CRITICAL THINKING IN THE GREEK EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

Kyriaki Theodosiadou

Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece

This essay is an attempt to review the Greek educational system in how it cultivates critical thinking among its students. Firstly, I will try to clarify the term critical thinking and give its conceptual framework, then I will present how the curricula refer to critical thinking and how critical thinking is cultivated in each of the three educational levels (primary, secondary and tertiary). Finally, I will elaborate on teachers’ training and how it fosters critical thinking and teaching approaches for the development of critical thinking.

Keywords: Critical thinking, Greek educational system, Primary education, Secondary education, Tertiary education, Teachers training, Curricula.

Introduction

Critical thinking is a higher form of thinking, so its development seems to the theorists of education as the only solution to the social, economic and political problems of modern societies (Rantos & Gritzios, 2006). The ever quickening pace of development, the new social, economic and technological data obtained and the surprisingly quick replacement of knowledge create new needs and requirements with which the citizens of modern societies are forced to deal. In the past, the thinking procedure was confided to repetition and memorization. However, after the changes mentioned above a new, complicated and complex way of thinking was essential (Trilianos, 1997). Furthermore, humanity’s social and educational problems made the replacement of proper by critical speech necessary (Chatzigeorgiou, 1998). Consequently, the cultivation of critical thinking was one of the education’s main goals globally.

Besides, modern pedagogical bibliography points out the significance of critical thinking cultivation at school, enumerating the pedagogical, social as well as the economic reasons that make it necessary in a constantly changing society (Matsagouras, 1998; Kiriakidis, 2006).

Specifically, the cultivation of Critical Thinking is needed for the following reasons:

a) educational ideology reasons, with a view to the development of an independent personality, to reliable knowledge acquisition as well as preparation for life,

b) learning reasons, in order to construct on knowledge and democratic education as well as,

c) social reasons, with a view to citizens’ democratization and education’s boosting in terms of what “will be preserved” and what “will be changed” in society (Matsagouras, 2002).

At this point, it is of great importance to make clear the term “critical thinking”. Nevertheless, we should point out that there is not a signal definition that all the professionals embrace, due to the different point of view from which they are looking at the specific term. Besides, critical thinking is not an one-dimensional processing, but a “body” of reasoning, skills and attitudes which are activated for various problem-solving (Matsagouras, 2006; Trilianos, 1997).
One possible definition is the following: critical thinking is defined as «a mental process that activates cognitive, psychological, emotional and metacognitive skills so that the individual is enabled to make decisions, formulate opinions, draw conclusions and take actions, individually as well as in groups, for problem-solving related to every aspect of life, with accuracy, discipline and method» (Rantos & Ritzios, 2006).

Despite the professionals’ disagreement in what critical thinking is, there is total agreement in what critical thinking is not. Thus, critical thinking is not related to negative thinking, faith, uncritical acceptance of scientific findings etc. (Mavroskoufis, 2008· Randall & Grady, 1998).

Although the professionals have pointed out the significance of cultivation of critical thinking for the reasons elaborated above, it seems that not only critical thinking is not promoted to the necessary degree and extent but it also is prevented and so the theoretical statements, which are occasionally formulated, are not implemented (Kiriakidis, 2006· Matsagouras, 2008· Trilianos, 1997).

Critical Thinking in Greek School

The first systematic effort for the introduction of critical thinking in the Greek educational system has been made through the texts of the Educational Association (Εκπαιδευτικός Όμιλος). Delmouzos, Ginos and Triandaffilides were the pioneers of the Educational Association trying to improve Greek education through a linguistic-educational reform aiming at the teaching of the vernacular at schools. According to Delmouzos, “all teaching subjects should have a common end: to educate the child, so that the latter will have the ability to think properly and spontaneously to teach him/her “a general habit of thinking” (Matsagouras, 2006:54).

Nevertheless, at a literary level, critical thinking was introduced in Greece in 1980 by Ilias Matsagouras, professor at the Department of Primary Education in the University of Athens.

