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ta' Malta**

LEADING INTENTIONALLY:

**THE HUMAN AND EDUCATIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES OF AN
ASSISTANT HEAD**

Marisa-Victoria Vella Demanuele

A thesis in partial fulfilment of the requirements of a Master in Educational
Leadership and Management at the Faculty of Education

University of Malta

May 2020



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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the role of assistant heads in primary schools from all three sectors of the Maltese educational system. It explores how assistant heads dedicate their time at school to not merely be educational managers whose work ensures school efficiency, but who intentionally transform and empower themselves to gain competence, confidence and credibility to serve as educational leaders. This research draws on a constructivist epistemology and uses a mixed-methods data collection design to collect data from assistant heads and teachers. 39 assistant heads and 130 teachers participated in the quantitative strand while 3 assistant heads and 3 teachers participated in the qualitative part of the research. Findings, presented thematically to answer the research questions, contribute to knowledge of the daily realities, practices and priorities of assistant heads. Moreover, data shed light on how assistant heads enhance their leadership by developing a dual directional axis leadership. This kind of leadership focuses not only on efficiency, but also on using intentional strategies to develop relationships which influence the process of school improvement. Emanating from the findings, this thesis discusses how assistant heads may facilitate a school environment which supports teaching and learning through genuine and intentional commitment, conversations and collaboration. This is primarily done through an ongoing process of learning about themselves and understanding the interpersonal, communication and decision-making skills they require to act and develop as leaders. Secondly, these leaders focus on their ethical beliefs and how these beliefs are translated into ethical actions which enable them to serve as catalysts to motivate and empower others, whilst also paying attention to details every day.

Keywords: Assistant heads; intentional leadership; roles and responsibilities; support strategies; teacher-assistant head relationships; teaching and learning; primary school

*I dedicate this thesis to my mother's memory, the one who taught me to
be strong enough to bend, who held my hand for twenty-seven years but
who holds my heart forever.*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This study would not have been possible without a number of people.

First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr James Calleja PhD (University of Nottingham), lecturer and coordinator at the Department of Leadership for Learning and Innovation within the Faculty of Education, for his meticulous guidance, for being within arms' reach throughout this study and for encouraging me to take on a leadership role.

I am also grateful to all those who responded to the surveys and to interviewees, as they spared time to provide me with valuable information and insightful viewpoints.

My thanks also go to officers at the Ministry for Education and Employment and at the Secretariat for Catholic Education for providing me with documents and the information I required to fully understand the research context and the role of the assistant head.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to my husband Josef, to my sons Gianluca and Michele, and to my dad John, for helping me throughout these three years in the best way they could, each in their own way. Final thanks go to my friends for cheering me on.

Thank you!

Marisa-Victoria Vella Demanuele

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1 Introduction

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Personal and Professional Experiences

1.2 Background to the Study

1.2.1 Education in Malta

1.2.2 Primary schooling

1.2.3 Decentralisation and reform

1.2.4 Assistant heads of schools

1.3 The Area of Research

1.4 Research Aims

1.5 Research Questions

1.6 Significance of the Study

1.7 Structure of the Thesis

1.0 Introduction

This chapter provides a snapshot of myself, as the teacher, assistant head of school and researcher, and describes the context to better present and situate the issue under study. It goes on to outline the niche that the research is trying to understand and the contribution it can make to the area of study. Research aims and research questions are listed and the structure of this thesis is outlined.

1.1 Personal and Professional Experiences

Having completed a Bachelor's degree in Education (Hons.), majoring in English and Early Middle Years in 1997, I started my teaching career in a local independent primary school, teaching a Year 5 class. In 2010, I moved to a local boys' church primary school. After teaching at Year 6 level for seven years, I was offered to revive a literacy department in the same school. I battled with the decision to leave 'my' classroom and to no longer having 'my' students for months, until I realised that I was mentally gearing up to this different challenge and had already started looking forward to new learning and new experiences. Indeed, teaching students whose ages ranged from 5 to 11 years proved to be a very enriching professional experience. In 2018, half way through the year as a literacy teacher, and with a newly found freedom from endless correcting, I enrolled for a master's degree course in Educational Leadership and Management at the University of Malta. Exposure to educational leadership literature and meeting educators from all sectors of our local tripartite system, some of whom already formed part of the senior leadership team, I started yearning to serve at school in a different way. It was then that I decided to apply for a post of an assistant head. I was accepted at a local girls' church school in the summer of 2018. As a newly appointed

assistant head, the move from a teaching role to a position of leadership led me to reflect on my role in our school. More importantly, I was willing and looking forward to work closely with my colleagues, be it other senior leadership team members, as well as other educators at school. Yet, I was particularly undecided about what they expected of me.

Without any professional preparation for this role (apart from the professional knowledge gained from the leadership course I was pursuing), and being overwhelmed by the huge amount of managerial tasks at the beginning of the scholastic year, I reflected on the broad range of responsibilities listed in an assistant head's job description. This analysis helped me distinguish between the operational and the strategic duties of an assistant head and it led me to prioritise. As I believe that "the primary work of educational leadership is to guide improvements in learning" (Copland & Knapp, 2006, p. 3), on top of my list of priorities were intentional conversations to build and develop relationships with my new colleagues. I also did my utmost to be present in classrooms, to slowly but surely involve myself in the day-to-day needs of pupils and staff, and to promote collaborative working for better learning outcomes. Nevertheless, gaining credibility from the teaching staff also necessitates good managerial and administrative skills. The dilemma encountered in finding the right balance of managerial and leadership behaviours, in order to be an efficient and an effective assistant head, justifies my choice of topic for this dissertation.

1.2 Background to the Study

1.2.1 Education in Malta

Education in Malta is compulsory from five through to the age of sixteen, as is defined in Chapter 327 of the Laws of Malta – The Education Act (Eurydice, 2019). There are three educational institutions: state, church and independent schools. As at academic year 2016-2017, 57.60% of all students in pre-primary, primary and secondary education attended state-administered schools, 29.2% attended church schools while the remaining 13.2% attended independently run schools (Figure 1.1).

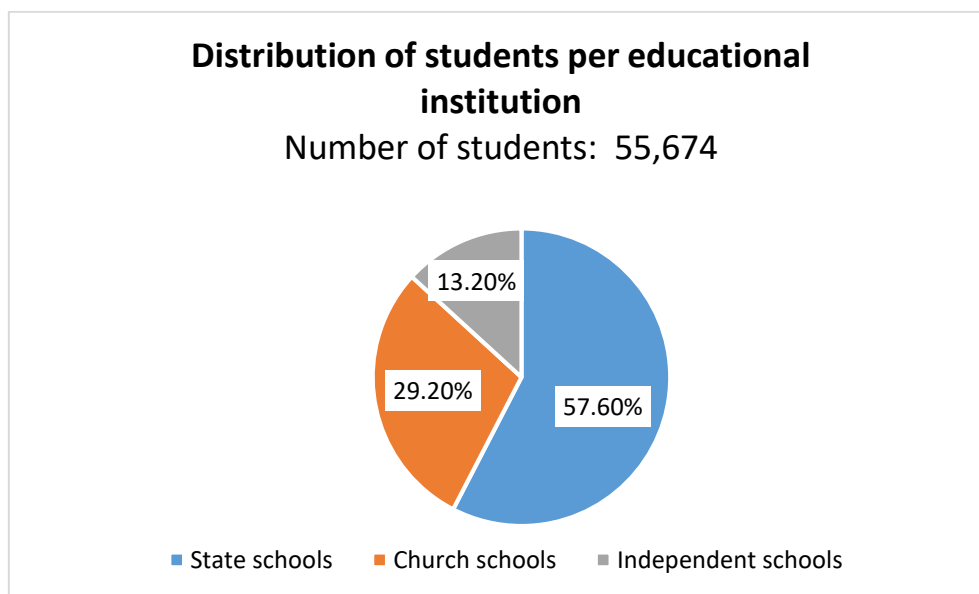


Figure 1.1: Percentage distribution of students by educational sector: academic year 2016/17 (NSO, 2018, p. 13)

Whilst acknowledging that the “considerable amount of autonomy” (Cauchi Cuschieri, 2007, p. 66) of each of the above mentioned institutions may result in a variation in the educational provision, all need to abide by the official Education Act and the National Minimum

Curriculum (Bonello, 2012, p. xi). Ellul (2015, p. 254) adds that implementation of the National Minimum Curriculum, is also “subject to the ethos of the individual school”.

1.2.2 Primary schooling

The first six years of compulsory education are covered in primary schooling. Students attending primary education are between five and eleven years of age. State and independent primary schools provide co-education, whereas church schools predominantly provide single-gender education. All education provision aims to achieve the learning outcomes set by the Learning Outcomes Framework (MEDE, 2017) and is aligned to the four broad objectives of the Framework for Education Strategy for Malta 2014-2024 (Figure 1.2).



Figure 1.2: The four goals of the Education Strategy for Malta 2014-2024

Figure 1.3 shows that 46.3% of enrolled students in academic year 2016/2017 attended school at primary level.

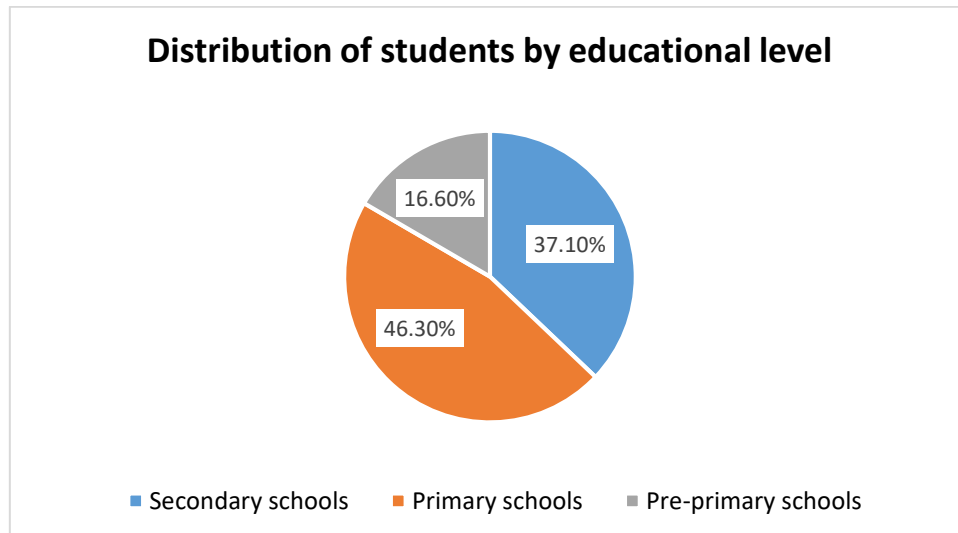


Figure 1.3: Percentage distribution of students by educational level: academic year 2016/17(NSO, 2018, p. 13)

In the primary cycle, teachers have a total of 5.5 hours contact time on full school days and the student population in a class does not exceed a total of 28 students. Primary school teachers feel the pressure brought about by having long contact hours leading to isolation from other professionals, having to differentiate teaching to cater for a spectrum of abilities in class, and from the lack of time for “collaborative professionalism” (Hargreaves & O’Connor, 2017), that is time in which teachers and educators are involved in demanding dialogue and continuous inquiry to transform teaching and learning. Hence, the need for senior leadership teams to provide class-based assistance to help teachers deal with day-to-day situations, and to “create more structured opportunities for teachers to engage in collaborative endeavours” (Vella, 2018, April 29th). As Attard Tonna and Calleja (2018, p. 34)

argue, this is needed so that teachers “may believe that together they can have a greater impact on all students”.

Statistics provided by the NSO in January 2019, reveal that 1994 teachers are employed in local primary schools. Furthermore, assistant heads employed in Maltese primary schools total 253. Statistics obtained from the Directorate For Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability and from the Secretariat for Catholic Education in March 2020 are shown in Table 1.1.

Sector	Number of assistant heads in the primary sector
State	180 (131 females, 49 males)
Church	57 (49 females, 8 males)
Independent	16

Table 1.1: Number of assistant heads in Maltese primary schools

1.2.3 Decentralisation and reform

Over the past couple of decades, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment promoted a decentralisation of the educational system (Zammit Ciantar, 1996) and tried to cultivate a culture of participation at school level (Cutajar, 2007). Furthermore, Cutajar (2007, p. 8) adds that “underlying the ministry’s vision, is the concept that reform and innovation are an essential element to satisfy both the economy as well as national aspirations”. Such reforms resulted in devolved responsibilities and enhanced accountabilities to the level of schools (Bufalino, 2017).

Fletcher (2004, p. 650) states that such stretched responsibilities call for “post-heroic leadership” in which leadership responsibility of schools is stretched over a range of different actors, namely the senior leadership team. This team is composed of the head of school and a number of assistant heads of school, as defined by a school’s capacity building entitlement based on the number of learners who attend the school. Table 1.2 depicts Clause 29.3 which defines a Maltese school’s entitlement of assistant heads as per sectoral agreement between the Government of Malta and the Malta Union of Teachers (MEDE, 2017).

29.3 Provided that by 2022, schools will reach the following entitlement for Assistant Heads when considering the population at the end of February:

- (i) All Schools minimum of one Assistant Head;
- (ii) Schools with over 125 students two Assistant Heads;
- (iii) Schools with over 250 students three Assistant Heads;
- (iv) Schools with over 375 students four Assistant Heads;
- (v) Schools with over 500 students five Assistant Heads;
- (vi) Schools with over 625 students six Assistant Heads;
- (vii) Schools with over 750 students seven Assistant Heads;
- (viii) Schools with over 875 students eight Assistant Heads;

Table 1.2: Clause 29.3 of the Agreement between the Government of Malta and the Malta Union of Teachers

1.2.4 Assistant heads of schools

Eligibility to apply for the post of an assistant head requires having not less than ten scholastic years teaching experience (as per sectoral agreement, 2017). The role of the assistant head has traditionally been associated with having a maintenance function rather than a

developmental function with a 'real' leadership function (Weller & Weller, 2002). However, the sectoral agreement between the Government of Malta and the Malta Union of Teachers (2017, p. 49-50) attributes to the position a leadership role as well as an organisational role. This contrasts with the 'For All Children to Succeed' policy issued by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment (MEDE, 2005), in which there is no mention of assistant heads as key personnel within a school. Clause 29 of the former agreement, describes the core responsibilities of the assistant head and these include day-to-day operations of the school, as well as curriculum-related and school-development activities, responsibility for ensuring educational entitlement to learners, meeting the needs of all students, creating a safe and cognitively stimulating environment, nurturing a community of professional educators, as well as mentoring duties.

Table 1.3 shows that there is notable overlap between the job description of assistant heads and that of heads of school (2017, p. 52). Both job descriptions imply that heads and assistant heads are to work 'together' to sustain the intensity of organisational routines, orchestrate educational outcomes and to satisfy Clause 9 (j) of The Education Act, which states that schools should "establish good leadership and management to promote a team culture among the school's senior management team and staff" (MEAE, 2016, p. 8).

The core responsibility of the Assistant Head of School (AHoS) is to assist and deputise for the Head of School (HoS) in pursuance of his/her role as the school's Educational and Operational Leader by	The core responsibility of the Head of School (HoS) is to serve as the Educational and Operational Leader of the respective school's community, with the ultimate aim of ensuring a high
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<p>undertaking such professional and administrative duties as are delegated by the HoS. As part of the Senior Management Team, led by the HoS, the AHoS is also responsible for the fostering of a climate of genuine collegiality amongst community members, setting the pace through active engagement in the development of a Community of Professional Educators, including through School Development Planning(Agreement, 2017, p. 49).</p>	<p>quality and equitable educational provision which meets the diverse needs of all learners. Together with the other members of the Senior Management Team, the HoS is also responsible to foster a climate of genuine collegiality amongst community members, setting the pace through purposeful leadership and active nurturing of a Community of Professional Educators, including through focussed leadership in School Development Planning(Agreement, 2017, p. 52).</p>
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Table 1.3: Job description of heads and assistant heads of schools

Despite the considerable overlap of responsibilities, Harris, Muijs and Crawford (2003, p. 2) state that “the leadership potential of assistant heads in many schools is not being fully released or exploited”. Harris et al. (2003, p. 3) continue that there is no consistency in the role and, while “in some schools, assistant heads have a central part in the decision-making process and have the possibility of broadening their leadership capabilities and responsibilities”, in other schools the head does not extend the responsibility for developing the school and takes decisions with little consultation. OECD (2008, p. 78) reports that the extent to which the leadership role is extended to assistant heads “is limited by the particular scheme of management of the employing authority”. As a result, “assistant headship is

possibly the most fluid position in schools today” (Calleja Sciberras, 2018, p. 40), and as a consequence, those in the role may experience role tensions.

1.3 The Area of Research

The Minister of Education states that “working in a classroom in today’s world has never been more difficult” (MEDE, 2017, p. 2). Indeed, in addressing students’ learning needs, teachers today need more day-to-day support from the school leadership team; support that is specifically focused on improving teaching and learning. This research looks into how school leadership has evolved to address these ever-increasing challenges. Sustaining educational improvement, reforms and initiatives is too demanding to be within the remit of the school head alone, and “their workload is becoming unmanageable” (Mackler, 1996, p. 84).

This research study examines how assistant heads of primary schools can extend their traditionally operational role to share instructional leadership and, as a result, increase a school’s success as a learning organisation for both teachers and students. It discusses how such empowerment rests on the shoulders of both the head of school, who needs to be willing to “cultivate new leaders to accept part of the challenges of school improvement and student achievement” (Kaplan & Owings, 1999, p. 81), but mostly on the intentional commitment of the individual assistant head of school. To become “competent, confident individuals of character whose actions are consciously designed to achieve the end goal” (Nelson, 2016, p. 25), the aspiring instructional leader needs to be willing to learn the professional knowledge and skills to be capable of supporting teachers. Adopting a mixed-methods approach, this research explores how, despite daily challenges, assistant heads provide professional support to better serve not only teachers, but also students and their parents.

1.4 Research Aims

This study sheds light on the increasing relevance of the role of the assistant head in schools. Intense demands are placed on education, hence the emergence of the newer trend of having what Fullan (2002) terms 'many leaders' for successful school management. This study aims to provide a lens which focuses on the potential benefits of the role of an assistant head, and how it can create closer links with teachers working in their classrooms.

This study also explores the existing practices of assistant heads. Their role includes both an operational function as well as a strategic function. They are required to liaise and work with educators at school and other professionals from other organisations but they also need to carry out managerial tasks. This wide range of roles raises a number of questions, namely: Are assistant heads focusing on the day-to-day organisational running of schools without allocating enough time to form and develop relationships? Are they involved in the teaching and learning that is taking place, or do they only visit classrooms solely to run errands and to carry out observation duties? Do assistant heads practise care ethics, and shoulder responsibility for developing human and educational leadership – forming relationships with staff, students and other stakeholders to lead intentionally? Do they share the responsibility with teachers to improve teaching and learning?

This study also looks at teachers' perspectives on the role of assistant heads. Hence, it values the voice of teachers in an attempt to understand their day-to-day experiences, needs for support and expectations. The central aim, here, is to uncover how teachers experience the leadership role of assistant heads by obtaining data related to pertinent questions, such as: What are teachers' expectations of an assistant head? What would they like from their

assistant head? Do teachers think assistant heads are relegated to the management role of day-to-day running of a school or do they feel they are a supportive link between the classroom and the direction of the school? Do they feel that assistant heads offer appropriate support to develop and improve teaching? Do teachers view their assistant heads as being attentive, receptive and empathic to their needs?

1.5 Research Questions

Based on the aims outlined above, this research attempts to answer the following four questions:

- Q1. How do assistant heads juggle the broad range of responsibilities? What are their main priorities?
- Q2. Which strategies do assistant heads use to build relationships with educators and to foster collaboration?
- Q3. What are teachers' perceptions on the role of assistant heads? How do they define their relationship with assistant heads and how are these relationships created, cultivated and sustained?
- Q4. What kind of educational support do teachers receive from assistant heads and how is this support perceived in relation to improving student learning outcomes?

1.6 Significance of the Study

The findings of this study will benefit school senior leadership teams in a number of ways. As Harris et al. (2003, p. 2) note, "literature pertaining to deputy and assistant heads is

substantially smaller than that relating to heads or principals". This study provides knowledge and sheds light on the existing role definition and current practices of assistant heads in primary schools. It explains how intentional strategies and opportunities to develop this leadership role may release the full potential of assistant heads. Such an approach to leadership may be a catalyst to facilitate the implementation of initiatives and reforms aimed at improving educational outcomes, to contribute to the development of social capital and culture of a school, and ultimately to improve student learning.

1.7 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is organised into five chapters, namely Chapter 1: Introduction; Chapter 2: Literature Review; Chapter 3: Methodology; Chapter 4: Presentation of Findings and Chapter 5: Summary and Conclusion. Each contributes to the overall aim of the study as follows:

Chapter 1: This chapter identifies the worldview of the researcher and situates the study by describing the local context in which the study is carried out. It explains what the research is about and why the researcher felt the need to carry out this study. The research aims and questions are listed, following which it describes how the thesis is laid out.

Chapter 2: This chapter reviews literature related to the research study, that is, the role of an assistant head in a primary educational context. It relates how intentionality in developing leadership characteristics, competences and strategies can consequently enable actions which strengthen the school community and promote school effectiveness.

Chapter 3: This chapter describes the study's ontological and epistemological beliefs and explains the research problem. It discusses and justifies the research methodology and methods used. It goes on to describe the four data collection tools employed and the research phases. A description of the research participants is provided and this is followed by a discussion on how data obtained from both quantitative as well as qualitative methods were analysed. This chapter also highlights ethical considerations and the boundaries and limitations of the study.

Chapter 4: This chapter presents findings drawn on a constructivist paradigm and based on hermeneutics, which attempts to interpret the meaning of something from the standpoint or situation of the research participants. Data is presented in themes that emerged inductively throughout the data analysis phase. These are presented through a thematic analysis.

Chapter 5: The concluding chapter gives a summary of the main findings, highlights its contribution to knowledge, gives suggestions for further research and describes the impact this study has left on the researcher.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

2 Literature Review

- 2.0 Introduction
- 2.1 From Single to Distributed School Leadership
- 2.2 Overall Purpose and Position of an Assistant Head
 - 2.2.1 The operational role
 - 2.2.2 The strategic role
- 2.3 Making Time for Intentional Leadership
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2.0 Introduction

This chapter reviews literature to describe the traditional form of the role of an assistant head and its evolution, as well as factors that influenced its reconceptualization. According to Harvey (1994, p. 15), the future role of assistant headship lies in the hands of current practitioners and “it becomes important that they develop strategies for empowerment”.

This chapter explores how assistant heads can be enabled to improve school effectiveness. It defines and describes ‘*intentionality*’ in the process of developing leadership characteristics, values, competences and actions that improve the school community – aspects that impact on student learning.

2.1 From Single to Distributed School Leadership

Irvine and Brundrett (2016, p. 87) describe schools as complex organisations in which “there is too much to be done in terms of leadership and management for it to be the preserve of one person”. Indeed, as reported by Cutajar (2007), the last two decades have seen constant policy change (changes to better the quality of education provision, to cater for the social and international dimension, to strategise for innovation, and to support the individual student) which has intensified the responsibilities and workload of a head of school. As Bezzina (2013, p. 1) puts it, with the ongoing introduction of reforms “educational authorities are expecting more and more of school heads and of teachers in their attempts to introduce change and implement the national curricula”.

The increased workload has led to a shift in the landscape of school leadership, from single to more distributed leadership. Gronn (2010, p. 70) states that schools “have seen a normative switch from heroics to distribution” and Harris (2004, p. 1) argues that “successful heads now recognize the limitations of a singular leadership approach”. Consequently, Kahl (2004, p. 2) redefines leadership as “achieving a goal through a team”, and central to this is the role of the assistant head. Hence, whereas the head of school was previously considered as leading single-handedly, with the increase of responsibilities, work has largely been resolved through distributing school leadership demands between a senior leadership team.

2.2 Overall Purpose and Position of an Assistant Head

To mitigate the increased responsibilities and work shifted onto schools, the leadership post of an assistant head was created. Harris et al. (2003, p. 6) state that “in the last decade, the assistant head teacher’s role has secured a much stronger institutional presence”. The scope was that of widening school leadership in order to cope with the new challenges, changes and tasks placed on schools. There is, in fact, no shortage of challenges in today’s schools. Some originate from mandates aimed at improving the quality of schooling to better equip students for a fast-changing world. Twenty-first century schools must also attempt to provide equity and to treat learning as both an individual as well as a collective activity. There is therefore an emerging demand for learning arrangements to better meet individual needs through collaborative forces. The school senior leadership team is expected to not only put these measures into practice, but also to achieve them through seamless collaboration and communication between all stakeholders.

Traditionally, specific responsibilities delegated to the assistant head were decided and handed over by the head of school. Austin and Brown (1970, p. 11) define an assistant head's role as "whatever the principal wants". As a result, the responsibilities delegated by the head of school were context specific and usually characterised by a lack of understanding, on the assistant heads' part, of the purpose of the role. Reed and Himmler (1985, p. 69) describe how assistant heads were "mainly associated with the maintenance of organisational stability" and whose efforts were directed towards "ensuring organisational regularity and remedying situations interpreted as upsetting organisational routines".

More recent descriptions of the role include a broader range of responsibilities which include greater involvement in instructional leadership. For example, as Harvey (1994, p. 22) contends, assistant heads "should direct their efforts towards instructional effectiveness as well as organisational effectiveness of the school". This is in line with the local Job Descriptions Handbook (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 34), which defines the purpose and position of an assistant head as one whose responsibility is to be 'efficient' in the management of the human, physical and financial resources of the school, and also 'effective' in offering professional leadership in the implementation and development of the National Curriculum Framework (Figure 2.1). The implication is that the leadership role of an assistant head is flexible since they could be anywhere on a continuum between operational managers (managing daily tasks and using positional authority to get things done efficiently) and strategic leaders (using leadership skills and performing those tasks which are essential to persuade and influence others to share a vision which improves instructional effectiveness). As Weller and Weller (2002, p. xiii) explain, "in no other position does one walk such a fine line between the maintenance and survival needs of the school and the needs and demands

of the students, teachers and principals”. Both ends of this continuum shall be dealt with in sections 2.2.1 and 2.2.2.

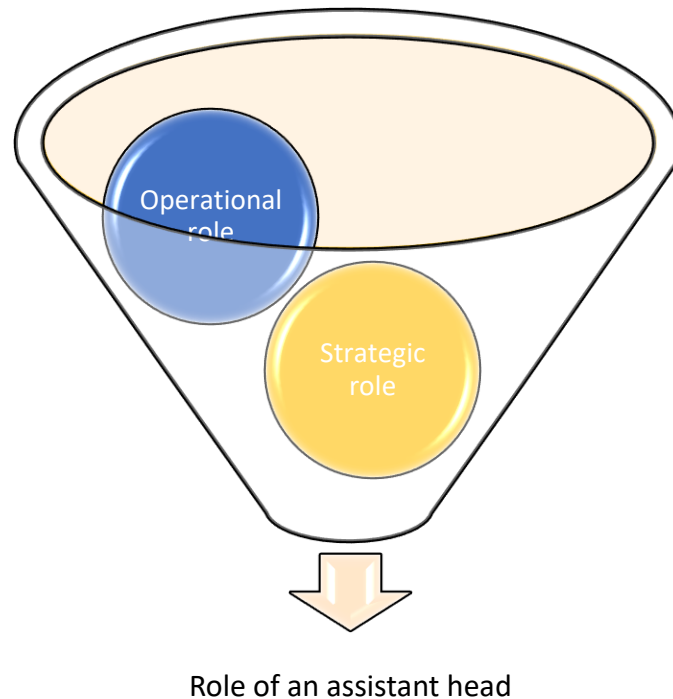


Figure 2.1: Distinct yet interdependent roles of an assistant head

2.2.1 The operational role

Cantwell (1993) describes the operational role of an assistant head in terms of administrative routines which consist of three distinct sets of responsibilities, namely: (i) clerical duties such as attendance; (ii) organisational duties such as timetables; and (iii) student welfare responsibilities such as discipline and non-classroom activities. Such a description reflects Koru’s (1993, p. 67) view of the role as “centering round routine clerical tasks, custodial duties and discipline” and whose activities “are characterized by brevity, variety and fragmentation”. Also, in investigating the perception of primary school assistant head responsibilities, Harvey (1995, p. 10) concludes that “such administrative routines and staff management tasks are

seen as components of the traditional facet of the role” since historically, “the assistant head’s role emerged from the passing on of an overflow of administrative tasks to a senior teacher in order to lessen the workload of the head of school”.

