From Classroom to the Dole: The Experience of Unemployment of Public School Substitute Teachers in Greece

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Abstract

The article addresses the labour experience of substitute teachers in Greece whose working life is punctuated by periods of employment and unemployment and long intervals of uncertainty. In other words, the labour of this particular category of teachers is precarious. As revealed by the relevant research, unemployment is experienced differently by each individual subject. The organization and management of substitute teachers' unemployment time can assume various forms: on the one hand, it can be devoted to seeking new employment or training or recreation but, on the other, it can have detrimental effect on the unemployed due to lack of employment. The dominance of neoliberal rationality in the labour market seems to tip the balance towards more unemployment than professional development and the suggestions of pedagogical theory about the contemporary teacher's role.

Keywords: substitute teachers, precariousness, unemployment, professional development.

1. Introduction

If teaching is an art (Bacharach & Conley, 1989) or if "the good teacher" is the one who develops a professional identity (Van Huizen, Van Oers & Wubbels, 2005: 275), then teachers' professionalism and their recognition as reflexive practitioners or artisans are undermined by precarious labour relations. Employment precariousness has detrimental effect, to say the least, on teachers' development, school daily operation and teaching. Due to their labour conditions, Greek substitute teachers easily fall under the rubric of precarious status.

Substitute teachers are recruited at the beginning of the school year or even much later, are dismissed at the end of the school year and register at unemployment offices to receive unemployment benefit. Their re-employment is not certain, as posts may not be available, or they can be offered positions in remote school units that makes their social reproduction difficult or even impossible due to commuting/re-allocation costs. It follows that they constantly oscillate between employment and unemployment without the prospect of tenure on the horizon. In the context of a prolonged financial crisis, a teacher may spend up to twenty years as a substitute teacher, without recognition of work experience thus experiencing a state of liminality (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016: 49).

The article focuses on substitute teachers' labour status and, in particular, unemployment, a preoccupation that leads us to approach their professional development not through the lens of contemporary pedagogical theory and, in particular, the reflexive practitioner perspective, or the development of professional identity but through the prism of precariousness. More analytically, we maintain that precariousness and unemployment hinder the professional development of substitute teachers. The experience of unemployment that resulted from the Great Depression has attracted the attention of research since the 1930's (Jahoda, Lazarsfeld & Zeisel, 2017), a trend that has revived due to the dominance of neoliberal rationality in the labour market and galloping unemployment.

2. Substitute teachers and the Greek education system

The status of substitute teachers in Greece is precarious as they face two basic problems: a) lack of professional prospects and b) low professional status and misrecognition of their work. Compared to their tenured colleagues, substitute teachers are deprived of the possibility for professional advancement and are relegated to an inferior position. Not only is the prospect of a tenured appointment not on the horizon but they are also denied access to a series of benefits and supportive arrangements provided to their tenured colleagues.

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For the school year 2019-2020, the total number of substitute teachers recruited was 39,420. Out of them, 13,371 were secondary school teachers (34%) and 25,358 were primary school teachers (64%). 46% of the total were SEN teachers. The following chart records the number of substitute teachers recruited in secondary education since 2014 (Kordis, 2020).

School Year	Recruitments
2014-15	5.164
2015-16	6.162
2016-17	6.007
2017-18	7.404
2018-19	9.578
2019-20	13.371

The extensive use of substitute teachers to cover educational needs has been a permanent feature of the Greek educational system which has recently been intensified.[2] This can be partly attributed to the country's geomorphology: school units are dispersed across a mountainous and island landscape which makes access problematic. This particularity affects the staffing of schools. For example, 34% of all secondary education schools are located in two major urban centers, while 18% of them in islands. 6% are in remote areas, half of which in islands. 6% of secondary schools are in municipalities with less than 3,000 residents while 39% in municipalities with less than 10,000 people (Kordis, 2016).

