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“I prefer any change to stagnation”: A Discourse Analysis on Teachers’ Voices about their Evaluation, Emotions, and Readiness for Change

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ABSTRACT This qualitative study investigates the relationship between teachers’ readiness for change and their emotional responses to the implementation of teacher evaluation reform in Greece. Using mini focus groups comprising 39 in-service teachers and principals, the research explores how emotional dynamics influence educators’ acceptance or resistance to educational reform. Data was analyzed through discourse analysis, revealing a spectrum of emotional responses, including fear, anxiety, anger, and pride. Resistance to change was commonly associated with concerns about job security, lack of trust in evaluators and criteria, and an absence of an evaluative culture. Conversely, some participants demonstrated pride and a willingness to engage in reform, highlighting variability in readiness. The findings emphasize that emotional responses are not merely consequences but integral components of teachers’ professional identities, significantly shaping their engagement with reform processes. A key outcome of the study is the identification of emotional and cultural barriers that inhibit reform implementation. The study concludes that successful educational change depends on inclusive approaches that respect teachers’ emotional realities, promote self-reflection, and foster internal motivation. These insights have implications for policymakers and educational leaders seeking to implement sustainable reforms that are responsive to the needs and dispositions of educators.

Keywords: Emotions, focus groups, discourse analysis, readiness for change, teacher evaluation, educational reform, qualitative inquiry



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Introduction

Educational reforms

The literature on educational reforms is rife with examples of attempted improvements at all levels of the education system (e.g., Holmes et al., 2013; Terhart, 2013; Van Veen & Slegers, 2006); yet most remain unfinished. Earlier reports have alleged that organizational change failures are estimated to occur at 70% rate (Miller, 2001) or even 80-90% (Cope, 2003), even though this has been questioned more recently (Hughes, 2011), especially given that the categorization of an attempted change as a success or failure is highly context-specific (Nilsen et al., 2020). Nevertheless, despite our inability to pinpoint a more accurate rate, the failure of the introduced changes is of major significance due to the severe long-term effects on the entire educational process. More specifically, historically, reforms have been pursued without securing the agreement of teachers, and, moreover, there were no supportive mechanisms for the intended changes (Elmore & City, 2007; Trombly, 2014). Often, previously failed reform initiatives are reintroduced under different names (Goh et al., 2006), proving equally ineffective. The aforementioned observations are similarly relevant to the Greek education system, which has experienced multiple reformative initiatives during the last decades, the most recent of which focuses on establishing school and teacher evaluation systems.

One of the most notable proposed causal factor for educational reform failures is that the execution of most reforms was solely the result of decisions and actions taken by policymakers and bureaucrats, who lacked understanding of school and classroom dynamics, while the perspectives of teachers were overlooked (Moran, 2015), a statement that clearly explains the resistance fostered by a major portion of the teaching community. Generally, education policymakers adopt a top-down strategy in administering the proposed reforms, with the school principals acting as mediators (Ittner et al., 2019; Shaked & Schechter, 2017), anticipating that the entire system will adhere to the specified directives and subsequently undergo the intended change, an expectation that does not often manifest.

This top-down approach in imposing the reforms usually intensifies teachers' resistance and could be evident not only in an organized way, i.e., via the teachers' union associations reactions (Pogodzinski et al., 2015; Young, 2011), but also manifest in teachers' everyday enactment of what is mandated, effectively redefining the reform (Imants et al., 2013). Even though the familiarization with the reform guidelines might result in adjustments in their demeanor (Donaldson, 2012; Fredriksson, 2009), their initial response might significantly influence the implementation of the reform (Ma et al., 2009). Therefore, comprehending the interaction between educators (i.e., their perspectives, emotions, and needs) and the imposed reform demands, may be the crucial element required to enhance the implementation (L. K. Smith & Southerland, 2007).

Resistance to change

Planned top-down organizational changes typically elicit strong protests, primarily from union associations, voicing concerns regarding the potential impact on employees (Bateh et al., 2013). The reactions manifest as resistance to change, mostly fueled by the anxiety and apprehension of organizational members concerning the stability of their employment and professional advancement. In addition to fear, certain employees exhibit a reluctance to engage in learning and skill development (Marsh, 2001). In educational institutions specifically, individuals require compelling justification for changes, which are only occasionally supplied.

Given that resistance to change signifies a breach of trust among the parties involved, it is usually addressed through extensive discourse (Ford et al., 2008). The primary approach to mitigating polarization is the enforcement of change by leadership, which almost invariably results in significant disagreement and subsequently the failure of the proposed policy (Michiotis & Cronin, 2011; Vakola, 2014). Transformations in educational institutions may be realized easier if they align with the local characteristics and represent the educators' perspectives, dispositions, and needs (Kim, 2024; Terhart, 2013).

Research examining the factors influencing educational transformation processes undoubtedly encompasses psychological variables, attitudes, personality traits, and broader organizational issues, the

interplay of which becomes increasingly intricate (Hayward & Spencer, 2010). Thus, it is evident that attempts for reform consistently encounter resistance to change, a deliberate and active stance of employees opposing planned changes (Oreg et al., 2011) linked to social-psychological elements, including fear of the unknown, biases due to previous experience, and social influences (DiFonzo et al., 1994). Conversely, readiness serves as an indicator of people comprehending the significance of change, thus supporting the suggested actions related to it (Teece et al., 1997). The theory in conflict resolution advocates for a transition from the concept of resistance to change to the concept of readiness for change (Armenakis et al., 1993).

Teacher evaluation

Teacher evaluation is a highly contentious issue in education. The rationale for its implementation centers around the pivotal role of educators in the learning process and the pursuit for professional development. The evaluation process involves significant challenges in design and implementation, with a long-term objective of establishing a dependable evaluation system grounded in robust theoretical principles (Kyriakides et al., 2006). It is notable that the policymakers have gradually started to include accountability measures in their evaluation models, in order to enhance the success rate of their implementation (Donaldson & Firestone, 2021).

Depending on the intended aim, the evaluation can be summative or formative. Summative teacher assessment methods are designed for decision-making regarding personnel (i.e., selection, promotions, or terminations) and utilized for accountability to assure teachers' effective performance based on defined standards. On the other hand, formative teacher evaluations emphasize skills development by offering feedback regarding instructional efficacy and highlighting areas for monitoring and improvement, targeted to their specific needs (Bell & Kane, 2022). Even though these types of assessment have distinct and incompatible goals, there have been attempts to combine them in a holistic evaluation system (Buchholtz et al., 2018).

Despite educational researchers expressing a willingness to implement a comprehensive evaluation system, the educational community seems less inclined. Focusing on the Greek educational system, there is a considerable resistance to every attempt to introduce an evaluation system during the past five decades due to various political and ideological factors. Notably, only in 2011 did the Ministry of Education introduce the school self-evaluation as a precursor of teacher evaluation. Teacher assessment gained significant public attention and extensive media coverage due to several factions expressing conflicting ideologies and advocating contrasting viewpoints, employing various measures such as strikes, school closures, and demonstrations.

