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School Culture and Change on a School Unit Level: A Theoretical Approach with Reference to Greece

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Abstract **– The following text discusses the conditions required for schools to change and be modernised, with the Greek educational reality serving as a point of reference. After defining the concept of school culture, the text draws attention to the role attached to the profile of teachers, the principal and deputy principal and students. It also features how this profile is shaped through the perceptions that these individuals have of themselves, their school and the profile of their students. Finally, we advocate the position that the most important changes and those most likely to cause long-term innovation are the ones that start from within schools; not as a result of orders and laws launched from above, i.e. by school supervising authorities and, mainly, the central Agency of the Ministry of Education. Thus, we highlight how positive the role of a decentralised and decentralising system of school organisation, management, supervision and control can be. On condition that, however, the school staff is adequately trained in new teaching methods, techniques and trends, has a high self-esteem and a good relationship with students, the majority of whom are willing and able to follow any changes attempted in their teaching routine and school life in general.**

Keywords **– Educational Reform, Educational System, Legislation, School Culture.**

I. Introduction

In recent years discussion is all the more frequently raised about the need to make schools a) *effective* – even though, first, how we perceive this effectiveness and what exactly it involves is not always defined or sufficiently clarified; and, second, not all those involved on a theoretical, practical, administrative, or central level with the school system share the same views on *what* (i.e. which type of factors and parameters) schools should be effective in. b) *adapted* to the new and constantly changing environment of the society and market, and also c) all the more closely *linked* with the local community where it is located so that the way it operates and its outputs – to use a term from the *systemic theory* or the theory of systems (Dekleris, 1986: 36) – can be in line with its special conditions and respond to the needs and problems of its residents to a relatively satisfactory degree.

At the same time, the so-called *innovation* in schools' operation has also attracted considerable attention; this is another notion that cannot be easily, clearly or accurately determined. In the text that follows we discuss, based on the international bibliography and our experience not only as active teachers but also as school principals with long experience in running secondary education schools, the factors that can lead to a change in the operation of school units; one that can promote innovation (and creativity – that is yet another term broadly discussed in terms of the teaching methods used at schools) which will lead to an improvement and increase of their effectiveness. The main conceptual tool that forms the basis of our analysis is *school culture* and what we place emphasis on, as regards the conditions for such necessary changes to appear, is the role of individuals and the personality (or the employment, education, perception and personality profile) of the teaching and administration staff employed in school units. Thus, we choose school culture (which is different for every school) as an 'objective reality' – as the great sociologist Durkheim would say-, that is, a collectively shaped - 'constructed' constituent. On the other hand, as a 'subjective' reality we choose that which is composed by the personality not only of the school principal but also that of its teachers. This choice derives from our methodological approach (which also expresses postmodernism) on the basis of which we believe that the social reality, which also includes the school-educational reality, is shaped not only by the solid institutions that relate to it and the institutionalization processes that define it (see mainly the legal framework regulating the operation of schools and their relationship with State authorities), but also the human factor which is fluctuant, changing and different from one person to another. In conclusion, for an analysis of the school reality to be successful and not insufficient, it cannot be simply institution-centered but also human-centered – and that is exactly what the following article wishes to be.

II. Thoughts on the Components of the Distinct Identity – Profile of Schools

School in general is an essential institution with a long history; the same holds true for each separate school unit. In other words, the school institution has two dimensions: the general/overall that concerns the *macro social* level-framework and the special/specific that relates to the local and particular field, the *micro social* level-framework.

We approach and study the School institution in its first dimension – which we also often refer to as *educational system* (or *Education*) – mainly by analysing a country's or broader region's (such as, for example, that of the European Union) educational policy, educational legislation and educational system, as these are shaped by the will, policy, decisions and acts of State and interstate bodies or other similar mechanisms. In fact, such kind of studies and analyses of the educational system are often based, amongst others, also on statistical details and quantitative data archives or comparisons mainly based on quantitative data which are established in terms of place (e.g. when we compare what applies in one country to what applies in another) and time, either short-term or long-term (about the short-term or long-term in historical time, see Braudel, 1999 and Wallerstein, 2013).

