

Primary School Principals' Perception on the Promotion of Changes and Innovations: Evidence From Greece

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to explore the views of primary school principals regarding the educational changes/innovations taking place in education. Innovation as a complex, long-term process sometimes shapes an educational organisation to a greater and sometimes to a lesser extent. Therefore, an innovative organization is not necessarily the one that conceived an idea, but the one that has chosen to implement and execute it (Beladakis, 2007). Therefore, an action in an organisation can be classified as an innovation when it brings about significant changes in the way it operates and reshapes its key features. The main agents of educational innovation are none other than managers/leaders and teachers, who must understand the necessity of having and effectively implementing new innovations in order to create modern and innovative schools that education requires (Day, 1990). This specific research also analyses in detail the mechanisms that contribute to the promotion, introduction and practical implementation of innovative programmes with the ultimate aim of improving the quality of education provided.

Keywords: innovation, change, innovative programs, quality of education, primary school principals, primary education

1. Introduction

In recent years, there have been rapid changes and developments in many areas of human activities. The development of technology and advances in science are evolving at a particularly rapid pace, bringing about dramatic changes worldwide. Education could not be unaffected by these changes and is now obliged to modernise and keep up with the pace of developments. Thus, in the modern era we live in, a number of educational changes/innovations are being promoted, which affect the educational process. Educational changes/innovations aim to modernize education by providing new educational possibilities and tools (platforms, innovative educational applications, modernized supervisory teaching aids, etc.), contributing significantly to the qualitative upgrade of education provided (Inbar, 1996). As a natural consequence, managers/leaders are important agents of change, and not only for education in general. The principal/leader, who through the school vision will lead the modernisation of the school unit, needs to be innovative by nature, constantly ensuring the promotion, introduction and practical application of innovations that occur in the school environment (Koutouzis, 2012).

Innovation as a complex, long-term process sometimes shapes an educational organisation to a greater and sometimes to a lesser extent. Therefore, an innovative organization is not necessarily the one that conceived an idea but the one that has chosen to implement and execute it (Beladakis, 2007). Still, the differentiated practices followed by an organization compared to those of previous periods can be referred to as innovation for the organization itself (association and introduction of new ideas and methods) (Day, 1990). However, equally innovative can be considered as the institutionalized goals of the organization, which may bring out modern and innovative ideas. Therefore, an action in an organisation can be classified as innovative when it brings about significant changes in the way it operates and reshapes its key features. The main agents of educational innovation are none other than managers/leaders and teachers, who must understand the necessity of having and effectively implementing new innovations in order to create modern and innovative schools that education requires. The promotion and implementation of innovations mainly relies on the implementation of specific educational programmes. Although, most innovative programs are imposed on school units through the legislation of the Ministry of Education, however, educational innovation programs are also observed, which the Teachers' Association decides to implement, taking into account the needs and characteristics of the school

(Beladakis, 2007). However, in order for educational change/innovation to succeed in qualitatively upgrading the educational work provided, the school unit must constantly adopt best organizational practices, guiding A particular contribution to this is made by successful leadership, which must motivate its subordinates to participate actively and responsibly in any educational change/innovation that is attempted in the school organization.

More specifically, the attitudes, behaviors and views of the directors of Primary Education in Greece on the educational changes/innovations implemented in education will be presented in order to reflect the current situation. In addition, the importance of both educational changes/innovations for principals and the administrative practices they implement, enabling, engaging, supporting and generally facilitating the promotion, introduction and practical implementation of educational innovations is explored. Finally, the research aims to investigate the degree of interaction between the introduction and practical implementation of educational changes/innovations on the part of principals and the qualitative improvement of the education provided.

2. Innovations in Education

In common parlance, when we hear the word innovation we perceive the introduction of something innovative and modern, which has not been tested in the past and carries an increased risk of sustainability, as anything new that emerges in any organisation does not automatically ensure its successful assimilation. However, in the broader research context, the term innovation is approached by researchers as a complex and multifaceted concept, as there are different types and dimensions of innovation, which are variously found in different aspects of our social life (Fenner, 1984).