Educational change and teachers' emotions

Change should not be regarded as an organizational issue, but rather as a circumstance to which organizations need to adeptly respond to (Kiel, 1994), and this is a stance that can refer to educational organizations, as well. What is of paramount importance is that changes in status and emotions are interrelated and co-occurring, in a perpetual flux, denoting the crucial role of the latter. Indeed, the numerous changes that educators undergo throughout their careers, though not always major, may lead to emotional cost (Schutz et al., 2006), with extensive educational reforms inducing the most profound psychological distress (Hargreaves, 2004, 2005).

Uncovering the workplace emotions of educators about their profession and reforms is essential for understanding their attitude towards change. Teachers often demonstrate significant excitement for various aspects of their work environment, including pupils, the educational institution, and other pertinent individuals, substantially influencing their professional effectiveness and development. Furthermore, the workplace emotions are primarily rooted in cognition; therefore, emotional reactions are inextricably linked to associated perceptions and value judgments as well as to the social and cultural framework, affecting the social environment (Nias, 1996).

Educational reforms are primarily articulated in technocratic language, focusing on their logical dimensions while neglecting the intricacies of emotional factors. Emotions are frequently sidelined and often excluded from comprehensive planning, perpetuating the prevalent, albeit misguided, notion that

they are uncontrollable and detrimental, and juvenile, while the attainment of professional objectives necessitates solely logic, knowledge, and mature conduct (Sutton & Wheatley, 2003). Teachers, although being the crucial element for successful reforms, hardly participate in the formulation processes. This has consistently resulted in impasses as it fails to foster the requisite trust for implementing reform; instead, it exacerbates suspicion and undermines professional values, particularly in contexts where hierarchical evaluation relies solely on quantifiable metrics (Levitt et al., 2008). Thus, educational reforms may result in sentiments of loss, disappointment, dissatisfaction, and confusion about their scope (Goodson, 2001; Hargreaves, 2004; Walland & Darlington, 2021). Those feelings may be intensified by the perception of changes as something temporary and transient, thus unworthy of the investment of time and effort for successful implementation (Clement, 2014). On the other hand, negative emotions are also prevalent when the teachers predict that the changes will lead to long-lasting damaging effects (Walland & Darlington, 2021).

The emotions encountered by teachers, arising from their work environment, are typically characterized as positive and negative. The predominant positive emotions include love, joy, satisfaction, pleasure, and pride, whereas the negative emotions encompass fear, rage, disappointment, anxiety, and humiliation (Darby, 2008; Sutton & Wheatley, 2003). As to the positive emotions, the sense of pride is associated with educators' perceptions of their self-efficacy, their rapport with students, mental well-being, and emotional fatigue (Taxer & Frenzel, 2015). Teachers derive significant pride from outcomes associated with their instruction, including improvements in student performance, acknowledgment of their pivotal role (Darby, 2008), and the attainment of educational objectives (Schutz et al., 2006).

Regarding reforms, a certain level of apprehension is anticipated (James, 2010); however, elevated levels of anxiety and intense reactions frequently arise when educators are displaced from their instructional responsibilities and required to address external factors, such as teacher evaluations, which are considered as threatening (Nias, 1996). Their response is contingent upon the opinion they will develop, i.e., when deemed positive it pertains to the generation of pleasant emotions; conversely, if the circumstances are perceived as threatening, negative emotions such as worry are expected to arise (C. A. Smith & Lazarus, 1993). Teachers experiencing significant emotional stress may respond to reforms in counterproductive manners if timely management measures are not implemented. The strategies typically employed to address the stress associated with reforms do not directly address the issues at hand, but, instead, they mainly aim to comfort, ultimately affecting the teacher's efficiency and hinder the attainment of reform objectives (McCormick et al., 2006; Zembylas, 2010).

When reforms are implemented without prior consultation, teachers respond with significant feelings of disruption and anger, as they perceive the imposed implementation as a sign of lack of respect from the central administration's part and believe that these changes divert their focus from the primary responsibility of teaching (Hargreaves, 2004). To mitigate negative emotions, it is essential to establish a supporting network in the workplace, foster collectivism, and cultivate a secure working environment (Tuytens & Devos, 2010).

Methods and Materials

Objective and Research Questions

The aim of this paper is to contribute to the ongoing debate on the importance of the readiness of recipients with regards to the implementation of changes. Specifically, the change studied concerns the teacher evaluation reform. The choice of this specific change was made because, in the Greek educational system, multiple reform attempts in the last decades have failed, where the degree of readiness of teachers and their emotions have been totally ignored by the planning of political strategies. In this context, the focus is to examine teachers' readiness for change, particularly regarding teacher assessment, by exploring their ideas and emotions, acknowledging their critical role in implementing changes. The research questions were:

- What specific emotional traits indicated teachers' readiness or resistance to change and evaluation?
- How are they expressed and communicated in their discourse regarding the teacher evaluation?

- Do they convey a need for change or rather maintain the status quo?
- Do they reflect upon their personal and collective actions regarding their readiness for change?

Research context and participants

The teachers' attitudes and emotions regarding the change in assessment were probed in a crucial period, just a few years after the implementation of a new generalized evaluation system. Therefore, it was deemed the proper time to get suitable feedback from teachers in order to understand, in depth, their experiences, provided them with the opportunity to talk about them at length and share them with others. In this context, we chose to conduct small groups interviews (mini focus groups; see section Data collection) so that participants would adequately express themselves by interacting with a small number of people.

The mini focus groups comprised in-service, tenured teachers and school principals who engaged in the recent evaluation process. Thirty-nine teachers (13 men and 26 women) participated, with an average of 17 years of experience. Twenty-three of them hold a bachelor's degree, 16 a master's degree and 1 a doctorate degree. Six were school principals, averaging 9 years of experience in leadership roles. Our mini focus groups are homogeneous (Flick, 2006), comprising public in-service teachers who share same evaluation experiences from recent years. The typical group size for each session was 3 and the maximum was 5.

Data collection

Our research focuses on teacher evaluation, which encompasses political, pedagogical, and educational elements that educators, both individually and collectively, engage with in diverse manners (de Ibarrola, 2018) that influence the extent of their readiness to embrace or respond adversely to any evaluative procedure. To facilitate interaction and uncover both the personal and collective opinions and emotions, we chose focus group method. Focus groups facilitate interaction and engagement, enabling the dynamics within groups to reveal elements and views about the issue under investigation that would be challenging to uncover through alternative approaches, as they allow collective memories and aspirations to surface (George, 2013).

The organization of focus groups must be guided by research inquiries and methodological framework. Typically, the number of participants in focus groups addressing non-commercial objectives is 6-8 individuals. Nevertheless, for subjects of particular interest or when a significant degree of specialization is required, mini focus groups are more advantageous. Mini focus groups are characterized by having fewer than six participants to enhance engagement in the discussion compared to traditional larger focus groups (Greenbaum, 1998). In literature, mini focus groups of experts have been conducted in various research fields, particularly within various scientific disciplines requiring high specialization, such as pharmaceutical interventions (Meurer et al., 2016), software architecture (Bonnington & Rose, 2014; Galster & Avgeriou, 2011), and mental health (Bonnington & Rose, 2014; Gibbs et al., 2002).

