

Educational inequalities and entrance to Greek higher education: Views of parents of high school graduates

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the views of parents whose children sat for entrance exams to Greek higher education and to analyse how social inequalities affect their academic outcomes. Fifteen participants aged 40 to 59 years participated in the study. Purposive sampling was used to select parents whose children had taken entrance examinations within the past decade. A semi-structured interview was used to gather data. The findings demonstrated that the Greek school system does not function as an equaliser but rather as a mechanism for legitimising social inequality. School failure is neither random nor isolated; it reflects the unequal power relations embedded in the school field. The results suggest that the Greek educational system tends to perpetuate social inequalities through discriminatory access to resources (such as infrastructure and tutoring), symbolic violence, and institutional barriers (including limited infrastructure and geographical constraints).

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Introduction

The institution of education in society is the primary means of socialisation and social integration, responsible for transferring knowledge, skills, and attitudes through a formal agency (Ballantine & Hammack, 2015; Giavrimis, 2020). Since the 1960s, several social scientists have developed theoretical frameworks to explain both the existence and persistence of educational inequalities. Although scholars agree that inequality is reproduced, they differ in their views on its underlying causes. Some theorists argue that the school itself is responsible for sustaining this inequality and should be a site of class struggle. Conversely, others emphasise that these inequalities are not the school's fault, as everyone is provided with equal opportunities, and attribute the causes to factors other than class. (Kantzara, 2011).

Cultural capital theory

Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital seeks to elucidate the intricate aspects of family and school environments that influence differences in academic outcomes and the perpetuation of social inequalities (Ballantine & Hammack, 2015; Giavrimis, 2020; Nova-Kaltsouni, 2010). Cultural capital is the set of cultural elements an individual inherits from their family background. It is divided into three types: embodied, objectified, and institutionalised (Hallinan, 2006; van Zanten, 2005). Embodied cultural capital is internalised and expressed through behaviours, opinions, and cultural practices; its development is gradual and complex (Blackledge & Hunt, 2019). Objectified cultural capital includes material items such as paintings and books, which can be inherited. However, understanding them requires a certain level of intellectual culture, which is part of the habitus. The cultural influences a child absorbs from their family can significantly impact their future cultural and spiritual development (Giavrimis, 2015). The third type, as noted, is the institutionalised form, conferred through qualifications granted by a recognised educational authority (Ballantine & Hammack, 2015).

Having cultural capital that aligns with the school's is important, even if it does not seem directly related to academic success at first. Children from privileged backgrounds face fewer challenges in meeting school

demands because they often internalise the social elements necessary through their families, sometimes appearing as naturally gifted children who perform well with minimal effort (Bourdieu, 1973). The family's acquisition of cultural capital that aligns with the school's makes learning easier, boosts enthusiasm for learning, enhances language skills, improves interactions with teachers, and supports emotional development, allowing their academic achievement to come more easily rather than through hard work (Bourdieu, 1973; Jæger, 2009). Students who lack this cultural capital, due to different perceptions and values instilled by their families, find it challenging to adapt to the school's operational methods and cognitive demands, which are set by the ruling class—those who possess the cultural capital (Askouni, 2003; Bourdieu, 1973; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Giavrimis, 2015; Nova-Kaltsouni, 2010). A key factor behind educational inequality is the system's failure to recognise the diverse cultural capital of students from underprivileged backgrounds (Jenkins, 1992). According to Bourdieu, it is common for students from families with the same educational level but different economic backgrounds to perform similarly in school. Conversely, two families with the same economic status but different educational levels show a significant gap in academic achievement, with those with higher parental education achieving higher scores.

Based on the theory of cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), higher education entrance examination systems are neither neutral nor objective; instead, they serve as mechanisms of social reproduction. The subjects, language used in the examinations, and skills required (e.g., critical thinking, creativity) reflect the cultural norms of the dominant class. Students with high cultural capital (usually from privileged backgrounds) view them as 'natural', while the education system perceives them as gifts, talent, or intelligence. According to Bourdieu (1973), examination systems create a "noble finding": they do not discover talents but confirm the existing distribution of cultural capital. Although presented as meritocratic ('everyone takes the same exams'), examination systems apply 'symbolic violence' and subtly impose the cultural criteria of the ruling class as universal. The exams turn cultural capital into academic advantages.

