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## HEAD OF SCHOOL BETWEEN CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS TO CHANGE

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**Abstract:** The Albanian school, in its direction, inherits an authoritarian and centralized culture. The history of the school during the monarchy and the period of socialism strongly influenced its typology. Indoctrination, powerful control and fierce class struggle gave absolute authority to monist leaders and dicasteries. In the last two decades, the Albanian school has been involved in continuous reforms of its decentralization and democratization according to contemporary models and European integration standards. In this framework, the reform of school leadership, and the professional and institutional development of the role of the school director are included.

This paper presents qualitative research on the model and style of the school principal today. The paper analyzes the factors that affect the achievement of school management standards and the reasons for presenting the school principal's preferred style. The paper is based on the meta-analysis of similar studies and the perceptions of 26 interviewed directors. The paper concludes that the most applicable style in school is the mixed style. This model is influenced by the community, the teachers, the culture of the school and the very nature and training of the school principal.

According to results of this paper, it appears that; school principals do not have much faith in democratic models and leadership, even though they positively evaluate them. They are careful not to compromise their authoritarianism, as rules, discipline and avoiding problems are their priority.

The paper gives some recommendations for school leaders, education specialists and school coaches of principals for strengthening the leadership capacities of schools in change processes.

**Keywords:** leadership, school principal, leadership style, school culture, teacher

### 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper was inspired by the experience during the training of school leaders and aspiring principals in the framework of training for the school of principals. *Are school leaders ready to become promoters of change? What relationship do they have with leadership and management style? How do they communicate and how much can teachers, staff, students and parents involve in the leadership process? What is their position in front of the legislation and instructions from the higher authorities? And the essential question: What is the most preferred style of the principal in Albanian schools? Does this style influence the steps of European school change?*

Change, in today's times, has become a slogan promoting development and adaptation to the challenges presented by the global functioning of society (Tran, Vasilescu, 2003; Albu, 2013). Therefore, facing the challenges and changes is proving that its process moves more slowly without reflecting the expected results. In search of factors that have a negative impact, the question arises:

*Is change considered as ideology, indoctrination of global trends, without daring to go against it, since opinion considers you conservative, traditional, backward and as such you are unacceptable in professional and institutional circles?*

A change of school cannot be accepted just for the sake of change, since change from challenge turns into pseudo-change, that can turn into a hidden blockage of change (Albu, 2013). Transforming a school is a time-consuming task that faces challenges and barriers for school leaders. They, under the pressure of educational change policies, often feel isolated from other stakeholders.

Teachers are interested in the results of learning, the smooth running of the process and the management of student behavior. However, the involvement of teachers in the drafting of the school's vision is very important. As Frizen (Freisen, 2013) points out, in the realization of the school's vision, the cultural model, the level of civic and professional responsibility is decisive in this process (Gurley, Peters, et.al. 2014).

The vision of the school in itself reflects a key concept for the educational institution, teachers, quality, success and the very existence of the school in the face of the challenge of change. School leaders bear the main responsibility to encourage, motivate, manage and improve the commitment of all actors within the school to really face the challenges of change (2003; Knapp et al., 2010; DeMatthews, 2015).

School principals must recognize that change which is not an easy challenge, therefore they must be prepared to make difficult decisions and face their consequences (DeMatthews, 2015; Knapp et al., 2010; Tatlah & Iqbal, 2012). According to studies, the directors believe that they can overcome external barriers, through collaboration,

communication, and interactive relationships with teachers, educational staff, parents, students, and all stakeholders that influence school performance (Marzano et al., 2005). Barriers can be caused by external and internal factors, stemming from ineffective management practices followed by the school principal (Alamassi, Al Jneibi, et al, 2015). School leaders perceive internal challenges as personal responsibility and ability, therefore they are intensively committed to design and implement the most effective strategies to overcome them (Navickaite & Janiunaite, 2012). School reform in the context of change is reflected in the curriculum framework and educational policy guidelines. However, the role of the individual's active engagement, individual and collective efforts of teachers are essential to improve student learning and formation (Balyer et al., 2015; Visvanthan, 2019).

Research has proven that when principals do not empower the internal capacities of teachers in the school, the school cannot have the expected success (Sebastian, Allensworth, Huang, 2016). However, various studies prove that the global pace of rapid acceleration is confounded by involvement and engagement in a variety of unstudied changes. This way of developing the change process turns it into an end in itself, losing sight of the necessity, importance and value of change (Visvanthan, 2019; Balyer, Karatas and Alci. 2015). Teachers show enthusiasm, interest, motivation and pride in their positive emotional engagement when reforms touch their sensibilities and needs. The leadership role of the school principal in motivating and engaging teachers is very important (Sebastian, Allensworth, Huang, 2016).