With the regulation 1566/1985, «objective of the Primary as well as Secondary Education is to contribute to the full, harmonious and balanced development of the students’ mental as well as psychosomatic powers regardless of their sex and origin, so that they have the ability to develop in complete personalities and live creatively» (Bouzakis, 1991: 133-117). In the aforementioned regulation, critical thinking is included formally among the basic goals of education.

However, legislation could not determine the educational reality and critical thinking instead of becoming a fact remained a challenge (Matsagouras, 2006: 54-55).

Curricula and School Textbooks

The reformulation of Curricula is a prerequisite for the educational reform. Such kinds of changes are considered essential, mainly during in times when the school’s objectives do not agree with and correspond to the society’s needs. Especially, the latest breakthrough that takes place in various domains of society makes the reformulation of Curricula necessary more than any time (Vrettos & Kapsalis, 1999).

Professionals refer to changes related to teaching methods as well as to Curricula, so that the school can efficiently deal with the modern society’s challenges and students can acquire the necessary skills, such as critical and creative thinking, which will help them to adapt to the constantly shifting society.

In 1997 after regulation 2525 the Unified Curriculum Framework (Ενιαίο Πλαίσιο Προγραμμάτων Σπουδών), which contained each lesson’s teaching principles and goals, the syllabus, the teaching objectives, the method and the means, was constructed by the Pedagogical Institute.

Some years later, the New Curricula (2003) referring to the nine-year compulsory education, were constructed. The new textbooks based on the Cross-thematic Curriculum Framework and the Curricula contained cross-thematic elements (Tsalikidou, 2006).

According to the Pedagogical Institute’s evidence for the pedagogic planning of the Study Programs, the Cross-thematic Curricula and the Curricula “present knowledge both as cohesive and
multi-perspective, consider learning not only as product but also as a process of self-acting and discovery on the one side as well as of socio-cognitive construction on the other side, involve students in experiential learning opportunities, relating school to personal life, interests, kind of intelligence and students’ aptitudes, contribute to a pleasant learning environment, so that the students can acquire the skills needed to deal with the life’s challenges” (Official Gazette, 2003).

Besides, according to the Cross-thematic Curriculum and the Curricula (numb.21072a/C2), among the educational system’s obligations is also “the conditions’ reassurance that enables the student to develop a personality with self-awareness, emotional stability, critical and reasoning capacity as well as with positive mood towards cooperation and self-acting: a responsible, democratic and free personality with social and humanitarian principles, without religious and cultural prejudices” and the fact that “the student should learn “how to learn” at school in order to approach the provided knowledge in an active and creative way” (Official Gazette, 2003).

Despite the specific effort for educational reform and change of the educational scenery, it seems that merely the measures cannot improve the situation. The need regarding the reconsideration of the student’s, teacher’s and society’s roles, of the school’s flexible adaptation to the new facts that constantly are coming out, of the regular teachers’ training etc. still exist (Tsalikidou, 2006).

It is a matter of fact that knowledge is accumulated in the school textbooks’ knowledge that touches upon every aspect of the society, science as well as culture. Nevertheless, it seems that students educated likewise are not able to think critically. As a result, we can reasonably come up to the conclusion that the whole substance lies in the quality and not the quantity of knowledge. Greek education, however, is rather characterized by learning aiming to the success in the final exams than by fundamental knowledge which can be recalled and implemented by the student after the exams and outside school (Therianos et al., 2007).

The New Cross-Thematic Curricula

The new Cross-thematic Curricula and the Curricula were constructed in an effort to update the traditional Study Programs and to bring many novelties for the Greek Educational System considering that cross-thematic integration enables students to formulate opinions about various and different but also interrelated cognitive subjects (Fountopoulou, 2006).