The Greek educational system and entrance to higher education

From the second decade of the 20th century until 1961, educational institutions conducted entrance examinations (Polychronaki, 2006). Starting in the early 1960s, a central committee selected the subjects for the examinations, and the institution of the "Apolyterion" (School-leaving certificate) was introduced. In 1967, when the dictatorship came to power, the new system resembled the one that existed before 1965. The fall of the dictatorship in 1975 led to the re-admission of candidates to higher education without strict regulations. In particular, national entrance examinations for higher educational institutions were introduced. In 1981, with PASOK assuming power, a series of reforms was implemented, the most notable of which included a substantial reduction in the examination syllabus and the introduction of national entrance exams in September, previously held in June (Greek National Examinations Organisation, 2016). Changes in the admission procedures for higher education examinations occurred in 1983, 1988, 1991, 1997, and 2000. These changes primarily involved fluctuations in course offerings, changes in the weighting of examined subjects, the introduction of scientific fields into candidate selection, and the establishment of a minimum admission base of 10, abolished in 2010 (Greek National Examinations Organisation, 2016) and reintroduced in 2021. Between 2015 and 2025, with minor variations, general high school (G.H.S.) graduates are tested on subjects from the G.H.S. grade 3 examination syllabus, compiled exclusively by the Central Board of Secondary Education. Ninety percent (90%) of the average grades in four nationally examined subjects within the relevant scientific fields—(1st Scientific Field: Humanities, Law and Social Sciences; 2nd Scientific Field: Health and Life Sciences; 3rd Scientific Field: Education Sciences; 4th Scientific Field: Economics and Information Technology)—and ten percent (10%) of the grade from the G.E.L. Baccalaureate for third-grade students are considered (Greek National Examinations Organisation, 2021).

Based on the above, we can observe ongoing instability in the education admissions process. The method of admission to higher education is constantly evolving, depending on the government in power, under the pretext that the system being promoted is new and revolutionary. Furthermore, each government promises to promote equality among candidates from different social groups and to expand access to higher education for lower socio-economic classes. Despite each government's efforts to present these changes as innovative, there is a consistent regression toward similar academic outcomes over time. Since at least 1960, when studies on higher education admission began, inequality in academic results has persisted and remains inversely related to social origin (Labiri-Dimaki, 1974; Meimaris & Nikolakopoulos, 1978; Papakonstantinou, 1981; Katsikas & Kavvadias, 1994; Kyridis, 1997; Mylonas, 1982, 1999; Sianou-Kyrgiou, 2006). A survey by the GSEE (2014) on higher education admission found that between 2001 and 2011, there was an overrepresentation of young people with parents holding high levels of education in prestigious fields such as Medicine, Law, and Polytechnics, while those with parents of lower educational levels were underrepresented. Of course, an important issue in the Greek educational system that remains unaddressed in legislation is the significant role of shadow education in the success of prospective students in higher education entrance examinations (Giavrimis, 2015; Giavrimis et al., 2018; Giavrimis, 2022).

This study aimed to explore parents' opinions of students who took the Greek higher education entrance exams and to analyse how social inequalities affect their academic outcomes.

While extensive quantitative research has documented educational inequalities in Greece, qualitative studies exploring parental perspectives remain scarce. (Saiti & Mitrosili, 2003). This study makes an original contribution by examining how parents, as key stakeholders in the educational process, perceive and experience the mechanisms of social reproduction within the Greek higher-education entrance-examination system. Through the theoretical lens of Bourdieu's cultural capital theory, this research provides rich, contextualised insights into the lived experiences of families navigating a system that, despite claims of meritocracy, appears to perpetuate existing social hierarchies. The study addresses a significant gap in the literature by giving voice to parents whose children have directly experienced these examinations, thereby illuminating the practical manifestations of theoretical concepts such as symbolic violence and habitus in the Greek educational context. At the same time, it highlights the commodification of the transformation of economic capital into institutionalised cultural capital, through shadow education, and the geographical dimension in the analysis of educational inequalities.

In this context, the present research examines: a) How do parents perceive the function of the school and the university entrance system? b) In what ways does cultural capital differentiation influence students' academic success? and c) What policies or practical interventions could reduce educational inequalities?

Method

A qualitative method was chosen to capture rich, contextual insights into the phenomenon. It was chosen because this method enables us to explore expressions, offering a more accurate and realistic view of the phenomenon than the interviewee's own words (Creswell, 2016).

This study employed an interpretive qualitative research design, grounded in the constructivist paradigm, which recognises that knowledge is socially constructed through the meanings individuals assign to their experiences (Creswell, 2016). The qualitative approach was selected for its capacity to capture the complexity, depth, and nuanced understanding of parents' experiences with the Greek higher education entrance examination system. Unlike quantitative methods that seek generalisation, qualitative inquiry allows for thick description and contextualised understanding of phenomena, which is essential when exploring subjective experiences related to educational inequalities.

Participants

For selecting participants, purposive maximum-variation sampling was employed to collect opinions from parents with diverse educational backgrounds (from secondary school to postgraduate), varied geographical origins (urban centres, regions, islands), and different economic statuses (unemployed to freelance). The eligibility criteria included parents of children who sat the 2013–2023 national exams, representing various socio-economic backgrounds. Participants were recruited through schools in their respective areas. Fifteen participants aged between forty and fifty-nine years took part in the research. Regarding the interviewees, purposive sampling was used to select parents whose children had taken higher-education entrance examinations in the past 10 years. Of the fifteen interviewees, fourteen were men, and eleven were women. Four of the parents interviewed were high school graduates, while the rest held university qualifications, and two were also postgraduates. Additionally, four parents were from urban centres, while the others were from mainland Greece and an island.