The Law 2525/1997 signified a major break in the Greek education system for it abolished the seniority-based waiting list for tenured appointment, a recruitment system that, despite its shortcomings (for example, some teachers had to wait between 8 and 14 years to be appointed), provided a guaranteed professional prospect. The written exams system, conducted by the Supreme Council for Civil Personnel Selection (ASEP), which replaced the seniority list, deprived substitute teachers of the right to tenured appointment -unconditionally linked to graduation- that the previous system had established. Substitute teachers experienced this measure as an insult to their professional identity as the ASEP exam treated them as candidates and not as acting teachers.[3] The change triggered the reaction of both the teacher unions and education intellectuals. Their critique focused on the vastness and indeterminacy of the examined academic fields, including didactic methodology and pedagogy, and the psychological overburdening of candidates, who are often acting teachers at various stages of their personal and professional lives (Zafiriadis et al, 2004· Ignatiadis, 2004).

The mere fact that teachers with, little or much, professional experience are identified by the official state as candidates obviously undermines their professional identity and places them in a new context according to which professional experience is devalued and appointment is contingent upon the ASEP exams, when, as Bourdieu & Passeron (1990: 153) argue, the mere existence of exams eliminates candidates before being examined. The transition from the seniority list to the written exams established precarious working conditions for substitute and unappointed teachers, in general. In fact the problem is exacerbated because these written exams do not take place on a regular basis. Moreover, the ASEP conducted exams have created a subcategory of teachers who despite having successfully passed the exams have not been appointed yet.

All this indicate that substitute teachers constitute a category of workers that, despite the fact that they meet permanent needs of the education system, labour under precarious working conditions which are intensified by the fact that they are dismissed at the end of the school year hoping to be recruited with the beginning of the next while, in the meantime, register on the dole as unemployed.

Thus substitute teachers, qua precarious workers, move in a revolving door manner between employment and unemployment (Karakioulafi et al, 2014). So, substitute teachers' annual regularity is the following: they are recruited, at best, in the beginning of the school year, negotiate, within by tight limits, with the Regional Primary and Secondary Education Authorities over the schools to be allocated -a negotiation indicative of the citizens-public services relations and the power of individual's social capital (Panagiotopoulos, 2013: 42)- only to be finally dismissed with the end of the school year.

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[2] According to Kordis (2016), substitute teachers percentage to their tenured colleagues rose from 8% in 2011 to 14,1% in 2015.

[3] On the knowledge that accrues from experience in atypical or non-typical learning environments see: Senge et al (1999)· Senge et al (2000)· Argyris & Schön (1996). On a critical approach to the accumulation of skills and recognition of professional experience in precarious jobs, see: Sennett (1998).

The fear of non-recruitment, on the one hand, leads them to accept dire working conditions (i.e. posts in remote places) and, on the other, to multiple employment (i.e. evening work in fields (ir)relevant to education) or a desperate pursuit of academic credentials and/or qualifications etc. (i.e. post-service development, MA/PhD degrees). According to Isabell Lorey (2015), precarity is neither a passing or episodic condition in modern Western societies nor a phenomenon confined to societal margins. Moreover, it constitutes a threat, even when new possibilities for employment are available, even for those that the state supposedly protects and provides security. Precarity implies living in utter contingency. In this context, fear and risk characterizes the social condition.

It can also be maintained that this context establishes a condition of "liminality" which affects identity building and creates a complex of contingent career paths. The concept of "liminality" seeks to capture the growing numbers of people in contemporary societies who seem to inhabit "in between" spaces, between and betwixt conventional work roles, employment and unemployment and/or career stages (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016: 48). The concept of "liminality, as developed by Ibarra & Obodaru (2016) and, in particular, their anthropological tracing of its origins in traditional societies, indicates that liminality can have a positive content when it is an institutionalized transitional condition according to which an individual moves from one stage of life to another. In traditional societies, the stage of "liminality" involved certain rites of passage and denoted a temporary stage in the transition between one social status and another (e.g., adolescence to adulthood). In this case, the post-liminal stage signified a return to relative stability. In contemporary societies, on the contrary, this transition appears to be incoherent or unfinished, a dead end leading to nowhere, trapping the individual in a permanently incomplete transitory stage (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016: 49).