On the other hand, the school institution on the level of specific school units - is approached and studied by observing and assessing mainly *qualitative* and, to a much lesser extent, *quantitative* elements. More specifically, we study a school by shaping a satisfactory picture of (i) the initiatives and projects undertaken by teachers and, generally, all those working in it; (ii) the way its Principal directs and manages[1] it; and, to a certain extent, (iii) the relations of this school to the society in general and the local community that surrounds[2] it in particular (i.e. its interior, as we would call it, environment of its students' parents and guardians, and right next, its exterior environment, i.e. the environment of the place where it is located, to which we can also include the Municipal bodies and services that support it either directly or indirectly). Besides, institutions are active thanks to interindividual relations, human interaction, social interaction.[3]

In addition, institutions are often perceived, albeit implicitly, as aspects of an *objective* reality, whose operation and structure does not seem to be extensively formulated by the *individuals* that constitute it either by experiencing it or working in it. However, it is true that the action of *individuals* is important for the operation of institutions. As a result, a deeper analysis of a school's special identity –profile- presupposes:

Knowledge, at least elementary, of the school teachers' profile. This profile is established: (i) from the knowledge of their subject area and teaching in general, (ii) from the way they approach their students in general or in terms of teaching, (iii) from their willingness to teach and work, and (iv) from their views about school at large and the school where they work in particular (e.g. about their students and the potential they have). Display quotations of over 40 words, or as needed.

Knowledge of the so-called *management profile* of the school principal, which is determined by the way (s) he runs the school, his/her views on school administration and direction, his/her administrative knowledge, abilities and skills, and also: (i) his vision for the school (s)he is assigned to and the extent to which (s)he can disseminate this vision to the teachers (s)he is responsible for, (ii) whether (s)he is appreciated by the teachers and students of the school (s)he is assigned to (appreciation which, to an extent, affects the aforementioned dissemination), and (iii) his/her view about school in general and the school (s)he is assigned to in particular (e.g. about its students and teachers and their potential to be productive, effective and able to improve).

Note here that we intentionally use the word *profile* for schools, even though it usually refers to the *identity* of people, not collective institutions, in order to imply that the special identity of each school unit is shaped mainly on the basis of its teachers and Principal's pedagogy, education and employment culture.

In other words, to return to our initial viewpoint regarding the double dimension of the school institution, we conclude that School in general, as an educational system, is centrally determined. In its particular aspect, however, which relates to the special identity of each school unit, it is determined by factors specially related to each *specific* school and primarily determined by the individuals active within it. This ascertainment also holds true for education in Greece, although the Greek educational system is a centralised system with a strict operational framework, clear hierarchical relations, extensive legislation – excessive laws and a centrally determined style of school organisation and administration (Koutouzis, 2012, 221).

III. In Schools, Effective Changes Start from Within

'The educational reform that did not take place' is the title of a now classic work by the father of the history of Education in Greece, Alexis Dimaras. It is a fact that the introduction and negation of reforming attempts is a major component of the educational reality in Greece since the Greek State was founded (Dimaras, 1998· Dimaras, 2013). This misfortune may apparently be rendered from many different angles. In any rendering attempt, however, understanding a key concept plays a central role; a central educational change may be conceived on a broad sociopolitical level, but is disseminated downwards and substantiated on the level of each individual and specific school unit. Therefore, it seems that many reforms in Greece fail, as they underestimate the role of the school unit. It also seems that behind the impressive failure of most reforms is how people actually experience change (Fullan, 1991, p. 8). And if we accept that successful changes can't only be applied *to* people, but should be made *with* and *by* them, then we are led to support (i) that we ought to look more into how schools can change through processes arising from within following a consensual activation of their staff and (ii) that perhaps the aim of changes and reforms 'should be the school unit as a whole, not the students or teachers or the curricula' (Mavrogiorgos, 2010b, 50, 53).