Table 1. Participants table

Associates	Gender	Age	Educational level	Place of residence	Occupation	Year of entrance examination
P1	Male	49	Lyceum	Mytilene	Military	2013
P2	Male	55	Lyceum	Mytilene	Unemployed	2016
P3	Female	56	Post-secondary education	Mytilene	Unemployed	2018
P4	Female	42	Lyceum	Mytilene	Banking	2023
P5	Female	41	Higher education	Mytilene	Teacher	2023
P6	Female	46	Higher education	Athens	Business executive	2023
P7	Male	59	Higher education	Lamia	Professor	2015
P8	Female	49	Higher education	Trikala	Teacher	2023
P9	Female	40	Lyceum	Mytilene	Unemployed	2023
P10	Female	47	Lyceum	Mytilene	Municipal employee	2023
P11	Male	55	Lyceum	Patras	Private employee	2018
P12	Female	47	Higher education	Athens	Architect	2023

P13	Female	43	Higher education	Athens	Professor	2023
P14	Female	54	Higher education	Trikala	Civil servant	2013
P15	Female	47	Lyceum	Mytilene	Private employee	2023

Research tool

A semi-structured interview was conducted to gather detailed insights and ensure that no aspect of this phenomenon was overlooked. The interview guide was organised around four principal axes. Specifically, these axes are: a) the demographic details of the interviewees (such as age and number of children), b) Parents' opinions on the current education system, encompassing both material and educational standards, as well as their views on how entrance examinations for Greek Higher Education are conducted and any suggestions they may have for reforms. The included questions were of the type: "What do you consider the most serious deficiencies of the school?" "What are your thoughts on the nationwide exams?" "Did your child's behaviour change during the exam period? Could you describe how?" and "What could be the best admission system for entrance to Greek Higher Education?", c) Parents' views on cultural capital and how it affects students' access to higher education. The questions asked included: "Do some students have an advantage over others? If so, why does this happen?" "Does the parents' educational level affect the student's success in entering Greek Higher Education? If so, for what reason?", and "Besides academic learning, what extracurricular activities can help a student develop additional skills to excel in exams?" and d) The relationship between parents' economic and social status and students' examination performance. Questions asked included: "It is believed that the financial situation of the parents affects students' success; how exactly?" "What additional actions would you take regarding your child's education if you had more money?", and "Can you describe what measures the school has implemented to prevent economic inequalities from being felt?"

Research process

The interviews were conducted between June and September 2023 with the interviewees present, either at their homes or outdoors. They lasted from 39 to 48 minutes. Throughout the interviews, participants' anonymity was preserved. They were informed both in writing via the consent form and verbally that if a question was embarrassing or felt too personal, they could skip to the next one. Before beginning, all interviewees received a verbal briefing on the research topic and purpose, then read and signed the consent form. In some cases, clarification of questions was necessary to gather as much information as possible. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Iosifidis, 2003) was employed to analyse qualitative data, with sentences as the basic units. Data analysis followed the six-phase thematic analysis framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2012): Phase 1 involved familiarisation with the data through repeated reading of transcripts and noting initial observations. In Phase 2, initial codes were systematically generated across the entire dataset to identify features relevant to the research questions. Phase 3 involved searching for themes by collating codes into potential themes and gathering all relevant data extracts. Phase 4 consisted of reviewing themes to ensure they aligned with both the coded extracts and the entire dataset. In Phase 5, themes were defined and named, with each identified as the essence of its contribution to the overall narrative. Finally, Phase 6 involved producing the report, with selected extracts embedded within an analytic narrative contextualised within the literature. Throughout this process, codes emerged inductively from participants' discourse and were organised into subcategories and overarching categories. Codes, subcategories, and categories emerged from the participants' discourse (Iosifidis, 2003) and are presented in the findings. The analysis was conducted in the original Greek language to preserve semantic nuances, with translations provided for this publication. To enhance trustworthiness, member checking was conducted with three participants to verify the accuracy of interpretations.

The limitations arise from the qualitative methodology, which prevents generalisation of the results, and from the study's limited scope, further constraining the findings. Moreover, most participants are from Lesbos, forming a geographical limitation.

Findings

The thematic analysis of interview data revealed four overarching themes that illuminate how educational inequalities manifest in the Greek higher-education entrance-examination system. These themes emerged from the systematic coding of participants' narratives and are presented in alignment with the study's research objectives: (1) Systemic Dysfunction: Infrastructure and Pedagogical Deficiencies in Public Education, (2) The Contested Nature of Examination Systems, (3) Cultural Capital as a Determinant of Educational Success, and (4) Suggestions for Structural Barriers and cultural differences. Each theme is discussed below with supporting evidence from participant interviews.

Thematic axis 1. Systemic dysfunction: Infrastructure and pedagogical deficiencies in public education

According to the findings, parents expressed strong dissatisfaction with the public school system, noting that it fails to equip students with essential skills for entrance exams.

Subtopic 1.1: Logistical infrastructure

The physical and technical infrastructure of schools was characterised mainly as inadequate. Many buildings were described as old and damaged, with issues such as cracked floors and bent roofs posing safety risks. Recent natural disasters, including earthquakes, floods, and fires, have further compromised traditional school structures, rendering some unsuitable for classes.