This traditional facet warrants organisational stability and efficiency, hence, associated with the maintenance of the status quo rather than addressed towards a desired improvement. Nonetheless, as Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris and Hopkins (2006, p. 11) point out, stability and improvement have a synergistic relationship since “it is difficult to leap forward from an unstable foundation”. This implies that although administrative and management duties may seem mundane, time-consuming and frustrating (as they reduce valuable time which could be dedicated to instructional leadership), operational tasks are vital for the smooth running of schools.

2.2.2 The strategic role

Whereas the operational function of an assistant head’s role concentrates on maintaining daily processes and administrative routines which are central to organisational efficiency, “the strategic category includes all those activities which have an eye on the future development of the school” (Garrett & McGeachie, 1999, p. 71-72). This implies that the strategic role of an assistant head focuses on what education is ‘for’ rather than on ‘how’ to run a school. Therefore, the focus is “more strongly on instructional effectiveness rather than organisational efficiency” (Harvey, 1994, p. 22). Kaplan and Owings (1999, p. 83) provide a list of typical duties of strategic instructional leadership that include “designing the vision, setting goals, coaching and evaluating teachers, creating the master schedule, developing and

managing curriculum and instruction programmes, communicating with stakeholders, using data to make decisions and facilitating professional development for teachers”.

The trend, since the late nineties, is that assistant heads have continuously shared more responsibility for school leadership (Harris et al., 2003; Pounder, 2005) and have had a stronger developmental function. This redimensioning, which encompasses both an operational role as well as the role of a strategic leader, is deemed valuable as research findings conclude that “when assistant heads work collaboratively with principals, not only as instructional leaders, but also as vision co-designers and teacher coaches, there is evidence of improvement in teacher effectiveness and student achievement” (Kaplan & Owings, 1999, p. 83). A study by West (1992) also shows that assistant heads have been eager to take on more leadership responsibility, even if this inevitably placed demands on their time as they needed to juggle both roles.

Weller and Weller (2002, p. 50) contend that “assistant heads are both managers as well as leaders” but the emphasis placed on the former and the latter is still heavily dependent on the leadership approach of the head of school, and more so, on the intentional commitment of the individual assistant head. Indeed, “moving from manager to leader, requires commitment, time and a personal plan that includes core leadership competencies and self-made opportunities to practise effective leadership” (Weller & Weller, 2002, p. 14).

2.3 Making Time for Intentional Leadership

An assistant head’s position and responsibility “requires the right mix of both managerial and leadership behaviours in order to be effective” (Weller & Weller, 2002, p. 36). As previously

discussed, the 'between' position of an assistant head makes the leadership role difficult as their day may easily be consumed by daily management chores and urgencies. Therefore, in order to fulfil the role effectively, assistant heads need to have a tangible plan not to let their time be taken up by matters unconnected to leadership. Since creating a leadership agenda lies to a lesser or greater extent in the hands of the individual assistant head, Weller and Weller (2002, p. 29) state that "one can be both a leader and a manager, but it depends on the person in that position".

If "the primary work of educational leadership is to guide improvements in learning" (Copland & Knapp, 2006, p. 3), teaching and learning need to be a visible priority of an assistant head. Unless there is a conscious and intentional decision, "in their preoccupation with the daily work of managing, educational leaders can easily lose sight of learning" (Copland & Knapp, 2006, p. 31). Kubicek (2012, p. 43) states that "the opposite of intentional is accidental, but an organisation does not grow accidentally". Hence, growth is more likely to happen by having an intentional focus that aims towards raising their own leadership status.

Regardless of how much authority and work is granted by the head of school, assistant heads must believe they can make a difference (Denham & Michael, 1981), and they need to "know and focus on what is important" (Sergiovanni, 2005, p. 112). If the higher purpose of an assistant head is "to build coherent, collaborative educational systems that deliver equitable learning to all students" (Copland & Knapp, 2006, p. xiii), then teaching and learning should define assistant heads' priorities and their intentional strategy should focus on leading to build a pathway to enable and sustain learning. In Fullan and Hargreaves' (1996, p. 82) view, assistant heads "must demonstrate the intestinal fortitude to push themselves to create the

professional learning environments they want". Hence, in leadership and management, assistant heads must make a conscious effort, plan and implement strategies to develop (i) first and foremost themselves as leaders; (ii) their overt behaviour to build consequential positive relationships; and (iii) they are also required to remain focused on their higher purpose, which is leading for learning. Each of these shall be discussed in sections 2.4, 2.5 and 2.6 respectively.

2.4 Developing Leadership Competence, Character, and Confidence

Definitions of leadership focus on the behaviour of leaders and "traits of leaders have thoroughly been studied to identify the work and personal characteristics of leaders and the skill traits associated with leader effectiveness" (Weller & Weller, 2002, p. 2). As stated by Leithwood et al. (2006, p. 67), "knowing what successful school leaders actually do is extraordinarily valuable". For this reason, this section looks at educational literature to review what Markham, Markham and Witt Smith (2015) call 'self-leadership', that is, strategies individuals use to improve their own leadership capacities and how being intentional about personal growth helps assistant heads raise their levels of leadership. According to Sergiovanni (2009), leadership is a personal thing. Furthermore, Porter (1996, p. 3) argues that change needs to start from within and "assistant heads need to view themselves as change agents, not keepers of the status quo". By focusing on the 'head' and 'heart' of their leadership, educational leaders can develop themselves to become "competent, confident individuals of character whose actions are consciously designed to achieve the end goal" (Nelson, 2016, p. 25). The 'hand' of leadership, which refers to the decisions leaders take, is then taken in the light shed by the other two dimensions of leadership, namely the 'head' and

the 'heart'. All three dimensions need to work in synergy to ensure the best possible outcome and leadership effectiveness. Indeed, as Leithwood et al. (2006, p. 8) claim, "what leaders do, depends on what they think and feel".

2.4.1 Developing competence

Crowther and Limerick (1998, p. 16) argue that "the principle of lifelong learning needs to be upheld and practised by the leader" and in agreement with this, Maxwell (2003, p. 17) states that "to keep leading, one needs to keep learning". Weller and Weller (2002, p. 38) emphasise that for leaders to succeed, it is essential that they are "constant consumers of research". In so doing, a leader develops the necessary "expert power" (Weller & Weller, 2002, p. 6) which is the competence and technical ability required to do the job, as well as the "mature wisdom" that, according to Gardner (1990), allows leaders to provide clear direction and a sense of purpose to their staff. Figure 2.2 lists the specific knowledge areas required by an assistant head of school according to Glanz (2004, p. 23).

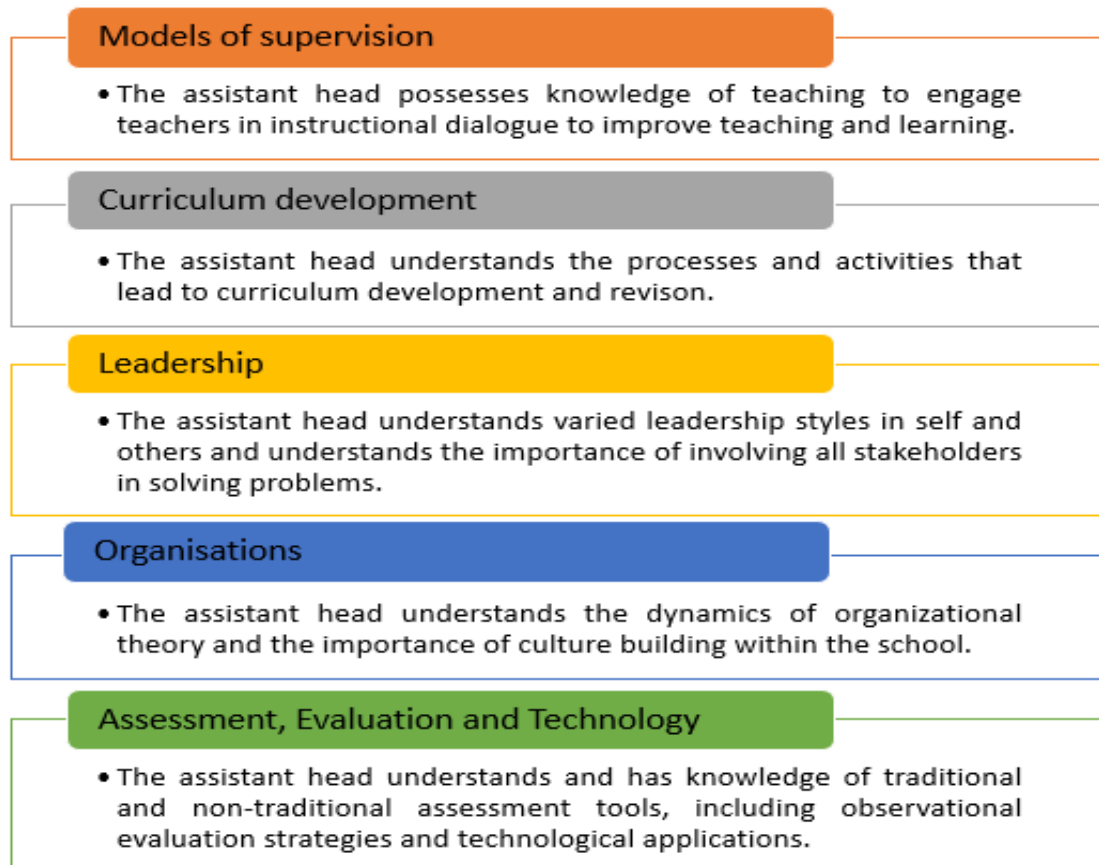


Figure 2.2: Glanz's (2004) specific knowledge needs of an assistant head

School leaders can add to their knowledge base both through 'out of context' learning opportunities, such as when one receives training at a workshop or a conference, as well as 'in context' learning, which takes place in the actual working environment. Regarding 'in context' learning, Fullan (2002, p. 16) states that this "has the greatest potential payoff because it is more specific, situational and social". For Kahl (2004, p. 32), the learning context is essential and advises leaders to "go where the knowledge is", and this is most effectively done when assistant heads are present, work alongside and listen to people.

Although professional development is necessary, Scerri (2013) argues that leaders' decisions are not only based on their knowledge, but they are also based on the beliefs and the values that the leader upholds. Indeed, for Scerri (2013, p. 92), "some see personal and spiritual development as synonymous with leadership development". This implies that leaders should

not only seek to focus on their cognitive development but they also need to strengthen and develop their character and capacity to be aware of, control and reflect on the values underlying their actions.

2.4.2 Reflecting on and developing character traits required for leadership

Whilst stating that intelligence and technical knowledge are entry-level requirements of leadership, Goleman (1998, p. 82) argues that “a person can have the best training in the world, an incisive analytical mind, and an endless supply of smart ideas, but he still won’t be a good leader”. Hence, self-awareness, self-regulation and empathy, are key character traits of effective and successful leaders. This is also echoed by Bezzina (2012) who questions how many people in key decision-making positions possess the character traits and qualities required for leadership. Referring to the local scenario, Bezzina (2013, p. 15) claims that “we have failed to understand the true meaning of leadership” because we tend to focus mainly on developing technical proficiency while disregarding the area of character.

Character is defined in the dictionary as the aggregate features and traits that form the individual nature of some person or thing. Plato, the Greek philosopher, is quoted to have said that “the first and best victory is to conquer self”. In conquering self, which is a process of identifying core beliefs, attitudes and emotions, leaders may be better enabled to bring out the best in others. Scerri (2013, p. 91) refers to “an inner edge that leaders must cultivate by working just as vigorously inside themselves as they do on the outside, material world of schooling”. In Weller and Weller (2002, p. 38), school leaders are encouraged to be intentional in taking time out to reflect on their character and to understand one’s own behaviour in order to better fulfil their responsibilities. Furthermore, they encourage leaders

to be more self-aware since “the more you understand your behaviour, the more you can manage it”. Vella and Mifsud (2013, p. 61-65) examine seven leadership characteristics that are conducive towards creating a warm school culture which helps the school move forward. These are: knowing and liking oneself, taking control, being flexible and positive, accepting reality and living fully. Also, Leithwood et al. (2006, p. 74-75) review the ‘big five’ leaders’ personality factors which are: emotional stability, extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness and openness to experience.

Assistant heads are oftentimes overwhelmed by the tasks at hand, but if they are self-aware and self-regulatory, they may earn themselves “referent power” (Weller & Weller, 2002, p. 6), that is, “power that stems from the ability of a leader to acquire a following through charisma”. This implies that ones’ personality traits can attract and win people over. Lunenburg and Ornstein (1996) state that reflective thinking, in conjunction with leadership theory and an all-important knowledge base, help school leaders to understand their behaviours and then modify their conduct to enhance effectiveness. Such “critical practice” (Foster, 1989, p. 3) enables better informed decisions.

2.4.3 Building confidence

Kahl (2004, p. 43) points out that “many leaders have the knowledge but lack the courage to make decisions that can make a difference when challenges are encountered”. However, in order to be effective and to do what is best for the students and the school, school leaders need to have courage to not have a ‘let sleeping dogs lie’ attitude, but to take risks and to be steadfast in addressing issues. Nelson (2016, p. 79) contends that “doing what is right and doing what is easy are not the same thing” and advises school leaders to free themselves “of

the need to be liked by everyone". This is especially challenging in the role of the assistant head whose responsibility is to work closely with, provide support, form trusting relationships, and handle issues with teachers, students and parents alike. Harvey (1994, p. 18) describes the tension that assistant heads need to juggle and how they have to act as "double agents" as they have to simultaneously supervise and monitor as well as provide support. According to Bennet (2007, p. 456), "navigating between being a leader and a peer involves knowing when to be a leader and when to be a peer". However, Hartzell (1995, p. 161) warns about this ambiguous challenge and they say that "it is very difficult to simultaneously be a sounding board or confidant for employees and still be responsible for their evaluation".

In order to use their positional power confidently and act for the good of the organisation without unnecessary confrontation, assistant heads need to put all three leadership dimensions (Sergiovanni, 2009) into practice. Weller and Weller (2002, p. 9) argue that leaders can do this by "enhancing their leadership skills and knowledge through continued professional growth and constant evaluation of motives". Intentional reflection on action is critical for leaders in "developing positive relationships and involving staff in decision-making to assist in the building of trust and acceptance of decisions" (Pilgrim, 2015, p. 1). Additionally, leaders need to understand when the team could be offered a choice and more responsibility, and when to intervene to support teachers so that high-quality student learning is ensured. Sergiovanni (2001, p. 12) advises leaders that when it comes to decision-making, incremental, focused and strategic approaches are always preferable.

This is especially true because schools are not just about teaching and learning, but fundamentally, they are about relationships, relationships which require time and attention to build, maintain and strengthen. Debono (2018, p. 39) states that “since the educational setting involves dealing with humans, relationships are of the utmost importance”. Likewise, for Crippen (2012, p. 193), building strong relationships is “an ongoing and constant issue that must remain a priority if a sense of inclusivity, respect, collaboration, transparency and caring is to be developed and valued”.

2.5 Building Positive Relationships

Intentional leaders keep in mind that people ‘volunteer’ to be followers and that they can only be influential if their colleagues attribute leadership to them (Leithwood et al., 2006). Leithwood et al. (2006) contend that the key question that one needs to answer is, “what causes people to attribute leadership status to others and allow themselves to be influenced?” According to Lord and Maher (2002), leadership attributions emerge from two distinct mechanisms, namely recognition-based attributes (which are judgements about a leaders’ potential) and inference-based judgements (which are judgements based on direct experience with the leader). Assistant heads act intentionally by adopting a range of strategies that attribute positive inference-based judgements and, hence, leadership effectiveness. However, Harvey (1994, p. 17) states that there are few significant studies of assistant heads in the micro-politics of the school and how the latter use deliberate skills in relationship-building.

Thomas Edison once said that “being busy does not always mean real work” (Wilbert, 2017). In this section, it is argued, that to retain human capital and inspire and develop people,

school leadership must engage in leading intentionally, that is, to keep communication lines open and adopt a care ethic that strengthens individual relationships and the school community at large. Underlying leader intentionality is a paradigm of the 'leader-as-steward' (DePree, 1989) and 'servant leadership' (Sergiovanni, 2005). The former and the latter leadership styles are similar in nature in that these leaders have a serve-first mindset focused on empowering and uplifting others to unlock potential and a sense of purpose. They differ in that whereas steward leadership focuses on the leadership long-term goal of building a stronger team and obtaining better results, servant leadership focuses more strongly on the identity and behaviour of the leader, whose main goal is to serve.

2.5.1 Developing effective communication

Effective assistant heads invest in ongoing and clear communication with both teachers and heads of school, and this usually extends to parents too (Weller & Weller, 2002). Effective communication skills are required to achieve school goals, to foster productive relationships, to gain credibility, to create a sense of community, and also to minimise conflict and facilitate problem-solving (Fullan, 2002). The ultimate aim and intention behind this is to better serve the students – their learning, well-being and educational needs.

Assistant heads rely on oral, non-verbal as well as written communication. Leaders tend to use one-way communication to provide "timely and accurate information about events, issues, problems, policies or change" (Yukl, 1994, p. 72). Such communication is usually top-down and used for regulatory purposes. It involves the transmission of information by providing facts from credible sources (Yukl, 1994) and, as a result, limits open communication. Open communication, on the other hand, is a "cooperative, reciprocal process wherein ideas

and messages are shared through exchanges between sender and receiver” (Weller & Weller, 2002, p. 113). Skills in active listening are essential if leaders are to enable effective communication and, as with other leadership traits, the skill of listening may be intentionally improved. Figure 2.3 lists O’Hair and Friedrich’s (1992) suggested ways of improving listening.

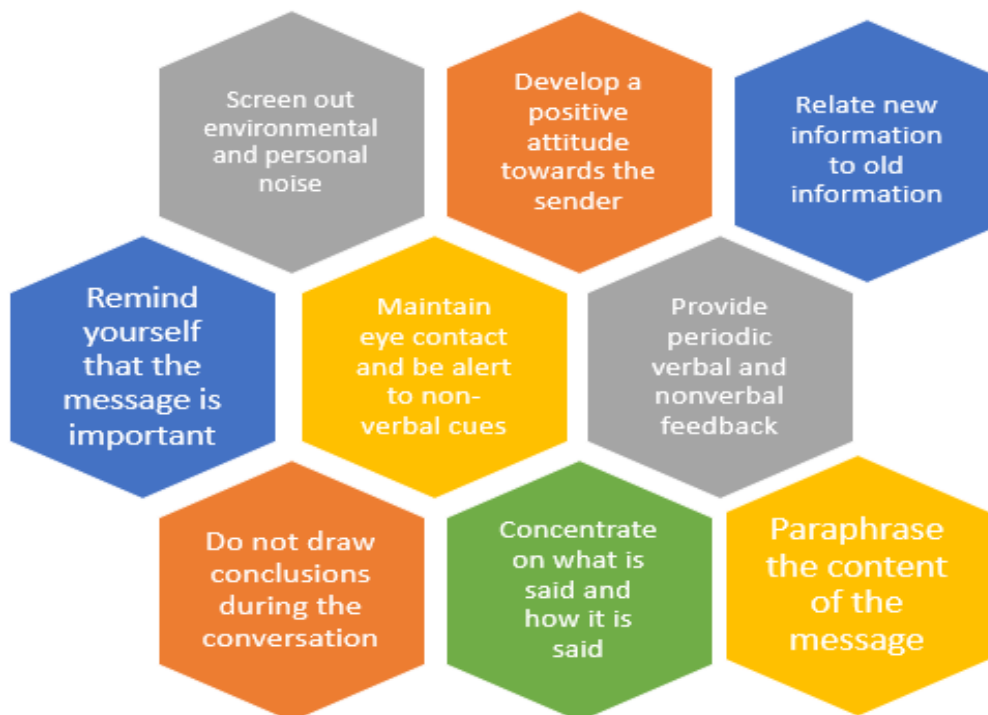


Figure 2.3: Ways to improve listening skills (O’Hair & Friedrich, 1992)

Sergiovanni (2005) suggests that educational leaders should replace the term ‘communication’ with ‘conversation’. While communication may involve a one-way transmission of information from one person to another, Sergiovanni (2005, p. 34) argues that “conversations are more an exchange of ideas”. Similarly, Northwehr (1988) states that conversations involve mutual commitment to the dialogue and recognise the dignity of each participant. Effective conversations require that ideas shared are respected and given their

due consideration. Furthermore, schools need to extend inside-the-school conversations to the students' homes in order to explore ways in which the school and home may work closer together to maximise student learning.

2.5.2 Fostering good relations with parents

Leithwood (2004) describes two ideologies on the level of interaction that schools may have with the families: the 'independent producers' and the 'interdependent co-contributor'. The 'independent producers view' states that schools are "capable of doing their job well in the absence of much interaction with families and communities" (Leithwood, 2004, p. 46). The 'interdependent co-contributor view' states that in order for schools to address the diverse needs of their students, schools need to extend their reach to encompass the students' experience in the home. Documents such as the National Children's Policy (2017) and the National Curriculum Framework (2012) aim to promote a holistic development of children which includes socio-economic aspects. The mission of the Learning Outcomes Framework (2007-2013) is to provide parents and other stakeholders with a clear picture of what children know and can do and to provide timely and qualitative feedback. These documents imply that school leadership cannot view the school in isolation from students' homes. In other words, parents are viewed as an important source of support and that it is the responsibility of the school to assist parents in gaining access to the full range of social services they require.

Furthermore, Mapp and Hong (2010, p. 348) contend that leaders are responsible for building partnerships between school and home and states that "school leaders must take the first step to foster strong relationships with the community". Additionally, educational leaders such as assistant heads, need to be 'community equity literate' (having a lens to see even

subtle ways in which access to quality educational opportunities are distributed unfairly, and an ideological commitment to equity), to strengthen their practice and to extend this knowledge to their staff, thus to avoid “harbouring beliefs, attitudes and fears about parents that hinder their ability to cultivate partnerships with families” (Mapp & Hong, 2010, p. 346). As leaders of schools, assistant heads are therefore required to acknowledge family circumstances and to integrate and value parents in school life.

2.5.3 Care ethic

The job of the assistant head requires tying leadership to the human perspective through valuing, caring and taking responsibility for others. Ciulla (2009, p. 3) defines ‘care’ as “attention and emotional concern about the well-being of others” and involves “attention, solicitude and active involvement with others”. Derrida (1996, p. 7) terms caring as “being attentive to otherness, to the alterity of the other”. This requires leaders to demonstrate “honesty, fairness and equity in all interpersonal activities, and respecting the dignity, diversity and rights of individuals and groups of people” (Knights, 2018, p. 3). By definition, this implies human equality wherein a leader is called to treat all personnel with the same dignity, respect, fairness and honesty.

Weil (1977) distinguishes between ‘natural’ and ‘ethical’ caring. Whereas natural caring is caring by inclination rather than out of duty, educational leaders are called to draw on ethical caring which “requires highly sophisticated levels of reasoning, but depends on emotion for motivation” (Weil, 1977, p. 51). In upholding this relational ethic, the carer is attentive and receptive to the needs of the cared-for whilst also considering the greater good of the organisation. On the other hand, the cared-for receives the caring and completes the caring

relation. The cared-for might provide additional information about their needs and this deepens the caring relation. Slote (2007) states that although there may be such a thing as an empathetic personality, in its absence, a disposition to care can be cultivated. Leaders may build up a habit of listening and feeling with others. Through developing their emotional intelligence, leaders would be able to better navigate the social complexities of schools. Furthermore, Zohar and Marshall (2000) argue that competence in ethical leadership requires a higher level of intelligence than emotional intelligence since it requires the leader to have a full and intentional level of consciousness (Figure 2.4).

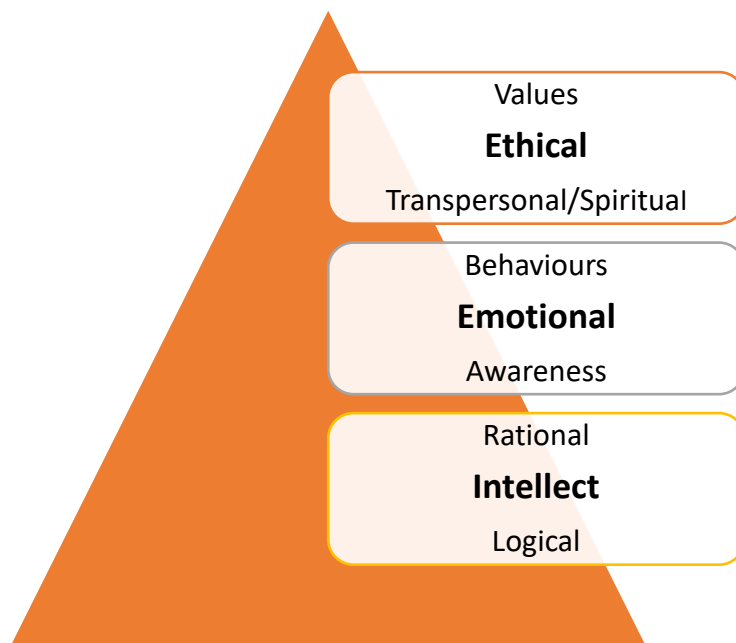


Figure 2.4: Zohar and Marshall's (2000) Hierarchy of Intelligences

When leaders adopt a care ethic, this is likely to generate trust that attracts and retains people. A caring ethos has a performance-enhancing purpose which cultivates a positive environment and motivates staff to embrace change and innovation. In ethically caring for personnel, assistant heads are called to have a personal knowledge of each member of staff and to truly value them for who they are in order to help them be better at their job. DePree

(1989, p. 12) says that when it comes to relationships, we need to think in terms of the leader-as-steward where leaders look after their personnel. This requires the leader to be approachable and available to personnel. As Noddings (2012, p. 777) states, “a climate in which ethical caring relations can flourish should be a goal for all educational leaders”.

2.5.4 Earning trust

Bennis and Nanus (1985, p. 153) claim that “trust is the emotional glue that binds followers and leaders together”. Indeed, leaders may earn trust through daily social exchanges and their subsequent actions. Assistant heads acquire trust when they exercise what Leithwood et al., (2006) call ‘authentic leadership’, that is leadership that “demonstrates transparent decision-making, confidence, optimism, hope, resilience and consistency between words and deeds” (Leithwood et al., 2006, p. 38). On the other hand, “followers trust leaders whose acts are predictable and whose values and beliefs are the norm of the organisation” (Weller & Weller, 2002, p. 69). Through professional competence, consistent behaviour, respectful exchanges (even when there is disagreement) and through subsequent action, teachers are likely to perceive that they are trusted and are more open to change, innovation and risk-taking.

2.6 Leading for Instructional Improvement

Copland and Knapp (2006, p. 3) define an instructional leader as one whose “primary work is to guide improvements in learning”. Sheppard (1996, p. 342) distinguishes between ‘narrow’ and ‘broad’ views of instructional leadership, the latter including leadership behaviours and attitudes that go beyond directly observable leadership actions (such as classroom

observations), to include all leadership activities that promote teacher and student growth (such as activities leaders engage in to create a school climate and culture which is conducive to such growth). In the 'broad' definition of instructional leadership, Hallinger and Murphy (1985) identify three categories of behaviours, namely those that (1) define the mission; (2) manage the instructional program; and (3) promote school climate.