Undoubtedly, the issue of 'external' general educational reforms falls under the jurisdiction of the State – more specifically that of educational policy that determines the occasional government choices - and exceeds by far the framework of this article, which focuses on small-range actions which we believe that can also lead to small-range, but, definitely, desired changes. And if a small change cannot bring a significant-decisive improvement, we are optimistic that many small changes may do so. Here we focus on these internal reforming processes – particularly

[1] About the difference between direction and management in a school we note that direction (i) relates only to human resources, while management is indirectly related also to material resources, (ii) is linked to what we call *leadership* in Management terms (Pagakis, 1998, 141-142), (iii) expresses a qualitatively superior management style that does not only aim at a school's smooth operation but something more: turning the school into a productive and effective educational organisation, which may also be promoted in the local community (about the concepts of *productivity* and *effectiveness* of organisations, see Ioannidou, 2010, 60· Saitis, 2002, 92-93).

[2] The term *environment* is here given the content that the systemic theory attributes to it (see Dekleris, 1986, 34-36).

[3] About this *interaction*, see, for example, Tatsis, 1992, 67-91· Gogou, 2010, 158-159· Karapostolis, 1984, 3-8.

those that are found on the micro level of just one school unit.

But how can we schedule any, even the slightest, change, something new, some innovation in a system structured since its very beginning (since 1832) to be centralised, like the Greek educational system? To what extent is someone allowed to act innovatively in a school reality that runs counter to innovation *both* on an ideological *and* practical level? In a school that imposes the same conditions-work framework to all teachers (the same books for each subject, the same syllabus, the same working hours, etc.)? Nevertheless, it seems that even in a centralised educational system, where the school unit should operate on the basis of an externally determined and centrally formulated educational policy, there is room for - at least some - autonomy in the educational practice; room that relates to shaping an "internal educational policy" in the school unit.

Thus, it is possible to develop creative and innovative initiatives and take substantial decisions on a school unit level in areas, such as:

- Human resources (drawing on the potential and experience of teachers, auxiliary staff, students, parents, local State bodies, supporting the professional advancement of the teaching staff, etc.).
- The curriculum (adjusting subjects and the syllabi, e.g. introducing courses on local history, building on local learning resources, developing different syllabi based on the potential of students, setting goals and objectives, etc.).
- The internal operation of schools (project scheduling-planning-reviewing, setting priorities, organizing in-school training courses/priorities, etc.).
- Teaching (adapting both the means available and the teaching and learning methods to the status of teachers, students, school units, etc.)
- Authority (delegating in such a way as to encourage everyone involved to participate in consultative or decision-making bodies or similar groups).
- The material/infrastructure (e.g. making the most of teaching rooms, materials and means available).
- Time (allocating time in such a way as to respond to the prioritisation of the school unit).
- Finance (drawing on the budget of the school unit).
- (Mavrogiorgos, 2010b, pp. 48, 51).

It is explicit that this internal educational policy should be determined in such a way as to be in line with the general principles defined by the central educational policy, given that the school unit reports to certain supervising authorities. As a consequence, the flexibility of the school unit can fluctuate depending on whether and to what extent the authorities view delegation favourably. To be more specific, it may vary depending on how positive the authorities are towards authorising individuals or collective State bodies to schedule activities that make the most of their experience, try new pedagogical approaches and teaching methods and respond to reque0sts posed as a result of the educational, geographical, social, etc. parameters that shape their distinct reality, such as:

- The cultural and social make-up of the student population.
- The material and technical infrastructure.
- The environment and the socioeconomic and cultural features of the local community (employment, tradition, history, relations with the school unit, etc.).
- The way that certain educational trends are experienced on a school unit level (e.g. poor education, poor school performance, school violence and delinquency, educational changes and how they are received, etc.) and the broader socioeconomic context.