P1: "...in the school where my son was, you could see the ground was cracked, which is dangerous, let us say you could see some roofs bent,..."

P4: "...I believe that the buildings are ancient in most parts of Greece and unfortunately, due to the recent earthquakes, floods, or even fires, many buildings that are considered traditional buildings have suffered too much damage to be considered unsuitable for a course to be held in them..."

Classroom equipment is also outdated, often limited to books and chalkboards, which fail to meet modern educational needs: P4: "...We cannot have only books and a chalkboard in the school, which has been out of date for so many years..." Notably, only one participant reported a positive experience, describing a well-maintained public school in the northern suburbs equipped with advanced resources, such as robotics: P6 "...a good school in the northern suburbs ...We were lucky with Melina because she went to a public school, but her school was very well-kept, and it was the only one in the area, so it was almost a model. I have no complaints about them doing robotics; they do everything. ..."

The above indicates that this unequal distribution fundamentally creates distinct educational 'fields' (Bourdieu, 1973), in which students' inherent talent is overlooked, as their academic opportunities and habit formation are predetermined by the unequal natural and technical resources provided by their social position (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Naidoo, 2004, pp. 457–471)

Subtopic 1.2: The role of educators and pedagogical practices

Furthermore, the teachers' behaviour does not align with their role. As mentioned, many of them appear bored during lessons or only teach the good students, neglecting the others. Some encourage students to attend tutorials or tutor others, which is both unethical and illegal. Interestingly, teachers grade students based on their social capital, thereby reinforcing existing inequalities. Additionally, teachers show favouritism towards certain students or encourage them to attend extracurricular courses, while their negative evaluations of students, as highlighted in the findings, directly impact students' psychology and ultimately affect their performance in entrance examinations for higher education (Askouni, 2003; Giavrimis, 2015). P11: "...I know that there are teachers who also teach outside in tutorials and say ...we will analyse in the tutorial what you do not understand..." Interviewees also noted cases of violent behaviour by some teachers towards students, e.g., one of them was throwing chalk at students, P4: "...because we have seen incidents of teachers taking it out on kids. We have seen teachers, I mean we have heard, throwing chalk at children in the classroom..."

The described teacher behaviours, such as favouritism, unethical tutoring, and grading influenced by social ties, exemplify Bourdieu's (1973) concept of social reproduction. Teachers often interpret students' inherited cultural capital as personal achievement, rewarding them with attention and grades, thereby turning it into formal cultural capital such as academic credentials. At the same time, neglect or hostility towards other students constitutes symbolic violence, undermining their habitus and restricting their capacity to accumulate capital. Therefore, these actions by teachers are not merely neutral errors but deliberate processes that reinforce and entrench existing class inequalities within the educational system. (Tsiplakides, 2023, pp. 1–15)

Thematic Axis 2. The contested nature of examination systems

Sub-topic 2.1: Exams as mechanisms of reproducing inequalities

Most people believe that higher education entrance exams are unfair, reproducing inequalities and should be either differentiated or eliminated: P2: "...Grading should be eliminated, and the teacher should see the student in judging whether the student can progress to where they are..." P8: "... I believe that the institution of entrance exams should not exist at all..." However, even the individual who described it as a meritocratic system suggested changes to the assessment process and called for the abolition of the minimum admission requirement.

P9: "...it is a generally meritocratic system, I would say, because you take exams and depending on your score, you pass somewhere...I want to say that I consider the system of Vocational High Schools better than the system in General High Schools, because every student takes exams based on subjects that interest him/her...I do not think that the base of ten is so correct because, let us say, a student of nine is much lower than a student of ten..."

The interview responses reveal a critical awareness of how educational systems function, which aligns with Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital. The participants identify entrance exams as unfair engines of social reproduction, arguing they do not assess pure merit but rather reward forms of knowledge and preparation unevenly distributed across social classes. Even the participant labelling the system as meritocratic contradicts this by proposing significant reforms, inadvertently highlighting how the system's perceived neutrality legitimises inequality. This collective critique underscores Bourdieu's central argument: the education system misrecognizes socially inherited cultural capital as individual talent, thereby reproducing existing hierarchies under the guise of fairness (Bourdieu, 1977; 1984).

Subtopic 2.2: Entry base and symbolic violence

Parents' opinions about the minimum admissions threshold, which has been described as "...a bloody choice by the minister...", influence the exclusion of many students from higher education, especially those with only minor grade differences. Specifically, one interviewee questioned the difference between a student who scored nine and one who scored ten. It was also observed that this practice reduces admissions to regional universities, thereby indirectly lowering their status. According to interviewees, the minimum admission threshold excludes numerous students who might have had prospects that could have led them to either enter the labour market as unskilled workers or attend private educational institutions.

P5: "...I consider it a bloody choice of the Ministry of Education to put a minimum basis for the admission of schools..."

P14: "...he did not score well in the higher education entrance exams, but at school he was able to cope much better, whereas if he had been cut with a ten he would never have had a chance to study,...but with a ten it is like telling them "...studying is not for you"....."