In today's restructured schools, which have undergone a redefinition of power relationships, delegation of responsibilities and in which collaborative decision-making processes are encouraged, "assistant heads can effectively share an instructional leadership role to increase a school's success as a learning organisation for students and educators" (Kaplan & Owings, 1999, p. 80). As a result, assistant heads are now able to have direct input in school instructional direction and improvement. Glanz (2004, p. 2) too believes that assistant heads can be "a vital resource for instructional improvement and school success". Notwithstanding the wide range of managerial tasks, according to Harvey (1994), assistant heads demand greater involvement in instructional leadership because as Glanz (2004, p. 98) claims "they value that it makes a difference in teacher development and student achievement". Southworth (2004, p. 4) argues that unless school leaders influence the quality of the teaching and learning, "they may not be making a strong contribution to the success of the school as a learning culture". Specific behaviours, strategies and priorities that instructional leaders adopt to develop effective instructional practices shall be discussed in this section.

2.6.1 Intentional visibility

Copland and Knapp (2006, p. 30) define leadership visibility as "consistently communicating that student learning is the shared mission of everyone in the school community" and Kaplan

and Owings (1999, p. 86) sustain that instructional leaders “are visible throughout the building, in classrooms, in the halls, and at curricular events”. Educational leaders need, hence, to reach out to students, staff and community members by leading visibly (Bezzina, 2013). By spending time with teachers and students, assistant heads communicate the school’s vision and the importance of student learning regularly. Weller and Weller (2002, p. 138) advise “management-by-walking around to diagnose problems impeding effective instruction and continually investigating new, better ways to improve the teaching and learning process”. This implies that assistant heads should not only visit classrooms to conduct formal evaluations, but if they are to acquire a deep understanding of the teaching and learning going on, they need to familiarise themselves with the micro-cultures of each classroom (Peresso, 2018).

2.6.2 Enhancing instruction through observations, professional development and mentoring

Glanz (1998) points out that teaching supervision has evolved since its early days, from bureaucratic and inspectional towards more democratic and participatory models. Glanz (2004) describes how supervision is now ‘purposeful observation’ which is a process that engages teachers in instructional dialogue whose purpose is to improve teaching methods and delivery in order to promote student learning and achievement. The premise of such a strategy is that “meaningful learning is dependent on the learner’s involvement in constructing that knowledge” (Glanz, 2004, p. 39).

Glickman (1998) presents three approaches (Figure 2.5) which heads of school and assistant heads may adopt for instructional supervision. The first is a ‘directive informational’ approach which frames solutions for teachers and asks them for their input. The ‘collaborative’

approach necessitates the sharing of information and possible solutions between the supervisor and the teacher in order to arrive to a mutual plan. The third approach is ‘non-directive’, that is, one in which the supervisor has the facilitating role to guide the teacher in developing a self-plan. The approach to be used may either be matched to the teacher’s level of development or the leadership philosophy of the supervisor, in this case, the assistant head.

Directive Informational Approach	Collaborative Approach	Nondirective Approach
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Identify a goal• Offer solutions• Ask for confirmation of teacher's final choices• Set a follow-up plan and meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Identify goal from teacher's perspective• Reflect back for accuracy• Brainstorm collaboratively• Problem solve through discussion• Agree on a plan and set a follow-up meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Listen carefully to teacher• Reflect back on the goal and clarify• Teacher problem solves and explore consequences of actions• Teacher commits to a decision• Reinstate teachers plan and set a follow-up meeting

Figure 2.5: Glickman’s (1998) approaches to supervision

Relationships between the assistant head and teachers are likely to offer challenges and may be, at times, jeopardised since assistant heads have both a teacher support function as well as a monitoring and evaluative function. Marshall and Hooley (1992, p. 6-7) concord that “when they monitor teachers’ compliance, assistants have difficulty maintaining equal collegial and professional relationships with them”. Although this conflict may exist, assistant heads need to make it clear, through their daily words and deeds, that their vision for school

improvement is rooted in democratic, participatory instructional leadership. They need to utilise teacher assessment and evaluation systems to “implement a newer conception of leadership – an essential factor linking teacher evaluation to improved teaching and learning” (Davis, Ellett and Annunziata, 2002, p. 299).

2.6.3 A thorough knowledge of educational leadership

For assistant heads to act as instructional facilitators and provide growth opportunities for teachers, they need to develop their expertise in educational leadership. Fenstermacher (1994) defines expertise as the ability to articulate the philosophies and beliefs that guide practice and goes on to say that, for assistant heads, this means gaining credibility, respectability and professionalism in terms of curricular and instructional responsibility. Hence, assistant heads should be trained in these areas to be perceived as ‘teachers of teachers’.

Ubben (2000) argues that, for 21st century leaders, the domain of educational leadership is the most crucial and it requires expertise in the areas identified in Figure 2.6. Thorough competence in the areas below will enable assistant heads to use their leadership as a catalyst

to improved organisational learning, school improvement and leadership density (Sergiovanni, 2005).



Figure 2.6: Educational leadership domain competencies

2.6.4 Sharing leadership and building a community of practice

MacBeath and Myers (1999, p. 61) state that being an effective leader means “getting the best out of people” and Hallinger and Heck (2003, p. 229) reiterate that “achieving results through others is the essence of leadership”. Sergiovanni (2005) refers to ‘leadership density’ which is achieved when leadership roles and functions are shared, and Hopkins (2001) defines the recognition and pooling of all expertise available within the organisation as ‘multi-level leadership’. Empirical evidence by Day and Sammons (2009, p. 222) presents a “strong relationship between distributed patterns of leadership and the performance of organisations adopting such models”. Such participative and democratic leadership encourages

collaborative engagement as opposed to teachers working in isolation and Leithwood et al. (2006, p. 39) state that “research unambiguously supports the importance of collaborative cultures in schools as being central to school improvement”. Edwards (2015, p. 69) supports the view that “all stakeholders of a school can benefit when teachers experience leadership density in their role”.

Glanz (2004) describes how the leadership efficacy of assistant heads is enhanced when they realise and recognise that all teachers are leaders in their own right. For this reason, Harris (2004, p. 10) advises that “those in formal leadership positions should create the conditions where leadership capacity is built, supported and sustained”. Examples of shared governance opportunities which aspire to a democratic and organisation-wide form of leadership are structured peer-coaching activities, appointing subject or area leaders, and leadership teams who build school action plans and who evaluate their outcome. Through supporting a non-hierarchical network of professionals, collaborative learning is enhanced and increased collaboration “can be a powerful and cathartic vehicle for positive change and development” (Holden, 2002, p. 7).

As members of the senior leadership team, assistant heads may contribute to develop tangible structures “which facilitate teacher collaboration and professional communities” (Attard Tonna & Shanks, 2017, p. 106). They may foster a collaborative instructional climate, that is, “a frame of mind and a collective attitude” (Weller & Weller, 2002, p. 147), by consciously empowering teachers to take responsibility for giving their input on the way forward and by encouraging a ‘systems thinking culture’ (Hatcher, 2005). In a ‘systems

thinking culture', teachers see the bigger picture of collective activity, learn from each other through social interaction and establish a shared understanding.

2.7 Conclusion

In an era of continuous restructuring and changing reforms in schools, the role of the assistant head has evolved to one which is more strongly focused on instructional improvement. Along with the head of school, assistant heads are now responsible for "building a collaborative culture that serves to focus a collective educational endeavour" (Harvey, 1994, p. 20). In order to strengthen and be effective in their leadership, assistant heads are called to intentionally develop themselves to become self-aware, confident and competent leaders who feel comfortable in empowering others in order to achieve school goals. As Leithwood et al. (2006, p. 38) claim, successful leaders are "in possession of a range of cognitive and affective qualities, strategies and skills" and Day (2000, p. 24) states that "effective leadership requires an intelligent head with an intelligent heart". These leaders escape impersonal and bureaucratic relationships in favour of conversations and a caring ethic to develop personal relationships within the learning community. Such dialogue builds trust, empowers teachers and binds collegial educational teams to root school improvement in democratic, participatory, instructional communities.

Chapter 3

Methodology

3 Methodology

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3.0 Introduction

In this chapter, the research methodology and the research design are discussed and justified. Scott and Morrison (2006, p. 153) explain that methodology is critical since, “readers of research are provided with a rationale to explain the reasons for using specific strategies and methods in order to construct, collect, and develop particular kinds of knowledge about educational phenomena”. Hence, this chapter includes the following: the ontological and epistemological paradigms of the researcher, the methodological approach used, a description of the data collection instruments, the participants and the method of analysis. Ethical considerations and the boundaries of this study are also discussed.

3.1 Ontological and Epistemological Beliefs

This study’s ontological and epistemological beliefs draw on the constructivist paradigm since it seeks to understand the phenomenon under study from the realities, perspectives and experiences of the participants. Within a constructivist paradigm “reality is subjective because it is constructed from the individual perspectives of participants engaged in the study” (Dickson, 2016, p. 6). In constructivism, “meanings are varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views rather than narrowing meanings into a few categories or ideas” (Creswell, 2014, p. 37). In this study, patterns of personal meaning are gleaned from both closed and open-ended questions in the quantitative component and meaning is further constructed through a qualitative open-ended inquiry.

By interacting with participants, the researcher engages in discourse, which according to Cobern (1993, p. 10), “can inform the researcher about the world views of consultees to

inform the research questions”. Within this viewpoint, the researcher attempts to inform the research questions and gain knowledge by interpreting the experiences of the research participants, whilst keeping in mind the philosophical basis of constructivism. Moreover, research within the constructivist paradigm considers epistemological fallibilism, that is, that “all knowledge is fallible by virtue of lacking exactitude and comprehensiveness” (Cobern, 1993, p. 109). Research relies heavily on the participants’ subjective views, which are formed through a combination of personal consciousness and their specific context. Towards this end, the present research is based on knowledge about the realities and perceptions of assistant heads and how they use their experience and intuitive knowledge to understand others in order to intentionally forge positive relationships. This is acquired and reported by collecting data from those assistant heads who experience the primary school context on a daily basis. Likewise, data is collected from primary school teachers in order to be able to understand their perceptions and expectations.

3.2 Methodological Approach

This section discusses the research problem and outlines the methodological approach best suited to explore the research questions. A mixed methods design is applied and this section delves into its characteristics in some detail.

3.2.1 *Research problem*

The research problem arises from the researcher’s own experiences in the role of an assistant head when experiencing the logistical constraints of administrative tasks, and consequently

the latter tend to undermine opportunities for developing professional relationships with teachers in order to support their teaching and learning needs.

This thesis reports on a study designed to explore and reflect on the relevance and practices of assistant heads in local primary schools. It investigates how these leaders juggle their broad range of responsibilities in order to not only be efficient in their administrative role but, more importantly, to be effective in their educational role to promote student learning while developing their human leadership role to motivate, support and strengthen teacher practices.

This study also seeks to understand the role of an assistant head as seen through the lens of primary school teachers. This is done to explore the intentional strategies that assistant heads adopt in order to be perceived as a supportive link, vital to alleviate the pressures of teaching, and to offer appropriate support for improving teaching practices.

3.2.2 Research methodology

Once the research problem is identified, the research method to adequately guide the researcher to answer the research problem and questions is established. Due to the constructivist belief guiding this study, the research questions merit a mixed methods approach. Creswell (2003, p. 43) advocates that the basic assumption underlying a mixed methods research approach is that, “the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods, in combination, provide a better understanding of the research problem and questions than either method by itself”.

Furthermore, this study adopts a 'fixed' mixed methods approach since in fixed mixed methods studies, the design is predetermined at the start of the study. The researcher draws on Graff (2017), who suggests that decisions about how to use qualitative and quantitative methods are made before the research starts. Figure 3.1 shows the research stages determined at the start of this study.

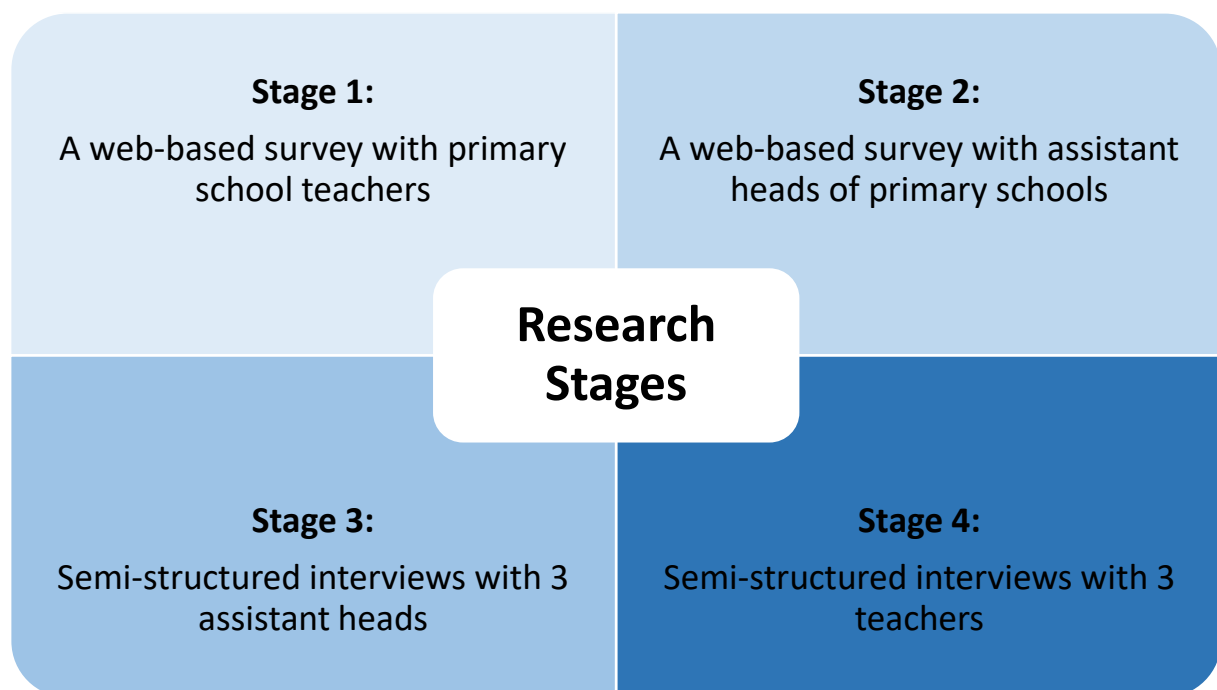


Figure 3.1: Research stages

Justifications for choosing a fixed mixed method approach are also based on a framework by Bryman (2006). This framework gives detailed reasons for choosing to combine quantitative and qualitative methods. For the purpose of this study, the following are three justifications for choosing mixed methods:

- (i) Triangulation or greater validity – The findings of the qualitative nature are confronted with the findings of quantitative data to see if they support or contradict

each other. Findings are also compared to information gleaned from literature and based on similar studies. As Burke Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004, p. 19) state, when “findings are corroborated across different approaches, then greater confidence can be held in a singular conclusion”. Hence, validity of findings is likely to be enhanced.

(ii) Completeness – As Gorard (2004, p. 4) claims, “research tools are always more powerful when used in combination than in isolation”. The use of mixed methods, hence, enables development of a more complete and comprehensive account of data gathered.

(iii) Explanation – The qualitative data is used to explain the statistics generated through the quantitative data. Quantitative data provide statistical results which are then developed and thoroughly explored by talking to people, whose personal experiences provide a more complete understanding and which lead to theory generation. This may be referred to as ‘putting meat on the bones’ on otherwise ‘dry’ quantitative results. As Burke Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004, p. 19) contend, “in many cases, the goal of mixing methods is to expand one’s understanding of the research questions”.

Although a mixed methods approach may yield a better understanding of the research problem and provide more complete evidence, this methodology also poses some challenges. Namely, the research design is more complex and it requires more time to plan resources, implement and analyse the data (Klassen, Creswell, Plano Clark, Smith & Meissner, 2012).

3.2.3 Timing of the quantitative and qualitative strands

Creswell (2003, p. 65) refers to timing (also referred to as pacing and implementation) as “the temporal relationship between the quantitative and qualitative strands within a study”. This implies that in the design of a mixed methods approach, the researcher needs to think about and plan when and how these two strands will be utilised for maximum benefit. There are three main timing designs of mixed methods study:

- Convergent parallel
- Sequential (explanatory/ exploratory)
- Embedded

In a convergent parallel design, quantitative and qualitative data are collected concurrently. On the other hand, sequential designs allow one data collection to build on the results of another. Alternatively, an embedded design is one in which, “a researcher may add a qualitative strand within a quantitative strand or add a quantitative strand within a qualitative design” (Creswell, 2003, p. 72).

For the purposes of this study, an explanatory sequential design was adopted. Firstly, quantitative data was collected and analysed, following which qualitative data was sought from a sample of participants to gain a more in-depth understanding of the initial quantitative findings. In other words, this research is considered explanatory and sequential because the initial quantitative results are explained further with the qualitative data collected at a later stage.

3.2.4 Priority of the quantitative and qualitative strands

Researchers may give equal priority, quantitative priority or qualitative priority. Creswell (2003, p. 71) defines priority as, “the relative importance or weighting of the quantitative and qualitative methods for answering the study’s questions”. This study gives priority to the collection and analysis of quantitative data to address the research questions. Subsequently, the researcher intended to target particular quantitative findings that required further explanation. Face-to-face interviews with assistant heads and teachers provided such explanation and data.

3.2.5 Point of interface of quantitative and qualitative strands

Burke Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004, p. 19) contend that for “a mixed-method design, the findings must be mixed or integrated at some point”. In this study, the point of interface, “a point within the process of research where the quantitative and qualitative strands are mixed” (Morse & Niehaus, 2009, p. 25), occurs during data analysis. After obtaining quantitative results, the researcher connects the results with the qualitative data, and brings the results together. In doing so, thematic analysis is utilised to explain the descriptive statistics in more depth.

3.3 Description of Data Collection Tools

Four research tools were designed to cover the four research stages (see section 3.2.2). Phase 1 comprises of both Stage 1 and 2, whereas Phase 2 comprises of Stages 3 and 4.

Phase 1 – Two web-based surveys generated quantitative data, as well as qualitative data from open-ended questions, from assistant heads in primary schools and primary school

teachers. An opt-in option was included to identify the participants’ willingness and availability to participate in Phase 2.

Phase 2 – Semi-structured interviews were conducted with assistant heads and teachers from all three sectors in the Maltese educational system. For the face-to-face interviews, questions designed to elicit answers pertinent to the research problem were asked. In order to reflect the constructivist epistemology, the questions were broad so that respondents could construct and share their own meaning of a situation. Table 3.1 summarizes the data collection methods.

Quantitative and Qualitative Methods of Data Collection and Types of Data			
Quantitative Research		Qualitative Research	
Phase 1		Phase 2	
Methods of Data Collection	Data	Methods of Data Collection	Data
Two web-based surveys (one for assistant heads and one for teachers); both consist of a mixture of closed-ended and open-ended questions.	Numeric scores Text data	Two face-to-face interviews (one with assistant heads and one with teachers); open-ended questions	Text data

Table 3.1: Data collection methods

3.3.1 Outline of the quantitative strand

The quantitative strand, consisting of two surveys provided “a quantitative or numeric description of trends, attitudes or opinions” (Creswell, 2003, p. 41) of a sample of assistant heads and teachers in primary education. Both surveys were disseminated online through

social media Facebook pages such as Malta Education, Assistant Heads of Primary Schools-Malta, Malta REAL Teachers and School Educators, on the researcher's personal Facebook page as well as on LinkedIn. The Primary School Teacher Survey was published online on the 7th April 2019, while the Assistant Head Survey was published online on the 2nd May 2019. Both surveys included a covering letter to inform prospective participants about the survey and how the results would eventually be used. The approximate time to complete each survey was ten minutes. Prospective participants were asked to confirm that they understood the purpose and nature of the study. Demographic questions at the start of the survey consisted of a nominal variable on gender, another on educational sector and an ordinal variable on years in post.

The assistant head survey (Appendix 1) consisted of ten questions, five of which were descriptive research questions that sought to quantify and describe the variables of interest, the quantities this study seeks to measure. Two questions were ordinal variables and one question was a dichotomous variable (takes one of two possible answers) followed by an open-ended question in which participants were required to give a reason for their answer. The last two questions were open-ended to allow assistant heads to describe their practices freely.

The teacher survey (Appendix 2) consisted of nine questions. Three questions were descriptive using Likert Scales. These attempted to measure intensity or the extent of agreement and frequency of statements related to the research questions. Two questions required participants to rank preferences and three nominal questions were followed by

open-ended questions which allowed participants to justify their choice. One dichotomous question was also followed by an open-ended question.

3.3.2 Outline of the qualitative strand

The qualitative strand, undertaken as “conversations with a purpose” (Dexter, 1970, p. 123), consisted of two different semi-structured interviews, one conducted with three assistant heads of primary schools (one from each educational sector) and one with three primary school teachers (one from each educational sector). Briggs and Coleman (2007, p. 209) define a semi-structured interview as one in which “the researcher broadly controls the agenda and process of interview, whilst leaving interviewees free, within limits, to respond as they best see fit”. Questions were broad and general so that participants could construct meanings of a situation, while the researcher listened carefully to what the interviewees said. The researcher’s role was to probe and ask open-ended questions that encouraged participants to explain their unique perspectives (Dickson, 2016). In this case, Briggs and Coleman (2007, p. 215) caution interviewers to avoid questions which “hammer reality into shape”, so this research attempted to avoid suggestive questions which may elicit a desired answer, but was careful to use effective questions that enable interviewees to say what is in/on their mind.

Moreover, in designing the interviews, the sequence and framing of the questions was considered to ensure that easier to answer, less challenging questions are addressed early on in the interview. Patton (1980) states that this might mean that the ‘what’ questions precede the ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions. Although the sequence and the wording was determined before the interview, the questions were not always rigidly adhered to. For instance, when

an interviewee spoke about a question that was planned to be offered at a later stage, the flow of the conversation was not interrupted and that question was tackled there and then.

The strength of semi-structured interviews, according to Briggs and Coleman (2007, p. 210), is that it reduces interviewer bias and increases comparability of interview responses, which facilitates final data analysis. On the other hand, its main weakness is that it increases interviewer bias when setting the agenda.

Five out of six interviews were face-to-face interviews, involving the researcher and one interviewee, conducted in a location outside the school. Interviewees agreed to be recorded and signed a consent form (Appendix 6 and 7). One interviewee (whose code is Assistant Head 3) could not make it to the interview and questions were sent via email. Information about each interview is provided in Table 3.2.

Interviewee code	Date of interview	Duration (minutes)
Assistant Head 1	6/08/2019	47
Assistant Head 2	12/08/2019	50
Assistant Head 3	Interviewee submitted data on the 06/09/2019	n/a
Teacher 1	23/08/2019	31
Teacher 2	26/08/2019	17
Teacher 3	03/09/2019	13

Table 3.2: Information about the interviews

Prior to the interviews, interviewees were told that there were no right or wrong answers but that the study focused on their own personal experiences. In the words of Briggs and Coleman (2007, p. 208), “we interview people to explore their views in ways that cannot be

achieved by other forms of research and report our findings in as near as we reasonably can in their own words". Interviewees spoke freely in their language of preference. Any interview quotes in the Maltese language were translated into English. Original quotes and their translation can be found in Appendix 10. When interviewees seemed to not understand a question, it was rephrased, and when needed, a question was repeated. Interviews were recorded using a digital recorder and the mobile phone recorder served as a backup. Transcription took place following each interview and back up on mobile was permanently deleted.

The assistant head interview (Appendix 8) consisted of the interview protocol, through which the interviewee code, the date of interview, the highest level of education, the educational sector, and the years in post were recorded. The interview questions were divided in three sections. Section A consisted of four questions related to what assistant heads do on a day-to-day basis. Section B consisted of five questions related to instructional leadership and in Section C, six questions focused on intentional leadership.

The teacher interview (Appendix 9) consisted of an interview protocol similar to that of assistant heads. This was followed by eleven open-ended questions through which teachers described their experiences and relationships with assistant heads. They also spoke about their perceptions on the role of an assistant head.

3.3.3 Piloting the research instruments

Prior to administering the surveys, both questionnaires were piloted to ensure that the questions were clear and served their intended purpose. As Briggs and Coleman (2007, p.

130) state, “the importance of piloting cannot be underestimated” as it is likely to shed light onto “inappropriate, poorly worded or irrelevant items, highlight design problems and provide feedback on how easy or difficult the questionnaire was to complete”. To this end, feedback was collected on the clarity of the wording of questions, as well as the timing of the survey. Participants were also asked for suggestions on questions they would alter or eliminate should they feel that the surveys were too lengthy. Refer to Appendix 3 for the feedback form.

For the pilot study, three assistant heads and three teachers participated. One participant suggested changes to the wording of two questions and these were refined accordingly. Another participant felt that she had restricted options in one question and suggested that a further option should be included. The question was hence adjusted to include this suggestion. Another participant pointed out that one question was taking it for granted that all participants experience lesson observations by assistant heads. The question was reworded to make it more universal. Furthermore, both interviews were piloted with colleagues in order to ensure that the questions were clear, that interview was not too long and hence tiresome, and that none of the questions asked were similar or repetitive.

3.4 The Participants

Research focused on a purposeful sample of assistant heads and teachers. A purposive sampling technique is one in which “the researcher decides what needs to be known and sets out to find people who can and are willing to provide information by virtue of knowledge or experience. This involves identification and selection of individuals that are proficient and well-informed on the phenomenon of interest” (Etikan, 2015, p. 2). Purposive sampling

focuses on people with particular characteristics who are able to assist in the research. Such a sample provides a homogenous sample population created on the basis of their role in the educational system. For this study, two respondent groups were the most important source of information, namely assistant heads employed in local primary schools and primary school teachers.

In the survey designed for assistant heads, the demographic questions were related to gender, educational sector and number of years employed as an assistant head. A total of 39 respondents filled in this online survey.

Gender	Female 29	Male 10	Other 0
Educational sector	State 21	Church 14	Independent 4
Years in post	1-5 years 27	6-10 years 11	11+ years 1

Table 3.3: Assistant head survey participants

Similarly, in the survey designed for teachers, the demographic questions were related to gender, educational sector and number of years employed as a primary school teacher. A total of 130 respondents filled in this online survey.

Gender	Female 122	Male 8	Other 0	
Educational sector	State 74	Church 45	Independent 11	
Years in post	1-5 years 29	6-10 years 28	11-15 years 23	16+ years 50

Table 3.4: Teacher survey participants

Since this study adopts an explanatory sequential design in order to gather qualitative data which contextualises and strengthens the quantitative data gathered from the online survey, six interviews were held with participants who opted-in when completing the online survey. Interviews were held with one assistant head and one teacher from all three sectors, hence completing six interviews in total. Interviewees were then chosen at random from each category of participants who had ticked in the opt-in option of the surveys as shown in Tables 3.5 and 3.6.

Assistant Heads	State	6
	Church	4
	Independent	1

Table 3.5: Assistant heads who opted in to being interviewed

Teachers	State	7
	Church	15
	Independent	3

Table 3.6: Teachers who opted in to being interviewed

In the interviews, the demographic questions asked to assistant heads and teachers were related to educational sector, highest level of education and years of experience. Tables 3.7 and 3.8 provide details regarding the interviewees.

Code	Gender	Educational sector	Highest level of education	Years in post
Assistant Head 1	Female	Church	Post-Graduate M.A.	9
Assistant Head 2	Female	State	Post-Graduate Diploma	3
Assistant Head 3	Male	Independent	First Degree	10

Table 3.7: Information about assistant head interview participants

Code	Gender	Educational sector	Highest level of education	Years in post
Teacher 1	Female	Church	Post-Graduate M.A.	9
Teacher 2	Female	Independent	First degree	27
Teacher 3	Female	State	First degree	15

Table 3.8: Information about teacher interview participants

3.5 Data Analysis

Data collected from four sources, namely an Assistant Head and Teacher Survey and subsequent interviews, was analysed. An inductive approach to the data analysis process was adopted. Creswell (2014, p. 41) defines an inductive way of generating data as one in which, “the researcher’s intent is to make sense of the meanings others have about the world”. Rather than starting with theory, the data inductively helped to develop theory from the patterns of meanings emanating from participants’ viewpoints and realities about their world. Figure 3.2 provides a visual model adapted from Creswell (2014) of how theory is emerged.