Innovation in the field of education is usually confused with a technological idea, which is usually associated with the corresponding technological equipment. There is no doubt that technology is a key factor in educational innovation. However, innovation refers to the executive creation of something new, modern and innovative through a new "ideological" guideline (Smith, Brand, & Kinash, 2013). School education aims to absorb innovations in order to succeed in responding effectively to in-school teaching activities (Khairova & Toktarova, 2016). Also, innovation brings dramatic changes in the educational system as it succeeds in parameterizing the conditions of the provided educational work, addressing problematic situations, providing meaningful solutions to practical educational issues and generally achieving a school culture withdrawn from outdated old pedagogical standards (Raptis, 2006; Spyropoulou, 2008). A modern school that chooses to implement innovations has the guarantees to offer better pedagogical work to its students by operating constructively. Besides, the main aspiration of educational institutions is the modernization and qualitative pedagogical upgrading of an educational organization through a continuous process of redefining goals, restructuring roles and tasks of the educational staff, changes in the educational structure and the way the organization seeks to operate for their practical implementation. These are, in essence, modifications that aim to replace older programmes and techniques, which are now outdated, with modern and effective strategies followed and modern practical methods implemented. As a result, through the intention to innovate, the school culture is being shaped on a daily basis with the continuous adoption of new principles and beliefs, new teaching tools and modern pedagogical approaches that the ever-increasing educational needs of the new era demand (Fullan, 2016).

Thinking holistically, educational innovation undoubtedly involves actions that end up promoting new innovative ideas and conceptions of education (Fullan, 1991). The main exponents of educational innovation are none other than principals/leaders and teachers, who must understand the necessity of having and effectively implementing new innovations in order to create modern and innovative schools that education demands. Due to their prominent role in educational organizations, principals/leaders shape the organizational conditions that functionally influence the management of educational innovations (Crossan & Apaydin, 2010). Therefore, the administrative functions that serve to integrate and manage innovations are determined by the dynamic presence of school leadership.

Managing innovation brings about significant changes in an educational organisation in both an organisational and operational context. Thus, educational innovations significantly improve any school unit, as they reshape through the reformulation of educational objectives the organizational structure of the school, modernize the content of curricula, highlight the necessity of using new pedagogical methods, give a more "active" role to the educational staff and significantly affect the relationships both between the members of an educational organization and with the local community (Dakopoulou, 2008).

Beyond structural and operational changes, innovation management is largely related to the way leaders/managers ultimately act in terms of organisational coordination, decision making and the practices by which they attempt to inspire and motivate their educational staff (Birkinshaw, Hamel & Mol, 2008). All these

changes that take place through the way innovation is managed are key characteristics for an educational organisation that chooses to operate managerially using new processes (Kesting, 2015). In conclusion, in this light, leadership is a necessary function since it enhances organisational creativity, promotes innovative projects and ideas, eliminates uncertainty and removes any resistance to the development of innovations, thus strengthening the managerial role of the manager/leader as the one most responsible for promoting or hindering innovation and how it is managed (Birkinshaw, 2008).

3. Research Methodology

In the present work, quantitative research was chosen using a questionnaire, which contains small questions, trying to ensure objectivity and universal transparency through the generalization attempted by the large number of participants compared to the realization of a similar qualitative research study (Creswell, 2011). In addition, this research tended to examine correlations of variables, which indicates the increased need to use the quantitative method as opposed to the qualitative method that attempts with open-ended questions to explore the existing variables (Robson, 2010).

Sampling design types are divided into probability samples and non-probability samples. As usual, in probability sampling, a selection of individuals that are representative of the reported population is made (Creswell, 2011). In the research community, simple random sampling is referred to as the most popular form of sampling, as all individuals selected are representative of the population. Considering all of the above, simple random sampling was deemed to be the most appropriate for the research conducted.

The present study constitutes a survey study, since it produces quantitative data on the characteristics of a population and the correlations between them (Cohen & Manion, 1997), which was conducted with the help of a closed-ended questionnaire. The sample consisted of 150 primary school principals (primary and nursery schools) from all over Greece. In this research, the questionnaire was considered the most appropriate data collection tool. A questionnaire is defined as a form, in our case an electronic form, containing a series of structured questions, presented in a specific order, which the respondent is asked to answer (Javeau, 2000). The survey was conducted in the school year 2022-2023 and anonymity and other basic personal information of the participants was voluntarily preserved. All data were collected, decoded and analyzed in order to obtain reliable and valid results using Ms Excel programs and IBM SPSS Statistics 25 statistical program. The analysis of numerical data was done using both descriptive statistics methods to calculate standard deviations, frequencies and means, as well as using the non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis test in order to derive as valid and reliable statistics as possible results in the conducted research.