As Stamatis Alahiotis- the President of the Pedagogic Institute at the time that the new Unified Curriculum Framework was written- points out, the most significant of the novelties that differentiate the Cross-thematic Curricula and the Curricula from the present Study Programs upgrading the Education’s quality are the following:

1. Establish the cross-thematic integration in school knowledge.
2. Do not only cite the content of the syllabus but also interrelate the goals, the content and the activities at the level of each teaching unit.
3. Establish the projects’ elaboration in the concept of all subjects.
4. Establish the Flexible Zone connecting the school’s knowledge to the students’ experiences and modern life’s problems.
5. Connect the assessment to the other teaching processes, suggesting various kinds and assessment’s techniques.
6. Cite the guidelines for the composition of the new school textbooks, so that the modern bibliography’s requirements are assured.
7. Improve the reading, mathematical and physician literacy (Therianos et al., 2007).

Critical Thinking in Primary School

As mentioned above, the Curricula corroborate at a theoretical level the significance of the critical thinking’s cultivation supporting it as the only way to deal with the problems of modern society.
In order to find out the extent to which the Greek primary school fosters the students’ critical thinking, we should search for the knowledge source as well as the process used for its acquisition:

- The teacher is considered the only master of knowledge “owning” and providing it in the way he/she wants.
- The knowledge is a product of critical thinking, is analyzed, comprehended, preserved and reshaped.

According to the first teaching approach, the teacher is the main person speaking in the classroom having also the control of the whole teaching process and making the students passively accepting the provided knowledge. According to the second one, the students, on their own, activate the mental and emotional processes for the production of knowledge (Rantos & Gritzios, 2006).

Examining the every-day teaching actions, it seems obvious that the development of critical thinking in primary school is absent. However, as it is mentioned above, over the last decade started an effort to change the school programs implementing the Application of Experimental Schools Education Programs and introducing the cross-thematic integration as well as the Flexible Zone helping the teachers change their teaching methodologies and adopt methodological approaches reinforcing experiential learning and scientific research (Droulia, 2006).

Critical Thinking in Secondary Education

Teaching at secondary education mainly aims at the accumulation and reproduction of knowledge and not at the teaching of thinking and learning strategies. The student’s role is restricted in recalling information that cannot use, express the teacher’s and not his/her own opinions etc. Despite the certificates they obtain, students cannot think critically. Even the best of them have problem in answering critical questions and expressing their opinion without difficulty. In that way, the qualified illiterate individuals are more than the fundamentally educated (Rantos & Gritzios, 2006). Thus, the teacher imparts knowledge in a mechanical way without involving students in thinking and therefore deeper comprehension processes. The main question is “what” and not “how”. The critical approach is not adopted in school classrooms. On the opposite, it seems that repetition, memorization as well as typical exercises dominate (Trilianos, 1997).

According to a research made by the Secondary School Teachers Federation, in the context of the 8th educational conference on “School Programs and textbooks in secondary education”, the majority of teachers (67, 4%) claims that modern school does not contribute to the students’ critical thinking development. The majority of the teachers consider that the learning process should be based on critical and creative knowledge approach and not on memorization. Besides, according to the educational programs’ as well as school textbooks’ formulation, teachers state that it is of great importance that their role should be emphasized (92%) while that of the Educational Ministry should be restricted (76, 1). The same research found out that critical thinking not only is not cultivated, but also it is degraded in high school compared to secondary school at 47,3% for the former and 54% for the latter (SSTF, 2008).

Critical Thinking in Tertiary Education

The aforementioned information makes it obvious that the teaching-learning context of the tertiary education cannot be different from that of the previous educational levels since it accepts students that have been used to the rote learning (Randos & Gritzios, 2006).

From the foundation of the first university in the newly established Greek state in 1837 until today there have been many conversations about the rudimentary or even non-existent development of students’ critical thinking. Teaching by desk, the bulk of knowledge, the single book available, the type of exams and the enormously large number of students are some of the characteristics of the Greek university that
hinder the cultivation of critical thinking despite the constant stressing of the problem as well as the state’s efforts. All things considered, the Greek university is unable to cultivate students’ critical thinking (Firipis, 2006).

