

## **The Inclusion of Refugee Children in the School Community as a Challenge to Introduce and Manage Change in the School Unit**

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this study is to develop a plan for managing change in a specific school unit in a mountainous area. The goal of the change is the smooth transition of refugee children from camps to the normalcy of school life, who have sought refuge in our country in recent years, and their successful integration into the school culture. The conclusions drawn are that change presupposes the formation of a vision, the articulation of purpose and objectives, mapping of the internal and external environment, good planning, and management. In conclusion, if the school does not effectively manage the change, the entire endeavor may end in failure, resulting in economic and emotional costs, waste of resources and time, both on the part of the educational organization and the State.

**Keywords:** Refugee children, change, school, reforms

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### **Introduction**

The school unit is an open social system and is in a relationship of interdependence and interaction with the environment (Chatzipanagiotou, 2010). Therefore, the school faces many challenges. In order to respond to the challenges of the times and serve the new orientations and goals of education, it must not lag in changes and innovations (Theofilidis, 2012). By "change," we mean conversion, modification, alteration, and replacement (Konstantinou, 2001; Beladakis, 2010). According to Babinotis (2002), change is defined as the definitive and complete transition from one state to another, while innovation, according to Armstrong (1973), concerns the introduction of a new element that deviates from established or traditional elements. Therefore, the term change is broader in reality because we can have change without having innovation.

Especially in recent times, our country is faced with the problem of increasing refugee flows. "Reception centers" have been created for the housing of refugees. The children of refugees, after being violently removed from their country, have remained out of school for many months. However, the right to education is a basic human right, and for this reason, the Ministry of Education has developed an educational program, which as a primary goal sets their transition from the camps to a school normality and their successful integration into the school culture (MoE, 2016a).

In the present study, the theoretical aspects concerning the management of change are described. Specifically, the necessity of change is highlighted, as well as the resistance to it, and the role of the leader. Subsequently, the policy followed by the Ministry of Education on the subject is analyzed, and the school unit is described. Finally, a change management plan is proposed through specific activities, which are integrated into the various phases of the applied model.

### **Necessity of Change**

The school, as already mentioned, as an open social system, interacts with its environment. It is influenced by factors of the internal and external environment and continuously receives challenges for changes, which it must face smoothly and effectively. Examples of external pressures are demographic changes, rapid technological development, continuous production of new knowledge, and economic and social changes. On the other hand, examples of internal pressures are changes in the educational system, procedures in organizations and systems in education, and the quality of life of educators and students at school. (Kythreotis, Pasiardis & Tsiakkirou, 2012).

### **Resistance to Change**

With the introduction of new elements into the organization, there may be conflict with the existing dimensions of the organization. The reaction and resistance to change can be inevitable (Kythreotis & Pasiardis, 2012). For some people, change means a challenge, while for others it is associated with a threatening disruption of a stably structured situation (Iordanidis, 2006). Therefore, not everyone involved sees the need for change in the same way, but some perceive it as a threat or a source of insecurity, as they believe their weaknesses will be revealed (Everard & Morris, 1999). Also, according to Konstantinou (2001), change causes concerns and fears because it involves the element of failure. Educators react because they are afraid that in case of failure, they

will lose their prestige and power. Therefore, to reduce fear and minimize insecurity and concern, strategies that could be used include motivation, negotiation and agreement, facilitation, support, participation and involvement in change, communication, and training of educators, so that they are convinced of its value. (Kythreotis & Pasiardis, 2012).

### **The Role of Leadership in Managing Change**

The role played by those involved in the change, the educators, the students, the parents, and especially the director, is the greatest factor of success. The main role of the director is to promote a change of culture in the school. A necessary condition for the success of any change effort is the change of culture so that the change is promoted and maintained over time (Kythreotis, 2012). Especially the director is the driving force, has the responsibility of planning, organizing the implementation, and also the task of evaluating the change (Konstantinou, 2001). He is the main carrier of innovations in the school, intervenes in the process of introducing innovations and supervises the way in which changes are introduced. The success or failure of educational innovations is therefore directly linked to the director's interest (Pasiardis, 2004). According to Theofilidis (2012), the role that the school leader must play during the introduction and management of a change is multidimensional. He is the one who gives the vision and guides the school unit towards its realization (Pasiardis, 2004). For the change management to be successful, the school director must have knowledge and skills as well as a sense of moral duty (Beladakis, 2010; Raptis, 2006). He needs to convince his colleagues that the change is directly related to their work and to clearly explain how the change will take place, to involve the staff in the whole process and to support them when difficulties arise. It is necessary to take care of the training, training, and guidance of educators, to ensure the appropriate means, equipment for educators. In addition, he should provide incentives according to the needs of each educator, such as opportunities for training and professional development, autonomy, responsibility, sharing of duties to avoid excessive workload, satisfaction from the nature of the work. Therefore, it is up to him to help those interested to discover and understand what change means and how it affects them (Everard & Morris, 1999; Konstantinou, 2001; Siakovelis, 2011).