4. Results

The extraction of the survey results revealed important data and information that provide key answers to the research questions posed. To begin with, Table 1 shows the extent to which the form of leadership followed by principals brings about the necessary or unnecessary educational changes. Observing below we see that 51.3% are occupied by those who strongly agree with the above statement, 29.3% are reached by those who moderately agree and 13.3% belong to those who agree very much. Those participants who agree a little or not at all represent 4.7% and 1.3% respectively.

Table 1. Degree of impact of the leadership followed on the corresponding necessary educational changes

		Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Not at all	2	1.3	1.3
	Little	7	4.7	6.0
	Moderately	44	29.3	35.3
	Strongly	77	51.3	86.7
	Very much	20	13.3	100.0
	Total	150	100.0	

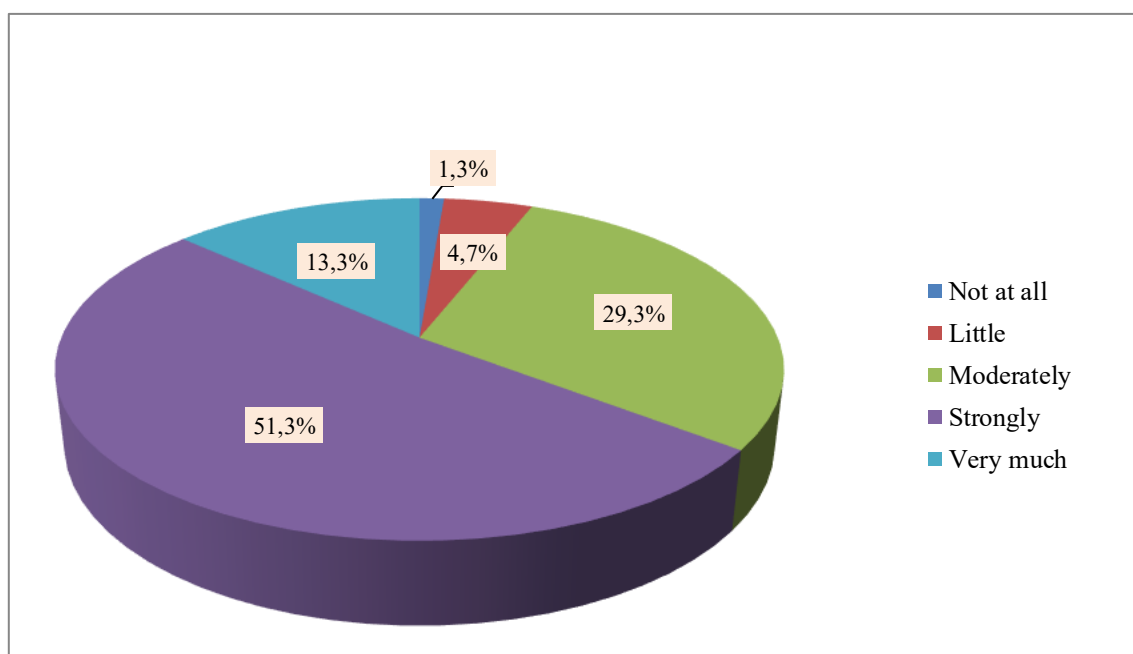


Figure 1. Degree of impact of the leadership followed on the corresponding necessary educational changes

Table 2 analyses participants' views on why innovations should be implemented in primary schools. More specifically, 47.5% are occupied by answers related to the improvement of educational work and participation, 37.9% by answers related to the educational role and the acquisition of critical thinking skills and 7.8% by the answer "Other reasons". Meanwhile, 4.3% is represented by the answers related to school prestige and 2.5% is occupied by financial reasons.