We should note that the above discrete flexibility of action is inextricably linked with *innovation*, which, as rendered here, is not simply a change – i.e. a differentiating transformation involving all possible aspects, as all innovations bring changes, while each change is not necessarily a form of innovation (Mavroskoufis, 2002). It rather involves introducing specially designed practices that aim at enhancing the ability of schools to provide quality education / paedeia and are substantiated within a framework that is specifically defined in terms of time and place with the perspective and anticipation of improvement.

This approach regarding change-improvement presupposes that: (i) we understand the general social operation of schools in today's reality and develop similar collective forms of intervention in this operation (Mavrogiorgos, 2010a, p. 19), and (ii) we agree that what needs to change/improve in schools is their culture, the quality of interpersonal relations and the nature-quality of learning experience, which are all developed inside them. Besides, this kind of improvement can be attained, as schools can achieve self-improvement if the conditions are suitable and the out-of-school factors can ensure the necessary conditions and the means required.

The fact that a school unit has - to the extent that we described above - the potential to be autonomous and introduce changes for improvement does not imply that it takes full advantage of that potential or that the changes that it chooses to enforce always have a positive outcome; particularly when a school unit needs to overcome well-established elements of its traditionally conservative culture in order to implement an innovative change. Therefore, we need to co-examine the concept of *change for improvement* with that of *school culture*, as: a. to save any reforming action in a school from having fatal consequences, it must first be approved by its culture (i.e. the members of the school community must first be convinced that the change is necessary) and b. for a change to be considered successful, it must be assimilated by the culture of that particular school. Only after that stage is completed, the change can actually be rooted in the school. This very interconnection between change and school culture has attracted an increasing research interest in recent decades (Colley, 1999, p. 14).

IV. Conceptual Definitions and Clarifications

Undeniably, the term *school culture* is difficult to define, as it can be ascertained by the plethora of essays, articles

and books available on the issue (see in Colley, 1999, pp. 11-18). Its essence, however, has been recognised since the 1930s and the relevant research interest has been intensified since the late 1970s and thereafter (Craig, 2006, p. 1). More specifically, the term *school culture* refers to the beliefs, perceptions, relationships, attitudes, written and unwritten rules that shape and influence how a school functions. The term also covers issues, such as:

The physical and emotional safety of students, the orderliness of the school area or the degree to which a school accepts racial, ethnic, linguistic or cultural diversity. Like the larger social culture, a school culture results from both conscious and unconscious perspectives, values, interactions, and practices, and it is heavily shaped by a school's particular institutional history. Students, parents, teachers, administrators, and other staff members all contribute to their school's culture, as do other influences, such as the community in which the school is located, the policies that govern how it operates, or the principles upon which the school was founded" (School Culture (glossary entry). The Glossary of Education Reform. See also in Peterson, 2002).

In brief, school culture affects the way people think, feel and act. This perspective is provided by two well-known succinct definitions: According to Deal & Kennedy culture -that involves guidelines for school operation, beliefs and expectations, particularly those linked with how people relate to one another - is 'the way we do things around here' (definition by Marvin Bower adopted by Deal & Kennedy, 1982, p. 4). Following the same pattern, only more complete, is Hobby's definition, according to whom culture is composed by the school's common beliefs and values, 'what people agree is true and what people agree is right' (2004, p. 8).

V. School Culture as a Culture of Change and Collaboration

In any case, from the big issue of school culture here we focus on its relationship with change, since the culture of a school unit not only shapes everyday reality, its present, but also has an important influence on encouraging or discouraging any development process of this unit. If we accept school culture as a set of rules, values and beliefs, rituals, symbols and stories that make up the identity, the school 'profile', then among the set of unwritten perceptions that have been 'sculpted' through time and determine its operation – such as, for example, what can be discussed in teachers' meetings, what makes a good teaching technique, how we interact with parents, what is the essence of the staff's professional development, etc. - are certain positive or negative attitudes regarding change, such as, for example, the attitude which supports that it is worth trying new teaching techniques because this is how we become better teachers or it is not worth it, since we are not paid well, etc.