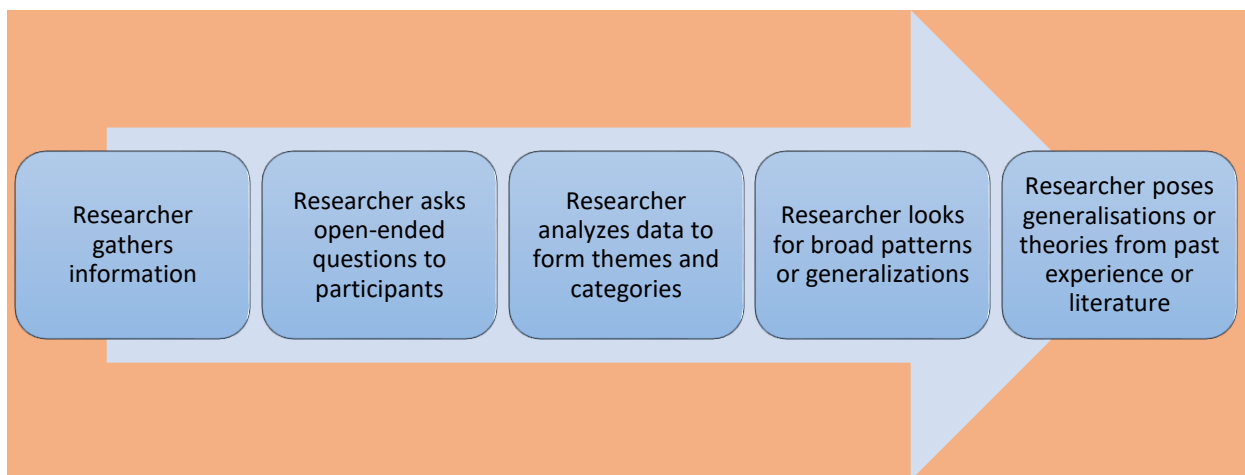


Figure 3.2: How theory developed inductively throughout the research

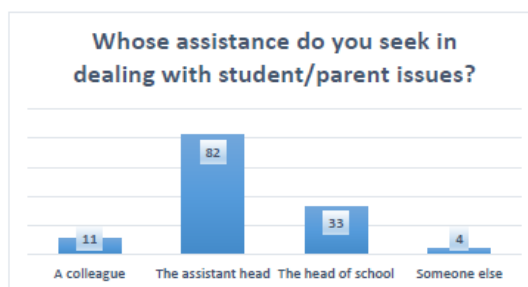
3.5.1 Quantitative data analysis

The first phase of data collection involved familiarisation with the data through statistical analysis. The univariate analysis included statistical data presented in graphs such as a pie chart (applied to nominal levels of measurement) or a bar chart (applied when comparing values) to increase the readability of the data gathered. Furthermore, interpretations emerging from this analysis were taken note of. On analysing the data produced by each quantitative question, the researcher also engaged with literature as such an engagement “sensitises the researcher to more subtle features of the data” (Tuckett, 2005, p.79).

On analysing open ended questions, both Nvivo software as well as manual coding were used.

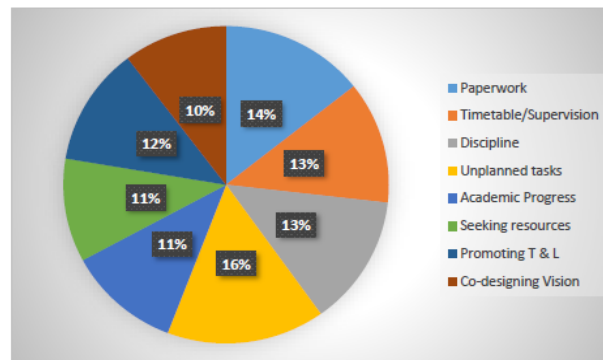
An example of this analysis is shown in Figure 3.3, 3.4 and 3.7.

Survey research Q3 asks: In case you require help in dealing with student/ parent issues, whose assistance would you seek?



Why do you seek the assistance of the AH when dealing with student/parent issues?	Response Category 1: Is responsible for my year group	Response Category 2: Is the link with the head and other stakeholders	Response Category 3: Is the most visible/available/approachable	Response Category 4: Has teaching experience and can give the best advice.	Response Category 5: Knows student/parent issues	Response Category 6: Has knowledge of policies/directives	Response Category 7: Is supportive, reliable and practical
% of respondents	33%	7%	14%	8%	16%	1%	17%

Figure 3.3: Screenshot of univariate analysis



The responses to research question 2 confirms the findings of research question 1. The role of the assistant head is that of ensuring stability within the school (when they are involved in unplanned tasks and crisis management, filling out paperwork, managing discipline, timetabling and supervision duties).

However, the role of the assistant head goes beyond ensuring the smooth running of the school, *“The role of assistant principals should include leadership, and must go beyond nuts and bolts duties.”* (Kadir, 2012). In fact, assistant heads also have a more expanded set of responsibilities which include leadership and development activities which recognise the assistant head as an educational leader who can positively impact the teaching and learning within the school through their role and visible presence (when they encourage quality teaching and academic progress and initiate programmes which promote learning, when they seek resources outside the school and develop community links, and when they co-design and promote the school’s vision).

Figure 3.4: Screenshot of univariate analysis

Emerging codes were inductively selected and sorted into potential themes. An inductive approach to research means that the coding process and the thematic analysis is data driven rather than trying to fit the data collected into a pre-existing coding frame. However, as discussed in the limitations section of this chapter, “researchers cannot totally free themselves of their epistemological commitments and data is not coded in a vacuum” (Braun & Clark, 2008, p. 84). Eventually, thematic mind maps (Figures 3.5 and 3.6) were created to identify and consolidate the emerging themes.

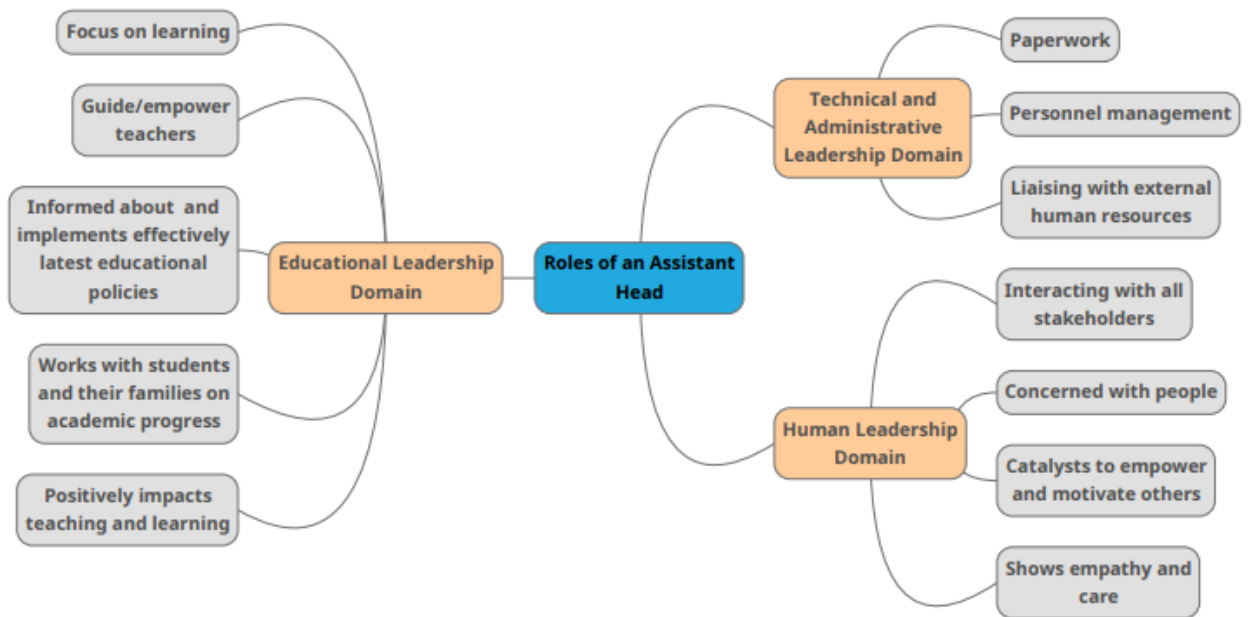


Figure 3.5: Thematic mind map 1

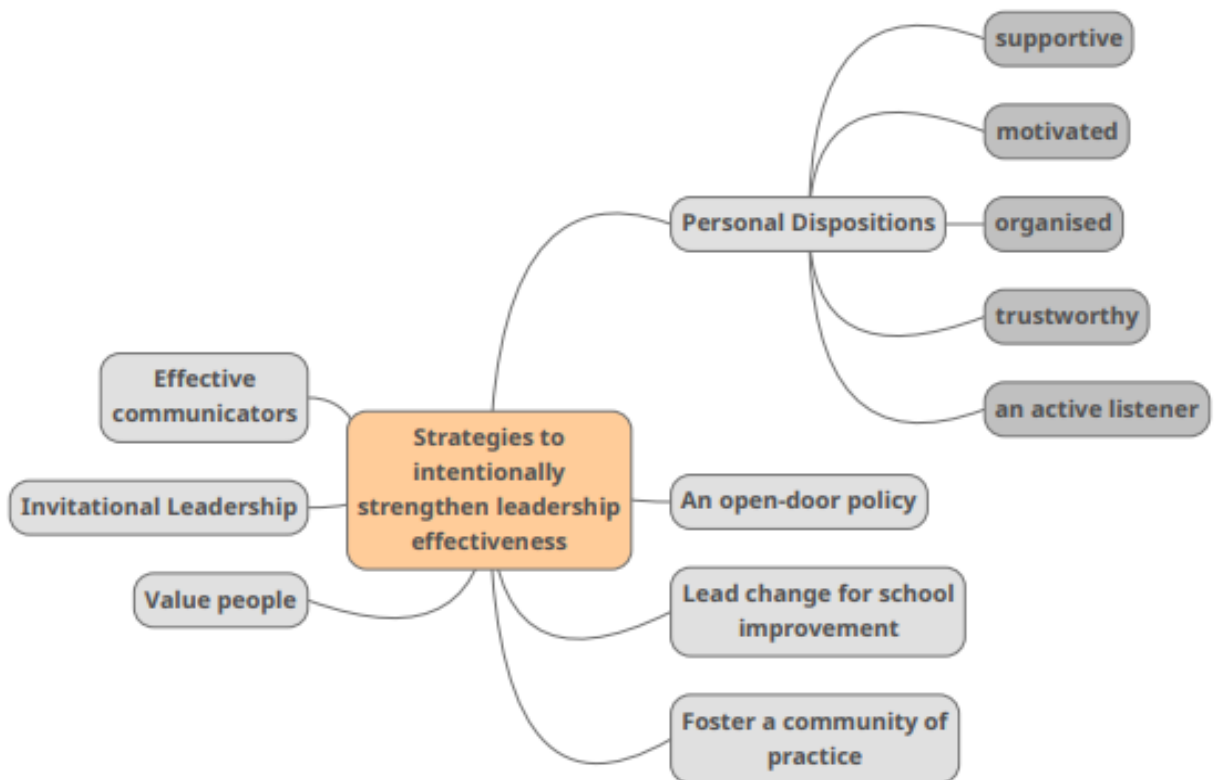


Figure 3.6: Thematic mind map 2

3.5.2 Qualitative thematic analysis

In this study, although thematic analysis is informed by themes emerging from the survey open-ended questions, the themes are further supported by the dense data from the interviews that delved deeper into the aspects emerging from the surveys. Braun and Clark (2008, p. 79) define thematic analysis as a, “method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data”. They identify six phases of thematic analysis, namely familiarisation, coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and writing up a narrative to tell the story of the data.

Although transcribing interviews may be time-consuming and tedious, the researcher invested in this exercise and it facilitated the first phase of thematic analysis through the researcher’s immersion in the data. Indeed, as Braun and Clark (2008, p. 87) claim, “the time spent on transcription is not wasted, as it informs the early stages of analysis, and a far more thorough understanding is developed”. Once familiarised with the interview data, vivid examples and interview extracts were identified to support the descriptive data from the surveys and to enhance a narrative which goes beyond a description of themes.

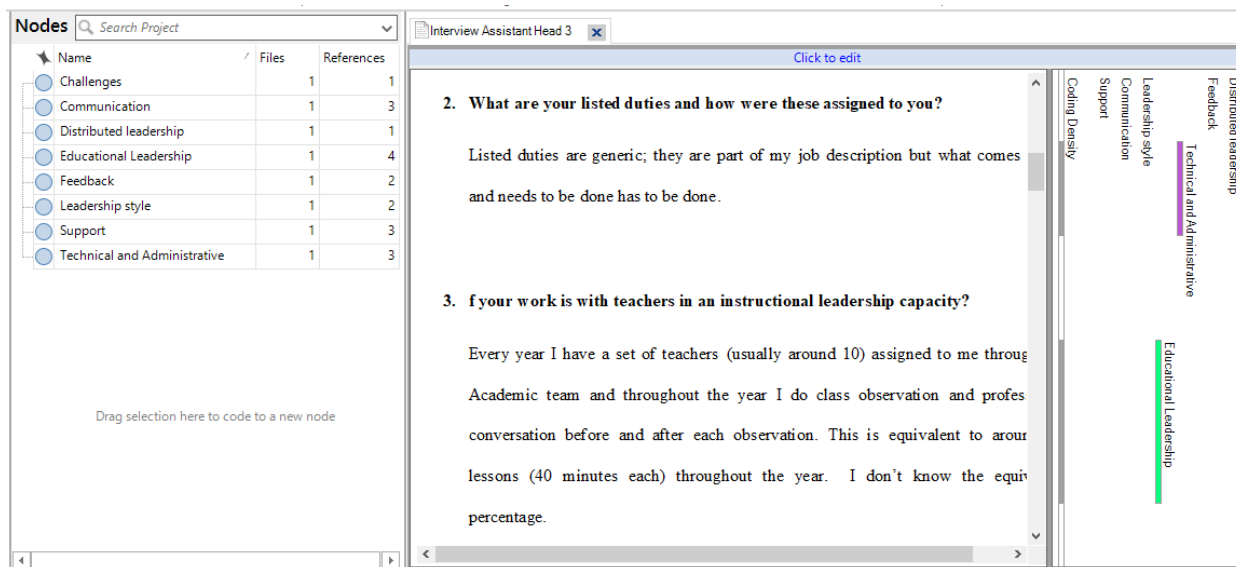


Figure 3.7: Screenshot of qualitative thematic analysis

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Cavan (1977, p. 810) defines ethics as “a matter of principled sensitivity to the rights of others, and that while truth is good, respect for human dignity is better”. In this respect, several ethical considerations based on The University of Malta Research Code of Practice dated September 2017 were taken into account. The main considerations include:

(i) *Informed consent*

In accordance with principle 2.5 of the above-mentioned Code, this study honours the requirement of informed consent, that is, “the subject’s right to freedom and self-determination” (Cohen, 2007, p. 71), by ensuring that research participants are fully informed about the purpose, methods and intended possible uses of the research as well as what is required of them should they choose to participate. Such an informed consent would, as Cohen (2007, p. 72) states, “form the basis of an implicit contractual relationship between the researcher and the researched

and will serve as a foundation on which subsequent ethical considerations can be structured”.

(ii) Confidentiality and anonymity

Cohen (2007, p. 83) states that “the essence of anonymity is that information provided by the participants should in no way reveal their identity”. In the first phase of the study, the researcher guaranteed anonymity to survey respondents as they could not be identified unless they themselves chose to be identified by providing their email address (in order to be contacted to participate in the second phase). On the other hand, the researcher guaranteed confidentiality to subjects taking part in the face-to-face interviews by securing data in a safe place that only the researcher had access to.

(iii) Voluntarism

Voluntarism implies that participants freely chose or refused to take part in the study. In accordance with principle 3.1.3 (g) of the Research Code of Ethics, the survey recruitment letter as well as the information letter sent to prospective interviewees provided a statement that “participation is voluntary, refusal to participate will involve no penalty,” and that “the participant may discontinue participation at any time” (UOM Research Code Of Ethics, p. 3).

(iv) *Non-maleficence*

This study adheres to the Hippocratic Oath ‘*primum non nocere*’, by keeping the welfare of the research participants at the forefront. On defining non-maleficence, Hewitt (2007, p. 1152) says that the end objective of the research “must not override the rights, health, well-being and care of the research participants”. The researcher feels obliged and thankful to those who took part in this research and it was of utmost importance that they were exposed to no harm or risks.

(v) *Beneficence*

This study aimed to provide participants in this study with the opportunity to experience a momentary pause to reflect on their daily activities and school routines. Such a reflexive activity, triggered through questions and meaningful conversations, may have challenged long held assumptions.

3.6.1 Informed consent of web-based surveys

According to Briggs and Coleman (2007, p. 108), internet-based research might pose ethical problems because of the “ethical pluralism on the internet in which there is a continuum of legitimate ethical choices available to the online researcher”. This study adhered to the British Psychological Code of Ethics and Conduct Guidelines for Internet-mediated Research (BPS, 2017, p. 1), whose goal is to “outline some key ethical issues that researchers should keep in mind when implementing an IMR study”. The need for such a code was felt because

although technological advances extend opportunities for researchers to conduct research, such advances also pose additional complexities which may impact ethical principles.

Survey respondents were informed about the identity of the researcher and the supervisor, the aims of the research, the reason for conducting the research and the expected duration of their involvement in the research in a covering letter preceding the survey. Respondents were not asked to be identified and were promised anonymity. At the end of the survey, respondents were asked whether they would like to be contacted to participate in a second phase of the study, namely interviews.

3.6.2 Informed consent of interviews

Cohen (2007, p. 401) claims that, “interviews have an ethical dimension; they concern interpersonal interaction and produce information about the human condition”. They identify three main areas of ethical issues, namely informed consent, confidentiality and the consequences of the interviews, each of which was given its due importance in this study. Firstly, participants in this second phase of research gave their ‘active consent’ to participate through an opt-in sampling technique. Once the random sample of participants was decided upon, an information letter was sent to the prospective participants via the email they themselves provided on ticking the opt-in option (Appendices 4 and 5). The information letter informed prospective participants about the identity of the researcher and the supervisor, a brief description of the aims of the study, and a description of how the interviews would be conducted. Cohen (2007, p. 365) claims that, it is “important for the interviewer to explain ‘the rules of the game’ so that the interviewee is left in no doubt as to what will happen during and after the interview”. A date and place convenient to the interviewees, who volunteered

to take part, was agreed upon. Access to institutions was not needed since all research was conducted outside school hours and not on school premises.

Before the commencement of the interview, participants agreed to being interviewed by signing a consent sheet (see Appendix 6 and 7). Interviewees carefully read through the Participant Information Sheet and the researcher ensured that they understood the confidentiality aspect. Codes, attributed to interviewees, are outlined in Tables 3.7 and 3.8 to guarantee confidentiality.

3.6.3 Recording, transcription and reporting

Interviews were recorded using both a digital recorder as well as on the mobile phone, which served as a back-up. Voice recording was chosen to facilitate the flow of the interview.

Transcription of interviews took place after every interview. The researcher followed the suggestion offered by Briggs and Coleman (2007) and transcribed the interview recordings as soon as possible to be able to use this opportunity, drawing on memory, to substantially develop the discussion that occurred. To ensure confidentiality, the voice recording was distorted and the audio-recordings stored in a safe place.

Moreover, reporting of data was carried out with honesty and integrity, and every effort was made to report data in the most accurate way possible. In order to be as authentic as possible, the researcher reported all pertinent data and attempted to analyse even data which seemed to be contradicting the research hypothesis or the emerging trend. Ethical considerations were also adhered to in reporting the findings. Moreover, the researcher attempted to be as objective as possible to ensure authenticity of the findings.

3.7 Boundaries/Limitations of Study

In this section, five main limitations encountered in this thesis shall be discussed.

- (i) While this study claims to be based on an inductive process, as Blaikie (2007) argues, the researcher is aware that such a claim could be an over-simplification as there is no such thing as 'pure' induction or 'pure' deduction. Indeed, researchers cannot generate research tools and interpret data with an unbiased or neutral mind.
- (ii) Following on (i), another concern was the positionality of the researcher. The researcher's personal experience and assumptions may have influenced the content of the research tools as well as the interpretation of data. The researcher is part of the educational world being studied, therefore the values, norms and experiences gained may make it impossible to be entirely objective.
- (iii) Whilst acknowledging that had the desired sample size, based on NSO statistics, been achieved, it would have added significance to this research. However, the researcher is confident that the responses obtained through both quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews are comprehensive enough for the findings to be based on robust data, leading to meritorious conclusions. Furthermore, the sample population included professionals from all three sectors of education in Malta, making inferences more generalisable.

- (iv) Since the surveys were disseminated through specific pages on social media for participant recruitment to target focused communities, eligible respondents who do not have access to these pages were excluded from the sample population. As Kayam (2012, p. 60) states, this created a constraint to claims made through the research findings “since the participants are reached via certain channels which make them part of a specific (online) group”.

- (v) When participant recruitment relies on web-based dissemination, there is also the possibility of ‘data pollution’. This may be due to multiple submissions by the same participant or the survey being taken by someone who is not part of the research target population.

3.8 Conclusion

This chapter highlighted the development and the administration of the research tools used in this study. It also described the methodology used to inform the research problem and it explained how the data which narrates the realities, meanings and experiences of the research participants was analysed to reflect the inductive nature of this inquiry and to write up the final analysis.

Chapter 4

Presentation of Findings

4 Presentation of Findings

4.0 Introduction

4.1 Assistant Heads in Primary Education: Their Existing Practices

4.1.1 The technical and administrative leadership domain

4.1.2 The educational leadership domain

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4.2 Strategies to Develop Relationships, Individual and Collective Capacity

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4.3 Conclusion

4.0 Introduction

The aim of this study is to explore, reflect on and understand the existing practices of assistant heads of primary schools. In addition, this study delves on strategies that leaders use to prod and support people towards a shared direction – a direction which positively impacts school culture and student learning. This study focuses on both overt as well as internal states of assistant heads' leadership. Data is gathered from both assistant heads of primary schools as well as those who directly experience their leadership, that is, teachers. Referring to the possibly isolated practice of teachers, Leithwood et al. (2006, p. 108) state that, "leaders may be influential only if their colleagues allow them to be". For this reason, the understanding of positive practices of assistant heads is likely to be vital to senior leadership teams who seek to improve their working relationships with teachers.

This study draws on the constructivist paradigm to gain an understanding of individual meanings of both assistant heads and teachers – their meanings and realities as experienced on a day-to-day basis. Within a constructivist perspective "meanings are varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views rather than narrowing meanings into a few categories or ideas" (Creswell, 2014 p. 41). This is done by triangulating data collected from assistant heads with that of teachers.

Firstly, this chapter outlines the existing practices of assistant heads in local primary schools and explains how the range of responsibilities span over diverse leadership domains. Drawing on the data, each leadership domain is defined and described, and the ways in which assistant heads handle their broad range of responsibilities and how they prioritise is discussed. In so doing, the discussion also includes teachers' perceptions on the role of the assistant head.

Furthermore, survey results and the qualitative data derived from semi-structured interviews are analysed to identify strategies embraced by assistant heads and internal dispositions which help forge positive and consequential relationships for instructional effectiveness. Included in this are perspectives of what an assistant head could do to make teachers feel valued and to help them grow professionally.

4.1 Assistant Heads in Primary Education: Their Existing Practices

Leading schools nowadays is beyond the ability of a single leader. As Dinham (2016, p. 395) states, “constant policy change and increased accountability and responsibility required of principals has resulted in work intensification that has, in part, been addressed by distributing the leadership load”. The landscape of school leadership has therefore shifted the focus from single leadership to distributed leadership and central to this shift is the role of the assistant head. Moreover, since “leadership is about achieving a goal through a team” (Kahl, 2004, p.2), teams in schools needs to be nurtured up close by a committed senior leadership team, a team which is composed of the head of school and the assistant heads.

The role of the assistant head is complex and cannot be narrowly defined due to the broad range of responsibilities. Marshall and Davidson (2016, p.274) state that “their roles and duties are ill-defined and inconsistent, requiring flexibility, spontaneity, and an anticipation of needs and problems”. Moreover, as outlined in the Job Descriptions Handbook (see DQSE & DES, 2007), the overall purpose and position of an assistant head is, “to assist and deputise for the head of school in the efficient and effective management and control of the human, physical and financial resources of the school and to offer professional leadership in the implementation and development of the National Curriculum Framework” (MEDE, 2007, p.

34). This job description implies critical leadership capabilities which belong to distinct leadership domains. Nonetheless, working efficiently in one leadership domain is likely to support efficiency in another. The leadership domains, which have emerged inductively from the quantitative and qualitative data gathered in this research, are:

- The technical and administrative leadership domain
- The educational leadership domain
- The human leadership domain

Participants in this study identified a range of responsibilities and acknowledged that an assistant head is both a leader of students and people and is also a manager of a never-ending list of school tasks. Alvy and Robbins (2005 p. 51) suggest that “effective leaders need to conduct tasks bi-focally – taking care of both learning and business as they move through the day”. Hence this requires assistant heads to wear many hats. Typical responses from the Assistant Head Survey suggest that the assistant head needs to be, ‘an all-rounder’ since ‘whilst the administrative role is important, an assistant head also needs to come into contact with all members of the school community’ as well as should ‘provide guidance, support and encouragement throughout’. The three above mentioned leadership domains shall be described in detail in the sections that follow.

4.1.1 The technical and administrative leadership domain

Technical and administrative leadership refers to the ways assistant heads carry out tasks to optimise the school’s human, physical and financial resources. The survey results show that

assistant heads are heavily involved in interactions and administrative tasks but less so on curricular matters (see Table 4.1).

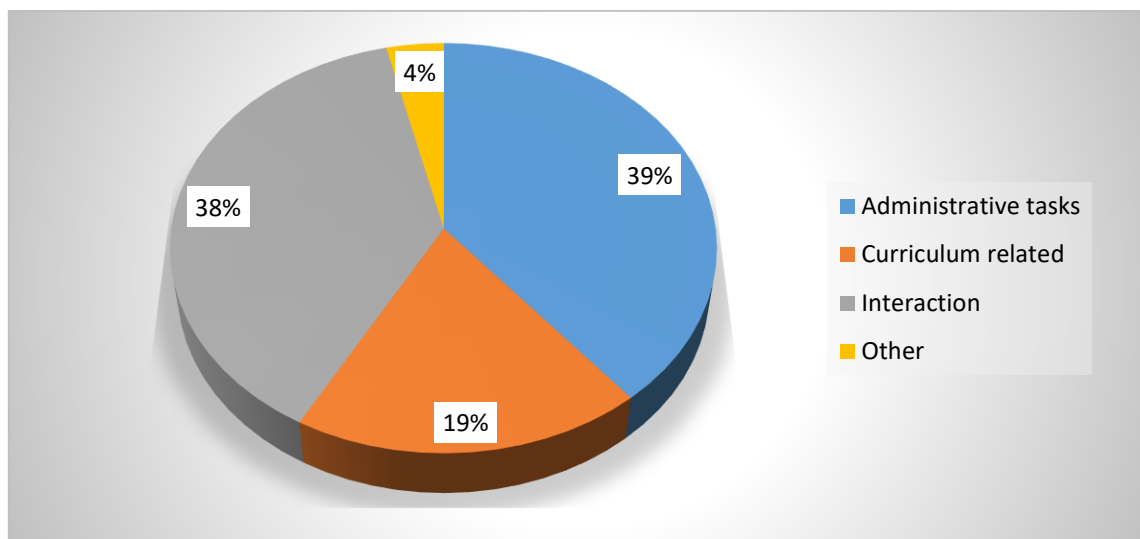


Table 4.1: Percentage allocation of time during a working week

Routine paperwork is reported to be required daily by 69% of the respondents. The technical and administrative domain also includes personnel management (time dedicated towards managing and resolving timetable and supervision issues to make sure that students are well supervised during early morning supervision, midday break as well as at dismissal time). The majority of assistant heads (64%) claim that this is a daily task. 87% of survey respondents liaise with human resources outside the school at least on a monthly basis to reach out to all available resources which may help the school improve and achieve its action plan. Overall, within the technical and administrative domain, the assistant head's role has a maintenance function – that of ensuring stability and the smooth running of the school.