Table 2. Views on the importance of implementing innovations in primary schools

		Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Improving educational work and participation	134	47.5	47.5
	Educational role and the acquisition of critical thinking skills	107	37.9	85.5
	Financial reasons	7	2.5	87.9
	Brand name of school	12	4.3	92.2
	Other reasons	22	7.8	100.0

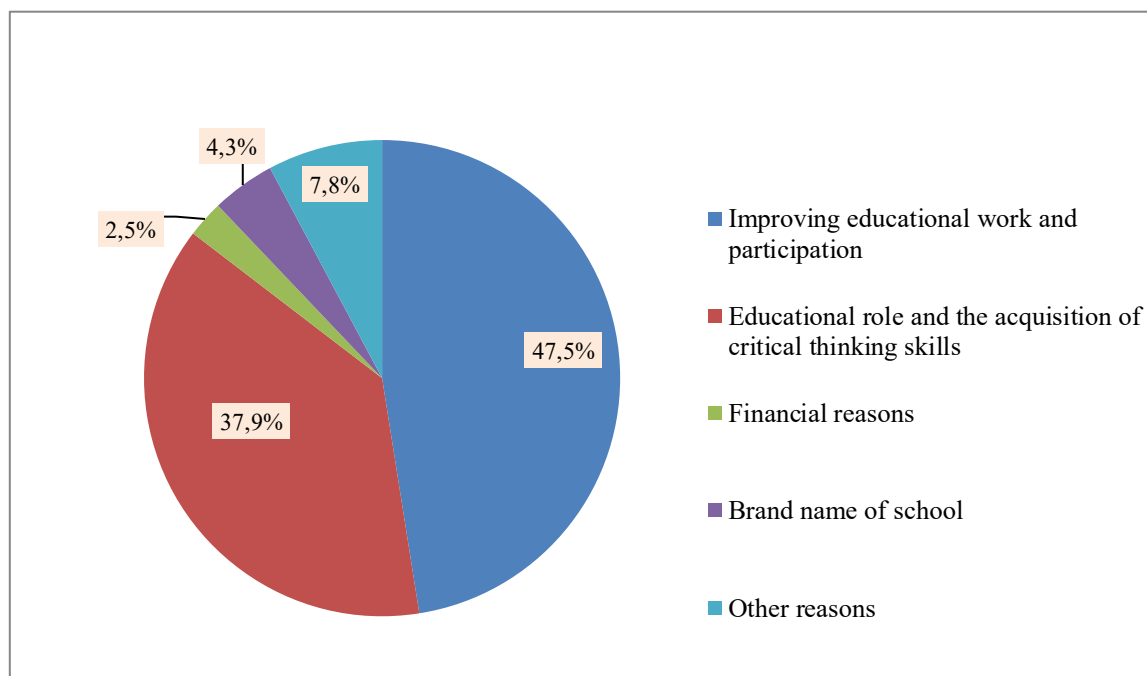


Figure 2. Views on the importance of implementing innovations in primary schools

Table 3 explores the benefits arising from the implementation of innovative programmes that contribute to the qualitative upgrading of primary education. Responses are scored from 1 to 5 (1-strongly disagree, 2-partially disagree, 3-undecided, 4-partially agree, 5-strongly agree) and the higher the average, the more participants agree with the statement. Principals seem to agree that they encourage active participation of students (4.25), that they favor collaborative and experiential learning (4.21) and that they highlight skills and promote creativity of those involved (4.20). At the same time, they agree in terms of developing communication skills and positive attitudes in students (4.20), that they encourage the development of initiatives (4.13), but also that they develop, modernise and reform pedagogical and teaching methods applied (4.06). In addition, principals strongly agree that these programmes enrich students' knowledge (4.01), foster a climate of mutual respect (3.97) and contribute to teachers' professional development (3.83). Finally, between disagreement and neutrality, with a tendency towards the former, they are ranked in terms of the fact that the programmes bring economic benefits (2.34).

Table 3. Benefits of implementing innovative programs

	Mean	Std. Deviation
Enrich students' knowledge	4.01	0.819
Favor collaborative and experiential learning	4.21	0.756
Develop skills and promote creativity of those involved	4.20	0.803
Develop, modernize and reform pedagogical and teaching methods applied	4.06	0.796
Develop communication skills and positive attitudes in children	4.20	0.733
Encourage the active participation of pupils	4.25	0.732
Cultivate a climate of mutual respect and cooperation between principals and teachers	3.97	0.874
Encourage the development of initiatives	4.13	0.753
Contribute to the professional development of teachers	3.83	0.988