In other words, to change/improve something in a school, its culture should be open to what 'we agree is right' as far as the change for improvement is concerned. Thereafter, in order to build a real culture of change we should be aware of the existing culture upon which we intend to innovate and also resilient to the turbulence that the new element, innovation, brings. All these, however, are not so self-evident, given that culture -inextricably linked with the special tradition of each educational institution- exerts such an immense influence on our attitude, while remaining so deeply hidden, that is beyond our conscious control. Besides, school culture is composed, almost by definition, by elements that remain unchanged through time (Hobby, 2004, pp. 5-6), so as to add stability, safety and predictability to any given school. Consequently, any kind of reform or change in the established order may cause a sense of loss of control and be experienced as threatening. Thus, in order for the school system to withstand the turbulence caused by the new elements, care must be taken, on the one hand, to sustain a kind of balance between maintenance and change, the fusion of the new with the old; on the other hand, the members of the school community should find this process meaningful -that it, accept -or even anticipate- the new as an essential and indispensable element to improve their individual or collective standing.

The question that arises from the above conclusions is whether it is possible to shape a school culture of innovation, given the general conservative dimension of culture that we underlined earlier, as a result of which there will always be some people who defend the safe and tested way we 'do things around here'. It is clear that we cannot express any mechanical approach here about the deep and long processes required to formulate a school culture that would be positive to change. We can, however, highlight certain facts that we should bear in mind towards such a course of culture formulation:

- Even though schools present common features as far as their culture is concerned, they are separate and unique collective entities. For example, the established school celebrations, which mark school life in all schools, and also the way these (routines) are realised and experienced differs between schools.
- Introducing innovation in a school should not be regarded as a goal in itself. Innovations are tools that support transition to a better school. Consequently, they should be scheduled with the necessary precaution.
- Change, as learning itself, also requires courage. Courage to express and tolerate disagreement, courage to abandon the (certainty and) safety of the beaten track for the unknown (Hobby, 2004, p. 19). It is easily understood that the courage to take risks undertaking responsibilities requires a supporting environment that accepts the possibility of making mistakes and views it as another chance for learning.
- In the international bibliography the role of the principal is stressed as central in determining a school's

culture[4]. In fact, Edgar Schein claims that the dynamic developments involved in creating and managing culture form the essence of leadership and make us realise that 'leadership and culture are two sides of the same coin' (2004, p. 1). The above conclusion, in our opinion, concerns educational systems that function in a more decentralised manner; in those systems, the principal has a strong influence over his subordinates. In Greece, however, the principals of various types of schools do not have a significant scope for action due to the strict institutional framework of our educational system (Pilitzidis, 2005).

In fact, the principal is today entrusted with many expectations, since (s)he is expected to be a leader and motivator of the school unit[5], fulfilling all his/her administrative duties at the same time. Apart from these, in Greece, it is important that the principal sees him/herself as a member of the team of teachers and the school community as a whole, understand the way these teams function and be characterised by a spirit of collaboration in relation to his/her various associates. Of course, the principal of a school unit may undertake various initiatives towards its development within the limits of the relevant autonomy of the school unit. The success of these actions, however, is directly dependent on the willingness of the school community -particularly the teaching staff- to collaborate with him/her. And since the school community is a team, then we need to see the way it is structured and works as a team, and also the way the separate *leading* roles are shaped within it, i.e. the people who will initially be the ones, as pioneers, who will support -both on a practical and 'ideological' level- the innovative work and then act as its multipliers. This ascertainment, however, does not mean that we underestimate the role of the principal.