These research findings on education, curriculum, grades, and the minimum admission criteria determine who is "...worthy" to continue in higher education and who will leave the labour market after school because, according to the system, they were not deemed competent enough to enter higher education (Daskalakis, 2017; Thanos, 2017: 212; Kyridis, 1997; Nova-Kaltsouni, 2010).

Thematic Axis 3. Cultural capital as a determinant of educational success

Subtopic 3.1: Embodied and institutionalised cultural capital

As the research progressed, the university graduate interviewees stated that the family environment was an important factor. However, it is not a decisive factor, as it helps students gain admission to higher education, unlike secondary school graduates, who claim that it has no relation to the entrance examinations for Greek higher education. P7: "..... Vasilakis, if he had been in a different family environment, that is, if he had been able to have some other parents, this student could have opened any university door..." The results of the research indicated that the parents of students with high achievement, in addition to their wealthy economic background, held university degrees and some had postgraduate qualifications, demonstrating the link between institutionalised cultural capital and students' admission to higher education (Sianou-Kyrgiou, 2008).

Research findings revealed that even those who initially claimed that cultural capital does not influence student achievement demonstrated, through their statements, that both embodied and institutionalised cultural capital are essential factors in a student's admission to higher education. Regarding embodied cultural capital, the interviewees argued that it provides psychological benefits, as parents with similar experiences know how to advise their children, unlike those without such experiences, by maintaining a calm atmosphere at home and being supportive of their child's needs:

P2: ".....when the parent is at university level, the knowledge of the course is much better with someone who did not finish.....",

P12: ".....parents, on the other hand, because they have gone through a similar process in their lives, that they kind of empathise with the children and understand, so to speak, the whole difficult task....."

Additionally, they serve as role models; for example, children observing their parents with degrees may assume they will also attend university, giving them time to develop their skills and find the right school for them, always with their parents' support and guidance: P11: "...I believe that when a child sees parents

reading books, anything ninety-nine per cent of the time is encouraged..." P14: "..... children seeing their family being like that, take it for granted that they too should study..."

Conversely, one interviewee, who holds two master's degrees, stated that a student whose parents own a family business is more likely to choose to work in the family business rather than attend university. They may even be encouraged by their parents to do so, leading the student to believe it is their natural path.

P5: "...we see cases where parents with a lower level of education, mainly involved in the primary sector, such as farmers who still require labourers for their fields or a family business to pass on to the children, jobs that do not necessarily demand university knowledge. Therefore, they influence their children, and a small percentage of the mindset suggests that 'you do not need to go to university'..."

Apart from the above, parents, depending on their cultural capital, engage their children in various extracurricular activities for different purposes. In particular, through the interviews, it was evident that parents who are secondary school graduates encourage their children to participate in sports to prepare them for the physical requirements needed for admission to schools related to the security forces:

P8: "...because my child wanted to pass security forces and because a key requirement for success in security forces was sports activities, he spent many hours a day preparing for sports that were tested just before the entrance exams ..."

Conversely, more educated parents encourage their children to participate in sports for health and aesthetic reasons, and enrol them in artistic activities to nurture their creativity and preserve their cultural heritage. Even in educational pursuits, parents' perceptions of what these activities entail differ.

P12: "...Because I think it is an essential part of a person's happiness to be in a group and to play sports for their growth and development both mentally and physically"

P6: "...sport takes you away from other situations that can be harmful to you..."

P14: "...theatre, painting, music, these help him to have a culture..."

Less-educated parents sought extracurricular knowledge online and through other sources. In contrast, the more educated individuals provided clear examples, such as attending workshops and reading extracurricular books on literature, psychology, and other relevant subjects.

P2: "...the internet, where we can find all knowledge..."

P6: "...Certainly, if he has time, he should go to workshops, listen, and interactively, through the internet, listen to some seminars that are of interest to him, to boost him psychologically..."

Regarding institutionalised capital, as our research shows, it holds a significant position. As indicated by the interviews, some interviewees have a relatively high level of education, which also influences their performance. Subsequently, this high level of education among the parents is either directly passed on to the children, as seen in the example of an interviewee who was a philologist and was preparing her son for the essay course in the entrance exams, or they are encouraged to attend extracurricular courses to gain these advantages. For example, one interviewee mentioned that she directed her son to learn foreign languages because she was a language teacher and had a passion for foreign languages. Furthermore, as noted in the research, parents' knowledge of the admission process and understanding of how the educational system functions give these students a comparative advantage over others, since the ruling class itself sets the cognitive demands (Askouni, 2003; Giavrimis, 2015; Nova-Kaltsouni, 2010).

P8: "...We all know that at the moment admission to higher education depends on extracurricular educational support, learning support. A child who is not able to be supported by private tutoring cannot compete with a student who is receiving full tutoring..."

P11: "...if a parent cannot afford to send their child to tutoring, it is unfortunately a minus for student performance on entrance exams ..."