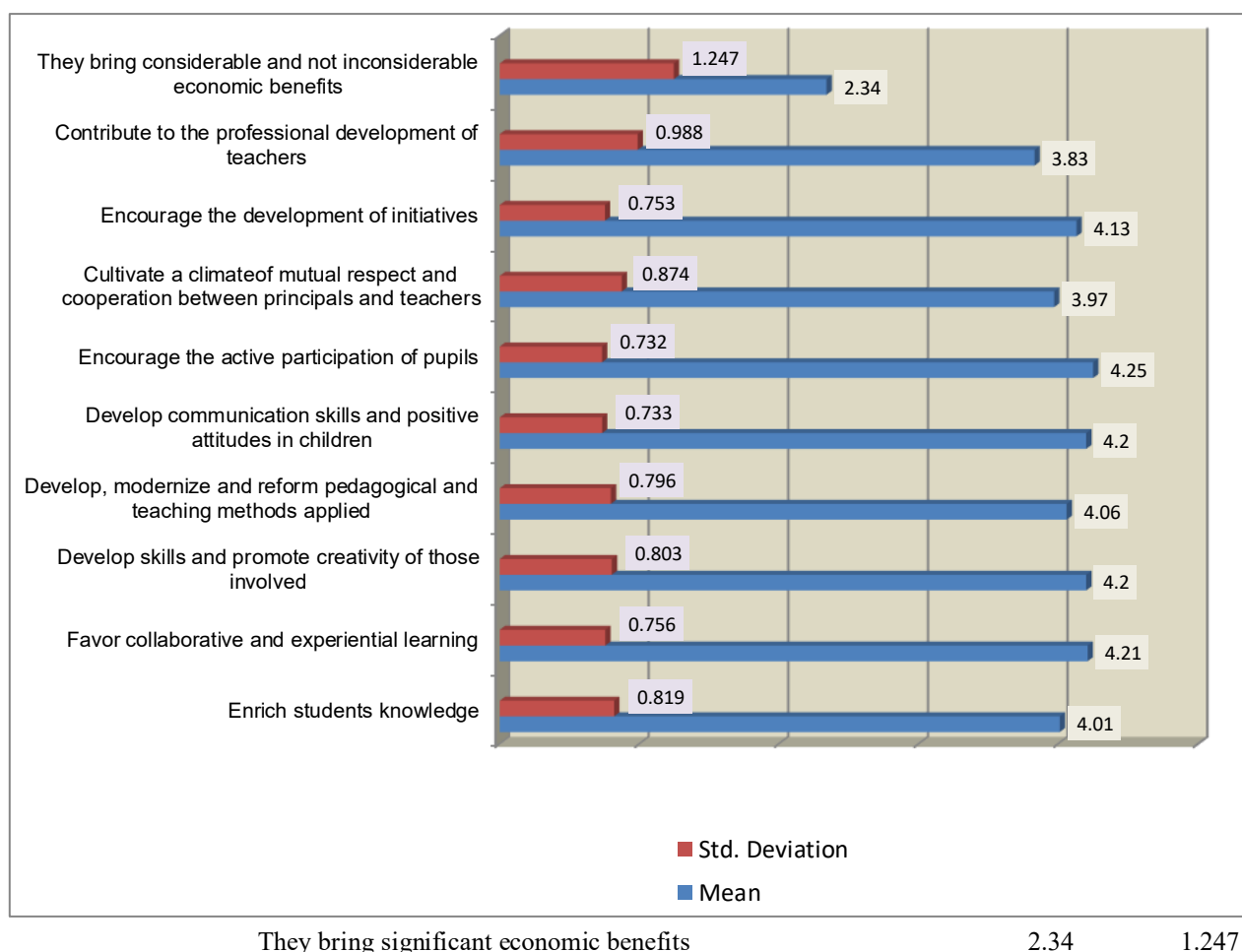


Figure 3. Benefits of implementing innovative programs

Table 4 analyses the respondents' views on innovation and actions based in the school they manage. The answers accept values from 1 to 5 (1-Not at all, 2-Slightly, 3-Moderate, 4-Very much, 5-Very much) and the higher the average, the more positive is the attitude of the managers towards the statement in question. As can be seen from the following results principals are very positive about encouraging teaching staff to implement new innovative ideas and actions (4.25) and new modernised teaching actions and approaches (4.14), while to the same extent they claim that they promote new innovative ideas and actions to solve problems of the school unit (4.01). Moreover, between the answers "Moderate" and "Very", with a tendency towards the latter, they are between "Moderate" and "Very" in terms of the school unit they run emphasizing innovations (3.61). Finally, between "A little" and "Moderate", with a tendency towards the latter, they are placed regarding the fact that they find it difficult to convince the teaching staff to implement an innovative action (2.57).