Prior to the commencement of the mini focus groups, we briefed the participants with the objectives and anticipated benefits of the research. Previous contacts provided clarifications on all matters pertaining to the study that may affect the participants, and logistical details regarding the timing and location of the meetings were also organized. The initial pilot mini focus group convened to ascertain the discussion topics, highlight aspects of the process requiring attention, and determine the transcription methodology. The subsequent 12 meetings were conducted at venues accommodating the participants, i.e., some occurred on the University premises, others in their schools, and one took place in a library, empty during our visit. We made provisions to guarantee that the discussions occurred with minimal external noise, and the likelihood of any external interruptions being negligible (in fact, none occurred during any of the meetings). Moreover, all venues possessed a recognizable atmosphere

familiar to the participants, which we believed would facilitate their comfort in expressing themselves freely. One or more weeks elapsed between the meetings to permit adequate time for transcription.

The average duration of our meetings was 62 minutes. To define the conversation topics, we provided the dimensions of the research interests, a strategy that we favored over specific questions to promote immediacy and minimize formality, while mitigating the possibility of discussions diverging into other issues. The recording devices were positioned throughout the venue to mitigate the risk of technological malfunctions or inadequate capture of dialogue. The limited number of participants and the subdued environment enhanced the clarity when the discourse overlapped.

The method of transcribing audio recordings into text affects the emergence of first concepts and the level of comprehension of the spoken content (Gibbs et al., 2002). The transcription was conducted by the first author with meticulous efforts to achieve the highest level of correctness. The final written transcriptions were verified by the second author, who listened to the recordings while concurrently reviewing the transcripts. The level of consensus was exceptionally high, with disagreements being few, primarily occurring during simultaneous remarks by two individuals.

The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki and involved adult participants. During the recruitment stage, a cover letter was provided explaining the purpose of the study, that participation was voluntary, and that the data would remain confidential. The participants signed an informed consent form and were given the option of removing themselves from the mini focus groups at any time. During the data transcription, a unique code was assigned to each participant so that they would remain anonymous.

Data analysis

The preliminary organization of the transcript data, encompassing the speaker's demographic attributes (gender, specialization, experience, educational level, and leadership position), was conducted concurrently with the input of the final texts into Atlas.ti9.

The initial phase involved the preliminary analysis of the data, which should be conducted not just in the linguistic component of the text but also the connotations (Mason, 1996). The objective was to understand the significance of specific remarks, examining any nuances in the dialogue process. To make sure we adequately captured the tone, pauses, and overlaps, we concurrently listen to the meetings. The codes were developed and revised with their annotations in a lengthy process. In every instance, the fundamental provision was that each code originated from specific data, by being consistently linked to a collection of excerpts (Mason, 1996). To further clarify this process, each of the four research questions explicitly guided the coding framework: for example, RQ1 ('What specific emotional traits...') informed codes under Theme B (fear, anger, pride), while RQ3 ('Do they convey a need for change...') aligned with Theme A (status quo vs. renewal). This ensured that codes were not only inductively derived but also systematically anchored in the research questions. Furthermore, to move beyond description, the coding process also involved iterative comparison between excerpts and emerging categories. This analytical step required us to ask how teachers' statements not only described experiences but also revealed underlying assumptions about evaluation and change. By clustering codes according to these interpretive connections, we were able to justify the transition from raw textual data to broader themes such as "Maintaining the status quo" and "Emotions about change," consistent with the emphasis on meaning-making in qualitative analysis (Gibbs et al., 2002; Guba & Lincoln, 1982).

The rigor of this research was evaluated for its trustworthiness using the criteria of credibility, transferability, and dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), by conducting mini focus groups that developed organically between the participants with minimal interruptions by the researcher, employing theoretical sampling, implementing synthesized member checking, overseeing the researcher's subjectivity during the research process through memoing, debriefing with the research group, reflective notetaking, and recognizing preconceptions prior to the initiation of the study. Moreover, Atlas.ti9 software was utilized to code the data obtained. The "Intercoder Agreement" function was carried out to assess dependability, utilizing Krippendorff's α analysis approach, subsequent to the completion of coding all 12 transcripts. The two authors applied the established coding system, supplemented by comprehensive comments elucidating each code and sub-code, to three of the twelve transcripts. The

outcomes were satisfactory, as the overall Krippendorff's α was .807. The decision to select three transcripts (i.e., 25% of the total number of transcripts) was made to balance breadth and feasibility, ensuring diversity of groups while avoiding redundancy. This approach is consistent with recommendations in qualitative reliability testing, where a subset can provide robust evidence of coding dependability (Campbell et al., 2013; O'Connor & Joffe, 2020).

Results

The data and code processing were nonlinear, often requiring revisiting specific points and codes and discussion among the researchers. Despite a foundational categorization of the main themes assigned to the mini focus groups, the approach was predominantly inductive. Ultimately, 5,867 snippets were generated from the 12 transcribed papers, categorized into 189 codes (including the software's automatic categorization of mini focus groups) and 208 memos. The data resulted in two themes relevant to the purpose of this study, i.e., A. Maintaining the status quo and B. Emotions about change and teacher evaluation. The data were categorized within each theme to aggregate comparable information, discourse, and experiences. A summary of themes and categories is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of themes and categories

Theme A: Maintaining the status quo	Category A.1: Maintaining the existing professional status Category A.2: Maintaining the existing evaluation framework Category A.3: Versions of change Category A.4: Self-reflection
Theme B: Emotions about change and teacher evaluation	Category B.1: Emotions about change Category B.2: Concerns about evaluation methods Category B.3: Fear Category B.4: Anger Category B.5: Pride

Note that, in presenting results, we explicitly connect quotations to the two overarching themes, thereby illustrating how interpretations directly emerged from the data.

Theme A: Maintaining the status quo

This theme included excerpts that related to participants' perceptions of maintaining their existing employment status and the absence of generalized evaluation.

Category A.1: Maintaining the existing professional status

Participants in nearly all sessions recognize the significant hesitation of themselves and/or all educators to implement changes in their career. Preserving the existing status quo provides stability and consistency in their everyday lives, alleviating emotional strain and the associated negative repercussions in both professional and personal domains.

[P12, Female, 30-35 y.o., Bachelor's, Greek language, Experience: 9 years]

We are wary of the new, of the different; we want the usual, what we [already] have, [which] doesn't take us out of our routine.

[P15, Female, 41-45 y.o., Bachelor's, Greek language, Experience: 16 years]

That is, when you see that someone is a person of routine and anything that slightly deviates from the routine, they go crazy, for example, they don't know what to do, from there on they carry this over into everyday life, into their professional life.

Their justification for the aforementioned include an unwillingness to embrace different pedagogical approaches due to the increasing amount of workload. The tension between the inclination to preserve

the familiar and the necessity for renewal, which demands effort and time for preparation and execution, is highlighted.