Finally, substitute teachers' professional carrier is punctuated by periods of unemployment and precarious employment. The employment period is characterized by anxiety over issues like commuting to work, the new school environment or the attitude of the head teacher, the colleagues and the students. At the same time, it involves challenges like teacher-students relations, the daily life in school, meeting the demands of the curriculum, problem-resolution, namely the whole range of issues that define, on the one hand, the framework within which teachers work and, on the other hand, their professional identity.

The unemployment period, on the other hand, is marked by the detrimental effects it has on human beings and, primarily, by the feeling of uncertainty over their future.

3. The experience of unemployment

Unemployment is the second characteristic of the working life of precarious workers. As far as teachers are concerned, when the school year ends, they, "with all formality", register on the dole to receive unemployment benefit. This course is predetermined while the possibility of re-employment and its terms are not.[4] This simple fact determines their identity formation process, and, on the one hand, forces them to cope with unemployment and, on the other, to plan their return to employment.

Unemployment has been described as an act of violence that affects individuals' social relations, leads to social deskilling and deconstructs their personality (Karakioulafi, 2013: 126). Recent research stress that unemployment is massive phenomenon that is increasingly individually experienced (Beck, 1992: 127-138).

The conditions of the modern labour market and the insecurity that characterizes the labour relations both in the private and the public sector lead to a situation in "which the individuals must produce, stage and cobble together their biographies themselves" (Beck, 1997: 95) without reliance either on the stable "conceptual crutches of the past" (ibid: 149) or on the security provided welfare policies (ibid: 17). Risk-taking takes place in a context that, on the one hand, is emptied of social protection networks and, on the other, individual decision-making is suboptimal, due to the complexity of modern societies. Thus, and despite the correlation that human capital theory has tried to establish between education level, job opportunities and income (Fershtman, Murphy & Weiss, 1996), in reality, many categories of highly qualified workers are in dire straits and either work in precarious jobs or are unemployed.

Despite its individual dimension and the fact that is subjectively experienced, unemployment is currently viewed by the dominant political forces through distorting lenses that deliberately make certain categories of workers invisible and/or propagate the dominant ideology of voluntary unemployment.

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[4] On the hardship the Greek teachers' professional development involve, see: Pyrgiotakis (1992). On the broader issue of professional identity formation due to precarious employment or unemployment, see: Offe (1985: 10-51).

The volume of unemployment is hard to define, a fact indicative of the liminality certain population categories experience and who literally disappear from official statistics. The complexity of the contemporary labour market landscape challenges the way "official statistics" measure unemployment. As Demazière (2014: 22· Gautié, 2015) remarks, "the boundaries between unemployment, employment and inactivity are not easy to identify, especially with the development of factors such as occasional work, underemployment, discouragement or forced inactivity" and other borderline cases. The difficulty of defining and measuring unemployment is analysed in Nikos Panagiotopoulos' book *The Violence of Unemployment* (2013: 77-99).

Demazière (2017: 111), trying to compare the experience of unemployment at an international level, unfolds the limitations and failures of defining unemployment by applying codified indicators based on set norms. In particular, he points out the difficulty of cross-country comparisons on the basis of standardized indicators that are assumed to be equivalent from one country to another and without taking into consideration national variations and different conceptualizations of the phenomenon.

Gourzis & Gialis (2017: 274) maintain that an approach to unemployment cannot overlook underemployment which "tends to take the form of covert unemployment as institutionalized wages are below poverty line while those who resort to it are more exposed to the danger of unemployment". In fact, as Rifkin (1995) stresses, most jobs available in contemporary societies are nothing but variations of unemployment.

