Resistance to Change in the Romanian Educational System: Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract

The traditional perspective on education, teaching, and learning is no longer sufficient in fluid societies exposed to dramatic and rapid changes. The need for continuous educational reform is evident. However, recent paradigmatic societal shifts, extreme events, and extraordinary scientific and technological advances underscore the urgency of these changes. These developments highlight the necessity for innovation and the reduction of intergenerational gaps in educating new generations. By embracing these changes, we can create a more inclusive, adaptable, and innovative educational environment for all. *While the Romanian educational system, like many traditional systems, is extensive in its spatial coverage, material resources, human resources, and the number of beneficiaries served, it also presents an opportunity for positive change. Its highly centralized, over-normative, and strictly structured nature, with a top-down control approach, has fostered systemic inertia and resistance to change.* However, this also means that with the right strategies, the system can be transformed into a more dynamic and adaptable one. *Effective and sustainable reforms are not just the responsibility of policymakers and educational leaders. They require initial assessments of the status quo to identify genuine needs for change and to determine possible obstacles and available resources. Real change and innovation are promoted and supported by a clear definition and understanding of the factors that generate and maintain inertia and resistance to change. Identifying and understanding these complex mechanisms at both the organizational and individual levels should precede any change plan, emphasizing the crucial role of each individual in the process. To identify individual motivations that can generate opposition or resistance to potential change requests within the educational system, we conducted a study involving 293 in-service and pre-service teachers from the Department of Educational Sciences at the West University of Timisoara. The study utilized the Resistance to Change Scale developed by Oreg (2003), a widely recognized and validated tool, which evaluates the primary factors determining resistance to change: routine seeking, emotional reaction, short-term focus, and cognitive rigidity.* This scale was administered through a structured questionnaire and the data was analyzed using statistical methods. *This study revealed notable variations in attitudes toward change based on gender, residency, and professional status (in-service and pre-service teachers). These findings*

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underscore the importance of addressing both systemic and individual factors to facilitate meaningful and lasting reforms in education. By understanding and mitigating the sources of resistance, educational leaders can implement strategies such as fostering a culture of innovation, providing professional development opportunities, and involving stakeholders in decision-making, that foster a more adaptable and innovative educational environment.

Keywords: resistance to change, educational system, pre-service teachers, in-service teachers.

Change - what is it good for?
Change, a catalyst for progress and personal development, plays a pivotal role in our lives and society.

Change is vital for adaptation, even survival in critical circumstances. Change allows individuals and societies to adapt to new circumstances, environments, and challenges. It enables us to evolve and thrive in ever-changing conditions. Positive stress nurtures the motivation to learn and grow.

In a rapidly changing, fluid society, we face new opportunities and obstacles and must be insightful and creative. Change fosters innovation and progress. It drives us to explore new ideas, technologies, and methods, leading to advancements in various fields such as science, technology, medicine, and culture.

Individually, survival, adaptability, and efficient and successful functioning build on self-developing, learning, and growth. Change provides opportunities for personal and collective learning and development. It encourages us to step out of our comfort zones, acquire new skills, and develop resilience and tolerance to uncertainty.

Global society is diverse, and to ensure inclusion, it requires understanding, acceptance and tolerance, empathy, compassion, and collaboration. Change promotes diversity and inclusion by challenging traditional norms and structures and fostering acceptance and appreciation of different perspectives, cultures, and identities.

Change often arises from addressing problems and inefficiencies. It prompts us to identify issues, brainstorm solutions, and implement necessary reforms for improvement. So, change promotes and requires developing critical and creative thinking, communication, and problem-solving competences.

Change is a constant in our lives, and it builds resilience by testing our ability to adapt and overcome obstacles. It teaches us to be flexible, resourceful, and persistent in adversity, making us more robust and capable.

Change offers opportunities for renewal and refreshment. It prevents stagnation and monotony by introducing new experiences, ideas, and opportunities for exploration.

In essence, change is a fundamental aspect of life that drives progress, innovation, and personal development. Embracing and managing change effectively can lead to positive outcomes and contribute to a more dynamic and resilient society.

Educational systems are one of the most sensible and reactive to unavoidable changes, and they have to adapt and progress continuously to remain relevant and efficient.

Should I stay or should I go? Forces of change

Lunenburg & Ornstein (2008, quoted in (van Wyk, C. van der Westhuizen, & van Vuuren, 2014)consider that the most potent and relevant forces that can demand and sometimes impose change are government interventions and requests (especially in the case of highly centralized and authoritarian education systems with top-down governance), the needs of society, and employees needs.