In Greek studies, the social and economic background of students (poverty, vulnerability) is proportionally related to their integration in various aspects, including the type of school (whether considered 'good' or not, and whether in an urban or rural setting), school dropout rates, and students' success in entrance examinations for higher education (Giavrimis, 2015; Kyridis, 1997; Mylonas, 1982; 1999; Sianou-Kyrgiou, 2006).

P4: "...I remember when my child was going to school, one year they had only informed them that they were running a social tutorial, and that was in another village..."

P13 "... It is the geographical reasons. That is, the child in Oinousses who does not have private tutorials has to do them online, or the child who is in the village... no teachers are coming, so there are geographical reasons..."

Subtopic 3.2: Differentiated expectations

According to the data presented, students from the upper class have high expectations and are not satisfied with merely being admitted to a school; instead, they aim for success at a prestigious institution. At the same time, they are encouraged to pursue studies that match their interests. In contrast, students from the middle and lower social strata desire admission to a school that will secure their professional rehabilitation, without having specific ambitions for further education. Additionally, children from rural areas also see university admission as an opportunity for social mobility and prestige. Parents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, due to financial difficulties, tend to send their children to schools near their homes or in towns where they have relatives. The middle classes are mainly influenced in their school choices by their teachers' encouragement in tutorial colleges. Meanwhile, students from the upper social stratum often make their own decisions (Giavrimis, 2015; Kyridis, 1997; Sianou-Kyrgiou, 2006). Another reason families set low expectations for lower-class students is the inability to afford the costs of sending them to an educational organisation far from home (Berg, 2016; Hurst, 2013).

P11: "...If you ask me personally, like any parent would want their child to go to a school where they can get an immediate professional rehabilitation, as I said before, military schools, security forces..."

P12: "...I think I would like medicine....."

P4: "...they should do what they like, regardless of the rewards, because I believe that in the end they will get what they like and what they should, what they are entitled to. They will develop it and move on..."

It should be noted that all interviewees, even those with specific expectations for their children, argued that, above all, it is important for their child to feel satisfied with the profession they have chosen. If they are content with what they do, then financial stability will follow: P2: "...That he loves the child. Because what the child loves, that is where he will progress..." , C7: "...I preferred a school that would give her the moral reward every day. ..."

Thematic Axis 4. Suggestions for structural barriers and cultural differences

Subtopic 4.1: Suggestions on how to conduct the entrance examinations for higher education

Regarding the method of conduct, as mentioned above, proposals were made by all, and these were categorised into two main types: a) those advocating for admitting students to university through examinations, and b) those supporting admission without examinations. Supporters of the first category argued that although they regarded the entrance examinations to Greek higher education as a meritocratic system, the courses each student undertakes should align with those offered by their school rather than constitute a generic set of courses. P3 "...Surely some test should be there, they will be called tests, as the existing ones are, I told you, provided we have seen the child's inclination towards what he is going towards...": P5 "...They should certainly ... not change every year depending on the change of government ...". Regarding the second category, it was suggested that admission be based either on the final examination grades taken throughout high school or on the unrestricted entry of all students to the school of their choice, with the final assessment being made in the first or second semester.

P6: "...You enter with your school leaving certificate, which must have a grade ... they set a basis for the universities, each school is different, ... you enter without exams and in the first semester in the exams they are cut and they do not even allow you to enter the same school again....."

P12: "...a good system could be a way of examinations that take place during the year, not just on one day at the end of high school....."

P13: "...to submit a portfolio and ... have the University assess them according to their portfolio, i.e. grades in all subjects..."

Traditional exams privilege students with institutionalised and embodied cultural capital, such as private tutoring and familiarity with high-status testing formats, reinforcing existing social hierarchies (Bourdieu, 1986). Conversely, alternatives like portfolio-based entry and semester evaluations recognise diverse forms of cultural capital that standardised testing under-values (Bourdieu, 1984). These methods aim to democratize access to institutional recognition and challenge the reproduction of inequality described by Bourdieu's framework (Bourdieu, 1986)

Subtopic 4.2: Actions to remove cultural differences

Research data shows that the Greek school has not taken any steps to reduce inequalities among students. Interviews revealed that these disparities persist because teaching is influenced by the dominant culture, which aligns with Greek literature (Giavrimis, 2015; Kapravelou, 2008; Kyridis, 1997; Sianou-Kyrgiou, 2006). Suggestions from interviewees to address educational inequalities require a multifaceted approach that combines social support, pedagogical innovation, and technological integration. According to participants, one critical measure is the provision of government subsidies for food programs, particularly in economically disadvantaged areas. Establishing school-based clubs or partnerships with local restaurants could ensure that children from low-income families receive nutritious meals, thereby reducing the impact of poverty on learning. Additionally, schools should offer free in-school tutorials to eliminate the financial burden of private tutoring and ensure equal access to academic support.

P5: "...There should be government subsidies, it is food, so there could be a club, restaurants in places where the economic poverty is very high, so children who do not have so much financial support from home could have meals and so on,..."

P6 "...They could have a tutorial within the school. ... so that the kids, if there is a financial problem, they do not have to go to tutoring..."