The difficulty of defining substitute teachers' unemployment is an open question. Is, one may ask, methodologically sound to focus on those employed during the school year or does this approach overlooks those previously employed as substitute teachers but not currently working? Would they count as unemployed teachers, if they are occupied in other (ir)relevant jobs or have even withdrawn from the labour market, as the Portuguese unemployed women Araújo (2017: 49) studied?

Teachers' resignations during the school year (Kordis, 2019) or their reluctance to even re-apply for a post gives rise to a series of questions the most pressing being: are they forced to do so due to unsurpassable problems of social reproduction? This problematizes the rather widely held idea of "voluntary unemployment" which overlooks the issues raised for those who, despite their willingness to work, deny a job offered.

Contemporary approaches to unemployment that draw upon the example of Marienthal (Jahoda, Lazarsfeld & Zeisel, 2017) emphasize the multi-dimensionality of the phenomenon and its personalized nature. Their research on unemployment pointed out the weaknesses of an approach that treats the unemployed as a unified category and unemployment as a unitary experience. Demazière (2017: 117-121) stresses that unemployment is a lived and complex experience the exploration of which cannot be confined to the job seeking dimension.

Panagiotopoulos (2013: 34) emphasizes the need to understand the situation of the unemployed "who confronts "rational", "theoretical" and, primarily, practical issues and who is not a homo economicus but a person who economizes to make ends meet" and concludes that unemployment cannot be understood in abstraction from the economic and social situation that informs the unemployed experiences through their subjective appreciation of the individual and collective future.

Fryer & Fagan (1993) identified a category of unemployed, the so called "good copers", who appear to cope with unemployment better than most, thus indicating the highly personalized, albeit socially mediated, nature of the phenomenon. Demazière (2017: 129-130), on his part, identified three interpretations of the problem and their implications: discouragement, competition and resourcefulness. The first has to do with the experience of permanent unemployment and the feeling of impotence; the second with job seeking and the third with adaptation and making plans. In the last case people engage in alternative activities to ameliorate the effects of unemployment.

The way the unemployed experience their condition is a multifactorial phenomenon related, on the one hand, to their individual characteristics (gender, age, education level) and, on the other, to factors like the duration of employment, the available household resources, the overall condition of the labour market, unemployment policies, the state of the local labour market etc. These factors interact and condition the attitude of the unemployed towards unemployment, entry to the labour market, acceptance of labour conditions and subjective perception of unemployment. This discussion gives us a way to approach the experience and interpretation of substitute teachers. In attempting to talk about substitute teachers, a question naturally arises: are we talking about teachers or unemployed? What we can say with confidence is that we are talking about people who experience liminality. Thus, the initial question is how they interpret unemployment and how the attitudes they adopt inform their identity as teachers.

Finally, and given teachers' well documented overload -consider only the case of diagnosing and coping with dyslexia (Nicolson & Fawcett, 2008)- forces upon us the question whether professional development is a non-rational choice or a value rational one (Weber, 2019: 97-129) and, thus, incompatible with the dominant model of homo economicus (Ubel, 2009· Martin, 2002); or, alternatively, whether the investment of time and energy, on the part of the teacher, to professional development may hinder job seeking opportunities. The antinomy between an activity such as teaching which requires love and devotion and the investment in "human capital" (Friedman, Hatch & Walker, 1998) characterizes this category of acting teachers.

4. The development of teachers' professional identity

The experience of unemployment affects the process of identity building. The social context also conditions the development of professional identity. Unemployment, as part of this framework, impacts upon the way teachers' professional identity develops. The development of teacher's professionalism presupposes the development of their professional identity. The way teachers experience their identity reveals their convictions, values and assumptions which, in turn, affect their actions and choices (Hargreaves & Dawe, 1990). The term "identity" refers to the ways we define our existence within a context of interaction with others or alternatively to the ways our individual self-realization is socially mediated (Frydaki, 2015: 37).