However, several inertia forces, such as the fear of the unknown, ineffective or insufficient communication, and employee non-involvement, exert a significant influence in preserving the current condition.

Lewin (1947, cited by (van Wyk, C. van der Westhuizen, & van Vuuren, 2014) indicates that the main dimensions impacting change processes in educational institutions are systemic, environmental, personality, process, work, and management.

The primary causes for resistance to change in the educational environment are the sudden and unannouncedness of the requested change, the excessive degree of uncertainty generated by the change, feeling out of control, discomfort generated by the loss of routines and familiar habits, distrust in the permanence of change, feeling being told that his previous strategies were wrong, fear of proving incompetent to learn new skills, fear of proving incompetent to learn new skills, the butterfly effect of the change in one range, affecting all others, overload in work, fear of being the failure of the group at the end of the change process, insufficient funding, fatigue that accompanies change efforts (Rehman, 2021).

The most frequent forms of resistance to change are aggressive, passive-aggressive, and passive (Darjan et al., 2017; Long et al., 2017).

The most effective strategies to combat resistance to change in the educational environment are education and communication, participation and involvement, facilitation and support, negotiation and agreement, manipulation and mutual deception, and explicit or implicit coercion. (Darjan & Predescu, 2024; Darjan & Tomita, 2014; Long et al., 2014; Predescu & Darjan, 2008).

The change: Driving and opposing forces

As a vital factor of evolution, change is inevitable at all levels. A simplified organizational change is a three-step model: unfreeze (from the current state), move (transition), and freeze (Lewin, 1947). The significant steps from the current state to the future state are formulating

the desired change (setting tangible goals required by the needs and expectations of the beneficiaries), realizing the change plan (what?, how? – people, processes, technologies, structure, cultural aspects), implementing the change, and managing the transition and maintaining change (Lewin, 1947).

The forces that can demand organizational change can be external or internal. The goals and reasons that trigger and require these processes of adaptation/adequacy or growth/evolution may be diverse, from the necessity/usefulness of assimilating new roles and tasks, the emergence of new material or financial or the possibility of acquiring new strategies or technologies, until expanding areas of interest or influence, with corresponding changes in visions or goals and assuming new missions and roles (Swaim, 2014).

The forces that can demand and impose changes in educational institutions are diverse: governmental decisions, social changes, the pressure of new technologies, and administrative or personal needs and processes (Dârjan, 2018; Yılmaz & Kılıçoğlu, 2013).

The need for change felt in organizations or at the individual level reflects the need for continuous development and professionalization, expressed by enriching knowledge and improving strategies. Periodic change in education understood as sensitivity, flexibility, and adaptability to the realities, requirements, and challenges of a dynamic society of fluid realities, is a vital and critical necessity of any educational system. Otherwise, education, as an aims-oriented process, becomes inefficient and obsolete.

From an individual perspective, Piderit (2000) conceptualizes resistance as a three-dimensional attitude towards change, composed of cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects, reflecting the different results of evaluating an object or a situation by a person (McGuire, 1985).

The cognitive dimension refers to the interpretation and the meaning that a person gives to change (is it necessary? Is it helpful?). The emotional dimension represents the responses to the potential change (anxiety, anger, excitement, etc.).

The cognitive and affective dimensions will influence the behavioral dimension, which is the person's actions or intentions in response to the requested change (either an attempt to oppose the change or plans to support the change).

These dimensions are interrelated, but they are distinct components and emphasize different aspects of the phenomenon of resistance to change.

This multidimensional view of resistance to change as a trait involves investigating the antecedents and consequences of behavioral decisions.

Also, identifying particular resistance components associated with different antecedents or consequences can differentiate between variables influencing the interpretation of the change and those generating a specific emotional experience. The individual understanding of the change and experienced emotions will determine specific decisions and behavioral reactions.

Whatever forces call for change, this process creates ambiguous feelings and can generate behaviors of opposition and resistance. Change is simultaneously an opportunity and a threat.

Scheidies (2017) believes that, at the organizational level, the most common obstacles to change are employee resilience, communication management, inability to adapt, and insufficient resources. Harkin (2017) also believes that the most critical challenges to organizational changes are the degree of employee involvement, the power of habit, and the confusion and uncertainty generated by the imposed modifications.

Among the most critical factors that can accentuate the resistance to change of education professionals are the sudden and unforeseen character of the requested change, the excessive degree of uncertainty generated by the change, the feeling of loss of control, combined with the discomfort of losing/giving up familiar routines and habits, the sense of involving a reproach/criticism of their previous strategies or performance, fear of not being able to acquire the new skills required, overload in work, etc.(Predescu & Dârjan, 2017; Yılmaz & Kılıçoğlu, 2013).