Also, staffing schools adequately from the beginning of the academic year is essential, especially in rural villages and small islands, where delays in appointing specialised teachers, such as philologists, can severely hinder student progress.

To address inequalities, all schools, especially those in villages and small islands, should be fully staffed at the start of the year with the appropriate teaching personnel, rather than, as mentioned, "...not to arrive in December and not have a philologist."

In addition, pedagogical strategies such as differentiated instruction, flipped classrooms, asynchronous tele-education, and collaborative teaching can further support students who struggle to keep pace with traditional lessons. Emphasising skill-based learning and group-centred approaches fosters active engagement and more profound understanding, while individualised learning plans accommodate diverse student needs.

P8 "...I believe that for a more meaningful and fruitful teaching of the course, the group-centred method should be applied. ..."

P9 "...It should be more skill-based,..."

P4: "Yes, that is, to be able to individualise... For example, one child was unable to follow 100% of the lesson in the classroom, whereas many students can follow it independently at home. The logic of the flipped classroom ..."

Technological advancements also play a vital role; digitising schools by providing access to e-books, e-class platforms, and teacher-created video content can make learning more flexible and accessible. These tools not only enhance comprehension but also allow students to revisit material at their own pace. P13: "...digitisation of the school is essential, i.e. children should be able to access ebooks, access through e-class to videos sent by teachers to make the material easier to understand..."

Finally, there was discussion about the need to introduce psychologists and sociologists into schools so they can advise and guide students where necessary: P14: "...I think that in schools there should be psychologists, who I know have been introduced recently, and there should be sociologists, so that there is an awareness and that students are helped and inequalities are not visible...". Ultimately, combining social initiatives, modern teaching practices, and digital resources creates an inclusive educational environment that empowers all learners, regardless of their socioeconomic background, and promotes equity in academic achievement (Megalou & Kaklamanis, 2018)

The proposed initiatives aim to address educational disparities caused by the uneven distribution of cultural capital. As Bourdieu explains, cultural capital includes knowledge, skills, and educational resources that families pass down, influencing academic achievement (Bourdieu, 1973). Students from lower-income backgrounds frequently lack this capital, which restricts their access to tutoring, technology, and enriching learning opportunities (Kyridis, 1997). To address these gaps, schools offer institutional support and digital tools to democratise access to cultural capital and break the cycle of social inequalities in education (Duncan & Murnane, 2014; Lareau, 2011).

Discussion

The concept of cultural capital, as developed by Bourdieu, serves as a crucial theoretical tool for understanding educational inequalities and exclusion in Greek schools. This research examined parents' perceptions of the education system and the functioning of higher education entrance examinations. Its findings show that the school legitimises and reproduces social inequalities through symbolic mechanisms, which are directly linked to the management and recognition of cultural capital.

The findings of this study provide empirical support for Bourdieu's theoretical framework while extending its application to the specific context of Greek higher education entrance examinations. The alignment between parents' lived experiences and Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital, habitus, and symbolic violence demonstrates the enduring explanatory power of this theoretical framework for understanding educational inequalities. Importantly, this study reveals how these mechanisms operate not merely at an abstract systemic level but are actively perceived and experienced by families navigating the educational system.

Parents recognising that the school favours certain students is consistent with the findings of Giavrimis (2015) and Sianou-Kyrgiou (2006) regarding the Greek system. The school favours students who possess the "...correct"... cultural and linguistic capital, that is, those from socially and educationally privileged families. Public schools in urban, privileged areas have adequate educational resources, while rural and island schools are under-resourced. Furthermore, the minimum admission threshold (10/20) excludes students from lower backgrounds, normalising educational exclusion as a meritocratic process.

The entrance exams for Greek higher education reveal the uneven distribution of economic and cultural capital. The cost of tutorials creates barriers for low-income families. Success depends on the ability to convert economic capital into cultural capital (high grades). The school system transforms social inequalities into academic differences... (Bourdieu, 1973). At the same time, the bourgeoisie reproduces the habitus that aligns with the requirements of the exams (e.g., standardisation of answers). The educational system presents Greek higher-education entrance examinations as meritocratic, but in reality, they perpetuate symbolic violence. The exams value a specific habitus (e.g., the written language of the bourgeoisie), that of the privileged classes, as "...objective knowledge." School failure is attributed to individual incompetence ("... did not read enough"), rather than to structural inequalities. The ten-point basis for higher education admissions emphasises self-reliance and a strong focus on prestigious fields such as medicine and law. It builds on earlier research (Kyridis, 1997; Mylonas, 1999) and supports the social dominance of those in such positions. The concept of meritocracy normalises the perceived superiority of groups with accumulated cultural capital, framing it as a natural difference (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1997; Nash, 1990).

Teachers tend to focus only on students who have prior knowledge from tutorials, exacerbating educational inequalities. They appear to treat students unequally by rewarding those who conform to the school's values and neglecting those who do not integrate well. The observed differential treatment by teachers is an expression of the 'hidden curriculum' described by Ballantine & Hammack (2015). This behaviour constitutes symbolic violence, an unseen yet powerful mechanism that excludes 'others'. The above supports Bourdieu's theory that educational success results from the alignment between the school habitus and the family habitus of the dominant classes (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1997).

