect the needs of the current labour market.

Nevertheless, some stereotypical ideas are still to be found (ie: the view that failure is due to a child's personality or low family status is also a factor of failure) and that can cause problems to the learning process. These reasons are serious problems when it comes to the child-teacher relationship.

Women are more objective and attribute failure more to the educational system than to personality. That attitude helps them, as they can take measures to counteract the system. International research has also

shown that women are more willing to face such problems and to help find a solution.

Students and young educators attribute failure to their lack of proper knowledge and to the pressure that parents' excessive demands put on them and less to the parents' status. A logical explanation could be that they are teenagers or young adolescents who have just left home and doubt not only teachers and school but also parents' demands. Educators might not know either how serious the problem of lack of knowledge is. Those with 11-year teaching experience are the ones who believe less in the inadequate knowledge theory. Those, of course, are young teachers who are anxious about their teaching abilities and their knowledge.

The large variety of views on school failure expressed by educators reflects the existing confusion among educators, government and scientific staff when it comes to this serious problem, which is the educators' personality, their attitude towards educators/students, the demographic characteristics of an area, exposure to experience and knowledge from students who find difficult to adapt to the school system. Educators fall under two categories: Those who attribute failure to sociological and psychological reasons and those who attribute it to personality. All of them in general criticize the unsteady educational policy and are aware of its long-term consequences. This diversity of opinion, however, is a good sign as it brings up the problem of school failure as a psycho-sociological problem which must be faced in order not to jeopardise the future. Children have already the verge of failure from an earlier age, are a group who needs support and understanding. If problems are sociological, schools must take measures to face them. However, if they are psychological, educators should acquire the proper knowledge to help solve this problem. Skilled

professionals should be involved in the process, so that educators be informed of the seriousness of social exclusion and its repercussions to society. In this way, the right foundation can be laid and a new mentality will characterise all agents involved in the educational process, i.e. educators, parents, students and the Ministry of Education itself.

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