The process of change in the school cannot happen without involving the student community. Based on the student-centered process development paradigm, the requirement of management practices gives importance to the socialization of students (Keiler, 2018; Ayda, Kaşot, Güneyle, 2018). In fact, from the studies we understand that in general, the principals see the inclusion and participation of students in school administration as useful (Vangrieken, Dochy, Raes, & Kyndt, 2013). Mulford, emphasizes that leadership affects the way students perceive teachers' methods and models of organization of learning and how they support their students. Likewise, students are sensitive to the attitude of leaders. They want their active involvement in decision-making related to issues that affect and influence their school life (Mulford, 2003).

Studies have found that school leadership style affects the effectiveness of school performance. Each school principal follows a personal style in running and managing the school. Their style is supported by their logic, experience and professional beliefs, which influence the selection of managerial strategies. Studies have shown that the level of teacher perception of the principal's performance, teacher cooperation, and teaching experience are crucial to the functioning of school leadership (Xie et al., 2022).

Teachers expect their leaders to bring about change for the better in school life. In the case where the director is authoritarian, the change is seen as the merit of his leadership force. Similarly, in schools where principals devote a lot of time to bureaucratic tasks and administrative procedures, the cooperation of teachers is lower (Gumus, Bulut and Bellibas, 2013). Conversely, when the school demonstrates positive change, teachers trust their leaders and obey them more closely (Du, Lia and Luo, 2020; Mulford, 2003; Gumus, et al, 2013). Studies show that when the process harmonizes the relationship of the principal's leadership style with the teacher's performance in the school, a positive learning climate is created, which affects student achievement (Sebastian, Allensworth & Huang, 2016). Therefore, principals in choosing a leadership style should adapt to the school culture and to the styles, beliefs and professional needs of teachers (Hoque & Raya, 2009).

Although teachers prefer principals with a democratic leadership style (Visvanthan, 2019; İnandi, Uzun & Yeşil, 2016; Reardon et al. 1998).

Authoritarianism as a direct leadership style is more operative and more influential on subordinates. Authoritarianism creates a suffocating climate for new ideas and the development of the educational institution in the dimensions of a democratic society (Visvanthan, 2019; Du, Lia and Luo, 2020). Educational institutions that are run by authoritarianism testify to the lack of vision of change as a concept and necessity to face the challenges of tomorrow. Authoritarianism promotes extrinsic motivation, nurtures narrow personal interests that differ from the interests and goals of the school (Ayda, Kaşot and Güneyle, 2018; Sierra et al., 2020).

School principals, regardless of their style, want their school's performance and results to be successful. They want to have the teachers' respect and trust in their beliefs. Teachers must be internally motivated to engage in the active change process and be open and willing to work as part of a team (Sierra, et al., 2020). In fact, teachers are open and active towards changes that facilitate the achievement of students' results, give them professional satisfaction and positive evaluation of their performance (Albu, 2013)

Interactive communication between the principal and teachers is very important to create the spirit of leadership in school management (Balıkçı el al., 2017). The school principal must have faith in the teaching staff, respect their ideas and experience. Cooperation is strengthened and becomes more productive when the time of this cooperation is abundant (Du, Lia and Luo, 2020; Bouchamma el al., 2012). Therefore, the principal gives time to the interactivity and teamwork of the teachers (It should not be thought that the possibility of cooperation brings about

the correct and normal functioning of the process (Xie et al., 2022). Within the team, there are also inappropriate teachers who do not conform and do not align with the group or the institution's expectations. Therefore, staff refreshment, with the transfer and recruitment of teachers is appreciated by the leaders as an act of facilitating the change process (Hoque & Raya, 2009; Balıkcı et al., 2017 )

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The methods used in this paper are qualitative. The authors of the paper during the years 2021 - 2023 have served as trainers at the School of Directors (CSL - Albania). During the training of 157 principals and aspirants for principals, theses and key points in the barriers and challenges of school change were identified. The main barrier was more evident than the director's style. In response to these situations, field studies were investigated and then research was undertaken to prove which style is the most appropriate and applicable in the Albanian school and how the principal's style can be included as an improvement process. Based on the problem, eight semi-structured questions were drafted and 27 school leaders were interviewed. The choice of sample was deliberate. to maintain honesty and truthfulness in their answers.

*Ethical Considerations:* Participants were also assured that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

Overall, the interview method provided valuable perspectives on the roles and challenges facing school principals in the local area, and the findings from this study have important implications for school leadership and education policy.)

Overall, the results of this study provide an important insight into the roles and challenges of school principals in the studied areas.

*Data collection:* Data for this study were collected through interviews with school principals. The interviews were conducted in the presence of the school premises, and each interview lasted about 45 minutes to an hour. The interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants, and detailed notes were taken during the interviews to capture all relevant information.