In other words, identity building is inextricably linked with the social framework of action and social practices (Wenger, 1998: 145). It follows that teachers' professionalism and their identities presuppose continuous development (Ifanti & Fotopoulou, 2010). The development of teachers' professional identity is related to school culture (Anthopoulou, 1999), state policies and the type of teacher they presuppose (Ifanti, 2011), teacher-student relations as well as their personal and professional experiences (Ifanti & Fotopoulou, 2010).

Wenger (1998) stresses the role of communities of practice in the identity building process, including professional identity. The communities of practice develop through three distinct modes of belonging: engagement, imagination and alignment. Engagement implies active involvement in mutual processes of negotiation of meaning; imagination involves "constructing an image of ourselves of our communities and of the world in order to orient ourselves, reflect on our situation and explore possibilities". Alignment "is a mutual process of coordinating perspectives, interpretations, actions, and contexts so that they realize higher goals" (Wenger, 2000: 227-228). Within the context of a social institution such as education, Wenger's three modes of belonging help us understand the ways identities are formed in relation to constantly negotiated meanings and institutional frameworks. Lacking one implies that individuals do not develop to their full capacity and find themselves unable to negotiate their professional identity in a restricting frame of reference.

What is critical in this perspective is the acknowledgement that teachers' professional identity cannot be conceived in abstraction from the framework of action and the way individuals construct their identity on the basis of their experience. Apart from the abovementioned developments and the overall retreat of the fordist mode of regulation of labour relations, the Greek labour market is characterized by a high degree of polyvalent employment. As Patiniotis (2007: 178) comments the widespread informal and multiple employment, particularly in relation to the "black market" or the "clandestine economy", distorts workers' social and professional identity leading to a sort of "patchwork identity".

Thus, fragmented and precarious working conditions, interrupted by periods of unemployment and punctuated by uncertainty are not fertile ground for teachers' development to flourish. The logic that perceives teaching as a collective long-term project that involves participation in school life, development of relations of trust and personal commitment is sidelined in favour of individual-based, short-term and short-sighted working teams bounded to disintegrate at the end of the school year only to be recomposed in the beginning of the next. As Sennett (1998: 122) remarks

"The short-term, flexible time of the new capitalism seems to preclude making a sustained narrative out of one's labors, and so a career. Yet to fail to wrest some sense of continuity and purpose out of these conditions would be literally to fail ourselves".
And concludes

"A pliant self, a collage of fragments unceasing in its becoming, ever open to new experience - these are just the psychological conditions suited to short-term work experience, flexible institutions, and constant risk-taking. But there is little room for understanding the breakdown of a career, if you believe that all life history is just an assemblage of fragments. Nor is there any room for assaying the gravity and pain of failure, if failure is just another incident" (ibid: 133).

5. Conclusion

This article focused on the Greek substitute teachers' unemployment experience and, in particular, their precarious condition which is punctuated by periods of employment and unemployment, and pervasive uncertainty. Substitute teachers' unemployment raises a number of issues: a) an accurate definition of their status and, in particular, whether they should count as unemployed teachers or unemployed in general; b) the experience of unemployment; c) the relation between professional identity, work experience, in-service training and unemployment time management and d) substitute teachers' social reproduction.

To address the issue of public education substitute teachers we were forced to abandon a purely pedagogical approach and engage with precariousness and unemployment as professional development and the challenges of teaching is but one aspect of substitute teachers' professional life. Precariousness and unemployment define substitute teachers' social identity in a manner detrimental to their professional self-realization. Finally, we stressed the antinomies involved in adopting a homo economicus perspective, namely, the antinomy between a theory that presupposes utility maximization and a profession which, on the one hand, is characterized by precariousness and, on the other, is predicated on qualitative characteristics that exceed the myopic boundaries of cost-benefit analysis.

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