Parents with higher or postgraduate education (institutionalised capital) guide their children towards university studies as a "...natural progression...", while parents with only basic education (low institutionalised capital) tend to steer children towards primary sector roles. Additionally, parents with high cultural capital offer direct academic support (e.g., exam preparation, shadow education) or guide them to specific extracurricular activities, thereby transferring cultural capital through everyday practice. The validation of institutionalised capital's role aligns with the Greek literature (GSEE, 2014; Kyridis, 1997; Sianou-Kyrgiou, 2006). Children whose parents have higher educational backgrounds have access to learning strategies, language skills, and knowledge of "...play".... Conversely, students from families with lower educational attainment often see school as an unfamiliar and unwelcoming environment, which further alienates them, leading them to focus on practical options (e.g., safety corps) due to financial limitations. Parental expectations are proportional to their social background (Bourdieu, 1973). Localism and geographical exclusion worsen this inequality by limiting access to educational opportunities and high-quality schools. The findings highlight a dimension underrepresented in Greek literature (Mylonas, 1999), whereas Bourdieu focused on social classes; the Greek context emphasises the importance of intersecting social class and geography. School ultimately transforms social inequalities into '...personal failures'..., obscuring their structural roots (Giavrimis, 2015; Mylonas, 1999).

The Greek school system functions less as an equalising mechanism and more as a means of legitimising social inequality. School failure is not an isolated or accidental event; it is embedded within the dynamics of the "...school field" as an expression of the unequal power relations that permeate society. The findings confirm that the Greek educational system functions as a mechanism for reproducing social inequalities through discriminatory access to resources (such as infrastructure and tutorials), symbolic violence, and institutional barriers (including minimal base requirements and geographical restrictions). The solutions proposed by parents, such as state-run tutorials and digitalisation, reflect the need to empower individuals with limited cultural capital. However, without structural reforms in the system, inequalities will continue to persist, as Bourdieu predicts. Entrance examinations in Greek higher education are a battleground where the criteria of the ruling class establish meritocracy, symbolic violence conceals social inequalities as "...personal values", and the educational system assesses not knowledge but the ability to reproduce the desired habitus. Education is the institution that transforms social variation into individual performance (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

To break this cycle, decentralising assessment methods (such as schoolwork, exams, and interviews), fostering the socialisation of habitus within the school (including free support and digital platforms), and demystifying meritocracy through critical discussions of inequalities are essential. Supporting these measures would involve changing assessment criteria, training teachers to recognise symbolic violence, and incorporating alternative forms of knowledge (for example, recognising popular knowledge) into curricula (Bourdieu, 2004).

Conclusions

This study investigated parents' perceptions of educational inequalities within the Greek higher education entrance examination system, utilising Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital as the analytical framework. The findings demonstrate that the Greek educational system does not function as an equalising mechanism but rather perpetuates and legitimises existing social inequalities through multiple interconnected processes.

Three principal conclusions emerge from this research. First, the public school system fails to provide equitable educational resources, with significant disparities in infrastructure, teaching quality, and support services between urban/privileged and rural/disadvantaged areas. Second, cultural capital, in all its forms, plays a decisive role in determining students' success in entrance examinations, with parents recognising the advantages conferred by educational background, cultural practices, and familiarity with academic expectations. Third, the examination system, despite its presentation as meritocratic, operates as a mechanism of symbolic violence that converts social advantages into academic credentials while attributing differential outcomes to individual merit or deficiency.

These findings carry important implications for educational policy. The introduction of free, state-provided tutoring services within schools could partially address economic barriers to examination preparation. Investment in school infrastructure and staffing in disadvantaged areas is essential to reducing geographical inequalities. Teacher training programmes should incorporate awareness of symbolic violence and the reproduction of social inequalities. Finally, alternative assessment methods that recognise diverse forms of knowledge and competence merit consideration as supplements or alternatives to the current examination system.

The study's limitations include the use of purposive sampling and the geographical concentration of participants, which limit generalisability. Future research could employ larger samples across diverse regions and incorporate longitudinal designs to track how parental perceptions evolve. Comparative studies with other national contexts would also help determine whether the observed patterns are specific to Greece or reflect broader phenomena in examination-based educational systems.

Declarations

Ethics statements

This study was approved by the ethics committee of Dokuz Eylül University Institute of Educational Sciences under approval number 17.12.2019.15. All participants were informed about the objectives of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the confidentiality of their responses. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection.

Data availability

The datasets analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on request.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Authors' contributions

This study is part of the first author's master's thesis, conducted under the supervision of the second author. Ozge Tagluktimur was responsible for the conceptualization, design, data collection, and initial drafting of the manuscript. Gul Unal Coban as the academic advisor, provided guidance throughout the research process, contributed to the methodological design, the interpretation of the results and revised the manuscript critically for important intellectual content. Both authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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