Although necessary, technical and administrative work is, according to survey respondents, the greatest source of frustration because it does not appear to impinge directly on the improvement of teaching and learning. As shown in Table 4.2, assistant heads rated

administrative work as the most burdensome and frustrating since this leaves them with less time to fulfil their extended set of responsibilities, responsibilities that mainly focus on teaching and learning. In agreement with this, Alvy and Robbins (2005) relate how teachers who become leaders do so with an aspiration to be educational leaders who can positively impact the lives of teachers and students rather than educational managers performing administrative tasks. Assistant heads, in both survey and interviews, reported that oftentimes they leave office work for home since they do not find the time at school. Others find the school environment as not conducive to this kind of work. For example, one respondent wrote that, 'working in an organised manner is important, but this is very challenging due to interruptions'.

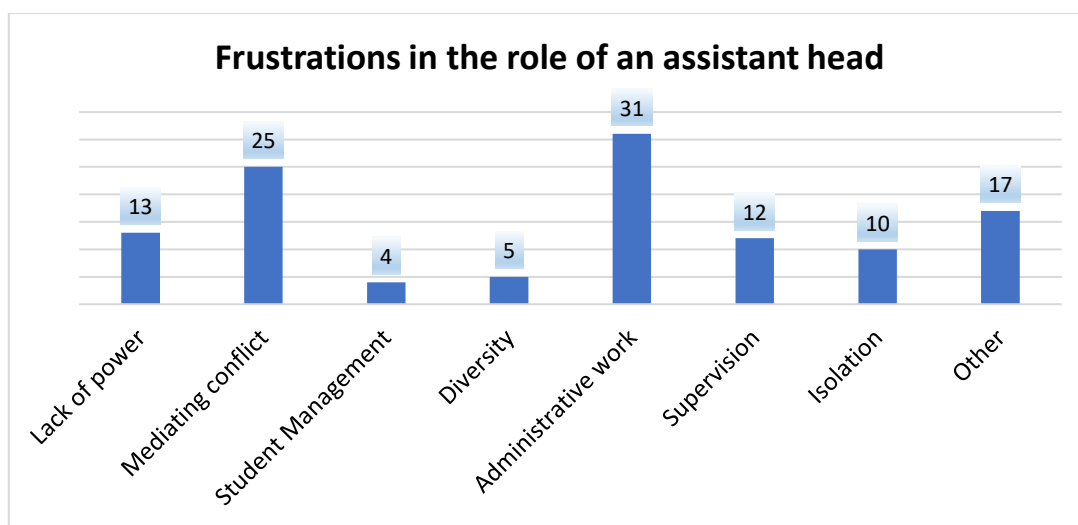


Table 4.2: Sources of frustration of assistant heads

From the findings in this section, it is evident that assistant heads who took part in the survey deem the technical and administrative leadership domain as necessary. The smooth running of the school depends on this work. However, assistant heads also feel that this work is

binding them to the office and detracts time which could be dedicated to educational leadership tasks, such as supporting teachers and facilitating student learning.

4.1.2 *The educational leadership domain*

Kadir (2012, p. 638) argues that the assistant head’s role, “must go beyond nuts and bolts duties”. Indeed, they also contribute to accomplishing educational goals by leading for learning. Shoho and Barnett (2012, p. 277) state that, “as accountability demands increase, assistant heads have been asked to share the instructional leadership role”. This involves demonstrating the capacity to work with and guide teachers and caregivers towards improving teaching and enhancing learning in every classroom. Assistant heads who participated in the survey recognise that they can positively impact the teaching and learning within the school through their intermediary role between staff and head of school and through their visible presence.

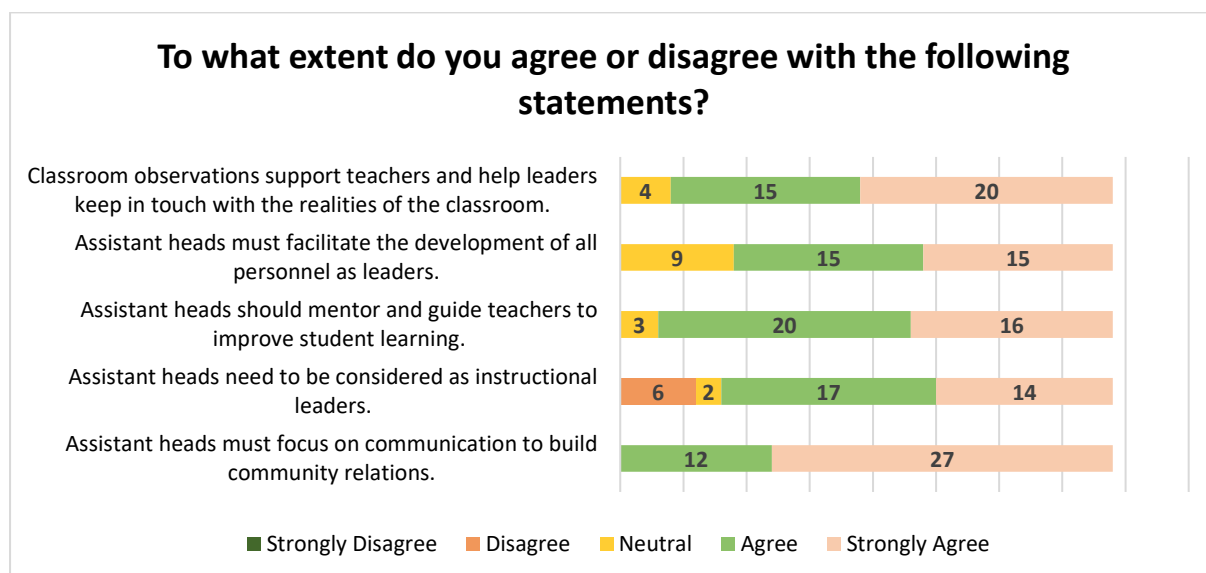


Table 4.3: Assistant heads as instructional leaders

Data obtained from this survey (Table 4.3) clearly indicates that these assistant heads believe in their commitment to lead both student and professional learning. It appears that they value their duty to create a focus on learning by being present in the classrooms and by focusing their attention on the effectiveness of the teaching taking place. Almost 4 out of 5 assistant heads see themselves as instructional leaders. As Kaplan and Owings (1999, p. 82) say, this role focuses on “creating a learning environment that supports higher achievement for all students”.

Having said that, in order to embrace this role, assistant heads need heads of schools who are willing to empower them and to support their professional growth. In a face-to-face interview, Assistant Head 2 said that, ‘many a time, we are either guided or restricted by the head of school and the more au courant with professional development the head is, the better your situation will be to make an impact on teaching and learning’. She was referring to the extent to which an assistant head can become immersed in leading for learning, and this appears to depend on how forward thinking the head of school is. On their end, assistant heads feel the need to prove to the head that they are capable of dealing with both educational management duties as well as being regularly engaged in educational and instructional leadership tasks. Assistant Head 3, said that his personal benchmarks for being effective in his role are both being deeply engaged in school activities and instruction but also being efficient and organised in administrative tasks. In discussing effective leadership, Day (2003) says that this necessitates careful balancing of leadership and management.

Referring to the Teacher Survey, data show that teachers also believe that assistant heads should give priority to instructional leadership. For teachers in this study, it emerged that the

most important role of an assistant head is the instructional function (related to monitoring, mentoring and promoting effective teaching and learning). Teacher respondents value an assistant head’s efforts to enable them to improve student learning as the most important. This, according to Harvey and Barry (1995, p. 2), was an emergent facet of the role of an assistant head. They define the evolving role as one “which emphasises critical scrutiny of policy and practice, articulating shared professional perspective, building culture and managing change which leads to programme improvement”. This echoes Robinson, Hohepa and Lloyd, (2007, p. 21) when they claim that, “the closer leaders are to the core business of teaching and learning, the more likely they are to make a difference to students”.

Teachers appear to have a growing expectation to see assistant heads as people who can assist them in improving student learning outcomes as well as to help them grow as teachers. Indeed, when asked to identify who they seek for assistance, 63% of survey respondents said that their primary source of instructional support comes from the assistant head (Table 4.4).

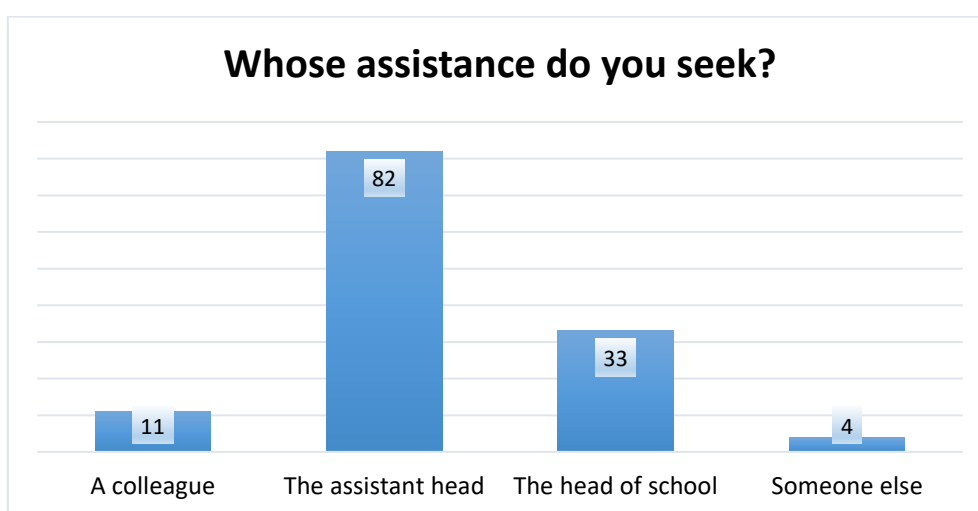


Table 4.4: Who teachers seek for assistance

Teachers who participated in the survey state that they seek the assistant head's assistance for five key reasons, namely: (i) to abide by the hierarchy of the SLT; (ii) an assistant head is the perfect link between home and school; (iii) an assistant head is easier to reach; (iv) an assistant head is a link with the head of school; and (v) an assistant head facilitates implementation of action plans and reforms. Each of these reasons shall be explored further.

Teachers feel that the assistant head is the go to person, 'to follow the hierarchy of the SLT', and also because 'it is the assistant head's role to collaborate with and support teachers in their teaching'.

Data show that teachers trust assistant heads. They view them as the ones who can best support and offer practical advice, particularly because they are the perfect link between school and home. Teachers said that assistant heads, 'would know the home background and issues', 'they can contact guardians' and 'can provide the best network to support the student as well as the teacher'. In the interview, Teacher 1 said that, 'the assistant head acts as a bridge and a buffer between a teacher and parents, and this takes off the pressure so I can keep focused on what I am doing'. In relation to this, 35 out of 39 assistant heads said they are contributing to the instructional role by working with students and families on academic progress at least once a month (Table 4.5). In the interview, Assistant Head 1 said, 'I am at the forefront instead of the teacher'.

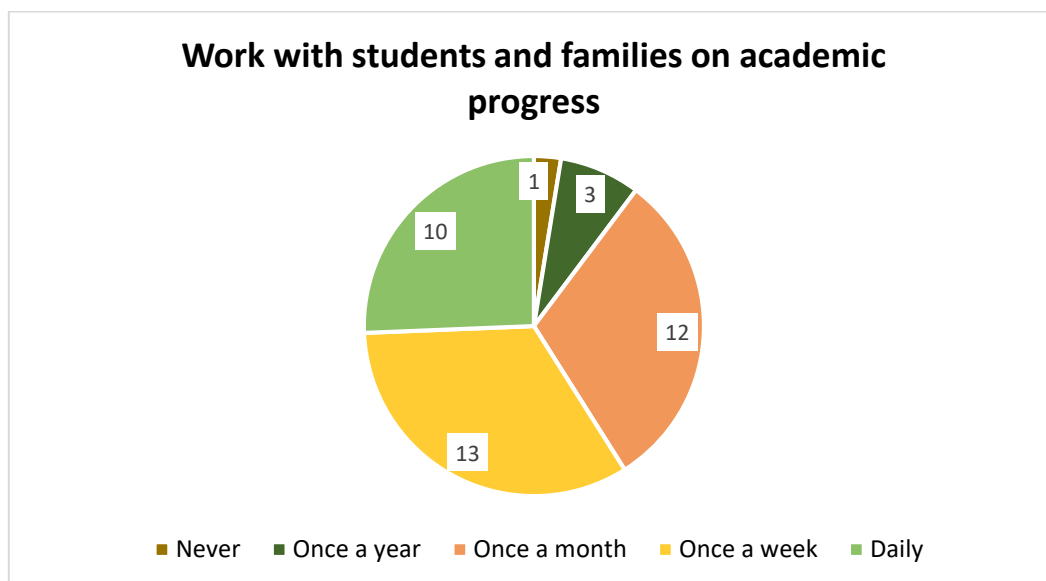


Table 4.5: Frequency of working with families on academic progress

According to teachers, the assistant head is the most visible and the most approachable since they are the ones who are where the teachers are. Teachers commented that the assistant head is ‘easier to reach’ and to communicate with, and hence is their ‘first point of reference’. In addition, as teachers usually need to deal with issues that require assistance on demand, assistant heads are ‘quicker to reach than the head of school is’. In the face-to-face interviews, there was a general consensus between teachers as well as assistant heads that to support teachers, assistant heads have to be where the teachers are. Assistant Head 3 said, ‘an assistant head needs to be proactive and intervention needs to be catered for immediately’. On the same lines, Assistant Head 1 said that one should not only be with the teachers physically, but also mentally. Teacher interviewees also yearn for the support and the daily presence of the assistant head. Teacher 2 thinks that assistant heads ‘should be at shop floor level with teachers to make sure they can help us if something crops up. They need to be visible and around us’. She also mentioned how reassuring it is to know that her assigned assistant head ‘has our backs, not most of the time but I would say all of the time’. Another

interviewee, Teacher 3, said that thanks to the assistant head, 'I feel that I am not there, behind a closed door, doing my job and am forgotten'. Also, Teacher 1 said that, 'assistant heads are very important because they are the first point of reference for every teacher who has a problem, a difficulty or a query'.

Assistant heads are also the link with the head of school and other stakeholders. Teachers mention how their assistant head facilitates communication with the head of school and collaborates with professionals from the education department, the secretariat and national agencies to help fulfil their initiatives and to help them achieve their targets. Teacher 3 mentioned that thanks to an effective collaboration, 'the assistant head listened to and understood our needs; she convinced the headmaster that we needed them (non-fiction books in Maltese) badly, she got help from Aġenzija Litterizmu, and we obtained them'. Assistant heads also reported having an important role in liaising with professionals from outside the school to contribute to the professional development of the teachers, to facilitate the implementation of the school's development plan.

Teachers refer to the assistant head also because they expect them to be informed about the latest educational policies and directives. They also trust, that not only will an assistant head be knowledgeable, but that s/he facilitates the implementation of reforms. Teacher 1 said that, 'the assistant head needs to be up to date with new and innovative practices that are going on, and not just local reforms but also with what is happening in the educational sector abroad'. This interviewee also goes on to say that 'assistant heads should know not only how a policy/reform is to be applied, but they need to embrace its philosophy in order to present it convincingly to the teachers. This because teaching should not be reduced to following

mechanical steps'. Besides being knowledgeable, assistant heads also feel the need to attend professional development sessions together with their teachers not only to know what is expected of teachers, but also to support teachers in the implementation of new policies and reforms. Assistant Head 1 mentions being present in the recent Learning Outcomes Framework professional sessions for teachers. She said that it was beneficial 'because you are listening to what they (the teachers) are being told, and together we will know what we are going to work upon. Being there, I kept putting myself in the reality of the classroom'.

Formal instructional supervision is also part of an assistant head's educational leadership responsibility. As shown in Table 4.6, most teachers reported that they feel moderately to extremely comfortable when the assistant head is observing them, and that this is due to 'a reliable and trustworthy relationship with the assistant head' and 'genuine feedback'.

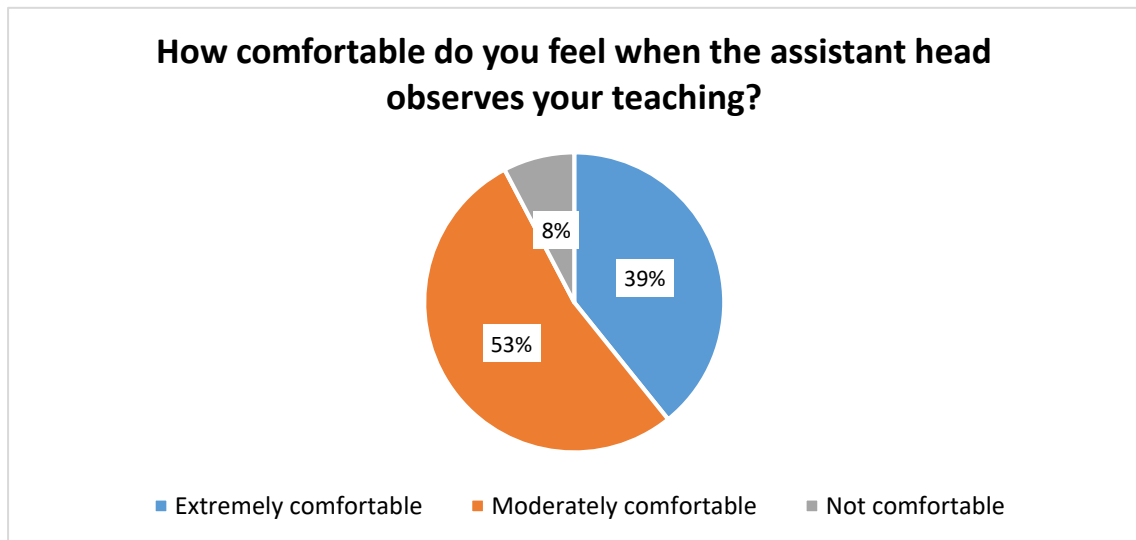


Table 4.6: Level of comfort during classroom observations

Many teachers mentioned that classroom observations are an opportunity for professional growth because they provide ‘insight on how to improve’ and ‘to show case well-planned work’.

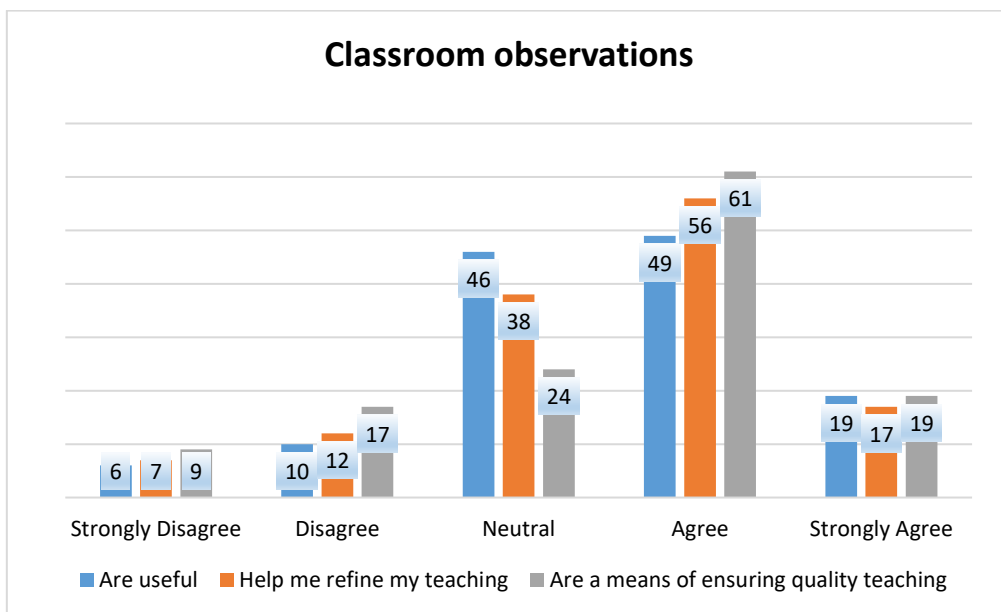


Table 4.7: The use of classroom observations

Most teachers agree that classroom observations are useful, help in refining the teaching and are a means of ensuring quality teaching (Table 4.7). 29% of teachers mentioned that although they could perform better if they were less nervous when being observed, they look forward to instructional supervision in order to grow professionally. They said they can sense when feedback is delivered honestly and constructively. When speaking about her assistant head, one teacher said, 'I respect her and know that I will get constructive feedback from her. Ultimately, her visits are to improve things not to catch us out'.

Assistant heads also mentioned that if mistakes and weaknesses are ignored, there can be no professional growth. Moreover, assistant heads make sure their feedback is delivered in a respectful manner. As Assistant Head 3 says, feedback is provided 'in the right tone of voice, at the right time, the right place and by addressing the issue. I am always very diplomatic and sensitive to the individual'. However, as Assistant Head 2 noted, providing feedback on instructional practices is always a difficult role particularly because an effective leader must encourage teachers to reflect, rethink and improve their practice without feeling threatened. Indeed, according to her, an effective leader needs to be confident enough 'to promote growth' and always 'push for change, even if it takes time and persistence'.

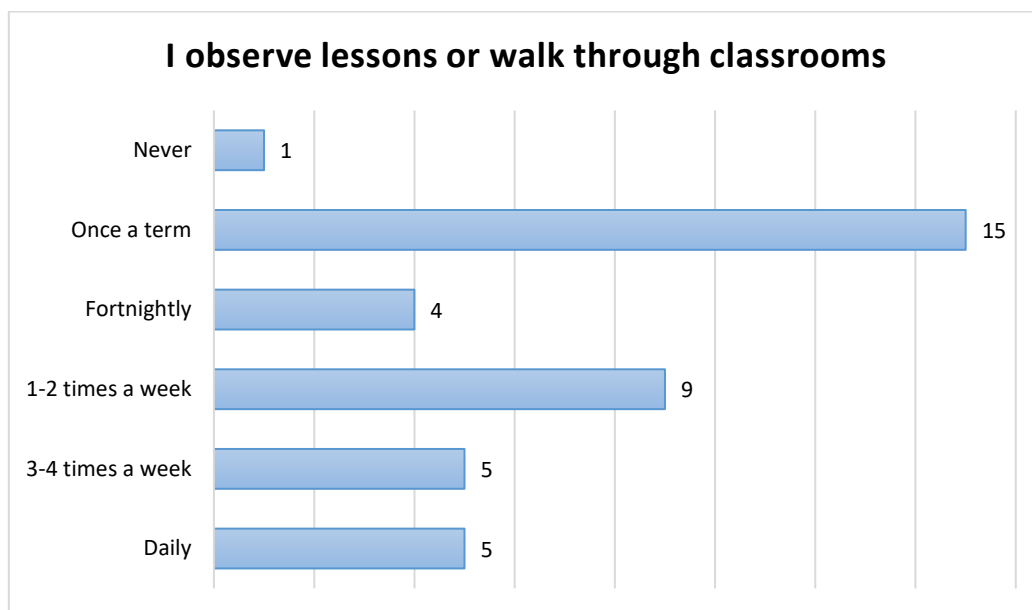


Table 4.8: Frequency of classroom observations

Despite being aware that classroom observations support teachers and help leaders keep in touch with the reality of the classroom, 38% of assistant head survey respondents formally observe teaching only once a term (as shown in Table 4.8). For these assistant heads, this lack of presence in the classrooms could be a result of daily realities which leave the assistant head with limited opportunities to exercise instructional leadership. Assistant Head 2 said that although she tries to observe each teacher in her remit deliver a lesson per term, more often than not, she does it the first term whereas in the second and third term formal observations become a rarity or are forsaken. Assistant Head 1 said that, 'until last year we only did instructional visits to NQTs (newly qualified teachers) and new members of staff. Now we are about to introduce instructional supervision to all other teachers as nowadays it is required'. On the other hand, findings reveal that almost half of the assistant heads who responded to the survey attend a lesson or walk through a class at least once a week.

As educational leaders, assistant heads need to build professional communities that value learning by supporting teachers and by distributing leadership among individuals in different positions within the school community. This is supported by Kouzen and Posner (2008). They sustain that “effective leaders do not hoard power, but they give it away”. Moreover, according to Drucker (1995), a good leader will help, support, and facilitate others to excel while placing less emphasis on controlling and directing the work of others. As shown in Table 4.3, 77% of teacher survey respondents agree that assistant heads should facilitate the professional development of all personnel as leaders. Assistant Head 3 described how distributed leadership works in his school so teachers are given incentives to take on different responsibilities such as form tutorship, level leadership, learning area leadership as well as other areas of responsibility through which they can all be involved in the school’s decision-making. Assistant Head 2 mentions that she is also keen on, ‘sharing a lot of professional development in order to have experts within the school rather than having to rope in external experts’. However, she also said that the mentality in the school works against this as when she encouraged a teacher, who was finalising her Master’s research, to share her work with colleagues, ‘she was not ready as she felt she would be seen as the assistant head’s pet or that colleagues would then be expected to follow suit’.

Further to enhancing the professional development of their teaching staff, 77% of assistant heads responded that they work closely with their heads of school to co-design the school’s vision, to improve the school mission and to review school targets. In such a setting, assistant heads have the opportunity to not only define instructional and organisational standards, but also to refine them. All three interviewed assistant heads feel that they are deeply involved

in the School Development Plan. On the other hand, their responses transpire various levels of consultation with the rest of the staff when prioritising the various needs of the school.

Assistant Head 1: *Surveys issued by the school are analysed, and together with the staff, the SLT pinpoint key areas of improvement and we base the SDP on common ideas.*

Assistant Head 2: *Together with the head, we brainstorm areas which need improving and then the head leaves it 100% up to me to consult professionals and to sketch out the SDP.*

Assistant Head 3: *I am part of an Academic Team and together we set up the School Improvement Plan.*

The comment from Assistant Head 2 seems to suggest that the school development plan arises from a process of self-evaluation between the head and the rest of the senior leadership team. However, Assistant Head 1 highlights more collaborative development planning, hence suggesting a more ardent desire to develop the school community's sense of ownership of the school development plan.

The data gathered relating to the educational leadership domain shows that assistant heads value their role as learning-focused leaders and they seek heads of school who enable such involvement in achieving educational goals. Teachers too believe that assistant heads should mainly be educational leaders who are readily available in order to help them focus on and improve teaching, and to make sure each child is given individual and holistic support.

4.1.3 The human leadership domain

Data gathered indicates that all three interviewed assistant heads view themselves as “leaders who are facilitators, catalysts – there to motivate and empower others” (Shaw, 2005, p. 245). The human leadership domain involves demonstrating the ability to foster a safe, purposeful and inclusive learning environment and the capacity to develop constructive and respectful relationships with staff, students and other stakeholders. Cuschieri (2013) states that schools are social systems and that the human relations dimension plays as crucial a role as does the curriculum. Allen (2007, p. 8) too believes that relationships are at the root of effective leadership. Assistant head survey respondents allocate a substantial time (19%) of their working week (see Table 4.1) to communicating and interacting with all stakeholders. This time is usually dedicated to provide support to the personal needs of students and staff members.

Table 4.9 shows that survey respondents regard themselves as task-oriented which means doing whatever it entails to get the job done. Nonetheless, it also emerges that they are very much also people-oriented since 87% say that they focus heavily on the needs of their team members and listen intently to what they are saying, this to fulfil their human leadership duties.