[P09, Female, 46-50 y.o., Bachelor's, Elementary school teacher, Experience: 17 years]
They favor strictly adhering to the content of the textbooks, as it necessitates a considerable effort to prepare project-based activities and implement alternative teaching methodologies, such as collaborative learning, which may lead to conflicts.

This is attributable to a general skepticism regarding reforms and their reliability, since their viability over time remains uncertain.

[P17, Female, 46-50 y.o., Bachelor's, Greek language, Experience: 17 years]
But it's what you hear every year, the scaremongering, let's say this, and then everyone forgets about it and the story ends there. There was a lot of fuss, let's say, about something that [in the end] doesn't apply and doesn't last.

Inactivity, stemming from the aforementioned factors, has become an integral aspect of teachers' professional identity, which is notably apparent and, to some degree, arguably anticipated. The lack of evaluation discourages them from doing new things, as they find comfort in their current circumstance, which further entrenches their work routine.

[P21, Female, 41-45 y.o., Master's, English language, Experience: 16 years]
I believe that it's tiresome to change; since I've learned it this way now, why would I go through the process of changing anything I do in my daily life. [ironic]

[P22, Male, 46-50 y.o., Master's, Physics, Experience: 19 years]
[...] but we are on the safe side, because no one bothers us to do it that way, that is, essentially, it is not imposed on us, nor do we participate and that's how we get comfortable.

[P29, Female, 36-40 y.o., Master's, Greek language (Sp. Ed.), Experience: 5 years]
Based on my own experience teaching to many schools, change is difficult for teachers who have been well-rooted in their schools for years; they cannot accept it.

Category A.2: Maintaining the existing evaluation framework

More specifically, the perceptions they articulated regarding the reasons for the persistence of the current situation align with their positions on the evaluation. The challenge of preserving the existing status quo is closely tied to the assessment and upkeep of their professional standing. Specifically, it is expressed that a potential job transition following evaluation may result in a new status devoid of work benefits, such as selecting the subjects to teach. This notion is also associated with potential teacher terminations, based on a ranking of schools depending on the evaluation results.

[P11, Female, 41-45 y.o., Bachelor's, Greek language, Experience: 16 years]
The issue is the second thought that comes to us afterwards, will I lose my permanent position; will I rank last [in the evaluation results]; if I am the last one placed in a school unit, I will have to teach the subjects that will be left for me by my colleagues; I will have to teach subjects that I don't want to. Then all these things, that are not unfair per se, add up, because, as the years go by, the truth is that our own decline also comes, both biological and from everything else. Thus, I start thinking 'I'm fine here, let someone new come'!

[P11, Female, 41-45 y.o., Bachelor's, Greek language, Experience: 16 years]

Why bother, I'm fine, I'm here, let a substitute come, a Greek language teacher for example, to whom we'll leave whatever [subject] we don't want and that's fine. It takes courage, it takes generosity. We're not giving in general; we're not giving in our work.

[P32, Female, 36-40 y.o., Bachelor's, Elementary school teacher, Experience: 8 years]

I believe that because we don't want to look at reality a little, to understand if we are good or not, we avoid it and it is in our best interest to say: "Oh, it won't happen because I will lose my job." No one has lost their job in the rest of the public sector that is being evaluated, I think.

Alongside issues over the preservation of tenured positions, the lack of evaluation is a serious issue, as it fosters the perpetuation of the status quo, which educators uphold either directly or indirectly. Their reactions are specifically situated within this context, and the hindering factors they reference, such as the distrust for the evaluator, obscure their genuine need for their circumstances to remain unchanged.

[P02, Female, 46-50 y.o., Bachelor's, Greek language, Experience: 12 years]

I get the impression that we start with an attitude that we don't want an evaluation; and when we don't want an evaluation, we don't like this, we don't like that, we don't like the other; I have this feeling. We are comfortable, as we have now proceeded without an evaluation and nothing bad happened, so why shouldn't we continue like this? Thus, we create obstacles; that is why there is always the bad evaluator; whoever he is, he will be bad.

The lack of evaluation has led to instructors, even if they are not numerous, resisting any change that may reinforce the qualitative distinction between competent and less competent educators. This stance, while acknowledged, does not appear to be universally accepted, and despite the absence of an evaluation culture, there is support for the notion that it should be associated with work-related repercussions. Participants assert that culture is a mutable quality, which can consequently facilitate the acceptance of evaluative outcomes, thereby prompting the most appropriate responses from educators to their professional responsibilities.

[P20, Female, 36-40 y.o., Master's, Greek language (Sp. Ed.), Experience: 8 years]

I think there is another reason because after all, all these years there was no real serious evaluation and we have learned that we are appointed; and then, even if I drink coffee during class, or rather if I am useless, I have no penalty and I get paid the same as the colleague who does a very good job. This is a fact, look, so I continue like this; why should I accept anything to change?

[P05, Female, 56-60 y.o., Bachelor's, Greek language, Experience: 28 years]

It is very deeply rooted, what I said; we do not have an evaluation culture. This must be uprooted and replaced with something else.

They recognize that the evaluation culture has not been adequately developed or is entirely absent among educators who are reluctant to embrace any changes in their professional circumstances. Ultimately, it is something that is deeply rooted both as practice and as an idea. Their concerns center on the methods by which any assessment might be implemented.

[P05, Female, 56-60 y.o., Bachelor's, Greek language, Experience: 28 years]

We don't have an evaluation culture, that's what scares me; that is, because we haven't been evaluated and those who evaluate haven't been evaluated either, who will evaluate me? We haven't learned to evaluate or be evaluated in general; not only as school life, in general as a society. This is automatically very difficult to change, to go from no to yes, to go abruptly to yes. That is where my fear starts. It is not the evaluation itself that scares me; it is how it comes about.

[P30, Male, 56-60 y.o., Master's, Elementary school teacher, Experience: 18 years]

Let me tell you why. Because they have learned to operate in a certain way and that stresses them out, it makes it difficult for them. They haven't learned to evaluate themselves. Evaluation requires a culture; [requires] learning evaluation; they haven't learned it.

The rejection of evaluation also highlights disparities due to age and proximity to retirement. Nonetheless, regarding age, the participants' stances seem rather ambiguous, and the anticipated work tiredness typically associated with teachers with many years of experience is also observed in younger educators who exhibit a degree of sluggishness. Moreover, progressiveness is not inherently bestowed upon younger educators, a fact that seems to astonish the participants as it deviates from conventional expectations.

[P28, Male, 51-55 y.o., Bachelor's, Informatics, Experience: 12 years]

[An obstacle is that] some people are close to retirement, and they don't want to do anything else.

[P39, Female, 41-45 y.o., Master's, Greek language, Experience: 10 years]

If I had to say from my experience who fears it the most, it's the elderly who are approaching retirement age and don't even want to think about it; the older they get, the more... Most of the people I've met, it kind of stresses them out!