Table 4. Actions related to innovation and school

	Mean	Std. Deviation
I emphasise innovation	3.61	0.817
I support and promote new innovative ideas and actions to solve the problems of the school unit	4.01	0.781
I encourage the teaching staff to implement new innovative ideas and actions	4.25	0.695
I find it difficult to convince the teaching staff to implement an innovative action	2.57	0.993
I encourage teachers to implement new modernized teaching actions and approaches	4.14	0.733

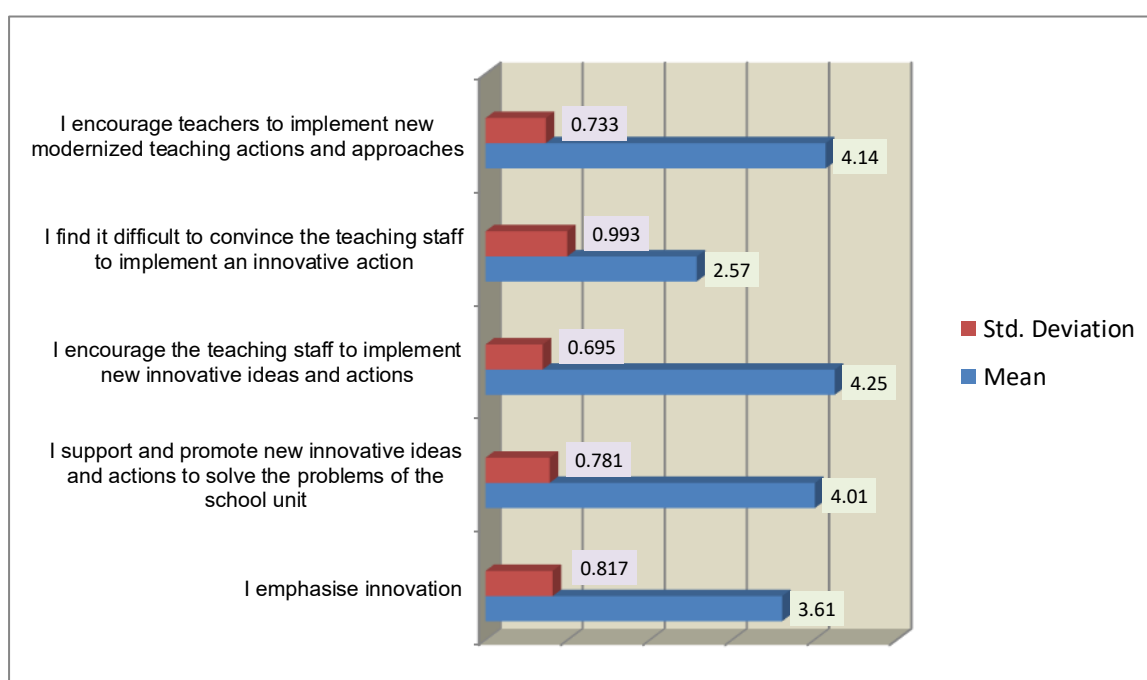


Figure 4. Actions related to innovation and school

5. Discussion

The above results provide important information on the role of educational change and innovation in terms of the quality of education provided in primary education in Greece. According to the findings of the survey, the high influence of the role of leadership with the educational changes/innovations implemented in education was found as a large percentage of respondents responded very positively (Table 1, Figure 1). Besides, due to their prominent role in educational organizations, principal-leaders shape the organizational conditions that functionally influence the management of educational innovations (Crossan & Apaydin, 2010). Therefore, the administrative functions that serve the integration and management of innovations are determined by the dynamic presence of school leadership (Psaras, 2016).

As far as managers' views on innovation are concerned, two dominant views overwhelmingly prevail. According to the first, educational changes/innovations improve the educational work and the participative process while according to the second prevailing view has a decisive influence on educational role and the acquisition of

critical thinking skills (Table 2, Figure 2). In full agreement with these findings, **Karambelas** (2006) argues that some of the key objectives that are achieved through educational innovation are, among others, the application of modern emerging educational platforms (improvement of educational work), the collaboration and active participation of all students, the transmission of knowledge and the development of critical thinking.