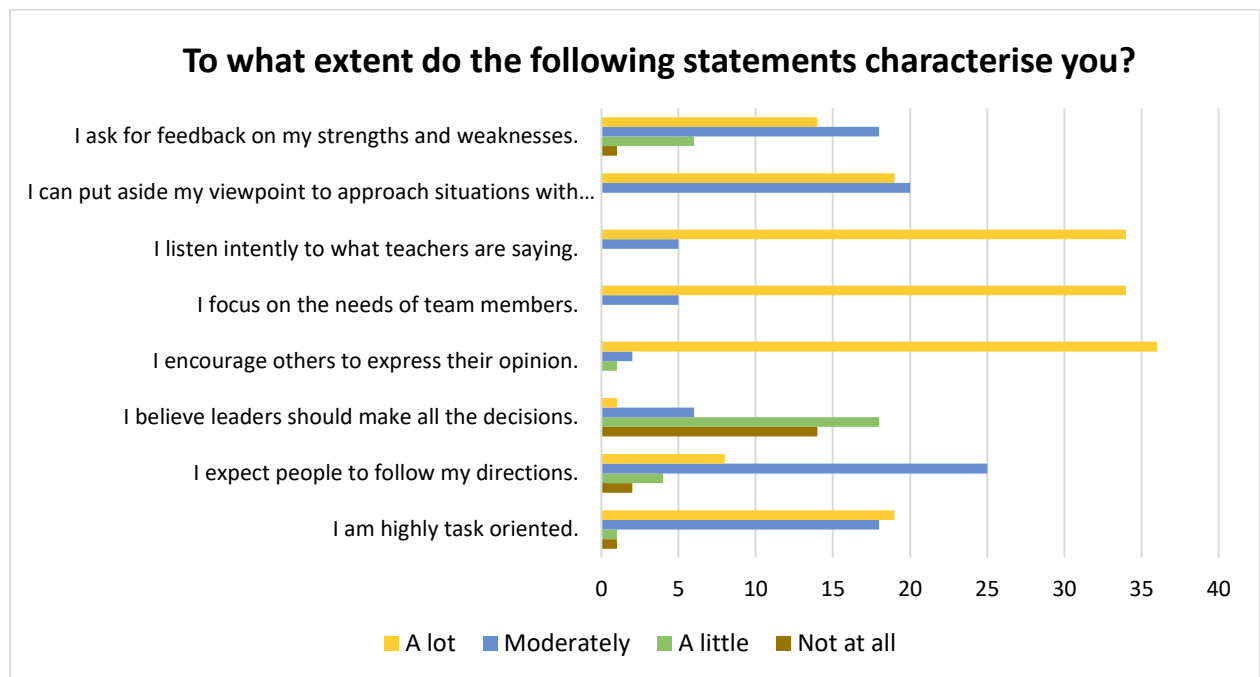


Table 4.9: Assistant heads’ leadership perceptions

In the human leadership domain, the assistant head, “is primarily concerned with people and their relationships, as established, stressed and threatened within the milieu of the school” (Austin & Brown, 1970, p. 76). Assistant heads reported that they build close relationships with people in order to understand them better. As one survey respondent put it, ‘an assistant head needs to be in contact with teachers and students – understanding their needs and providing support and encouragement throughout’. In order to build relationships and to be of support, the assistant head needs to be visible and available to students, teachers and parents.

Teacher survey respondents rated this affective leadership role, of supporting the personal needs of staff and students and showing empathy, as the second most important function of an assistant head. Maslow (1987, p. 52) defines such emotional understanding as, “the ability to understand the feelings, thoughts and behaviours of persons, including oneself, in

interpersonal situations and to act appropriately upon that understanding". An assistant head is called to understand the emotional states of colleagues and students, manage one's emotions and respond to the situation in a way which is helpful to the concerned as well as to the organisation in general. Bloom (2004, p. 1) also refers to this quality of leadership when stating that, "school leaders fail not because they lack brains, determination, knowledge and technical skills, but because of what is characterised as style and people skills".

However, building and strengthening individual relationships whilst remaining faithful to the whole school community may be an arduous task. All three interviewed assistant heads reported that, 'in a school you deal with people all of whom have different agendas, aims and objectives and interests. Getting all in line with the school's objectives may sometimes be challenging'. Juggling this requires assistant heads to be intentional about everything they do or say – it requires intentional and strategic leadership.

After having analysed the existing roles of assistant heads of school in Section 4.2, in section 4.3 this study focuses on intentional strategies which assistant heads put into practice to achieve what Sergiovanni (1990) terms as 'the extra quality of leadership', that is, looking at "strategies of building and bonding, which will add value and help people transcend competence to reach the level of inspired commitment and extraordinary performance" (Sergiovanni, 1990 p. 24).

4.2 Strategies to Develop Relationships, Individual and Collective Capacity

In section 4.2, analysis focused on the existing roles of assistant heads, as perceived by both those in the role itself as well as by teachers who experience this leadership. Like Cilia (2009),

participants in this research emphasise that being a leader is not just a role, but also a way of being and through adopting certain strategies, the effectiveness of leadership can be strengthened. Assistant heads who participated in this research are aware that their practice and their relationships with teachers may impinge on staff motivation and as a result, on productivity. In turn, teacher motivation could have a ripple effect and generate a more learning-rich environment for the students.

In order to create a positive climate, assistant heads mentioned dispositions and strategies they embrace to intentionally forge positive relationships. Indeed, as Leithwood et al. (2006, p. 108) state, “Leaders may be influential only if their colleagues allow them to be. This is the case especially in teaching, since for much of the time a teacher’s work is carried out in the privacy of the classroom”. Hence, teachers were also asked how an assistant head could motivate and make them feel more valued since these are of utmost importance and should be taken into consideration. Leadership dispositions and strategies mentioned by assistant heads and teachers are analysed within the emerging themes in the sections below.

4.2.1 Personal leadership dispositions

Establishing positive relationships and dispositions towards colleagues can, according to Debono (2018, p.232), “make a real difference in the lives of others”. In his doctoral thesis, he recommends that school leaders need to “maintain positive relationships and strive for LtL (Leadership that Loves) in order to support teachers and students”. NCATE (2008, p. 89) defines dispositions as “professional attitudes, values and beliefs demonstrated through both verbal and non-verbal behaviours as educators interact with students, families, colleagues

and communities”. Such dispositions appear useful and affect the assistant head’s ability to build relationships, communicate and resolve conflicts effectively.

Teacher Survey	Assistant Head Survey
Supportive ✓	Supportive ✓
Motivated ✓	Motivated ✓
Organised ✓	Organised ✓
Trustworthy ✓	Trustworthy ✓
A listener ✓	A listener ✓
Compassionate	Plans strategically
Efficient ✓	Efficient ✓
Plans strategically	A leader
A leader	Charismatic
Charismatic	Compassionate
A critical friend ✓	A critical friend ✓
Ambitious ✓	Ambitious ✓

Table 4.10: Essential Assistant Head Dispositions

Table 4.10 illustrates responses from the Assistant Head Survey as well as the Teacher Survey when asked to list, starting from the most important, leadership dispositions which ensure effective leadership. Both assistant heads and teachers identified the assistant head as a person who is supportive, motivated, organised, trustworthy and a listener. In what follows, each of these five dispositions as well as the one least chosen by respondents shall be discussed.

(i) The most frequently chosen disposition is being *'supportive'* and, hence, caring about the well-being of staff and students alike. This trait falls within the human leadership domain and the educational leadership domain, in which a leader demonstrates the ability to develop relationships as well as individual and collective capacities in order to improve instruction. When asked how teachers benefit from working with them, 59% of assistant heads mentioned different ways in which they provide support to teachers. Some mentioned that they give specific and practical advice about teachers' practice. This is especially done when teachers request it. Moreover, it appears that teachers are willing to accept this advice because they value assistant heads' previous teaching experiences. One respondent mentioned the *'sharing of good practices'*; another mentioned that advice helps teachers manage student behaviour; another respondent said that support is specifically focused on teaching and learning as her assistant head *'organises frequent meetings between teachers, and invites professionals to help teachers develop their practice'*. An assistant head claimed that in order to support teachers, she keeps up to date on educational matters and that facilitates her in her role of being a point of reference to teachers. Moreover, 32% of assistant heads say that teachers benefit from working closely with them because they offer support that addresses personal needs. These respondents adopt a more personalised approach investing upon communication built on trust. Indeed, by getting to know their staff, they also discover their personal and professional needs and aspects that motivate them to improve on their classroom practices. As one assistant head put it, *'the psychological safety of staff is*

paramount' and that this can be achieved through 'having someone who listens to them', 'building trusting relationships' and 'caring for their well-being'.

(ii) According to survey respondents, an assistant head should also be '*motivated*'.

This is possibly due to the fact that not only does the role require its tenure to accomplish goals in improved teaching, learning, and curriculum alignment, but assistant heads need to lead intentionally in order to promote motivation within the team. This supports Kahl's (2004, p. 46) position that "a leader can't just say that he/she is passionate, and ask the team to come along; a leader must light a team's fire and compel them to engage their own ambition". This disposition represents an educational leadership domain in which the leader demonstrates the capacity to motivate others.

(iii) Being '*organised*' was also regarded as important in view of the educational administrative duties of an assistant head. Albeit being the greatest frustration (as seen in Table 4.2), the technical and administrative leadership domain appear to be a necessary evil in order for them to be effective. An assistant head is required to demonstrate the capacity to plan and make optimum use of a school's resources through the nurturing of effective management practices. This justifies in part why administration is allocated significant time in an assistant head's agenda (as seen in Table 4.1).

(iv) Being '*trustworthy*' is considered to be an important trait since to be an effective leader, an assistant head needs to demonstrate and model values and behaviour that sustain and nurture a professional learning community. Assistant heads are

expected to develop themselves in order to align their own actions with the desired school values. These leaders believe that school values are translated into practice if they demonstrate these values themselves.

(v) *'Listening'*, and being a good listener, is also an important aspect. When leaders listen, they notice and are likely to capture truthful information about what is important to the people around them. Nelson's (2016, p. 209) advice to, "meet them often, and listen, listen, and listen some more" is hence essential for assistant heads to follow. For Teacher 1, the most important goal is to 'communicate well with teachers to listen to both their ideas about the curriculum as well as other problems that might arise'. She goes on to say that 'listening is a priority because only through listening can she support and ultimately make informed decisions for the benefit of the teachers and the students in general'. She further explained that when her ideas are heard, even if they are only considered and not actually implemented, it is the greatest motivator of all for her to pursue with her work. On the same lines, Assistant Head 2 argued that one has 'to keep ears on the ground all the time, in order to know what the teachers are feeling. Unless you listen, you cannot evaluate whether things are working as they should be'. She added that 'it all boils down to trust, because you can listen as much as you want, but unless you have their trust, teachers will not speak to you and you don't have anything to listen to'. Speaking about his experience, Assistant Head 3 learned that both teachers and learners will quickly pick up such a trait in a leader, and the extent to which leaders are open to listen will effect whether

others ultimately approach them for support. He goes on to say that 'being receptive reassures teachers and improves their wellbeing'.

(vi) Notwithstanding the fact that being an assistant head is considered an important step on the path towards headship, none of the respondents from both surveys chose '*ambitious*' as a disposition for an effective assistant head. This may be due to two reasons:

Schools are organisations in which a hierarchical power structure is still present and felt. The possibility that an individual might display personal ambitions which go beyond his/her appointed position within that organisation, may be frowned upon. Shoho and Barnett (2012, p. 270) say that, "assistant heads should not only be prepared for their role, they must also learn the norms and expectations of the organisation". This is what Marshall and Greenfield (1987) term 'career socialisation'.

Another possible reason could be the fact that recent educational literature points towards leadership which is dispersed rather than located within one person. Hatcher (2005 p. 253) states that, "distributed leadership has come into prominence in school management discourse as a means to achieve the participation and empowerment of teachers and to create democratic schools". To this reason, rather than personal ambitions, people within an educational organisation favour character dispositions which promote organisational aims, not personal aims. Assistant heads are expected to act as moral agents who are committed towards their students. This echoes Sergiovanni's (1999, p. 15) claim

that “school leadership practices should reflect a sense of common good and a promise that those moral values are required from everyone”.

(vii) It is also important to highlight that *‘plans strategically’* ranked rather low in the assistant head survey, and even lower in the teacher survey. This suggests that the assistant heads of schools are attributed a more monitoring, supportive and evaluative role in the school development planning and process as opposed to a leading role in strategising to setting educational targets and bringing about quality change.

4.2.2 Leaders as communicators

Besides personal leadership dispositions, being capable of communicating effectively also emerged as a recurrent theme in the data. As a member of a school’s senior leadership team, an assistant head is responsible for vital outbound communication, which entails communicating information to staff. Indeed, as Parkes (2007, p. 210) states, “being knowledgeable with the ability to share information effectively is an essential trait of a successful administrator”. However, when survey respondents were asked to explain how they provide support to teachers, they mentioned that they also listen carefully and act upon inbound communication, information coming from staff. Nelson (2016 p. 214) states that intentional leaders are required to be intentional listeners too as “both outbound and inbound communication skills are critical to meaning”.

Particular forms of support (see Table 4.11) appear to facilitate and enable the development of trusting relationships. As a result, conflicts are more easily resolved because as opposed to reactive and confrontational interactions, these assistant heads emphasise the importance of developing a proactive approach to interpersonal communication. Participating assistant heads spoke about ‘two-way communication’, ‘open communication’, ‘an open-door policy’ and ‘open communication even after school hours’.

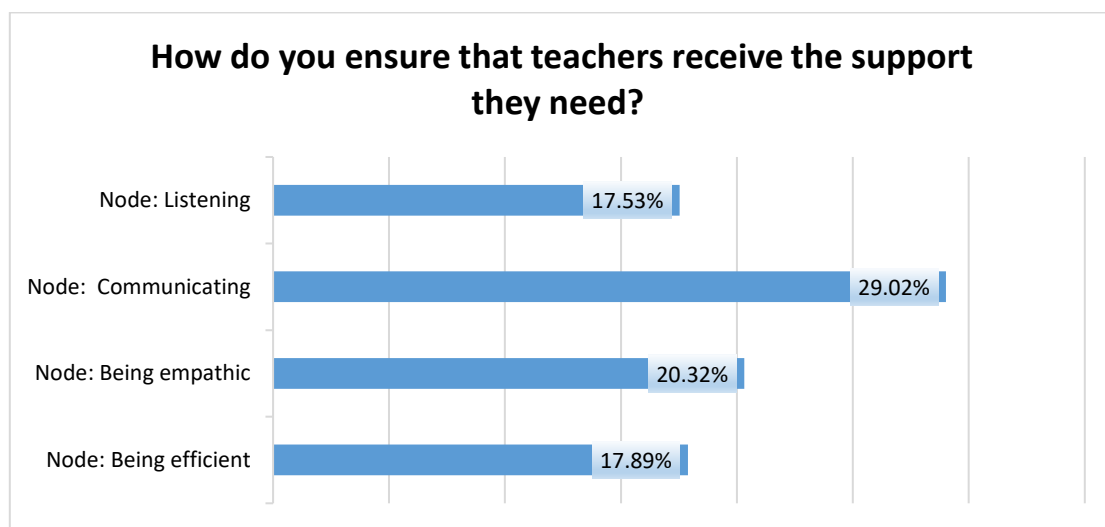


Table 4.11: Forms of support

The emphasis on and importance of communication also emerges in the findings of Vick (2011). In this study, which was carried out among 371 assistant principals, communication was found to be the most important skill needed for effective leadership.

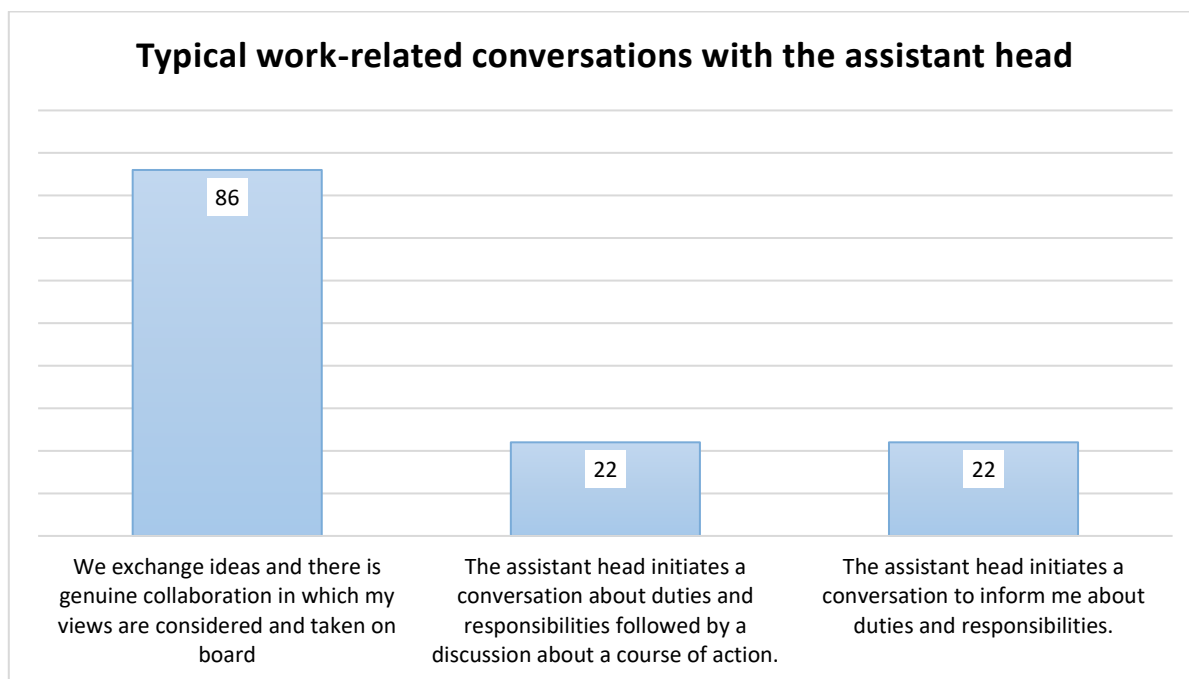


Table 4.12: The nature of dialogue

In describing the communication with the assistant head, 86 (66%) teachers described these as a genuine exchange of ideas, in which all views are taken on board (Table 4.12). Teachers value assistant heads who believe that leadership in schools should be idea-based rather than role-based. As opposed to the traditional model of leadership which is vested in one person, idea-based leadership implies that the ideas of all members of the team are listened to and considered. According to Sergiovanni (1999) leadership calls on everyone – teachers, parents, and students – to accept responsibility and to participate in what is happening in school.

Dialogue necessitates two-way communication to instil a sense of ownership in teachers. Rather than being told what to do, teachers acknowledge that they are provided with opportunities to share opinions, opinions which are listened to, respected and which also influence the way forward. For example, when asked what hinders teacher motivation and teacher efficacy, Teacher 1 said that ‘when things are imposed, I will put up a wall. I will be

less proactive, it creates passivity and it makes teaching a routine of following rules and orders'. Instead, this teacher feels that the assistant head is fulfilling his/her role in supporting teachers when there is real listening to feel the pulse of the staff and the children.

4.2.3 Leaders' interruptibility

Communication is a key part of an assistant head's everyday job. However, interactions are not always planned and take place formally as well as informally – a quick informal chat. Parkes (2007, p. 204) identifies a leader's 'interruptibility' and defines it as "the willingness to be interrupted because of the value placed on quality interpersonal relationships, to attend to others' concerns and to allow the person interrupting to feel valued in terms of his/her concern taking priority". Assistant heads who participated in the survey mentioned an open-door policy and doing their best to be approachable in order to make others feel welcome. They ensure that teachers receive attention by being available and offering timely support. The following are three excerpts from assistant heads' reflections:

Listening must be a priority. Leave your desk and talk to teachers.

I am available whenever they need to discuss or mention something.

I offer help and support whenever they demand it.

Due to their disposition to attend to teachers' needs, assistant heads leave many loose ends as they usually have to leave their work to attend to the needs of others. Such situations were reported frequently, with 82% of survey respondents saying that this happens on a daily basis. Assistant Head 1 describes how planned agendas are challenged and 'I just step in; whatever is on my desk stops and it is continued at home!' According to Kaplan and Owings (1999),

when doing so, assistant heads exchange daily crisis management for long-term planning and school improvement. Calleja Sciberras (2018, p. 77) also found that for assistant heads, “the unpredictability of life at school is very challenging, and it often happens that things on the day’s agenda are postponed, such that other more important incidents are treated as priorities and tackled straight away”.

4.2.4 Leaders fostering leaders

According to Stoll and Fink (1996), leaders who lead by standing alongside and behind rather than at the forefront are adopting ‘invitational leadership’. Such leaders strive to empower staff by creating a climate of collaboration, one that aims towards encouraging teachers to use their expertise beyond the walls of their classroom. They believe that, for school improvement, they need the capabilities of many rather than those of a few. For example, Sergiovanni (2001) states that every leadership act should lead to more leadership in order to help the school become a whole community of leaders. Data from this study show that, 77% of survey respondents (see Table 4.13) agree that, as assistant heads, they should facilitate the development of all personnel as leaders.

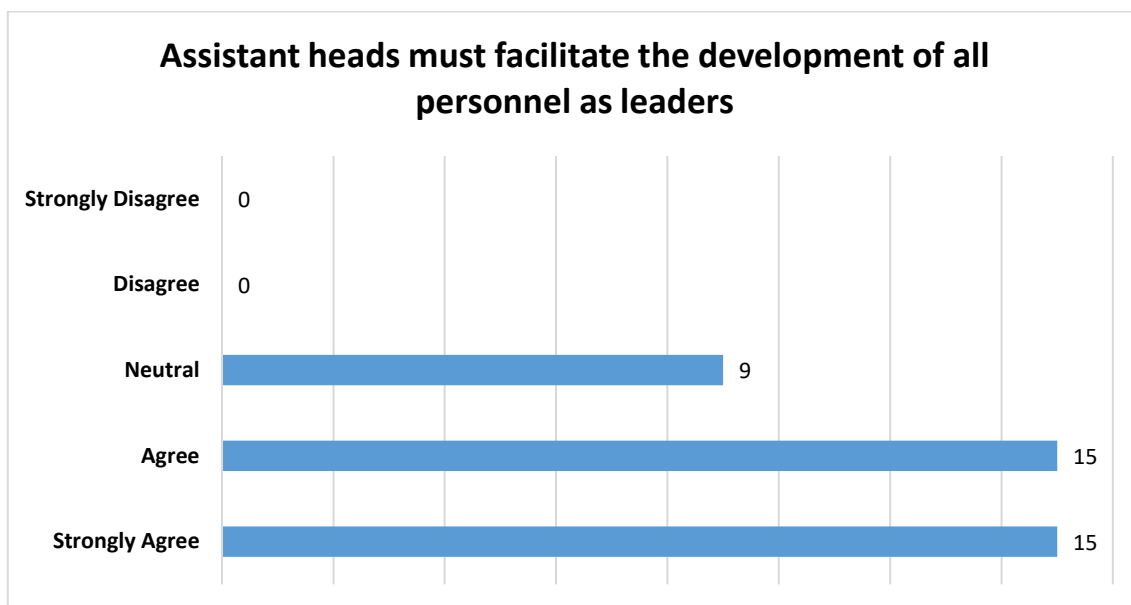


Table 4.13: Leadership to develop other leaders

Leaders who believe in empowering staff believe in their people and feel deeply committed towards their growth. Debono (2018) suggests that leaders who have such optimistic thoughts and commitment to everyone in their school are indeed practicing 'leadership that loves'. One survey respondent said that she tries to invest in professional development which is tailor made to individual needs and also makes use of curriculum time to develop staff. Similarly, another survey respondent agrees that leaders need 'to empower them (teachers) to take on more leadership roles'. Like Soderquist (2006), who notes that a true servant leader believes in and feels responsible for the growth and development of others, assistant heads in the present study believe in sharing good practices in order to help teachers grow professionally. Besides helping to support professional growth, such approaches promote collaboration towards shared goals.

4.2.5 Learning as central to leadership

As stated in 4.2.2, there is the growing expectation that assistant heads should contribute to instructional effectiveness and educational leadership. Within this domain, it is particularly important for assistant heads to focus on leading change for school improvement. However, to improve student learning, they need to positively approach the work of teachers and learning support educators, who in turn have a more direct influence on student learning. However, assistant heads could also influence positively other aspects of their organisation, such as school climate. This was captured by one survey respondent who said that assistant heads ‘are key in making teachers feel at home and happy and eager to create the best learning environment for pupils’.

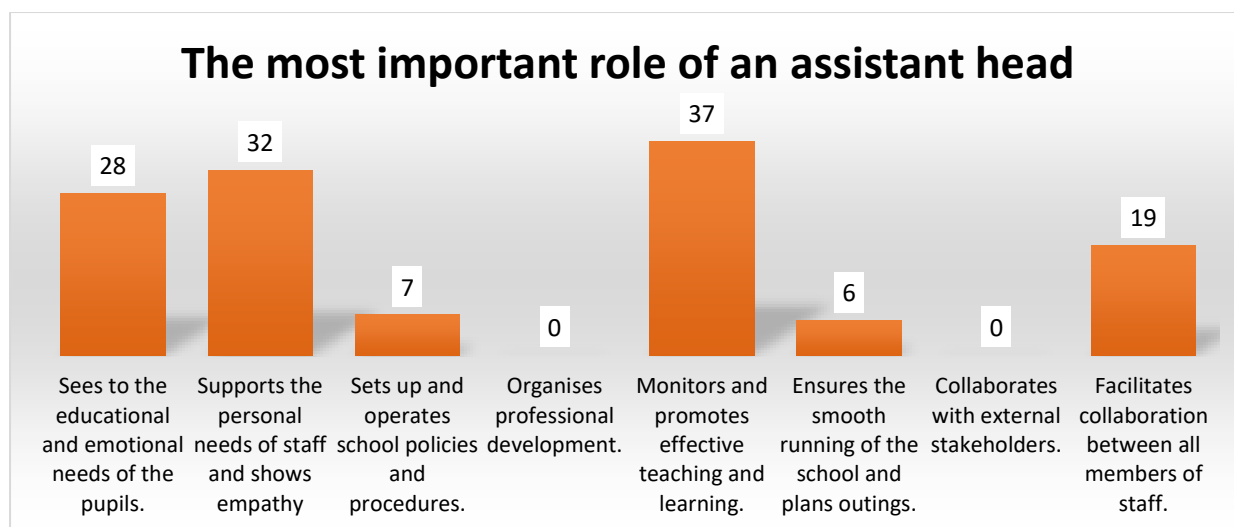


Table 4.14: Teachers’ Perception: The primary role of an assistant head

Leading for learning appears a primary concern for an effective assistant head (Table 4.14). Further to this, 93% of the teachers (Table 4.15) confirm that assistant heads support them in improving teaching and learning.

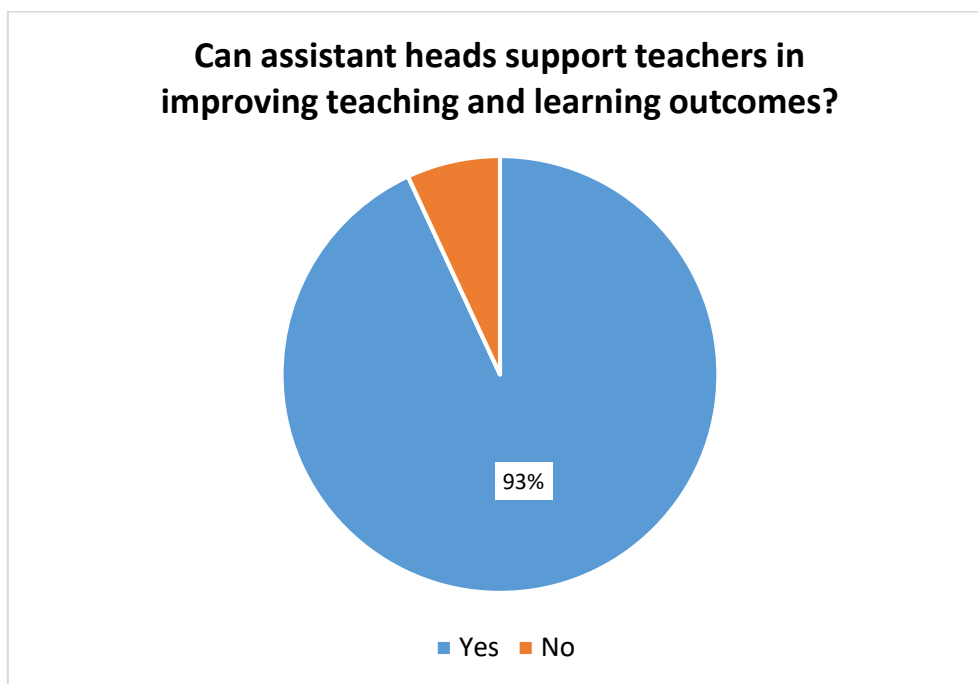


Table 4.15: Teachers' perception on whether assistant heads can support teachers in improving teaching and learning outcomes

When asked how assistant heads support them in improving teaching and learning, teachers mentioned the following reasons:

- (i) *Assistant heads have teaching experience and can mentor not only newly qualified teachers, but also experienced teachers.*

Assistant heads are responsible for evaluating teachers' performance both formally as well as informally. This is reflected by one of the teachers who wrote that, 'through their experience, assistant heads can help teachers with less experience face and overcome challenges'. Teachers recognise the assistant head's role to support the development of instructional practices. Many teachers believe that due to the assistant heads' own teaching experiences and their leadership skills, they can be possible mentors, advisors and role models who help

to guide them in their teaching, in supporting them resolve their difficulties and also in boosting their confidence. This appears important as teachers need praise, encouragement, appreciation but also guidance – whether they are newly appointed teachers or experienced in-service teachers. Lowe (1996 p. 415) says that as a result of their mentoring and support, assistant heads' practices contribute to leader effects on students since they facilitate, "employees to appreciate, dissect, ponder and discover what they would not otherwise discern".