We conclude our discussion on changes for improvement with three additional remarks:

- We perceive the school unit to be a learning organisation that is constantly under a renewing transformation process in order to respond effectively to its changing internal needs and external demands. And if organisations are products of the way people think and interact within them, then an innovation for improvement, a change for the better that introduces and establishes a new way of thinking and interaction among people, contributes to the advancement of the whole organisation to an organisation in which *people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together* (*Peter Senge* in Koleza, 2014, 14).
- Innovation is well-founded and bears fruit when it is organised on the basis of collectivity and attempted through participatory processes. Characteristically, Saphier & King's classification of the twelve norms of positive school culture ranks collegiality first and experimentation/innovation second (1985)[6]. Nurturing a culture of collaboration among the entities involved in school life -which presupposes being consciously committed and taking common action and common responsibility for decisions and results- is central in the efforts to improve the operation of the school unit (for relevant research data, see Valentine, 2006).
- It is equally important that participation in collaborative action is of a voluntary nature. Voluntary participation in shared decision making and common work to achieve a goal is stressed in the classic definition by Cook & Friend regarding collaboration in the field of education as 'a style of direct interaction between at least two co-equal parties voluntarily engaged in shared decision making as they work towards a common goal' (1991, pp. 6-7).

Therefore school culture can be either individual or collaborative. Fullah & Hargreaves introduce their book *What's Worth Fighting for?* with the answers of two teachers to a relevant question of an interview. The first complains because his opinion is not taken under consideration in decisions about his work, his experience is not recognised and he feels he has been marginalised by an indifferent administration. He says, among others:

Nobody has ever asked us our opinion about anything […] they just go ahead and proclaim and we have to follow […] there's a lot of dissatisfaction in teaching.

When the second teacher recalls a recent all-school activity –a teacher who collaborates with his colleagues, has confidence in his skills and abilities and feels respected- he writes:

That was very involved […] we certainly learned a lot about planning ourselves, and I think we felt pretty proud, because some schools did nothing or very little, and we were very involved with it […] Of course, I'm biased, but I think the school atmosphere here benefits from the kind of family atmosphere we have [...] I think it's because of staff unity and the way the principal sees the school as a unit, not as separate little divisions (1991, 15-16).

It seems, therefore, that although the two teachers are part of the same system they experience their work in a different way. Adapting the issue to the Greek reality, the words of the first teacher reflect the culture of a Greek educational unit. To these we can add more, such as the *introverted* character of some schools, compliance to the formal responsibilities-thorough coverage of the syllabus and passing on responsibilities to the 'upper level'.

However, there is also the other side. In a framework-system where teachers are not encouraged and do not have many opportunities for collaboration, there are individuals/teams -with or without support- that render their

[4] For a bibliographical review of the relationship between a school's leadership, school culture and students' performance, see also in Mees, 2008.

[5] In fact, the principal plays many roles at the same time. For example, Deal & Peterson claim that the principal shapes the school culture, fulfilling five different roles as 'symbol, potter, poet, actor and healer' (1990, 23-28).

[6] The norms that follow are: High Expectations, Trust and Confidence, Tangible Support, Reaching Out to the Knowledge Base, Appreciation and Recognition, Caring, Celebration and Humour, Involvement in Decision Making, Protection of What is Important, Traditions, Honest, Open Communications (Saphier & King, 1985).

work in terms of individualism and collegiality at the same time. Should we wish to improve our schools, individualism and collegiality can and should coexist (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1991, 3). And there are initiatives that promote this spirit. We refer to small-range transformational interventions that are planned and implemented on a school unit level and not only contribute to improving the everyday reality of school life and the results of school operation, but also put the relationship between school and society, in general, on a different basis. This is accomplished as the school, by taking initiatives, does not simply follow what the system dictates, but also proposes, finding itself at the spearhead of broader changes that restructure the culture that is dominant in society and also some of the components of society itself.

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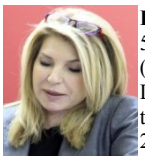

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