*Interview Protocol:* An interview protocol was developed for this study, including open-ended questions regarding the role and responsibilities of school principals, challenges they face, strategies for school improvement, and their perspectives on teaching. The interview protocol was tested with a small group of school principals to ensure the clarity and consistency of the questions.

*Data analysis:* Data from the interviews were transcribed verbatim and then analyzed through thematic analysis. The first step in the analysis involved reading and rereading the transcripts to become familiar with the data. Themes and patterns in the data were then identified, and relevant quotes were extracted to support the findings. Also, data triangulation was used to ensure the reliability and credibility of the findings.

## 3. RESULTS

Leaders in the Albanian school during the reformation process express their institutional sensitivity and their responsibility to the institution, teachers and education workers in the school where they lead. The directors state that they try to be correct with the task and the institutional requirements set forth in the educational legislation. This attitude makes them to be both authoritarian and democratic in certain moments and situations:

*"I am sometimes authoritarian in enforcing the law and in demanding the correct completion of the work, as not everyone is aware of their duty. I am a democrat because I am cooperative and work with organizations"* - says a school leader. *"For matters that must be carried out, authority must be used!"* - says another director.

In most of the statements of the leaders, the mixed style of school management is preferred. This style is also influenced by the principle of school autonomy for participatory decision-making. Principals claim that before making decisions, they discuss them with the teachers. Principals consider the teachers' pressure on the principal's behavior to be strong. In schools, where the professional level of teachers is high, as well as their responsibility and civic engagement supporting changes, the role of leadership becomes more democratic. *"My role as a leader is more democratic than authoritarian,* says a director. *- This selection has to do not only with my nature, but also with the attitudes of the teachers."*

The relationship between authoritarian and democratic style is also related to the cultural level of the school, the attitudes of the teachers and the very nature of the principal. On the other hand, the schools themselves prefer principals with a mixed leadership style. They state that these principals who behave according to this model better fulfill the goals of the school and ensure the general well-being of its members. The principal is under pressure from the philosophy of the school and the community on the one hand and on the other hand from the predominance of the school's institutional spirit over the spirit of the school's functioning as an organization.

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*"In our school, the mixing of both styles of leadership is applied. This is a reality which is related to the fact that the school as an institution should be authoritarian, but on the other hand the community, the teachers and the philosophy of the school require a democratic principal."*

Another influencing factor in the implementation of the authoritarian model is the limited time available to the director. Directors complain that they have a lot of letters, e-mails, phone calls, etc.

*"That way, you don't have time left and moreover the desire to be the one you want to be, whether you are an authoritarian director or a democratic one or even a mixed one, whether you are a director who will listen to your colleague because we are human, because your email is screaming at you. ...!"*

The principal and vice principal of the school carry a strong potential in creating the climate and the progress of the change process in the school. The operation of the school in accordance with the strategies and plans of the school also depends on the way the leaders behave and operate with the school staff. The principals themselves claim that they are *"the head of the school and therefore have wider responsibilities"*. Vice-principals deal with the management of the operational activities of the school, therefore they *"play a more specialized role in this process"*. - says a director. Based on these positions, as there are directors who admit that it is possible that "the director is more communicative and cooperative than the deputy director, who in some cases appears somewhat pretentious and shows autocracy tendencies.

School leaders, based on educational legislation and the understanding of the arts, harmonize the design of school plans with the regulation and with all human resources. However, as some principals say, *"If the management of the school is guaranteed by the legal framework, this is insufficient, since the principal and vice principal must cooperate with each other but also know each other's place."* Albanian school principals are vigilant about not exceeding their competences and violating authority, therefore they say that *"In our school, the functioning happens best, when it develops in accordance with the school's goal, based on a healthy culture of cooperation not only between leaders but also between them and teachers, teachers and students, as well as parents and beyond."*

Teachers have historically been identified as an important factor in school change. Therefore, the principals see the commitment of teachers as a decisive factor. "The principal - asserts a principal - has a key role in promoting and supporting pedagogical cooperation between teachers, because he is the main leader of the school and has influence on the policies and organization of the school." While an aspiring principal teacher states that "Interactive and collaborative activities help us create rich and stimulating learning environments for students, helping them achieve greater academic success and the development of their other skills." And a director adds that "Interaction and cooperation help not only to strengthen cooperative capacities, but it is also influencing the creation of rich and motivating learning environments for students." .

The principals, despite their authoritarian tendencies, value the cooperation and contributions of the teachers in the design of the school's change strategy. "The level of pedagogical cooperation in the design of the directorate's organization plans depends on the school's cultures and practices, where the school's leadership role as a leader is very important" - emphasizes another director. Principals themselves in the school's annual plans encourage and organize various activities to promote cooperation among teachers. The level of involvement of teachers is related to their commitment and level of awareness, as this director says, "I think it is a positive practice that occasionally teachers undertake such initiatives, as this shows how busy teachers are for the smooth running of the school change process theirs."