[P13, Female, 41-45 y.o., Bachelor's, Greek language, Experience: 15 years]

I mentioned age, given that, if you are younger, and I don't know if you will disagree, you are more receptive because you have the a lot of years ahead of you and you can say "I have to work, I will make these changes"; while an older colleague, [and this is something that] I have heard them in various meetings, say: "Oh boy now I have a few years ahead of me!"

[P37, Female, 46-50 y.o., Master's, Greek language, Experience: 17 years]

From what we see, sometimes it impresses me that I find them [younger teachers] very bored, for their age. We are 45–50-year-olds and we have more desire to do [new] things, to educate ourselves for what can we do. These children...; I find them somewhat sluggish for their age. And it is also the opinion of other colleagues I have discussed it with.

Category A.3: Need for change

The many interpretations of change are examined in relation to its significance for participants, with a primary emphasis on educational reforms, specifically evaluation. These viewpoints encompass a broad conceptual range, beginning with a favorable disposition towards change, regarded as a facet of renewal, and as an internal process that initiates at the individual level, subsequently extending to the school unit and, from there, to the educational system as a whole.

[P14, Female, 56-60 y.o., Bachelor's, Greek language, Experience: 29 years]

I prefer any change, it's hard to deal with change, but I prefer any change to stagnation.

[P30, Male, 56-60 y.o., Master's, Elementary school teacher, Experience: 18 years]

It is possible for change to happen. People go through internal change, which takes shape over time. This change also affects school and education in general.

The defining characteristic for approving reform is if it is considered positive, i.e., if it aligns with progress. Although this is not always self-evident in the context of education, for a change to be deemed acceptable, it requires to be backed up by science.

[P16, Female, 46-50 y.o., Bachelor's, Greek language, Experience: 20 years]

When I ask you if you want to change, it's obvious that I'm not asking you to become worse. Because if it's about becoming worse, losing something, you'll say no. So, change has to do with something different, it has to do with progress.

[P38, Male, 41-45 y.o., Master's, Greek language, Experience: 10 years]

They are in line with new scientific data, of everyday life theoretically, at least.

The participants consistently agree that change needs to have a beneficial impact on educational growth. The fundamental aspect of the changes is their internal origin; no substantial transformation can take place without stemming from the individual's intrinsic desire for change, and in this context, official regulations wield limited influence.

Category A.4: Self-reflection

Participants articulated their views on the lack of acceptance of changes. The predominant response to the changes, they contend, is the instructors' unwillingness to acknowledge them, even as a foundation for discourse, a phenomenon they ascribe to distinctive traits that have emerged within the educational community. Moreover, the replies occasionally appear to suggest that teachers' initial response is that no change can occur, before even acquiring a comprehensive understanding of the reforms.

[P16, Female, 46-50 y.o., Bachelor's, Greek language, Experience: 20 years]

In the educational community, as a whole, we tend to complain!

[P17, Female, 46-50 y.o., Bachelor's, Greek language, Experience: 17 years]

We complain without knowing all the facts!

[P13, Female, 41-45 y.o., Bachelor's, Greek language, Experience: 15 years]

On the one hand, it caught us unprepared, but on the other hand, our first reaction was, "It won't go ahead, it won't go ahead." Always; [...] So, we too operate with a childish mentality, initially with "no, I don't want it..."; perhaps we should be a little more receptive; perhaps less skeptical.

The self-reflection disposition is evident in their professional roles and in their decisions on job-related personal development. They acknowledge that they do not fully use all opportunities for personal development and the advancement of their knowledge and abilities. They also perceive that professionalism is deteriorating.

[P10, Male, 46-50y.o., Bachelor's, Physics, Experience: 14 years, Leadership experience: 2 years]

I think we are not professionals. We, teachers, are amateurs. Take a professional, a plumber for example. If the plumber doesn't get the new machine, doesn't learn the new idea, he will be out of a job; you won't call him back. We are there; they have hired us and everything is fine; it's unbelievable. We are not professionals; [...] nor do we want to search, to find something new, nor do we like it!

[P11, Female, 41-45 y.o., Bachelor's, Greek language, Experience: 16 years]

[Many teachers think] It's just forty-five minutes, they'll fly by. I can handle it.

The reasons for teachers' resistance to change are attributed to the fact that the educational community is conservative and they do not intend, as a formed culture, to make changes, even if they are deemed necessary.

[P08, Female, 46-50 y.o., Bachelor's, Elementary school teacher, Experience: 17 years]

I generally think that teachers are more conservative and don't really want changes.

[P33, Male, 41-45 y.o., Bachelor's, Mechanical engineer, Experience: 13 years]

The concept of change for teachers? The teaching profession is conservative; the concept of change is not easy. Basically, it is conservative to ultra-conservative... Even those who behave and lead in schools as progressives; I believe that they are pretending; in essence they are the most conservative. Why? Because they simply express the opinions that will make them likable, not what is necessary.

Participation in dialogue and co-decision on educational changes in general is not mandatory, because the participants acknowledge the substantial input from authorities that offer guidance on changes, while allowing considerable margins of flexibility in implementation. Conversely, evaluation has not been afforded the same consideration, because the "top-down" methodology is regarded as imposition, and the educators' stance lacks coherence between rhetoric and practice.

[P30, Male, 56-60 y.o., Master's, Elementary school teacher, Experience: 18 years]

No, not necessarily, the evaluation will be enforced. [...]

Because teachers are not mature; because they say we are all in favor of evaluation, but they don't want it. [...]

Everyone says that; if you ask them, they will tell you: "Yes, of course, we are in favor of evaluation". But why do they say that and not do it?

Participants assert that factors deterring the acceptance of changes, such as the absence of a reflection culture and collaboration, ought not to serve as impediment. Moreover, the importance of collectively addressing hesitation to implement necessary reforms is underscored.

[P35, Female, 36-40 y.o., Master's, Greek language, Experience: 12 years]

This is my opinion; we are not ready for change because we do not have a culture of collaboration; because we do not have a culture of reflection; because we do not have a culture of self-evaluation. This is what I believe.

[P34, Male, 56-60 y.o., PhD, Elementary school teacher, Experience: 33 years, Leadership experience: 21 years]

All this that [P35, above] says should not be; this reasoning should not be a deterrent to moving towards a change. The fact that we are afraid, that we do not trust, that we are not ready should not be a deterrent. In other words, the move forward must be made.

The maintenance of the existing status quo and the reluctance to accept changes in education are recognized by the participants as an already established reality. They take a self-critical perspective, asserting that the familiar is distinctly preferred and that a conservative ideology is established, serving as a barrier to the acceptance of change.

Theme B: Emotions about change and teacher evaluation

This category encompasses excerpts pertaining to participants' stated emotional responses to teacher evaluation. Emotional responses extend beyond this category, coexisting in nearly all others, with emotional declarations and connotations enhancing the meaning of other passages.