- (ii) *Assistant heads keep up to date on new teaching methodologies and policies and they can bridge theory with practice.*

According to teachers, 'assistant heads can offer not only experience but also thorough knowledge of current policies and practices thus bridging theory to classroom practice'. This knowledge may come from seeking information about policy changes and trends in education or through emails which contain a lot of information which they may then pass on to the teachers. However, when training is provided to teachers, assistant heads are not always able to attend as they are tied down to school duties. One teacher interviewee mentioned that this was the case with the recent Learning Outcomes Framework training. In such situations, assistant heads end up being less informed than the teachers. Ideally, assistant heads should avail themselves of external professional opportunities that enable them to develop knowledge and eventually use this knowledge to support and guide their teachers.

- (iii) *Assistant heads know the reality of the classroom so they can help teachers put educational directives into practice.*

Harvey (1994) says that assistant heads should act as '*double agents*' when they simultaneously act for and against new mandatory educational reforms. On one hand, they play a major role in implementing such reforms, but on the other hand they can assess the educational implications of specific policies as they are aware of the professional needs of their teachers and the educational needs of their students. According to one teacher, 'assistant heads can provide policy guidance and set goals which are achievable throughout the year'. They therefore contribute to a constructive critique of changes and facilitate their implementation by helping teachers cope with and take on board the proposed policy. These leaders are called to be sensitive to the context in which they work and to be flexible in the implementation of changes. Gronn (2000, p. 320) states that "leadership is evident when ideas are recognised by others as capable of progressing tasks or problems which are important to them". Not doing so may result in hindering teachers' motivation. As Teacher 1 argued, 'if there is a policy and I am feeling that it is not working, and the assistant head does not try to help out, it would demotivate me'.

- (iv) *Assistant heads lead by example and are key in creating the best environment for teachers and students.*

Kouzen and Posner (2012) calls leaders '*ambassadors of the organisation's shared values*' and in order to effectively fulfil their role, they need to lead by example to

communicate the organisational mission to all stakeholders. They need to be perceived as credible, honest and of moral character in order to influence others. Teachers said they expect assistant heads 'to be role models' and 'to support teachers by being the first example'. This is in line with the statement made by Bush and Glover (2014, p. 3) that leaders need "to ground their actions in clear and professional values". It appears that teachers wish for consistency between what an assistant head says and what an assistant head does. Avolio and Gardner (2005) term this 'authentic leadership'.

- (v) *Assistant heads are of support by listening, discussing and by remaining in touch with classroom struggles.*

Apart from listening to and discussing issues with teachers during Curriculum Time and any other informal time, this entails protecting teachers from too much contact with other stakeholders; incidents which might expose them or distract their teaching and focus and maybe also negatively affect their relationship with the student. Leithwood et al. (2006, p. 108) call this, 'buffering staff from distractions to their work' and "this buffering function acknowledges the open nature of schools and the constant bombardment of staff with expectations from parents". The assistant head can alleviate a challenging situation since he/she spends a significant amount of energy in building productive relationships with the families of the students. This entails that the school is not only accountable to parents, but also acknowledges the meaningful and significant role that parents/caregivers have in the students' lives. Assistant heads do their utmost to

build trusting relationships with parents to gain information which may help understand the student and to rope in the parents.

According to Leithwood et al. (2006, p. 108), “internal buffering is also helpful, especially buffering teachers from excessive pupil disciplinary activity”. Teachers know that the assistant head would have seen the student from year to year and they can help the teacher to understand and respond to that students’ needs. A teacher survey respondent said: ‘They can give ideas on how to improve as they would have known the students for longer and would know their history; the kind of issues and problems the students have from one year to the other’. In such cases, the assistant head might pull the student out of the class to have a one-to-one talk. This supports the teacher and less time is detracted from teaching.

(vi) *Assistant heads are in a position to ensure continuity and collaboration between class teams and year teams.*

Teachers said that an assistant head can ‘ensure continuity in the curriculum from one year to the next’. Of course, for collaboration to become a reality, leaders need to orchestrate time for teachers to be able to collaborate and discuss and this is very challenging especially in the primary sector. Teacher 1 mentions a significant moment when teachers in her level were feeling that their workload was too much to handle. She describes how the assistant head was pivotal in solving the problem when she ‘really listened to us and we managed to change the workload so that it is better suited to the needs of the children. She insisted on having meetings between Year 1 teachers and Year 2 teachers and we actually

talked to each other. She did not dismiss us, but she took our pleas on board and created the change’.

(vii) *Assistant heads can encourage teachers to peruse ideas and initiatives.*

These respondents believe that an effective assistant head uncouples leadership from positional authority and can help to improve teaching and learning outcomes through encouraging teachers to use their strengths and areas of expertise. A teacher survey respondent said, ‘I think teachers and assistant heads can become a team that can learn from each other’. This is not always easy as some teachers are reluctant to take the initiative and are reluctant to engage in initiatives which would make them stand out from their colleagues. This is also influenced by the school culture.

4.2.6 Valuing people and developing individual capacities

As shown in Table 4.16, 46% of teacher survey respondents feel that supporting the personal and emotional needs of staff and students and showing empathy should be the primary role of an assistant head.

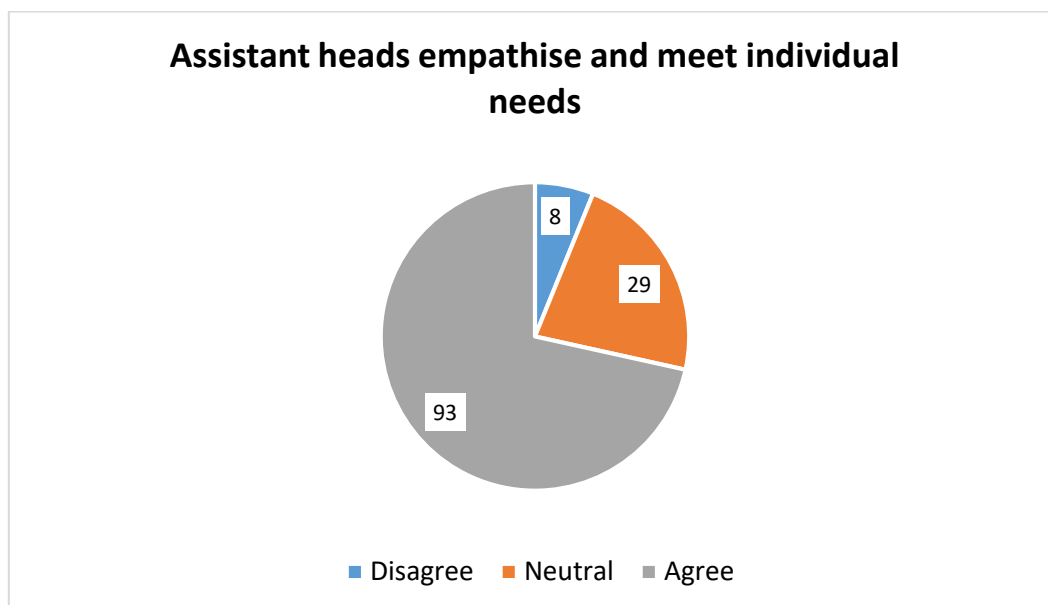


Table 4.16: Extent to which assistant heads empathise with and meet individual needs

Viewed in this way, the work of the assistant head is largely defined by the needs of other school participants (Harvey, 1994). These teachers see the assistant head as one who is heavily involved in the micro politics of the school as they are the ones who need to build and maintain good relationships with others in the school so as to accomplish their work. In the interview, Teacher 2 said that an assistant head will increase teacher motivation and efficacy if he/she has ‘a let me feel how you feel attitude’ and an ‘I can reach you attitude’. She goes on to say that unless there is this attitude, the chain of collaboration will be broken.

When interviewed, teachers were asked which strategy they would adopt to build relationships with educators were they to be the assistant head. All three mentioned approaching teachers as individuals and they all said they would try to mingle informally to break down barriers. Teacher 1 mentions that she feels valued when ‘the assistant head asks for her opinion on certain issues that concern the learning process because she knows that I take an interest in exploring and trying things out’. Teacher 1 also said that as an assistant

head, she would want 'teachers to know that she is a fair person and that I value all of them and I give time to them equally'. For Teacher 2, building a relationship by meeting staff regularly is crucial while Teacher 3 valued a personal approach. However, these teachers also mention that assistant heads should be 'caring and friendly but to a certain extent. There needs to be a bit of a distance because after all, the assistant head needs to take decisions for the greater benefit of the school, not for the benefit of an individual alone' (Teacher 1).

4.2.7 Fostering collective capacities and communities of practice

Facilitating and fostering collaboration between all members of staff is considered to be a significant role for effective leadership. Respondents value assistant heads who strive to create a non-hierarchical network of collaborative learning culture among staff. In their capacity, effective assistant heads can instil a culture within the organisation in which everyone is aware that they are all interdependent and that the actions of an individual only makes sense within a context of collaboration when actions are advantageous towards a collective vision. This was evident in the way Assistant Head 2 explained her role which entails 'enabling teachers to look beyond their classroom walls'. This reflects 'systems thinking' as advocated by Bezzina (2008, p. 22), in which members of the organisation "would be able to see the bigger picture of their organisation and understand how parts of the whole are interrelated and how actions in one domain, creates consequences in another".

4.3 Conclusion

From the survey carried out with assistant heads in Maltese primary schools, it appears that the delegation of responsibilities in the role of the assistant head are primarily concerned

with three leadership domains namely: the technical and administrative, the educational and the human relations leadership duties.

Although a substantial 39% of an assistant head's time is dedicated to the technical and administrative tasks, respondents have also confirmed that there is what Harvey (1994, p.7) refers to as an emergent role of an assistant head. Respondents allocate 38% of their time to communicating and interacting with students, educators and parents/guardians in order to foster constructive and humane relationships with all. This in order to build what Barth (2006, p. 12) defines as "fostering consequential relationships which would facilitate and be a prerequisite of improved learning outcomes". 19% of their week is dedicated to leading for learning when they dedicate attention to curriculum development and innovation, coaching and supporting teaching staff, roles which recognise the assistant head as an educational leader concerned with development. Due to having both a traditional and an emergent role "the combination of moving forwards while maintaining stability make the job at times seem daunting" (Sergiovanni, 2001, p. 1).

In order to fulfil what Calleja Sciberras (2018 p. 20) terms as "the most fluid position in schools today", assistant heads adhere to the statement by Whitaker (2003, p. 104) which states that "what makes some leaders of schools more effective than others is not what they know, but what they do". Vick (2011) also supports this. Similar to the findings in this study, assistant heads in his research rated 'knowledge' as least important whereas 'knowledge of people' as the most important characteristic.

Like Bezzina (2008, p. 13), primary school assistant heads in this study believe that, "strong employee relations are the backbone to successful organisations". They therefore take a step

back from the hectic rhythm of school life and make time to stay in touch with the human side of their job, to support through listening, empowering, and being genuinely interested in the welfare of their co-workers. As opposed to the hierarchical leadership models present in our schools, and despite academic structures which do not simply move aside or let go, these leaders try to make their leadership more personal. Moreover, they intentionally engage with their staff to influence their willingness to grow and perform, and to ultimately better the service the school gives to its students. At the receiving end of their leadership, teachers trust, feel motivated and are won over when they get a sense of genuineness – “real caring, real interest, and real conversation” (Nelson, 2016, p. 209).

Chapter 5

Conclusion

5 Conclusion

5.0 Introduction

5.1 Summary of Research Findings

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5.1.2 Research question 2

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5.2 Research Implications

5.2.1 Implications from findings

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5.4 Conclusions

5.4.1 Main conclusions

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5.0 Introduction

This study sought to examine the role of the assistant head in Maltese state, church and independent primary schools. It focused on exploring existing practices and on how assistant heads seek to adopt managerial and leadership behaviours in order to be both efficient as well as effective. As assistant heads are part of a senior leadership team, this study funnels its focus on intentional leadership behaviours. Hence, strategies employed to transform oneself, to develop meaningful relationships between leaders-teachers and to engage and influence others to be involved in the process of school improvement, are also dealt with. This research also provided insights into teachers' perceptions on the role of the assistant head and ways in which the latter can support, motivate and enable teachers to sustain and develop an environment that facilitates learning.

This chapter summarises how the research findings inform the research questions. It also offers recommendations intended for policy makers, heads of schools as well as assistant heads themselves, who aim to maximise the leadership potential and capacity of this role through being intentional.

5.1 Summary of Research Findings

In this section, the findings discussed in Chapter 4 are presented as answers to the four research questions.

5.1.1 Research question 1: How do assistant heads juggle the broad range of responsibilities?

What are their main priorities?

Assistant heads identified bifocal responsibilities of their role – they are both educational managers as well as educational leaders. This resonates with the finding of Day (2003) who claims that effective leadership is indeed a careful balance of the two foci.

Survey results among assistant heads suggest that the average time spent on ‘managing’ the school takes up around 39% of their day. This includes clerical, organisational as well as student welfare responsibilities. Although they report that such administrative work is the greatest source of frustration since it binds them to the office and detracts time which could be dedicated to teachers and students, interviewees also acknowledge that efficient management is fundamental to the smooth running of the school day, school activities and school events. Interestingly, the Teaching and Learning International Survey Malta Report (TALIS, 2018), reports that heads of schools spend an average of 28.3% of their time on administrative tasks and meetings. This statistic is lower than the statistic that assistant heads in the present study report to spend on time to perform similar tasks. This suggests that, in accordance with the traditional facet of their role, assistant heads are likely to take on more administrative duties to lessen the workload of the head of school (Harvey, 1994). More often than not, research participants took administrative work home in order to dedicate more time at school to address educational leadership.

Research participants claimed that 38% of their school day focuses on instructional effectiveness. The corresponding head of school statistic as obtained by the TALIS Malta (2018) report is 40.8%. The similar statistic obtained in the present study might be due to

considerable overlap of duties of the head of school and that of the assistant head, as discussed in chapter 1. Assistant heads report that they make face-to-face instructional leadership a priority in a number of ways, namely: (1) stay in touch with the realities of the classroom and visit them often, (2) focus their attention on the effectiveness of the teaching taking place, (3) empower and mentor teachers, (4) continuously work with students' families, and (5) invest their time in communication to build community relations. These assistant heads are aware that they can also influence school outcomes through interpersonal relationships and a collaborative attitude. Consistent with Ogawa and Bossert (1995), who suggest that leadership is not embedded in particular roles but is an organisational quality defined by relationships, assistant heads state that they believe that relationships are the root of effective leadership and consequently dedicate 18% of their time to interactions which support the personal needs of staff members and students. In comparison, TALIS (2018) reports that heads dedicate 15.6% of their time to interacting with students.

Research findings in this study suggest that assistant heads in primary schools aim towards a leadership routine which makes sure that the school runs efficiently, but most importantly, they aspire to be educational leaders. They are intentional in forming constructive relationships to be in a better position to assist in the learning of effective pedagogical practices. Moreover, they feel a responsibility to support teachers who, as reported in a study in *The Times of Malta* (2019), are undergoing excessive stress deriving from incessant changes and expectations, and from having the challenging task to teach students from diverse backgrounds, cultures, social-economic status, and who have a wide spectrum of learning needs.

5.1.2 Research question 2: Which strategies do assistant heads use to build relationships with educators and to foster collaboration?

Along with the rest of the senior leadership team, an assistant head has the complex task of building and maintaining relationships and collaborations with teaching staff that enable opportunities for improving student learning. The task is not only about single-handedly executing a vision, but it is up to assistant heads, as school leaders, to instil an approach for motivating staff to work together and to collaborate. The data collected suggests that this requires a blend of personal dispositions, values, knowledge as well as intentional strategies.

Assistant heads who participated in both the quantitative as well as qualitative strands of this study identified several strategies which foster professional collaboration. These strategies were, in turn, viewed as motivators for teachers particularly as they go through the challenging task of “not only reinventing the school, but also reinventing themselves as teachers” (Lieberman & Miller, 1999, p. 19). Although assistant heads stated that they have no single leadership style, since “no single strategy, style, list or formula fits all situations the same way” (Sergiovanni, 2001, p. 20), the emerging themes suggest that, to foster collaboration, a leader needs to develop strategies related to three important dimensions: the head, the heart and the hand of leadership (Sergiovanni, 2009).

The head of leadership is strategic leadership. It requires personal professional growth in terms of having a sound knowledge of both leadership theories as well as keeping abreast with the latest trends and policies in education, to be capable of guiding and mentoring teachers in the implementation phase. Data from both assistant heads and teachers suggests that the primary role of an assistant head is to be an instructional leader who works to

improve the effectivity of the school. Therefore, in order to earn trust and respect from teachers, assistant heads need to be an informed point of reference – a resource for teachers. Moreover, according to Sergiovanni (2001), when school leaders wish to strengthen the culture of the school, they need to develop shared leadership with others, provide opportunities for collaboration and encourage ongoing professional development. This would serve the dual purpose of catering for the self-fulfilment needs of the staff as well as to instil a collaborative learning culture (Maslow, 1987). Indeed, 92% of research participants said they encourage teachers to innovate and embrace change, and they empower them by encouraging the sharing of ideas, discussions and adopting a critical mind.

Strategies linked to the heart of leadership include reflecting on one's character dispositions and developing skills which cater for the love and belongingness needs, as well as the esteem needs of educators in school. Assistant heads said that they value an inspirational leader, one who is supportive, trustworthy and a listener. These respondents said that they adopt a care ethic, comparable to authentic leadership. This implies being deeply committed to the welfare of others, establishing meaningful relationships through genuineness and honesty, and being available at all times to display an openness to the ideas and perspectives of others. All respondents agreed that a focus on communication and conversations are of utmost importance to build community relations, to value people and to know what motivates them.

The hand of leadership has to do with the words, decisions and actions leaders take and these usually are a reflection and a consequence of the head and heart of leadership. Ricoeur (1992, p. 1) expresses this correlation as "I think. I am". Data suggests that besides procedural knowledge, an assistant head is also required to have a form of situated awareness to identify

the best means to an end. Aristotle (350 B.C.E) called such practical wisdom 'phronesis', that is, judgement in context or action oriented to the good. Ricoeur (1992, p. 174-175) defines *phronesis* as "the path that man follows to guide his life as he grasps the situation in its singularity". Respondents referred to this type of wisdom when they said that, more often than not, they are called for immediate intervention, and that their decisions need to be based on the common good. Consequently, in the "non-linear and messy context of schooling" (Bezzina, 2013, p. 2), leaders who would have reflected on and developed the head and the heart of their leadership are more likely to make the best choices and to articulate them in a constructive way.

5.1.3 Research question 3: What are teachers' perceptions on the role of assistant heads? How do they define their relationship with assistant heads and how are these relationships created, cultivated and sustained?

Data collected from teachers strongly suggests the belief that the main function of an assistant head is to be an instructional leader. Results show that most teachers trust that the assistant head assigned to their year group can best assist them in both their teaching as well as in helping them improve their teaching and adjust to new practices. In fact, 63% of respondents' first point of reference, when they need assistance, is the assistant head. Respondents described having a strong relationship with the assistant head because they are ready to serve, are approachable and visible, and ready to listen to them. Assistant heads' proactivity and immediate intervention appears valued by most teachers participating in this study. Most of all, teachers appreciate when the assistant head is not only present physically but also mentally, empathising with the teachers' classroom realities. As one respondent put it, the assistant head walks alongside them not in front of them.

In describing what makes their relationship with the assistant head an effective one, teachers said that they feel 'safe'. This feeling generally emanates from assistant head's humble disposition, advocating and practising genuine collaboration. Two-thirds of the teachers in this study described relationships and conversations which are reminiscent of 'invitational' leadership or as Lynch (2016) describes, "a mutual commitment between colleagues, instead of a series of orders issued from top down".

Most teachers (72%) said that the assistant head's role is to be heavily involved in the micro-politics of the school, by forming close relationships to enable empathising and meeting the individual needs of the staff. They value affective leaders who intentionally understand emotions to elevate people and to empower them (77%) and to gently nudge those who have not as yet discovered their inner strength. While forming relationships, however, the assistant head is also expected to aspire to the common good, without either focusing on nor leaving behind the few.

5.1.4 Research question 4: What kind of instructional support do teachers receive from assistant heads and how is this support perceived in relation to improving student learning outcomes?

Leithwood (2004, p. 4) states that "effective educational leadership makes a difference in improving learning". In the knowledge that "leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school related factors that contribute to what students learn at school" (Leithwood, 2004, p. 5), this research question attempts to explain the essential ingredients which help teachers improve student learning outcomes. Indeed, data show that the

instructional support teachers receive comes directly from assistant heads of school. The nature of the support shall be summarised below.

Teachers view assistant heads as working at shop-floor level with them. In other words, they are within reach, and are in a position to offer them the timely support they need while they are teaching. Similarly, Robinson et al. (2007, p. 21) note that “the closer leaders are to the core business of teaching and learning, the more they can make a difference to students”. Teachers trust that the assistant head can be of support as they see them as ‘a buffer’ and ‘a bridge’ between them and other stakeholders, for example, parents and the head of school. They feel that the assistant head has a more holistic and realistic picture of the students they teach, as they would have followed them from year to year and they would also be knowledgeable of family circumstances.

Additionally, assistant heads offer instructional support not merely by being knowledgeable about the latest policies and directives, but by passing on this information to them in a convincing way, ironing out any difficulties that may emerge in the implementation phase. As leaders, assistant heads are seen to be sensitive to the context and knowledgeable about how changes may impact the teachers at that particular moment in time.

As an instructional leader, the assistant head is also called to observe teachers in the classroom and to provide constructive feedback to promote teacher growth. Data reveal that most teachers are comfortable when they are observed by the assistant head especially where there is a trusting relationship and when they are confident that feedback is given in a constructive way. In addition, teachers tend to see assistant heads as critical friends.

Teachers also believe that contemporary assistant heads build a context that acknowledges people, aim to build social capital and encourage teacher collaboration. They do so by structuring, for teachers, time for planning both within their level as well as across levels. This is especially challenging in the primary sector. Data also suggest that teachers feel that in allowing time for teacher collaboration, assistant heads invest in what Stoll (2012, p. 5) terms ‘critical friendship’, which involves assistant heads in challenging, supporting and stimulating new thinking for teachers. Assistant heads appear to actively collaborate with teachers and to work as a team by listening to and considering ideas and initiatives communicated by teachers. In agreement with Robinson (2011), they believe that in their leadership role, they can make a profound difference to pupil outcomes by participating in teachers’ professional learning.

5.2 Research Implications

5.2.1 *Implications from findings*

- Data, as reported by assistant heads, show that newly qualified assistant heads are overwhelmed on starting their experience in this role and, as reported in a study by Calleja Sciberras (2018, p. 100), all participants “agreed on how unprepared they were for the post and how their expectations differed from the actual requirements of the role”. This lack of preparation on commencement of the leadership position, and hence lack of leadership intentionality, may have a cost on relationships and may also slow down strategic execution. The implication is that for assistant heads to be more intentional in their habits, time management, interactions and emotions, they need to be initiated in their new role through professional development (e.g.: mentoring).

This would equip prospective assistant heads with a better vision and plan for their role – a clearer intentional picture of their mission, objectives and priorities and of the mindfulness required to lead towards these goals.

- The research findings show that the role of the assistant head includes the mission to encourage teachers to become “active agents of their own professional growth” (Schleicher, 2012, p. 73). One reason for this could be that for these assistant heads “great professional development is fundamental to great pedagogy” (Stoll, 2012, p. 2). The implication is that as promoters of such growth and as agents of change, assistant heads themselves need to be open to professional learning and to self-seek such development themselves – even prior to being appointed as a member of the senior leadership team. They need to embrace learning, be knowledgeable and sensible to the different teachers and classroom contexts. Moreover, in order to enable teacher learning, they need know the kind of professional learning experiences that are likely to be effective for their teachers.
- Furthermore, the findings suggest that assistant heads need to enter the role with the mentality that mentoring and coaching teachers “is not something that you do for one hour, twice a year at review and development time or even once a month, but coaching is the way you enter a relationship” (Robertson, 2009, p. 45). Data show that when the senior leadership team promotes, enables and participates in collaborative learning experiences, in which educators reflect on practices through focused meaningful conversations, such exchanges have a positive impact on teacher practices as well as on teacher motivation and school culture. Robertson (2009, p. 44)

sustains that a school which enables a coaching culture “fosters trusting, respectful relationships, narrative and evaluative feedback challenges thinking and improves teachers’ practice and student learning”. His research highlights that if teachers and leaders partake in peer coaching, “a particular type of professional learning culture and norms develop” (Robertson, 2009, p. 45).

5.2.2 Implications for future research

- Most school leadership studies have, to date, concentrated on how heads of school define effective leadership which affects pupil outcomes (Morrison, 2002). Future studies are warranted in determining how an assistant heads’ quality of leadership and involvement influences not only the teaching but also the level of student motivation and achievement. The research base on how assistant heads can have a positive impact on school development and student learning outcomes is still limited.
- Also, there is a growing expectation that the head of school is not the only initiator of leadership functions in the school. Together with the assistant heads, they may collaborate and cultivate teamwork that enhances the formulation of the school aims and leadership to implement the school’s action plan. Research that focuses on building strong partnerships and approaches to sustaining effective leadership teams is essential.

5.3 Recommendations

In the light of the findings from this study, this section offers a number of proposed actions that are aimed to better cultivate and empower assistant heads as instructional leaders prepared to share the challenges and growing demands of leading a school.

5.3.1 *Recommendations for policy makers*

- *Additional support staff for schools to relieve from organisational duties*

The descriptive research findings that emerged from this study suggest that assistant heads may easily be alienated by daily administrative duties, such as routine paperwork and other organisational tasks, to ensure the smooth running of the school. According to research participants, such tasks are frustrating because they keep them aloof from teaching staff and students and do not exploit their leadership potential. Assistant heads in a study by Calleja Sciberras (2018, p. 119) report that they felt like “glorified clerks” and that lack of human resources hindered them from devoting time to teaching and learning.

This study recommends that schools’ entitlement of resources is increased to have more clerical staff per capita to relieve from organisational duties. While the new sectoral agreement (MEDE, 2017) has increased the number of assistant heads in schools per capita, clerical primary school entitlement (Table 5.1) is currently only at one part-timer for schools who have a student population of up to three-hundred students (Guidelines to Church Schools' Entitlement of Resources, 2011). Similarly, in state schools, the number of hours of clerical work needed per week is calculated by

“dividing the school population by 6 to obtain the number of hours of clerical work allocated per week. For example, a school with a population of 600 students is entitled to 100 hrs of clerical duties, that is, two full time clerks (40hrs per week) and a part-timer (20 hrs per week)”(MEDE, Email communication, 25th Feb, 2020).