The Educational Institution involved in the dynamics of change, according to the school leaders, based on the annual analysis, draw up the school improvement plan. However, the principals admit that when they assumed the position of principal, they did not find any plans or reports on the reflection of the functioning of the school. *"From my experience, I found that in the school directorate, I did not find any of the plans of the directorate in the previous years."* In Albanian schools, there are still cases when the continuity of the development of the vision is interrupted by the change of directors. In the years of transition, the change of leaders was more related to the change of political governments than to the performance of school administrators. These models also affect the motivation and credibility of teachers, who feel the political pressure, mainly in rural schools.

However, the teachers see the principal as a teacher, as one of them, so as a school principal says, "If a principal has been a good teacher, he will definitely have the support of his colleagues and his performance will definitely affect his colleagues." Albanian teachers, from the very cultural status of their profession in society, believe in professional reputation and express their opinions openly and clearly. A principal, when talking about teachers' reactions to the management style, says that: "Teachers, who love and have connected their life and professional activities with teaching, react directly to the principal's performance, showing different attitudes towards him." Principals to support their position regarding the importance of teachers' feedback, they also link this to "teachers' responses to questionnaires developed by state institutions."

#### **4. DISCUSSIONS**

The discussion gains value in this paper if we focus on identifying and comparing the factors that influence leadership style in the face of change barriers. As it appears in the qualitative treatment of the paper, the factors that are evident in various studies of the field are also present in the leadership of the Albanian school, despite its distinguishing characteristics. The Albanian school in facing change is closely related to the direction and the way it is managed. For this reason, the vision, style and management model is related and compatible with the capacities of the staff and the readiness of their involvement in the operation of the school and the process of its improvement.

The principals consider the pedagogical and civic level of the teachers in the school to be important. They ask for the refreshment of the staff and their responsibility in the selection and retraining of the teachers in the school they lead. The management and operation of the reformed school is strongly based on the commitment of teachers. The directors consider the relationship between the teacher and the director as an important factor. This relationship is strengthened in the ongoing work through observations, controls, discussions and interviews, achieving evidence of achievements through the display of statistical data collected through various performance measurement instruments. During this process, the director discusses with the teachers, confronts the results and gives suggestions for improving their work and their own. Another important factor is interactive cooperation with parents and the community. The organization and involvement of parents in the decision-making of the school and of all collegial bodies in the school creates the decision-making and accountability base of the school. The involvement of all actors in the change process should go beyond the aspect of desire and readiness and turn into an important aspect of training and finding functional modalities in the nature of the school.

The decisive factor, according to the directors, is the transformation of the director's leadership role, since according to the directors' own statement, they "... are little concerned with the direct monitoring of the change process as they are overloaded with writing, filling in and posting excessive bureaucratic paperwork, with problems of discipline and prevention of undesirable situations

The principals before the development efforts of the change process feel under pressure both from the problems and barriers within the educational institution they lead, as well as from the orientations and directives of the higher state institutions that deal with educational policies.

#### **5. CONCLUSIONS**

In conclusion, we can say that the school is involved in the process of change and achieves its successful reformation as a whole. To set the functioning of this system in motion, you need to know, increase and strengthen all the capacities within the school. The change cannot happen without the organization, strengthening and harmonization of these capacities.

The style of running the school affects the organization, motivation and commitment of the leader in the effective functioning of the school. The style must adapt to the climate and spirit of the school to pull it on the right path of change. For this reason, school leaders perceive internal challenges as personal responsibility and skills, therefore they are intensively committed to design and implement the most effective strategies. The manager, cooperating and communicating with the teachers, identifies the opportunities for the involvement of teachers in order to involve them and manage them as effectively as possible. They expect from the teachers commitment and responsibility in the process of change. The process of effective school change needs teachers who are proactive, creative, initiators, courageous and with mature authentic judgment, who do not act as the leader likes, or to satisfy his mediocre ego. This paper proved that the most flexible style preferred by principals is mixed. More than nature or preference, they fit the culture of the school and community. The school director tries to know and understand the attitudes and willingness of the actors who influence the school and builds development strategies on this knowledge. They are convinced that internal changes require a strategy adopted by the staff in adaptation and the individuality of each school. School principals give more importance to the education of people open to change than to the integration of the school in the process of change. They follow the paradigm that if principals clearly define their role and position in managing change, they have the opportunities to overcome barriers, through cooperation, communication and interactive relationships with teachers, educational workers, parents, students and all actors that influence the performance of the school.

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