Category B.1: Emotions about change

The emotional ramifications of change, as indicated in the participants' accounts, are profoundly powerful and predominantly unfavorable. The extensive breadth and multitude of changes in recent decades, which have neither enhanced education nor consistently been appropriate, have fostered an atmosphere of skepticism and apprehension over new suggested reforms. The tone of the statements and the rather definitive nature of the opinions reflect a degree of self-assurance and conviction in the critique they convey.

[P25, Female, 46-50 y.o., Bachelor's, German language, Experience: 16 years]

I don't see them in a good light. [...]

Because my experience has shown that they are never done for a good reason.

[P24, Female, 56-60 y.o., Bachelor's, Greek language, Experience: 26 years]

Nothing is happening, nothing has changed for the better in the last 30 years. Good books have been abolished; good courses have been abolished; what has it brought us?

As discussions advance, discrepancies from the original favorable perspectives arise in various instances, exacerbating problems, particularly when considering the emotional toll associated with these changes. The abrupt nature of them, coupled with the lack of preparation of teachers for their implementation, stimulates profound unease and apprehension. The emotional stress also leads to a degree of bewilderment concerning the beliefs about the participants' professional competence.

[P17, Female, 46-50 y.o., Bachelor's, Greek language, Experience: 17 years]

I remember that I was... while before I stated that I believed in changes, I was very afraid of changes; and because I had to work...; because, not to fool ourselves, you sink or swim in the system.

Concerns and apprehensions regarding changes in educational are multifaceted, originating from several dimensions, such as political accountability for sufficient information, individual insecurities, the inclination to preserve the status quo, the conservative ethos of the field, and the influence of trade union entities. Despite emotions, primarily articulated or unarticulated fear, they cultivate a disposition of profound self-criticism regarding their individual and communal contributions to this predicament, coupled with a drive to surmount challenges.

Category B.2: Concerns about evaluation methods

The emotional responses, particularly the level of anxiety stated by participants regarding the evaluation and its processes, complement those concerning the changes in general. Diverse components of the evaluation serve as catalysts for the issues, and the professional dimensions they address are multifaceted. The primary concern is the professional identity of the participants, but, if emotional barriers are surmounted, there is the potential to enhance both the teachers' self-perception and the societal esteem of the teaching profession.

[P04, Female, 46-50 y.o., Bachelor's, Economics, Experience: 12 years]

I agree, as well, as much as this scares us, it is not pleasant for anyone to be evaluated, at any level and sector of their life, but it must be done and I believe that it is good for [themselves] and for the local community and for the educational system to ... give a reason; because in this way we all believe that work is not being done; [because lots of people express] "you have filled your positions, you don't care, only in the private sector is work being done and in the public sector nothing". As much as it scares someone, the evaluation must be done.

The discomfort due to evaluation is also associated with the observation of instruction. The sentiments of unease associated with observation do not arise directly from the notion of evaluation but rather stem from the lack of prior observational experiences. These emotions are deemed tolerable, provided that appropriate settings are established or pertinent experiences are obtained. The primary insecurity linked to such evaluative techniques appears to be the potential connection to termination.

[P03, Male, 61-65 y.o., Master's, Greek language, Experience: 25 years, Leadership experience: 5 years]

If there are ten meetings, my unease will go away, and if I'm sure I'm not in danger of being fired, let's face it, my unease will go away again.

Throughout the mini focus groups, participants proposed recommendations for every facet of the evaluation. This signifies their readiness to embrace changes and assessment, indicating that conversations and the potential collaborative development of an evaluation framework should not be inherently dismissed. It is crucial that the needs assessment and pertinent training - especially for individuals lacking prior experience with the relevant processes - are identified as essential components.

Category B.3: Fear

In the discussions, particularly when addressing institutional texts or specific evaluating situations, the prevailing feeling was fear. It manifests with varied intensity, either explicitly or implicitly, and is predominantly associated with the preservation of employment status (both position and conditions). The emotion of fear is multifaceted and manifests across all analytical categories, where factors that generate or exacerbate it are identified, according to educational changes in general and in evaluation. Educational reforms and evaluation cause cognitive and emotional responses, mainly the fear of termination or stagnation in salary progression, thus exacerbating the pre-existing sentiment of chronic anxiety. This combination serves as a catalyst for resistance to change and is so robust that it diminishes the perception of any potential improvement, even in the long term. Thus, teachers seem reluctant to embrace the notion that evaluation can facilitate improvements in the educational system.

[P02, Female, 46-50 y.o., Bachelor's, Greek language, Experience: 12 years]

Here another issue arises; we are open to the concept of termination?

[P03, Male, 61-65 y.o., Master's, Greek language, Experience: 25 years, Leadership experience: 5 years]

To play the role of, let's say, union advocate; it's when the evaluation brings the bogeyman of termination or wage stagnation; [then] it creates a, how should I put it? A defense trench; "no to the evaluation."

[P11, Female, 41-45 y.o., Bachelor's, Greek language, Experience: 16 years]

How will we help ourselves and how can we help both colleagues and students in this unclear landscape; and because in Greece we have a permanent phobia when we hear the word "evaluation"; because we associate it with salary developments, with whether or not I will have a job tomorrow; [thus,] ultimately, we reject anything that can take us a little further.

Fear primarily pertains to the preservation of one's occupational status. Nonetheless, certain aspects of the working environment may vary following the evaluation's implementation, eliciting a response characterized by a potentially diminished apprehension. One concern is that the evaluation may induce friction in colleague relationships. This scenario reveals the adverse consequences of teachers striving to fulfill the institutional self-evaluation criteria due to concerns about disturbing the existing cooperative atmosphere.

[P03, Male, 61-65 y.o., Master's, Greek language, Experience: 25 years, Leadership experience: 5 years]

We'll stick to that and not get into the gist. A colleague won't dare say "I do five things and you do two" because he won't have any reason to start a fight.

The intricacy of the factors that induce or contribute to sentiments of fear regarding evaluation extends beyond the lack of prior experiences; the ambiguities of the methods are also very influential. The lack of a well-defined evaluation culture affects not only teachers but, more significantly, the evaluators, expressed as a questioning if they have undergone evaluation themselves. The pervasive distrust and the overall deficiency of assessment at all levels also contribute to this issue. Thus, the adjustment is very challenging, and the emotions it elicits serve as an additional deterrent.

[P05, Female, 56-60 y.o., Bachelor's, Greek language, Experience: 28 years]

We don't have a culture of evaluation; that's what scares me [...] and those who evaluate haven't been evaluated either! Who will evaluate me? [...] So, my fear starts from there; not the evaluation itself, I'm afraid of the way of evaluation.

In conjunction with the evaluator, they also highlight the contribution of the relevant criteria that will be utilized in the assessment on their fear development. The belief that educational work is immeasurable serves as a source of both anxiety and apprehension. The emphasis on formal or quantifiable qualifications acted as a deterrent, as participants express fear about being terminated due to lack of official documents to prove skills they obtained in practice or through non-institutional means.

[P02, Female, 46-50 y.o., Bachelor's, Greek language, Experience: 12 years]

Another reason that it is scary, and many are against it, is what exactly will be evaluated, that is, the measurable [i.e., official documentation] and the non-measurable. Is it possible that most of our work is non-measurable?