Deployment of clerical support staff	
Primary schools	
Up to 300 students	1 part-time clerk
300-500 students	2 part-time clerks
501-650 students	1 school secretary + 1 part-timer
651+ students	1 school secretary + 2 part-time clerks

Table 5.1: Clerical staff entitlement in Church schools (2011)

- *A TNA to provide a clear picture of assistant heads’ needs*

As schools are “not static organisations that need to be administered but learning organisations that require continuous development” (Pashiardis, 2009, p. 112), and since “we live in an era of complexity where the only stable factor is constant change” (Pashiardis, 2009, p. 120), it is not surprising that the professional development of school leaders is an area of concern. Current stand-alone, three-hour sessions offered by the Institute for Education and by the Malta Diocese may not be enough to sustain educational leaders in implementing changes, ensuring provision for educational quality and in supporting their teachers by mitigating the turbulences spurred by constant change.

Periodic training needs analysis, conducted at a national level, is recommended. This is likely to provide a better picture of relevant needs and identify gaps and areas of support that may be addressed through the provision of continuous professional development. Professional development organisations may then provide opportunities which are current, realistic, meaningful, tailor-made and differentiated according to context as well as to the career stage of assistant heads.

5.3.2 Recommendations for heads of schools

- *Enabling the professional growth of assistant heads*

The head of school is a key player in defining the role of the assistant head and “no other entity has a greater impact on the fortune of the assistant head than the head of that school” (Gorton, 1987, p. 3). When heads of schools feel a strong responsibility to mentor their assistant heads, they devolve developmental areas of responsibility which may release the leadership capabilities of the assistant head. Based on the data obtained from interviewees, this study recommends such empowerment because in so doing, heads increase assistant heads’ job satisfaction as well as expose them to experiences which may pave the way for headship. In the words of Bezzina (2013, p. 249), in addressing heads of schools, “there is no end to the good you can do if you don’t mind who gets the credit. It is so important that the careers of significant people who share the leadership role in a school are nurtured”.

- *Encouraging and enabling practices which move beyond hierarchical leadership towards collaborative learning*

Since “the school head can contribute substantially to building a collaborative environment” (Firestone & Pennel, 1993, p. 502), this study suggests and encourages heads of schools to develop school-wide structures and collegial opportunities which develop a culture of sharing expertise and working together as a team. Hoy and Tarter (2007) define the sharing amongst organisational members, who are at different hierarchical levels, as participative management. The National Curriculum Framework (2012, p. 44) also advocates a shift in thinking away from leadership which ‘feeds’ teachers with information, towards a leadership frame of mind “which develops a collaborative culture which draws on the full range of professional skills and expertise to be found among the members of the organisation”. When heads of schools, along with their assistant heads, promote and participate in collaborative practices (e.g.: mentoring and co-teaching), they dedicate quality time to their teachers – time to collaborate, reflect on teaching and learning issues, discuss and learn together in a non-threatening environment. When they promote the frequent exchange of information and ideas, they may enable communities of practice to flourish, particularly when these are “made up of newly qualified teachers, experienced teachers and school leaders” (Attard Tonna, 2013, p. 156). When heads and assistant heads join their staff in job-embedded professional development (e.g.: mentoring, peer coaching or co-teaching), the senior leadership team engage with teachers in learning about teaching and this helps to build trusting relationships. In particular, it

breaks down both the isolation which surrounds our practices (Hall, 2013), as well as any hierarchical divisions.

- *Altering the physical infrastructure to remain connected with staff*

Based on the finding that assistant heads explicitly described efforts to shape their daily routines to communicate with, support and maintain visibility with teachers, this study suggests that school leaders would be more likely to interact with and support teachers if they were not physically clustered and isolated in the school's infrastructure. On the other hand, "the strategic decision to place themselves in locations within their school building to maximise their access to, and potential to interact with school staff" (Shirrell & Spillane, 2020, p. 10) is hereby recommended.

5.3.3 Recommendations for assistant heads and those aspiring to be

- *Preparation for the post of an assistant head*

As per sectoral agreement (MEDE, 2017, p. 50), eligibility for the post requires having "not less than ten scholastic years of teaching experience". Although additional qualifications in educational leadership, inclusion, SEBD, mentoring, curriculum or counselling have weight in the filling of vacancies, they are not entry requirements. According to Irvine and Brundrett (2016, p. 86), "taking on a leadership role in a school requires a different skill set to that of a classroom teacher". This study recommends that assistant heads could pursue a postgraduate qualification in leadership, as teaching experience alone is likely to not prepare candidates for the responsibilities that the leadership role of an assistant head demands.

Postgraduate studies prior to appointment would not only equip new members of the senior leadership team with skills targeted to help them fulfil their role but may also relieve from the shock of transition. Studies which expose aspiring assistant heads to a firm leadership knowledge base, knowledge relevant to Malta's educational system, technical capabilities, strategies to better deal with "individuals and their own experiential biographies" (Starratt, 2011, p. 1), as well as training which "teaches how to behave like great leaders – somehow instilling in them capacities such as courage and integrity" (Bezzina, 2013, p. 15), is strongly recommended prior to appointment. It is also recommended that professional development should continue even after appointment so that assistant heads are in a better position to face and address the challenges of the school.

- *Develop an intentional action plan*

In the role of an assistant head intentionality is all about avoiding falling into the routine of burying oneself in organisational tasks, which albeit necessary, are not the main aim of a school leader. Findings from this study suggest that if assistant heads are to assume the role of a school leader as opposed to a school administrator, then they must be intentional about the use of time and getting the most out of formal as well as informal time. This should reflect the real purpose of a school leader, which is about "ensuring that their schools provide quality teaching, that parents are engaged with the school and their child's learning and that there is excellent leadership" (Mulford, 2008, p. v).

Campbell (2009) reports that levels of intention can be broken into three categories which are: overall strategic, daily scheduling and moment-to-moment intentions. Overall strategic intentions include engaging in reflective practice, awareness of self and deliberate relationship building for others to follow direction and vision. Daily scheduling intentions include a commitment to understanding the importance of building and supporting a team of teachers. It entails being available, visible and knowledgeable about the realities of the classroom and of students. Moment-to-moment intentionality involves purposefully handling each situation with care and dedication, to strengthen communication and relationships at an individual and classroom level.

- *Follow-up investigation*

This study draws on professed affirmations rather than on attributed practices and experiences of participants in their real-life school environment. It includes data as stated by the participants rather than drawn from observations. It is recommended that a deeper insight of the role of the assistant head could be achieved through ethnographic research in which the researcher directly observes and/or interacts with the participants in context.

5.4 Conclusions

5.4.1 *Main conclusions*

The data emerging from this study resonates with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development report (2012, p. 18-19) highlighting that contemporary school

leadership “should focus on supporting, evaluating and developing teacher quality as a core of effective leadership” as well as “supporting collaborative work cultures - an increasingly important and recognised responsibility of school leaders”.

As described in the sectoral agreement (MEDE, 2017, p. 49), assistant heads have seen an extension of their traditionally operational role to include the sharing of strategic instructional leadership with the head of school. This has placed growing demands and pressure on their use of time. While the operational aspect of their role is necessary, “it easily clutters the daily landscape of leadership work in education” (Copland & Knapp, 2006, p. 41). Hence, assistant heads appear to be experiencing a struggle to give priority to those responsibilities which impact instructional school improvement.

Data from this study combined with educational literature has offered means to discuss how assistant heads can combine practical management whilst also fulfilling their leadership role effectively. At the core of effective leadership are intentional strategies. Intentional leadership, or strategic leadership, “requires the leader to be conscious about everything they do and say” (Nelson, 2016, p. 13). Through leading intentionally, assistant heads take deliberate steps (intentional metacognition and self-development, intentional prioritising, intentional conversations, intentional care for the wellbeing of those who experience their leadership and intentional distributed empowerment) to define the higher purpose of their work. They then push themselves and inspire their team to move to the next level along the journey towards school improvement.

5.4.2 Personal reflections emanating from this study

My interest in this area of study stems from my current work, just as I was taking my first steps into assistant headship. A new school context, the lack of targeted professional development and endless management duties made me wonder about my leadership journey including the prospect within my new role. I sought to find out how I could develop a 'real' leadership role whilst being very efficient in routine tasks. I also wanted to research whether the experience, influence and involvement of other assistant heads in educational leadership differs considerably across schools in our educational system. I focused on the primary sector because there appears to be a particular lack of 'personal' time for everyone involved (Harris, 2003) and also a greater pressure to fulfil both roles (there are usually less designated leadership roles than in secondary schools).

A constructivist approach to research has enabled me to acquire knowledge and understanding which is based on the personal experiences of other professionals in the same role. Through research, I gained an understanding of how other assistant heads manage their expanded set of responsibilities. I also find comfort in realising that the tensions and challenges I encounter are common to many within the same profession. However, I also recognise the difference between effective and ineffective leaders, between excellent and mediocre leadership – that it is a personal intention and initiative based on “a decision to dig deep inside oneself and make a choice to serve the team from the very heart” (Kahl, 2004, p. 2). The quality of the desired leadership and the impact of one's work to better the lives of others is heavily dependent on a personal strategy to cement desirable leadership traits into one's character, uphold principles to value and care for others and consequently, to act by serving others. In the words of Maxwell (1999, p. xi), “leadership truly develops from inside

you. If you can become the leader you ought to be on the inside, you will become the leader you want on the outside". Only in this way will I become the leader others will want to follow.

6 References

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7 Appendices

7.0 Appendix 1: ASSISTANT HEAD SURVEY

Dear Prospective Participant,

My name is Marisa-Victoria Vella Demanuele, and I am currently reading for a Master in Educational Leadership and Management at the University of Malta. As part of my study, I am conducting an anonymous survey which attempts to explore how assistant heads may be instrumental in motivating and supporting human resources in the school organisation to promote student learning.

This survey attempts to uncover the nature of the support which educators are currently receiving from assistant heads of school, the support they would like to receive as well as how this support is perceived in relation to improving student learning outcomes.

I am conducting this research with the support of my supervisor Dr James Calleja, Lecturer (Professional Learning and Development) Department of Leadership for Learning and Innovation, Faculty of Education.

The researcher requests your consent for participation in this study. Participation is voluntary and anonymous. Moreover, data will be treated with strict confidentiality.

The survey will take approximately 10 minutes.

Thank you in advance for your participation.

I understand the purpose and nature of this study and I am participating voluntarily. I also understand that I can withdraw from this study at any time, without prejudice.

Yes

No

I grant permission for the data generated from this online survey to be used in the researcher's publications on this topic.

Yes

No

Section A: Basic Information:

Gender

Male

Female

Other

Years employed as an assistant head of school:

1-5 years

6-10 years

11+ years

I am employed in:

State school

Church school

Independent school

Section B: Kindly answer the following questions.

1. On average, throughout a school week, what percentage of your time in your role as an assistant head do you spend on the following tasks? Kindly make sure the vertical total is 100%.

	0%	5%	10%	20%	30%	40%	50%	70%	100%
Administrative tasks									
Supervision									
Curriculum and teaching related tasks and meetings									
Interacting with students									
Interacting with teaching staff									
Interacting with parents/guardians									
Other									

2. How often do you do any of the following?

	Never	Once a year	Once a month	Once a week	Daily
Complete routine paperwork					
Resolve timetable and supervision issues					
Work with students and families on discipline issues					
Work with students and families on academic progress					
Deal with emergencies and other unplanned circumstances					
Seek resources (human/material) outside the school					
Promote quality teaching within and across grade levels					
Co-design school vision with the head					

3. When working directly with teachers, how often per week do you do any of the following?

	Never	Once a term	Fortnightly	1-2 times a week	3-4 times a week	Daily
I observe lessons or walk through classes						
I take action to ensure teachers improve their teaching						
I discuss students with teachers						
I discuss with teachers to reach the best decisions						
I collaborate with teachers to resolve discipline issues						
I praise and publicly recognise teachers' efforts						

4. Do you believe that being an assistant head is a particularly challenging role?

Yes	
No	
At times	

Give a reason for your answer.

5. Tick the 3 greatest frustrations in your role as an assistant head.

Lack of power	
Mediating conflict	
Student management	
Diversity	
Administrative work	
Supervision	
Isolation	
Other	

If other, kindly state which. _____

6. To what extent do the following statements characterise you?

	Not at all	A little	Moderately	A lot
I am highly task-oriented				
I expect people to follow my directions				
I believe leaders should make all the decisions				
I encourage others to express their opinion				
I focus on the needs of team members				
I listen intently to understand what teachers are saying				
I can put aside my viewpoint to approach situations with an open mind				
I ask others for feedback on my strengths and weaknesses				

7. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

(i) Assistant heads must focus on communication to build community relations.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
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(ii) Assistant heads need to be considered as instructional leaders.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
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(iii) Assistant heads should mentor and guide teachers to improve student learning.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
-------------------	----------	---------	-------	----------------

(iv) Assistant heads must facilitate the development of all personnel as leaders.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
-------------------	----------	---------	-------	----------------

(v) Classroom observations support teachers and help leaders keep in touch with the realities of the classroom.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
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8. Tick the 4 most important traits of an effective assistant head.

motivated		a listener	
organised		a leader	
compassionate		charismatic	
plans strategically		trustworthy	
ambitious		supportive	
efficient		a critical friend	

9. How do you ensure that teachers receive the support they need?

10. How do teachers benefit from working with you?

Tick the opt-in option, and provide your email should you wish to be interviewed in a second phase of this research.

Opt-in

Email: _____

Thank you for contributing to my research by participating in this survey.

7.1 Appendix 2: TEACHER SURVEY

Dear Prospective Participant,

My name is Marisa-Victoria Vella Demanuele, and I am currently reading for a Master in Educational Leadership and Management at the University of Malta. As part of my study, I am conducting an anonymous survey which attempts to explore how assistant heads may be instrumental in motivating and supporting human resources in the school organisation to promote student learning.

This survey attempts to uncover the nature of the support which educators are currently receiving from assistant heads of school, the support they would like to receive as well as how this support is perceived in relation to improving student learning outcomes.

I am conducting this research with the support of my supervisor Dr James Calleja, Lecturer (Professional Learning and Development) Department of Leadership for Learning and Innovation, Faculty of Education.

The researcher requests your consent for participation in this study. Participation is voluntary and anonymous. Moreover, data will be treated with strict confidentiality.

The survey will take approximately 10 minutes.

Thank you in advance for your participation.

I understand the purpose and nature of this study and I am participating voluntarily. I also understand that I can withdraw from this study at any time, without prejudice.

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Yes

No

I grant permission for the data generated from this online survey to be used in the researcher's publications on this topic.

Yes

No

Section A: Basic Information:

Gender

Male

Female

Other

Years of teaching experience

1-5 years

6-10 years

11-15 years

16+ years

Which sector do you work in?

State

Church

Independent

Section B: Kindly answer the following questions:

1. The roles and responsibilities of an assistant head are diverse. Tick the **three** most important duties and then order these using numbers 1 to 5 (1 indicating the most important).

Sees to the educational and emotional needs of the pupils.

Supports the personal needs of staff and shows empathy.

Sets up and operates school policies and procedures.

Organises professional development.

Monitors and promotes effective teaching and learning.

Ensures the smooth running of the school and plans outings.

Collaborates with external stakeholders.

Facilitates collaboration between all members of staff.

From the three roles and responsibilities you selected in the question above, which one would you rate as the most important? Please write the wording in full.

2. In case you require help in dealing with student or parent issues, whose assistance would you seek? (Tick just one option)

A colleague or colleagues

The assistant head of school

The head of school

Someone else

Give a reason for your answer.

3. Why and how often do assistant heads visit your class? Fill in the table below.

Reason for visit	Never	Once in a while	Most of the time	Almost on a daily basis
To inform students about events				
To speak to a student				
To observe a lesson				
To support the teacher				
To gather information from the teacher				
Called in by the teacher for a specific reason				
To observe a student				

4. Which of these characteristics do you believe are essential to be an effective assistant head of school? (You may choose up to 3)

Motivated

Ambitious

Charismatic

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Organised

Efficient

Trustworthy

Compassionate

A listener

Supportive

Plans strategically

A leader

A critical friend

5. Do you believe that assistant heads can support teachers in improving teaching and learning?

Yes

No

Please explain your answer.

6. How comfortable are you when an assistant head carries out class observations?

Extremely comfortable

Moderately comfortable

Not comfortable at all

Give a reason for your answer.

7. For each of the statements below, kindly indicate your preference.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
I feel classroom observations by the assistant heads are useful in our school.					
I feel that classroom observations help me refine my teaching and are of support.					
I feel classroom observations are a means of ensuring quality teaching.					

I feel assistant heads have the necessary knowledge and experience to carry out classroom observations.					
I think assistant heads can be very supportive.					
Assistant heads sincerely care about helping me refine my teaching techniques.					

8. Which of the following statements best describes the quality of interpersonal interaction with the assistant head?

- The assistant head initiates a conversation to give me direct duties and responsibilities.
- The conversation is focused on a consensus about a course of action instead of openly sharing different views.
- We engage in deliberate and thorough information exchange and there is authentic cooperation.

9. From your experience, assistant heads:

	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
Empathise with and meet individual needs			
Empower staff to come up with initiatives			
Believe in working collegially			
Mentor educators to enhance the quality of teaching			
Develop a respectful relationship with staff			
Develop individual and collective capacities			

Tick the opt-in option, and provide your email should you wish to be interviewed in a second phase of this research.

Opt-in

Email: _____

Thank you for contributing to my research by participating in this survey.

7.2 Appendix 3: PILOT STUDY SURVEY QUESTIONS

1. Do you think the directions of the survey are clear?
2. Is the wording of any of the items unclear?
3. How much time did it take to complete the survey?
4. Do you think the survey took too long to complete? If so, how can the time it takes be decreased?

7.3 Appendix 4: INFORMATION LETTER – ASSISTANT HEAD

Dear Assistant Head,

I, Marisa-Victoria Vella Demanuele, an assistant head at a primary school, am currently reading for a Master in Educational Leadership and Management at the University of Malta. As part of this course, I shall be conducting a research entitled 'Leading Intentionally: The Human and Educational Responsibilities of an Assistant Head' with the support of my supervisor Dr James Calleja, Lecturer (Professional Learning and Development) Department of Leadership for Learning and Innovation, Faculty of Education.

In the course of my research, I shall be investigating the strategies which assistant heads use to build relationships with educators and to foster collaboration between teams of educators. My research shall also look into the support teachers receive from assistant heads and how this support is perceived in relation to improving student learning outcomes.

I would like to invite you to participate in my research study, which involves two parts. The first part is a web-based survey. Completion of the web-based survey shall be taken as consent to participate in the first part of the study.

The second part of the study involves an interview which will take around one hour to complete. Should you have ticked the opt-in option at the end of the survey, I, Primary Investigator, may kindly ask you to participate in the second part of the study which consists of a face-to-face interview to be held at a time and place convenient to you. The focus of the interview will be to contextualise and develop the data gathered from the survey and to elicit

examples pertinent to the research hypothesis. With your signed consent, the interview shall be audio-recorded as I would need to transcribe your responses in order to analyse them. The recording shall be transcribed immediately and to preserve your anonymity, your voice shall be distorted, a pseudonym shall replace your name in my write-up and the recording shall be destroyed after transcription. Only my supervisor and myself shall have access to the raw data.

Participation is voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without suffering any negative consequence. Should you choose to withdraw, your interview data will not be used for this study and it will be destroyed.

If you agree to participate, kindly complete the consent form.

If you require further information, do not hesitate to contact me or my supervisor on the emails below.

Yours sincerely,



Primary Researcher: Marisa-Victoria Vella Demanuele

Primary Researcher's email: marisa.vella-demanuele.97@um.edu.mt

Supervisor: Dr James Calleja

Supervisor's email: james.j.calleja@um.edu.mt

7.4 Appendix 5: INFORMATION LETTER – TEACHERS

Dear Teacher,

I, Marisa-Victoria Vella Demanuele, an assistant head at a primary school, am currently reading for a Master in Educational Leadership and Management at the University of Malta. As part of this course, I shall be conducting a research entitled 'Leading Intentionally: The Human and Educational Responsibilities of an Assistant Head' with the support of my supervisor Dr James Calleja, Lecturer (Professional Learning and Development) Department of Leadership for Learning and Innovation, Faculty of Education.

In the course of my research, I shall be investigating the strategies which assistant heads use to build relationships with educators and to foster collaboration between teams of educators. My research shall also look into the support teachers receive from assistant heads and how this support is perceived in relation to improving student learning outcomes.

I would like to invite you to participate in my research study, which involves two parts. The first part is a web-based survey. Completion of the web-based survey shall be taken as consent to participate in the first part of the study.

The second part of the study involves an interview which will take around one hour to complete. Should you have ticked the opt-in option at the end of the survey, I, Primary Investigator, may kindly ask you to participate in the second part of the study which consists of a face-to-face interview to be held at a time and place convenient to you. The focus of the interview will be to contextualise and develop the data gathered from the survey and to elicit

examples pertinent to the research hypothesis. With your signed consent, the interview shall be audio-recorded as I would need to transcribe your responses in order to analyse them. The recording shall be transcribed immediately and to preserve your anonymity, your voice shall be distorted, a pseudonym shall replace your name in my write-up and the recording shall be destroyed after transcription. Only my supervisor and myself shall have access to the raw data.

Participation is voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without suffering any negative consequence. Should you choose to withdraw, your interview data will not be used for this study and it will be destroyed.

If you agree to participate, kindly complete the consent form.

If you require further information, do not hesitate to contact me or my supervisor on the emails below.

Yours sincerely,

Marisa Vella Demanuele

Primary Researcher: Marisa-Victoria Vella Demanuele

Primary Researcher's email: marisa.vella-demanuele.97@um.edu.mt

Supervisor: Dr James Calleja

Supervisor's email: james.j.calleja@um.edu.mt

7.5 Appendix 6: CONSENT FORM – ASSISTANT HEAD

TITLE OF STUDY: Leading Intentionally: The Human and Educational Responsibilities of an Assistant Head

I confirm that I have read the attached Participant Information Sheet for this study and that I have had the opportunity to ask questions and discuss the study.

On the basis of the information given, I agree to allow Ms Marisa-Victoria Vella Demanuele to interview me.

I give my consent on condition that the above mentioned researcher shall anonymise my identity, distort my voice, store audio-recordings in a safe place, and that I am free to withdraw my consent at any time in the course of this study.

Assistant Head's name

Assistant Head's signature

Researcher's name

Researcher's signature

Date: _____

7.6 Appendix 7: CONSENT FORM – TEACHER

TITLE OF STUDY: Leading Intentionally: The Human and Educational Responsibilities of an Assistant Head

I confirm that I have read the attached Participant Information Sheet for this study and that I have had the opportunity to ask questions and discuss the study.

On the basis of the information given, I agree to allow Ms Marisa-Victoria Vella Demanuele to interview me.

I give my consent on condition that the above mentioned researcher shall anonymise my identity, distort my voice, store audio-recordings in a safe place, and that I am free to withdraw my consent at any time in the course of this study.

Teacher's name

Teacher's signature

Researcher's name

Researcher's signature

Date: _____

7.7 Appendix 8: ASSISTANT HEAD INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study.

Interview Protocol:

Name (pseudonym):	
Date of interview:	
Highest level of education:	
Educational sector:	
Years of experience as an assistant head:	

Section A: What assistant heads do.

1. The roles and responsibilities of an assistant head are diverse. What does a typical day look like for you?
2. What are your listed duties and how were these assigned to you?
3. What percentage of your work is with teachers in an instructional leadership capacity?
What does this work entail?
4. Describe a typical situation when your priorities have been challenged.

Section B: Instructional Leadership

5. *"To support teachers, I have to be where they are."* (Wing, 2017). Do you agree with this statement? Why?
6. *"The primary work of educational leadership is to guide improvements in learning."* (Copland & Knapp, 2006). How can an assistant head's actions have progressive and long-term effects on teaching and learning?
7. *"Collaboration is having an honest and open dialogue on the ways to best help students achieve to their full potential."* (Hoffman, 2014). What kind of dialogues do you engage in with teachers? On which issues?
8. What input do you have on the School Development Plan?
9. Do you feel you are truly making a difference in the lives of teachers and learners? How?

Section 3: Intentional Leadership

10. Describe your leadership style.
11. Are teachers involved in organisational decision making? If so, in what ways?
12. *"Leaders are responsible not only for communicating information outbound, but also for listening to information inbound."* (Nelson, 2016). How important is the intentional skill of listening?

13. "There are undisputed benefits of giving and receiving feedback. Most people want feedback and when given correctly, they can learn and grow from it." (Nelson, 2016, pg. 175). How do you give feedback to and receive feedback?

14. How important is it for an assistant head to see the world (e.g. a teacher's classroom) through the eyes of others?

15. What are the personal benchmarks that you adhere to for an effectively leadership role?

7.8 Appendix 9: TEACHER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study.

Interview Protocol:

Name (pseudonym):	
Date of interview:	
Highest level of education:	
Educational sector:	
Years of experience as a teacher:	

1. To start with, do schools need assistant heads? Please state why/why not.
2. Which are the 3 most important goals of an assistant head?
3. Which practices can an assistant head undertake to improve teaching and student learning?
4. Does an assistant head visit your class regularly? What for?
5. Describe a time when you and the assistant head collaborated effectively to make a positive difference for student learning. What were your goals?
6. How, in your opinion does an assistant head support teachers?
7. Describe a time when you felt supported by an assistant head.

8. "Collaboration is having an honest and open dialogue on ways to best help students achieve to their full potential." (Hoffman, 2014). What kinds of dialogues do you engage in with assistant heads? On which issues?
9. Which practices by an assistant head hinder teacher performance and which practices increase teacher motivation and teacher efficacy?
10. "*Teachers and students alike work better when they are cared about.*" (Day, 2004). Do you feel valued by the assistant head? How?
11. If you were to take on the role of an assistant head, what strategies would you use to build relationships with educators?

Thank you very much for your time!

7.9 Appendix 10: MALTESE-ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF ORIGINAL MALTESE QUOTES

Maltese version	English version
<p>“Hafna drabi we are guided or restricted by the head of school għaliex jiddependi ħafna minn x’tip ta’ head of school illi għandek. Jekk inti għandek head of school li huwa forward thinking, jew jekk ikun iktar involut mad-department, jaf x’inhu jgħri, jaf x’gej, inti tkun f’pożizzjoni ħafna aħjar milli jekk ma jkollokx dan it-tip ta’ head”.</p>	<p>“Many a time, we are either guided or restricted by the head of school and the more au courant with professional development the head is, the better your situation will be to make an impact on teaching and learning”.</p>
<p>“Allura I try to share a lot of professional development opportunities. Jekk inti għandek l-experts għol-iskola, għada pitgħada qas għandek bżonn iġġib experts minn barra”.</p>	<p>“So I try to share a lot of professional development in order to have experts within the school rather than having to rope in external experts”.</p>
<p>“Nixtieq li għada pitgħada jkollha l-kuraġġ illi she trains her colleagues. They don’t do it għax jaħsbu li sħabhom se jarawhom bħala the assistant head’s pet, or the head’s pet. Jew li se jobbligaw lil sħabhom biex jagħmluha”.</p>	<p>“she was not ready as she felt she would be seen as the assistant head’s pet or that colleagues would then be expected to follow suit”.</p>
<p>“100% u, ħafna drabi nagħmlu ftit brain storming jiena u s-surmast, lanqas l-SLT kollu, għaliex mhux id-duty tagħhom allura they are not interested”.</p>	<p>“Together with the head, we brainstorm areas which need improving and then the head leaves it 100% up to me to consult professionals and to sketch out the SDP”.</p>
<p>You have to keep your ears on the ground. All the time. Importanti biex tkun taf anki kif qed iħossuhom it-teachers.</p>	<p>“to keep ears on the ground all the time, in order to know what the teachers are feeling. Unless you listen, you cannot evaluate whether things are working as they should be”.</p>