Also, insufficient funding, fatigue, and consumption accompanying change efforts can negatively affect the change process. Given the above reasons, staff resistance is more significant than management, and managers' orientation towards change is more optimistic than staff (Van Wyk et al., 2014).

The literature began to distinguish two types of reactions to change: reactions to change outcomes (power and prestige, job security, intrinsic rewards, etc.) and responses to the change process (trust in management, social influence, information about change, etc.). So, resistance to change is a multidimensional construct. Although potential outcomes and the change process influence people's reactions, studies suggest procedural aspects have a more significant impact (Robbins et al., 2000).

Oreg (2017, 2006, 2003) looked at possible reasons why some resist changes, even when they would prove beneficial. Using an empirical approach and different theoretical perspectives on this mood, Oreg proposes an individual dispositional structure consisting of four factors: orientation towards preserving routines (searching for routine), emotional reactions triggered by the requested change, irritation, and discomfort felt during the implementation of a change (short-term focus) and stubbornness and opposition to changing one's own opinions (cognitive rigidity).

Method

The present research is investigative, aiming to assess the degree of individual resistance to change of teachers within the Romanian educational system, as well as its main obstacles and individual factors.

The working hypothesis states that Romanian teachers tend to show a high degree of resistance to changes required in the educational environment. The research question asked was: What are the most pronounced dispositional features that determine the manifestation of resistance to possible requests for change at individual, institutional, or system levels?

Instrument

Oreg (2003, p. 682) developed an individual measure of resistance to change. This tool directly measures an individual's tendency to "resist or avoid making changes, to disavow change in general, to consider aversive change in different contexts and to different types of changes" (Oreg, 2003, p. 680).

Consistent with Purerit's (2000) multidimensional conceptualization of the construct, Oreg proposes evaluating four factors that, even if not entirely independent, represent distinct dimensions, reflecting the scale's cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects. Thus, the scale developed by Oreg (2003) focuses on an individual's dispositional resistance to change as an aspect of personality, not an attitude towards a particular change situation.

According to Oreg, people differ depending on their internal inclination to resist or accept change, thus having different attitudes towards change, both voluntarily chosen and imposed. People with a high predisposition to resist change are considered to have a stable personality trait, are much less willing to accept change voluntarily, and are more likely to experience adverse emotional reactions when change is imposed on them.

The Change Resistance Scale, a comprehensive tool, has the potential to reveal inter-individual differences and their consequences in the context of institutional changes necessitated by various circumstances. It consists of 17 items, each with multiple answers on a 6-step Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree). The scale provides a total change resistance score and scores on four subscales, each measuring a different factor contributing to resistance to change.

The Routine Seeking (RS) subscale targets the behavioral dimension of resistance to change, focusing on the trend and preference for adopting and preserving routines;

Subscale Emotional reaction (ER) assesses the affective component of resistance to change, expressed by the level of stress and anxiety caused by the prospect of change;

The Short-term focus (STF) subscale also measures the affective component of resistance to change but aims to identify the degree to which individuals are worried and demotivated by the prospect of short-term inconveniences generated by change, which may outweigh the potential long-term benefits;

The Cognitive rigidity (CR) subscale investigates the cognitive component of resistance to change, measuring the frequency and ease with which individuals change their beliefs and opinions.

Participants

Our group consisted of 293 subjects, 214 in-service teachers, and 79 pre-service teachers, of whom 28 (9.6%) were male and 265 (90.4%) were female. Of the total number of those working in education (233), including some of the students, most worked in urban areas (182, 78%), and the rest in rural areas (51, 22%).

The length of service in the educational environment varies from 0 to 5 years (42, 18%), 6 to 15 years (77, 33%), 16 to 30 years (95, 40.8%), and over 30 years (19, 8.2%).

Results presentation and discussion

Statistical processing of the obtained results showed good internal consistency of the scale (Alpha Cronbach's .80), consistent with those obtained in previous studies (Oreg et al., 2008, p. 940). Good consistency also exists in the routine search (.70), emotional reaction (.87), short-term focus (.82), and cognitive rigidity subscale (.70).