Fear may be exacerbated by the necessity to uphold routine, the perceived professional inadequacy stemming from significant emotional strain, insufficient mastery of the subject matter, and the insecurity linked to the "opening" of the classroom to external scrutiny during observation.

[P29, Female, 36-40 y.o., Master's, Greek language (Sp. Ed.), Experience: 5 years]

Assessment is scary and do you know why it is scary? Because, unfortunately, when there are teachers who have been in education for many years and learn in a routine, they come in, complete their lesson, and leave.

[P02, Female, 46-50 y.o., Bachelor's, Greek language, Experience: 12 years]

A group gets scared when they don't do their job properly.

[P07, Male, 46-50 y.o., Bachelor's, Mathematics, Experience: 15 years]

I believe that someone doesn't want an evaluation when they feel they are inadequate. If they feel they are not, there is no problem there, as long as the right grounds are in place. And so, if I feel inadequate...; those who aren't [adequate] feel it, know it, don't you assume that they don't know it. I am sure, in other words, that those who feel that they don't do their job well know it very well.

Fear, as indicated in the participants' accounts and connotations, was the predominant emotion, significantly influencing the emotional atmosphere. The factors contributing to varying intensity of fear appear to be associated with the uncertainty surrounding procedures, a deficiency of trust in evaluators and criteria, and educators' subjective perception of inadequately fulfilling their professional responsibilities.

Category B.4: Anger

In the context of anger, a notable observation emerged: while the cognitive and emotional responses of participants to the changes and the more abstract notion of evaluation were predominantly positive or mildly negative, there was a complete absence of anger. Conversely, anger, at times intensely, is associated with specific evaluative processes, such as making it mandatory to declare 10% of the teachers in a school unsatisfactory. Participants' anger targets the institutional texts and the implementation processes, expressing concerns of professional insecurity and the distinctive behaviors of various agents responsible for the evaluation.

[P34, Male, 56-60 y.o., PhD, Elementary school teacher, Experience: 33 years, Leadership experience: 21 years]

I think, that is, given that I am also in favor of the evaluation, we were scared by the evaluation that was proposed, which had a quota. I think that this method of evaluation made them treat the evaluation as the worst thing that could happen, because it seemed that it was not intended to provide feedback to the teacher but how to terminate some. [...] That is when we reacted. So, I, who am in favor of the evaluation, was the first to be against this type of evaluation [...] and of course the teachers were against it, as well! And, at that time, I was a principal, and I was worried. Is it possible for something like this to happen? In other words, do I mandatorily have to declare one teacher unsatisfactory out of the 10 in my school? If the school next door has two [unsatisfactory] and I don't have any, how will it be done?

The school self-evaluation involved aspects that, with other emotions, also elicited anger. The implementation was characterized by pretentiousness, prioritizing logistical infrastructure over fundamental instructional aspects, which were thus diminished. The administration's conduct incited outrage, as it relinquished its obligations and opted, in certain instances, for favorable yet superficial implementation of the evaluation process.

[P07, Male, 46-50 y.o., Bachelor's, Mathematics, Experience: 15 years]

[When the school unit's self-evaluation was done, the criteria] were building-related; they were sports facilities; they were a bunch of nonsense; and I saw them and my hair stood on end. What can I tell you now? They weren't the essence of education, which was the lesson, the collaboration between the teacher and the student.

[P36, Male, 51-55 y.o., Master's, Greek language, Experience: 29 years]

An example was when this self-evaluation was implemented; there were some questionnaires where the deputy principal handpicked five students who would write positive comments; I got furious, I started shouting in there. But this is the situation...

Anger, at times fiercely, is linked to certain evaluative processes. They focus on the pretentious nature of the procedures, emphasizing issues of professional insecurity and the unique behaviors of different agents involved in the evaluation.

Category B.5: Pride

The participants indicated through their reports that they experienced an additional emotion, namely pride, during the evaluation processes. This pertains to their overall disposition on the assessment as well as their behaviors, which they deem significant. Their reactions, highlighting the distinct attitude they exhibited compared to their coworkers, were deemed noteworthy.

[P10, Male, 46-50y.o., Bachelor's, Physics, Experience: 14 years, Leadership experience: 2 years]

So, a personal story that is for me an excellent example of this process is that we were called upon as the School's Teachers' Association of our school to decide whether we would implement self-evaluation. Well, in a total of 45 people, maybe even 50, the only hand that was raised to declare that they want to do a self-evaluation was mine; meaning 45 people and no one said anything; not the principal; not anyone.

Alongside their theoretical perspective on evaluation, some participants emphasized the practical aspect of their difference. They articulated the practical manifestation, at an administrative level, of embracing evaluation as an occurrence that reinforced their professional identity.

[P12, Female, 30-35 y.o., Bachelor's, Greek language, Experience: 9 years]

I had a similar experience [with P10, excerpt above]; with 45 people in the School's Teachers' Association, a statement was made that we refuse to implement [self-evaluation], to evaluate the school unit; except for five colleagues, including me, who refused to sign the statement, and it was noted [in the end of the document] that we refused to sign it.

Reports indicating pride in their distinct approach to self-assessment also suggest that a portion of teachers exhibits a higher readiness for change. This is also connected to their refusal to conform to something they do not endorse, even inside a collective that advocates for an opposing professional decision.

Discussion

Teachers' attitudes towards change imposed by reforms are influenced by various factors, including age, career stage, and professional identity (Hargreaves, 2005). For example, novice teachers are typically energetic, optimistic, and more inclined to embrace changes, while, conversely, senior educators closer to retirement age are more prone to experience stress, anxiety, or exhaustion, rendering them less adaptable to new circumstances, which may therefore heighten their resistance to change (Alonso-García et al., 2022; Goodson et al., 2006). This means that the extent of readiness for change is influenced by the emotional impact of the changes, which, consecutively, serves as a significant predictor of resistance to change (Oreg, 2003; Vakola, 2014), especially given that teachers demonstrate higher risk aversion regarding occupational career compared to other professions (Ayaita & Stürmer, 2020).

This study examined instructors' readiness for educational changes, and particularly regarding the introduction of teacher evaluation. The effectiveness of any change initiative is contingent upon how its beneficiaries interpret it both cognitively and emotionally and whether they view it as advantageous for both the present and future (Armenakis & Harris, 2002; Rafferty et al., 2013; Vakola, 2014; Van Veen & Slegers, 2006). To gather data on the aforementioned factors, 12 mini focus groups were conducted, involving 39 principals and teachers. Their perceptions of teacher evaluation, particularly their readiness to change versus their inclination to preserve the status quo, as well as their emotional responses to the changes, were examined. Participants' explicit perspectives on their evaluation perceptions reveal how they comprehend the specific shift and reflect their opinions about the gap between the existing and intended states (Armenakis & Harris, 2009). It is essential to highlight that numerous perceptions and ideas were articulated in manners that demonstrated semantic overlap among the different categories and subcategories of the coding. This illustrates the intricate nature of readiness for change, as beliefs, perceptions, and emotions are articulated in a highly interrelated fashion, often with indistinct borders.