Through the introduction of innovative programs in Greek schools, education has entered a new innovative era, where traditional teaching methods are now considered obsolete (Spyropoulou, Anastasaki, Deligianni, Koutra, Louka, Bouras, 2008). At the end of the implementation of a wide range of innovative programs, it was found that they brought about significant changes and benefits for Greek educational system. According to Raptis (2006) noticeable changes were observed, such as the *development of students' skills*, cooperative learning, the cultivation of positive attitudes and behaviours of students, the adoption of values, *the development of initiatives*, problem solving, the cultivation of critical thinking and perceptive skills, the enhancement of students' self-esteem, the acquisition of new knowledge and information and the development of creativity. Furthermore, all innovative programs share some common features such as the application of alternative teaching methods, the use of new technologies as supervisory tools, the approach to knowledge through experiential processes, *the active participation of the student in learning*, *the practical reform of teaching on the part of the teacher and the teaching of learning with "working groups"*. Indeed, in our research study many of the above findings are verified as in Table 3, Figure 3 there is a trend of agreement regarding the active participation of pupils (Mean: 4.13, Std. Deviation: 0.753), develop, modernize and reform pedagogical and teaching methods applied (Mean: 4.06, Std. Deviation: 0.796), encourage the development of initiatives (Mean: 4.13, Std. Deviation: 0.753), develop skills and promote creativity of those involved (Mean: 4.20, Std. Deviation: 0.803) as well as favor collaborative and experiential learning (Mean: 4.21, Std. Deviation: 0.756).

Every innovation and reform is a new challenge, often accompanied by anxiety and uncertainty about the unknown (Everard, Morris & Wilson, 2004). In any case, no drastic reform can be successfully implemented unless realistic targets are set from the outset. By "realism", we mean introducing change in an environment designed on the basis of the actual conditions prevailing in the school organisation, not utopian ones. Therefore, before the leader-principal plans to create an innovation in education, he or she must have done proper and thorough action and implementation research. One thing is for sure, that for it to be successful and accepted by both the school and the social environment, the basic prerequisite is the traits of action (Morrison, 1998) and the degree of overlap and connection between the changes and the needs and prompts of the external environment. Considering the above, one could summarize that the actions that contribute actively and positively to the successful promotion and institutionalization of innovations in educational systems are briefly the characteristics of the leader-manager's physiognomy, the initiatives and the active participation of the teacher in the promotion and implementation of educational changes, the good cooperation between teachers and manager and the general school climate that prevails.

Undoubtedly, according to the results of our research study, the dynamic, innovative and progressive characteristics of the leader's physiognomy are confirmed as in Table 4, Figure 4, leaders encourage educational staff to develop new innovative programs and actions (Mean: 4.25, Std. Deviation: 0.695) as well as encourage teachers to implement new modernized teaching actions and approaches (Mean: 4.14, Std. Deviation: 0.733). In addition, it is concluded that there is good cooperation and a harmonious school climate between teachers and leadership. As leadership support and promote new innovative ideas and actions to solve the problems of the school unit (Mean: 4.01, Std. Deviation: 0.781) and find it difficult to convince the teaching staff to implement an innovative action (Mean: 2.57, Std. Deviation: 0.993). Besides, the negative divergence is indicative of the ease with which leadership both collaborates and persuades teaching staff to implement innovative actions. Finally, the lack of universal agreement on the emphasis on innovation by the leaders (Mean: 3.61, Std. Deviation: 0.817) themselves may also highlight some inhibiting factors that significantly influence both their judgment and the priority they give to innovation over their already heavy administrative workload (Theodoridis & Cyprus Pedagogical Institute, 2009), the inflexible nature of the reform programs and the lack of time required for their proper and effective implementation (Cox, 1987).

6. Limitations of the Research

There are limitations in this research which are important to take seriously. To begin with, this research mostly used closed-ended questionnaires for data collection. Such type of questions limit the respondents' ability to choose possible answers. As a result, there is an increased likelihood of the phenomenon whereby participants may not fully express their views on certain questions they were asked to answer (Zafeiropoulos, 2005:68).

Equally important is the fact that the questionnaire is self-reporting. The exploration and inference was obtained through the personal views of primary school principals on the school units they manage. This 'raises' issues of credibility as the views of headteachers may not fully reflect the school reality while preserving both their administrative authority and the authority of the school they run. It is worth pointing out that it is common for respondents to wish to present a good image of themselves and the school they represent, overlooking true feelings, beliefs and the actual behaviour of themselves and those around them (Robson, 2010). In other words, mainly for ethical reasons, teachers and principals should participate in similar future surveys answering the same questions. Thus, the research approach that will emerge from cross-referencing the views of principals with those of teachers serving in their school will undoubtedly provide more reliable and secure conclusions.