The total score (m = 3.19) obtained on this scale by our subjects (Fig. 1) is significantly higher than other scores reported in previous studies (Oreg et al., 2008), which means that the tendency to resist change is higher in our subjects.
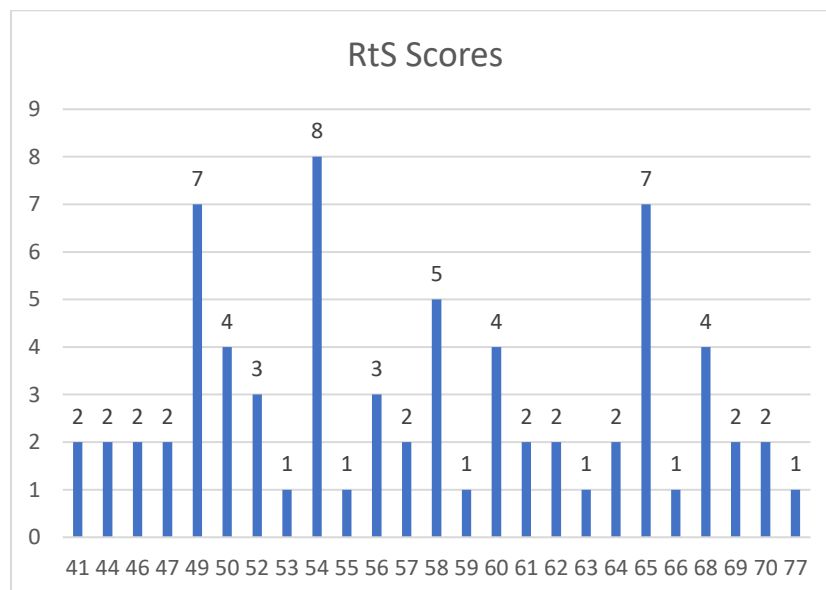

Figure 1: Scores distribution on RtC (Skewness = .33, Kurtosis = .28, std. error = .28)

Although the average obtained by our group of participants is higher than the averages reported in previous studies, this is most likely due to the small number of participants and the unequal ratio between female and male subjects (due to the actual reality in the educational system). This reason may explain the nonparametric distribution of the scores (Fig. 1).

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

Measure	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Resistance to change	293	1.65	5.59	3.1853	.59414
Routine seeking	293	1.00	4.80	2.5311	.75979
Emotional reaction	293	1.00	6.00	3.2722	1.08832
Short-term focus	293	1.00	6.00	2.9667	.97834
Cognitive rigidity	293	1.50	6.00	4.1348	.88374
Valid N (listwise)	293				

According to the results obtained, cognitive rigidity (m = 4.13) has the higher score an dis the most prominent dimension influencing the resistance to change, followed by emotional reaction (m = 3.27), short-term centering (m = 2.97), and routine search (m = 2.53) (Tab. 1).

Differences between in-service and pre-service teachers (Tab. 2) were significant for overall scores related to resistance to change, emotional reactions, and short-term focus. These findings can be attributed to the varying levels of experience between the two groups. In-service teachers, having already adapted to the demands and routines of their profession, may exhibit lower resistance to change due to their established familiarity and confidence in handling job-related challenges.

Tabel 2: Comparisons by professional status

Measure	In-service teachers		Pre-service teachers		t-test for Equality of Means	Sig. (2-tailed)
	M	SD	M	SD		
Resistance to change	3.1442	.56581	3.3352	.67158	-2.276	.024
Routine seeking	2.5139	.74954	2.5937	.79917	-.737	.461
Emotional reaction	3.1598	1.00803	3.6825	1.26778	-3.440	.001
Short-term focus	2.9033	.93491	3.1984	1.10000	-2.134	.034
Cognitive rigidity	4.1576	.81498	4.0516	1.10274	.843	.400

In contrast, pre-service teachers, who are still in the process of training and have not yet fully entered the professional environment, may experience greater anxiety and uncertainty about their competencies and their ability to adapt to their future roles. This uncertainty can

heighten their emotional reactions to change and lead to a more pronounced focus on short-term goals, as they might feel unprepared to plan extensively for the future without a clear understanding of the job's expectations and requirements.

The lack of concrete professional experience can make it difficult for pre-service teachers to foresee and prepare for long-term career developments, reinforcing a more immediate and cautious approach to their professional planning and response to change.

Regarding gender, males exhibited a higher resistance to change (Tab. 3), although these differences were not statistically significant. However, males did demonstrate statistically significant greater cognitive rigidity, indicating a stronger tendency towards inflexible thinking patterns and resistance to adapting their cognitive frameworks.