### **The Ministry of Education's Policy for the Education of Refugee Children**

The right to education is a basic human right, which the Greek state respects, protects, and promotes. Every child has the right to education according to European and international law. For this reason, the Ministry of Education (2016b) decided to establish Reception Structures for the Education of refugees, which will operate within the school units of primary and secondary compulsory education located near the reception facilities during the afternoon hours. By forming an afternoon zone of lessons, the state's goal is to ensure the psychosocial support and gradual integration of refugee children into the Greek educational system after a period of preparation, without burdening the schools with an excessively large number of children who do not know Greek and have not been adequately prepared for attendance at a Greek school.

### **Description of the School Unit**

The school unit is located in a mountainous area of the Ioannina Prefecture, 64 km from the city of Ioannina, with a population of about 2000 residents. In the school unit, a Reception Structure (ΔΥΕΠ) operated for the education of refugee children. The school was attended by 24 refugee children aged 6-10, distributed in three sections. For the staffing of the Structure, a permanent educator was seconded as a coordinator, and substitute educators of various specialties with specialization (postgraduate or doctoral degree) and experience in intercultural education were hired.

### **Planning the Change**

The model developed by Fullan (2001) was chosen for managing the change in this particular unit, as it has been developed for managing change and improvement at the level of the school unit and links change with the daily operation and needs of the school. Also, the differentiation between the three phases of change is particularly useful because it clarifies the appropriate activities for each stage (Kythreotis, 2012). The change process, according to Fullan's (2001) model, consists of three phases: introduction, implementation, and internalization. Often these three phases coexist during their implementation. In the introduction phase, the start of the change is signalled, a review of the current situation in the school unit is made, and factors that may affect the change are taken into account. The implementation phase includes activities for the practical application of the plan, and finally, in the internalization phase, the change is no longer something new but is integrated into the school unit and becomes the school's way of working (Kythreotis, 2007; Tsiarantoniaki, 2015).

### **Application of the Change Model Introduction**

The change that the school unit director had to manage was the operation of a Reception Structure for refugee children and their smooth integration into the school reality. The first phase aimed at reviewing the current situation, informing the educators, and planning the implementation plan was completed in October. The Director informed the educators and reminded them that this process is a need for adaptation to external pressures. Change is inevitable, as it is the school's obligation to provide education to refugee children according to Greek legislation. Subsequently, a change management team was formed, consisting of the director, educators trained in intercultural education issues, the School Advisor, the Coordinator of the Structure, and members of the Parents and Guardians Association, who become part of the change process through mechanisms of collective decision-making.

### **Implementation**

The second phase lasted from November to June with the aim of implementing the plan, which was based on specific actions under the responsibility of the coordinating committee. Through dialogue, lectures, and training, the Director shaped the mission and transmitted the vision. The transmission of the vision is gradual and at a different rate of reception depending on the recipient. To overcome resistance, the Director initially detected the educators' concerns. Changes are a common phenomenon in education. As already mentioned, resistance to change by school staff is also common, as people often tend to resist change because it forces them to change habits, the way they carry out their work, or burdens them with additional workload. A cornerstone for the acceptance and effective management of change is training. It was deemed necessary to train the educators in intercultural issues through a series of lectures by school advisors. Also, organizational problems were created, as the program was implemented for the first time. The management team had to ensure the smooth operation of the structure. The needs and problems of the building infrastructure, classroom equipment were recorded, and additional funds were requested from the School Committee. Specifically, expenses for additional heating oil, stationery, and cleaning supplies, cleaner's fees, telecommunication fees, electricity, and other needs had to be covered. Moreover, it is important to consider the pressure coming from the external environment, namely the reactions of the parents. Actions to overcome resistance from parents needed to be coordinated. The significant help of the Parents and Guardians Association, which acted as a mediator between the school and the parents, was crucial. Finally, for everyone to become part of the change, it is important that the Parents and Guardians Association, along with students, engage in activities that will take place from the first day of the refugee children's reception, in celebrations or anniversaries, so that their participation in the events helps them understand the school's operation and perceive its multifaceted role (Epstein, 1995). For example, a small welcome party was organized in collaboration with the educational staff, with posters made by students, songs, and some snacks prepared by the parents, to create a friendly atmosphere for the refugee children.

### **Internalization**

During the third phase, the change was no longer something new but was incorporated into the educators' way of working. The goal was the consolidation of the change, stabilization in the new situation, and avoidance of superficial change (Everard & Morris, 1999; Raptis, 2006). The positive change in attitudes and behaviors, the overthrow of stereotypes, and the cultivation of a climate of tolerance and solidarity were considered a success in managing the change. Conclusions

In conclusion, the school, as an open social system, is influenced by the environment and is called upon to effectively manage a series of changes. To survive, it must be able to adapt to the changing needs of society. The role of the director is decisive in managing change, acting as a driving force for successful change management. He is the one who will announce the changes, inform the educational staff, and be responsible for the change process. He must have the ability to manage conflicts, motivate the staff, seek their training, and organize efficient team meetings. Therefore, he must be knowledgeable of the theoretical principles of change management, as their in-depth study equips him with tools and gives him the ability to effectively address change (Raptis, 2006).

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