**Teachers’ Training Aiming at the Development of Critical Thinking**

Teachers’ constant training is absolutely necessary so that they can stand up to their roles’ requirements every time new research findings come out or the Curricula change. In addition, the position of critical thinking in the modern multicultural school (attribute of every thoughtful individual and one of the most basic school objectives), makes necessary the teachers’ training towards this direction.

It should be clarified that the term “teacher’s training” does not have the meaning of “professional training” as it did during the decade of 1990. In contrast it is related to a deeper need: that of the student’s preparation for life.

The prospects for teachers’ training are significant taking into consideration that the educators are the basic body that can more directly affect change efforts in the school. Therefore, teachers should not only disseminate knowledge but also help their students develop competencies that enable them to attain this knowledge on their own.

Training programs that can contribute to the development of teachers’ critical thinking also include programs cultivating productive thinking, brainstorming and production of ideas through questionnaires. Furthermore, some models for critical thinking’s development are the problem-solving models, methods and models studying communing, decision taking models, cognitive intervention programs etc. (Nasainas & Tsiga, 2006).

Teachers should be trained according to the following strategies: inductive-hypothetical teaching strategy, deductive teaching strategy, inductive-deductive teaching strategy, pre-organizing teaching strategy, monologue-dialectic teaching strategy, the strategy of comprehensive approach of written speech, the strategy of effective or direct teaching, the strategy of directed inquiry, the strategy of team working (Nasainas & Tsiga, 2006).

Although teachers’ training is of great importance, it seems that they are not properly trained. Something like that causes various problems to the teachers themselves as well as to the learning process in general. Long since, the long lasting training programs have been removed while the rapid seminars organized are characterized by improvisation, aggravating rather than facilitating teachers’ position. The aforementioned research undertaken by SSTF provides evidence that 88, 9% of the teachers state that their training to the new Curricula and the books of their expertise was inadequate (SSTF, 2008).

**Teaching approaches towards Critical Thinking’s development**

Teaching practices for the development of critical thinking are classified as follows:

- Inquiry practices (practice that helps the student to investigate and find out the knowledge on his/her own)
- Implementation practices (enable the student to put into practice the acquired knowledge)
- Presentation practices (help the student in the presentation of several topics)
- Guidance practices (enable both the teacher and the student to process the lesson in cooperation)
- Discovery practices (the student practices a process of mental research)

Since the implementation of a single practice leads to monotony and weariness, the combination of the aforementioned practices is recommended so that the appropriate practice is used for each teaching unit, motivating also the students.
Brainstorming, activities, team working, conversation, case study, role play, simulation, educational visits as well as interview from specialists are some examples of practice implementation with a view to the critical and creative thinking development (Koulaidis, 2007).

Conclusion

In a nutshell, the critical approach of knowledge should portray modern school. Therefore the practices that should be used are those encouraging students’ thinking related to teaching content, the finding of alternative solutions for various issues and the analysis of their way of thinking. In that way they will have the competence to understand how they come up to conclusions and to examine the reasons as well as the conditions under which they learn something. Nevertheless, it seems that such practices cannot be implemented in the context of traditional teacher-centered approaches characterizing the Greek education. Furthermore, the critical approach of knowledge presupposes the knowledge dispute however, school knowledge is taken for granted and considered unquestionable. Today, more than every time knowledge is not restricted in the context of school. In contrast, it is acquired both before and after schooling. Consequently, every student should realize that human knowledge is constantly under process thus its regular reconsideration in and out of the school is of great importance (Kassotakis & Flouris, 2006). It becomes obvious that the development of critical thinking in students and tomorrow’s citizens is significant and necessary because no piece of knowledge can be considered sufficient while the constant information is a prerequisite for every human being to resist loss of his/her individuality and misinformation (Kiriakidis, 2006).

References