Tabel 3: Comparisons by gender

Measure	Masculin		Feminine		t-test for Equality of Means	Sig. (2-tailed)
	M	SD	M	SD		
Resistance to change	3.2836	.46705	3.1749	.60581	.920	.358
Routine seeking	2.6643	.78703	2.5170	.75702	.976	.330
Emotional reaction	2.8750	1.00577	3.3142	1.09000	-2.042	.042
Short-term focus	3.1786	1.01803	2.9443	.97335	1.206	.229
Cognitive rigidity	4.5714	.78131	4.0887	.88263	2.780	.006

On the other hand, females reported experiencing more intense emotional reactions when confronted with change, suggesting that while they may be more emotionally affected by change, this does not necessarily translate into cognitive or behavioral resistance.

These findings highlight the complex interplay between gender, emotional responses, and cognitive flexibility in the context of change.

More statistically significant differences were found between urban and rural contexts (Tab. 4).

Subjects from rural backgrounds tend to exhibit greater resistance to change, showing a stronger preference for routine, heightened emotional reactions, and a focus on short-term outcomes. Interestingly, there were no statistically significant differences in terms of cognitive rigidity between urban and rural respondents.

Tabel 4: Comparisons by residency

Measure	Urban		Rural		t-test for Equality of Means	Sig. (2-tailed)
	M	SD	M	SD		
Resistance to change	3.0887	.56022	3.4107	.59271	-3.662	.000
Routine seeking	2.4612	.76530	2.7630	.71541	-2.583	.010
Emotional reaction	3.0984	1.03504	3.5463	1.04732	-2.787	.006
Short-term focus	2.7664	.89818	3.4676	.99651	-4.915	.000
Cognitive rigidity	4.1858	.83595	4.0278	.93247	1.188	.236

These results may reflect the greater conservatism and traditionalism characteristic of rural areas. The lack of significant differences in cognitive rigidity suggests that while rural individuals may be more resistant to change emotionally and behaviorally, their cognitive flexibility or openness to new ideas may not differ significantly from their urban counterparts.

Conclusions and recommendations

The obtained results confirm the existence of a high degree of resistance to change among teachers, which can be explained both by the system's characteristics—such as centralization, normativization, implicit conformism, and top-down decision-making—as well as by a collective and individual mentality marked by decades of dogmatism, rigidity, forced conformism, and discouragement of individualism, self-reflection, self-determination, and critical thinking. This combination of systemic and cultural factors has ingrained a marked cognitive rigidity among educators.

Developing critical thinking, assuming responsibilities, and maintaining the cognitive flexibility of those involved in change are essential objectives in change management. Effective change management must consider the opposing forces of change and employ appropriate techniques to counteract them to achieve accurate, effective, assumed, and sustainable change (Dârjan, 2020).

In cases where there is fear of self-change, loss of familiar rituals, or difficulty in predicting the post-change situation, it is crucial for management to engage in permanent dialogue with the individuals involved. This dialogue should demonstrate concern, care, empathy, and compassion, possibly facilitated by resource persons or groups trusted by their colleagues. Confusion, inherent uncertainties, and fear of not meeting new standards must be recognized and addressed through ongoing communication. This involves providing

precise and detailed behavioral frameworks and expectations, as well as comprehensively specifying goals and deadlines (Harkin, 2017).

The traditional educational paradigm has become obsolete, inefficient, and sometimes harmful. It can no longer be merely updated or cosmetically altered to maintain a state of subsistence, as this approach generates material costs (inefficiently used) and, more importantly, costs and losses in human resources (insufficiently supported, valued, and utilized). The industrial model of education, which emphasizes uniformity, conformism, and the flattening of individual differences, must be replaced with an "agricultural" model (Robinson, 2015). This model emphasizes diversity, creativity, and innovation, allowing individuals to flourish.

A transformative approach to schooling is necessary for a society that aims to progress. These paradigm shifts will enable schools to provide relevant education aligned with new societal transformations. Actions such as updating and responsibly assuming new roles for teachers (as mentors, facilitators, and counselors), focusing on developing key and transversal competencies, and changing the teacher-student relationship paradigm and discipline practices are crucial steps in modernizing the educational offer (Darjan & Predescu, 2024).

Educational institutions have the potential to drive development and innovation in a fluid, constantly changing society. This society is, and will continue to be, confronted with new problems whose solutions lie not only in previous content and knowledge but in their creative use and combination. Critical and reflective problem-solving thinking, collaboration, empathy, and compassion are essential skills that need to be fostered to address these challenges effectively.

By embracing these changes, educational systems can better prepare students to navigate and contribute to an ever-evolving world. Schools must move away from outdated practices and towards an educational model that supports individual growth, creativity, and adaptability, ensuring that learners are equipped with the skills necessary for the future.

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