Moreover, the time factor should definitely be included as a limiting factor, as the research was conducted in a strictly given period of time as opposed to a longitudinal research that could probably provide more information and secure conclusions regarding the correlation between leadership styles and educational innovations/changes, which de facto need the necessary time in order to be implemented and then investigated.

In conclusion, the absence of a study of qualitative characteristics in the research also presents several disadvantages. The lack of significant data on the philosophy with which respondents were asked to make responses by the researcher combined with the increased risk of misinterpretation of some questions are two key issues (Howard & Sharp, 2001). However, given the strict research timeframes set and the distance of the research schools from the researcher, it was deemed most appropriate to apply quantitative research.

7. Conclusion

Beyond structural and operational changes, innovation management is largely related to the way leaders/managers ultimately act in terms of organisational coordination, decision making and the practices by which they attempt to inspire and motivate their educational staff (Birkinshaw, Hamel & Mol, 2008). All these changes that take place through the way innovation is managed are key characteristics for an educational organisation that chooses to operate managerially using new processes. Also, the complex and often unclear role of innovations requires interpretative communication skills that a manager must have in order for teachers to understand the necessity of their implementation. Through a shared vision, the principal achieves meaningful change, which gradually develops the culture in which the educational organization chooses to be managed and operate (Birkinshaw, Hamel & Mol, 2008). Equally important is the contribution to simplification mechanisms, as managers are often observed to facilitate their subordinates' understanding and necessity of changes/innovations especially in cases where they are of an obscure and highly ambiguous nature (Marion & Uhl-Bien, 2001).

Undoubtedly, the exercise of a leadership that promotes educational change and innovation presupposes the existence of an "ideal" director/leader, who possesses specific managerial abilities and characteristics (profile). Factors related to the encouragement of initiatives on the part of the educational staff, the development of skills to promote and manage educational changes, mechanisms to promote creativity, the development of innovative programs, new innovative teaching techniques, the development of a positive school climate, as well as the promotion of cooperative, participative and experiential learning. In conclusion, the influence exerted by the leadership as factors such as the profile of the principal combined with the professional training, plays a decisive role both in the promotion and practical implementation of educational changes/innovations in primary education. Nevertheless, we should not neglect important elements of possibly inhibiting factors that significantly influence the leadership regarding the implementation of educational changes/innovations in primary education. It is therefore considered particularly necessary, in order to modernize the educational system through the necessary educational changes/innovations, to draw up and implement a new clear educational policy that will take seriously the issues faced by the school leadership (Pedagogical Institute, 2009).

8. Suggestions for Future Research

The survey compiled as clear a picture as possible of the views of primary school principals on the promotion of educational change and innovation in Greece. However, the study of literature leads to the conclusion that there are no corresponding research approaches that produce similar results for secondary education. Therefore, a similar study in secondary education would provide a more comprehensive picture of what prevails in compulsory education on a nationwide basis. Also, future researchers could deal with a comparative study of the existing research with similar research in foreign countries, in an effort to adopt similar innovative ideas and innovative educational programs in the future in the educational system of Greece.

In addition, future research combining both qualitative and quantitative methodological approaches could confirm the results of the present study. "The use of different methods through their mutual validation can work

cumulatively to accurately capture the same phenomenon under investigation" (Tsiolis, 2013) which becomes absolutely necessary for the completion of a multifaceted and multiprismatic approach to research data.

Considering the contribution of the principal in promoting educational changes/innovations in an educational organization (Lindfors & Hilmola, 2016), it is concluded that it is important to conduct future research in order to investigate the views of principals on the practices and actions that they themselves implement in order to ensure their smooth introduction and effective development. Moreover, it would be equally necessary to place further emphasis on investigating additional variables that involve both enhancing and inhibiting factor in the efforts made by principals/leaders in terms of promoting educational changes/innovations. It would also be useful to examine the sustainability of educational changes/innovations implemented in terms of quality improvement of education based on clear criteria related to leadership styles, administrative practices followed, school climate, innovations implemented by teachers and students' response to them. In conclusion, through the implementation of the above surveys, useful information and conclusions will be extracted in order to use them as feedback both for the improvement of the school organization and for the readjustment of the planning of the promotion and introduction of educational changes/innovations by the competent bodies of the Greek educational policy making

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