The acknowledgment of the divergence between the existing educational reality and their perceived ideal or, at the very least, suitable standard was evident from the outset of the sessions and their initial stances. Within the broader framework of educational changes, they frequently articulate significant concerns regarding the quality of planning. In this context, resistance often serves as an indicator to decision-makers regarding the unsuitability of those specific changes (Ford et al., 2008; Osborn, 2006). The participants firmly assert that teacher evaluation initiatives failed to deliver education

constructively or enhance its quality; instead, they fostered attitudes and behaviors that were antagonistic to both the legislation and the evaluation process. The end results align with findings from prior studies concerning educators' apprehensions about the efficacy of a mandated implementation (Osborn, 2006).

The emotionally charged references in our mini focus groups were prevalent and pertained to all facets of the changes and evaluation. Educators engage both cognitively and emotionally in their profession, forging strong connections with the educational environment, which account for their occasionally fervent responses to perceived factors that enhance or undermine their professional life. The majority pertained to either emotions themselves or behaviors originating from an emotional basis (namely those expressing fear or anger) or were associated with the development of perceptions of the proposed reforms (mostly the concerns identified in both the changes and the assessment). It is important to note that emotions frequently manifested concurrently, being interconnected and interdependent.

The negative emotional burden, often directed against reforms, is ascribed to the coercive nature of their execution and the inadequate preparedness of teachers by political leaders. They express, in straightforward terms and without embellishment, the cognitive and emotional challenges they encounter in interpreting the ongoing reforms and the minimal effect these reforms have on their professional growth, which is disproportionate to the emotional toll they impose. These results align with previous studies (Geijsel et al., 2001; Van Veen & Slegers, 2009). The effort is evident, even emotionally, to equitably distribute the accountability for the rejection of reforms and the reluctance exhibited by educators. They perceive the reluctance via emotional and sentimental lenses, rooted in the qualities adopted over the years and the established conservative culture they believe defines the educational community. Within this context, the sense of job stability and the inclination to preserve the established professional routine also exert a significant influence.

Teachers' self-esteem elevates when they align their actions with their values and beliefs. The participants readily articulate their perceptions and openly communicate their emotions regarding the impact of evaluation on their professional identity. The most surprising emotion conveyed was pride in their attitudes and behaviors, indicating that a portion of instructors possess a heightened readiness for evaluation. Undoubtedly, these participants regarded the endorsement of their stance as an event that reinforced their professional identity. The emergence of pride from surmounting initial uncertainties aligns with findings from additional studies (Hargreaves, 2004).

The dominance of negative beliefs and, thus, emotions, i.e., fear, anger, and anxiety, created the conditions for the intense and/or passive resistance to change that was manifested by most participants during the implementation of the evaluation was expected (Baş, 2021; James, 2010). The strong emotional load permeated all the categories and co-shaped the perceptions of not only the ways in which they reacted but also of the attribution of responsibilities. Therefore, there are elements of the evaluation that seem to cause a degree of anxiety among teachers, a phenomenon anticipated in any change process that is also reinforced, to a significant extent, by the lack of relevant experiences. Beyond reporting these emotions, it is important to critically consider their implications. For example, while fear and anger were commonly expressed, they did not always translate into outright resistance; in some cases, they coexisted with openness to reflection or even pride in professional identity. Moreover, what is noteworthy is that negative emotions, such as anger and anxiety, are not necessarily predictive of readiness (Ittner et al., 2019), a suggestion that highlights their unique interplay with the other cognitive and emotional conditions. This ambivalence suggests that emotions should not be treated only as barriers but also as potential catalysts for dialogue and growth within the teaching community, echoing the perspective that resistance can serve as an indicator of reform unsuitability and as a trigger for constructive discourse (Ford et al., 2008).

A key indicator of the participants' readiness to embrace changes and, more specifically, evaluation is their capacity for self-reflection concerning their attitudes and behaviors towards reforms and evaluation. Indeed, it was previously shown that self-reflection is related to professional development and enhanced appreciation of specific professional standards as guidelines for teacher evaluation (Pedaste et al., 2019). The participants' acknowledgment of the disparity between the existing and ideal educational state, along with their recognition of shared responsibility and of the effect of their typically unfavorable disposition towards reforms, can serve as a foundation for conversation in order to facilitate and achieve the improvement of the educational system.

Based on the above, it is evident that, for educational changes to be successfully implemented, the reforms need to center around the people involved in the process, as it is imperative to engage them in the decision-making process, taking into consideration their emotions and providing them with autonomy and authority, creating internal motivation. Although this study is situated in the Greek educational system, the findings may be transferable to other centralized contexts where evaluation reforms are introduced top-down. Nevertheless, transferability should be approached cautiously, since local institutional norms and professional cultures mediate teachers' emotional responses.

Thus, finally, our position is that transformation in education should rely not on the imposition of legislative reforms, but on the initiatives and collaborative efforts of the educators. Given that the people implementing a newly introduced change are the key factors for its success, highlight its value and communicating clearly the expected benefits with the teaching community may result in uncontroversial acceptance leading, hopefully, to educational transformation. Concretely, this suggests that policymakers should move beyond general encouragement and implement actionable strategies such as piloting reforms through co-design workshops with teachers, providing structured forums for emotional expression, and ensuring that evaluators themselves undergo transparent training and evaluation. These steps would more directly address the cultural and emotional barriers identified in our findings and create the conditions necessary for genuine educational change. In this way, reform is not only implemented but sustained, as teachers are more likely to perceive themselves as active agents rather than passive recipients of policy.

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Data Availability Declaration

Data Availability Upon Formal Request:

While the primary datasets utilized in this study are not publicly accessible due to certain constraints, they are available to researchers upon a formal request. The authors have emphasized maintaining the integrity of the data and its analytical rigor. To access the datasets or seek further clarifications, kindly reach out to the corresponding author. Our aim is to foster collaborative academic efforts while upholding the highest standards of research integrity.

Author Contributions

Both authors, Evgenia Tsiouplis and Julie Vaiopoulou, contributed equally to this work. They collaboratively handled the conceptualization, methodology design, data acquisition, and analysis. Each author played a significant role in drafting and revising the manuscript, ensuring its intellectual depth and coherence. All authors have thoroughly reviewed, provided critical feedback, and approved the final version of the manuscript. They jointly take responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of the research.

Authors' statements on ethics and conflict of interest

Ethics statement: The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki and involved adult participants. During the recruitment stage, a cover letter was provided explaining the purpose of the study, that participation was voluntary, and that the data would remain confidential. The participants signed an informed consent form and were given the option of removing themselves from the mini focus groups at any time. During the data transcription, a unique code was assigned to each participant so that they would remain anonymous. We declare that research/publication ethics and citing principles have been considered in all the stages of the study. We take full responsibility for the content of the paper in case of dispute.

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