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Head of School Engagement in Teacher Induction and Mentoring in Malta

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Abstract: Research has shown that school leaders' engagement in teacher induction is vital for establishing supportive school structures and conditions that are conducive to successful socialization and long-term sustenance of newly qualified teachers (NQTs). In Malta, the problem of teacher recruitment and a growing attrition rate is becoming very acute. This article describes findings from an exploratory qualitative study that examined the perceptions of five heads of schools regarding their engagement in the induction and mentoring programs that have been designed to support NQTs in Malta. The findings describe the ways through which the heads of school support NQTs and their advice for new heads of schools working with NQTs. The article offers a discussion of research results in relation to the extant literature and concludes with implications for practice and further research.

Keywords: *Heads of school engagement, Malta, newly qualified teachers, teacher induction, mentoring.*

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Introduction

In this article, we examine the pivotal role that school leaders have in supporting newly qualified teachers (NQTs). Research has shown that school leaders' engagement in teacher induction is vital for establishing supportive school structure and conditions that are conducive to successful socialization and long-term sustenance of (NQTs) (S. T. Bickmore & Bickmore, 2010). This becomes even more important given the concerns coming out of countries like the US, the UK, Australia, Germany, Norway, and Sweden (Karlberg & Bezzina, 2022; Kyriacou & Kunc, 2007) that are facing difficulties in attracting and retaining teachers (EC, 2010; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2005). In fact, teacher attrition rates are extremely high in many countries (Caudal, 2022; Galea, 2020; OECD, 2021b; Schmitt & de Courcy, 2022; Wyatt & O'Neill, 2021) drawing concern that in the future there may be a problem to recruit enough teachers for our classrooms (e.g. Fernet et al., 2016; Fry, 2007; Lindqvist & Nordänger, 2016). We know that a considerable number of teachers deal with daunting challenges in their early careers, which can potentially lead to burnout, stress, and decreased motivation and dissatisfaction (Arvidsson et al., 2016; de Jesus & Lens, 2005; Fernet et al., 2014; Han & Yin, 2016). As a result of lack of support, early career teachers leave the profession in the first few years (Kutsyuruba et al., 2022). While the majority of novices quit the teaching profession in the first two to five years, in some extreme cases, teachers drop out even before their first year ends (Black, 2001; Clandinin et al., 2015; Fernet et al., 2016). Moreover, Perryman and Calvert (2020) suggest that 40-50% of teachers consider leaving the profession within the first ten years and do not consider teaching as a long-term profession. It is not surprising then that researchers and policymakers around the world wonder why many NQTs quit in the first few years and what can be done in the school systems to increase teacher retention.

These observations are quite disconcerting when we all know that for novice teachers to settle in schools they need ongoing "intentional supports" (Mitchell et al., 2020, p. 813); that a collaborative culture that fosters learning amongst adults is critical for them to leave an impact on student learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Edwards Groves & Rönnerman, 2013; Goddard et al., 2007; Hattie, 2011; Ronfeldt et al., 2015). If these 'ingredients' are missing, then we have to do our utmost to challenge the existing cultures and work towards nurturing a work ethic that supports mutual growth.

It is within this context that we position our study that has been undertaken in Malta, a small island state in the middle of the Mediterranean. The problem of recruitment, and now also a growing attrition rate (Galea, 2020) is becoming more

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acute in Malta. Policy reforms resulted in a considerable shortage of teachers due to mediocre working conditions and a rigid salary scale system (Galea, 2020; Malta Union of Teachers, 2017; Micallef, 2017; J. Mifsud, 2017). The problem has worsened due to COVID-19 pandemic-related challenges (European Commission, 2023; Farrugia, 2022). Teachers in Malta are voluntarily leaving the profession and unqualified supply teachers are being recruited to fill in these vacant positions (Galea, 2020; Glazer, 2018). This has led to student disengagement, changes in the school climate, and lessened quality of education (Galea, 2020).

Following these concerns and beginning back in 2010, the Ministry of Education and the Malta Union of Teachers (MUT) mandated a two-year induction period for all newly appointed teachers (European Commission, 2023). Research indicates that participation in a comprehensive induction program contributes to the quality of teachers and to excellent teaching practice, provides novice teachers with a positive trajectory in their careers and reduces attrition (Australian Institute for Teacher and School Leadership, 2016), and in most education systems in Europe, a period of early career support is required to obtain a full teaching qualification (European Commission, 2023). This induction period may include a combination of mentoring support, professional development seminars, reduced workload, or team teaching (European Commission, 2023). Malta's program encourages mentoring support and professional development activities but does not allow for a reduced workload or the opportunity to participate in team teaching with experienced colleagues (European Commission, 2023).

After reviewing the literature pertaining to school leaders' engagement in teacher induction and mentoring programs in Malta, in this article, we describe findings from an exploratory qualitative study that examined perceptions of heads of schools regarding the induction and mentoring programs that have been introduced for NQTs in Malta. Specifically, the following research question guided this study: *What is the perceived role of school administrators in induction and mentoring programs designed to support NQTs in Malta?* This article provides an overview of school leaders' perceptions regarding their engagement in teacher induction and mentoring programs and their experiences as school leaders of supporting NQTs. Qualitative data were gathered from interviews with five heads of schools. The article offers a discussion of research findings in relation to the extant literature and concludes with implications for practice and further research.

Literature Review

For the purposes of this article, we have reviewed the literature on the role of school administrators in the teacher induction process and situated it within the context of the teacher induction program in Maltese schools. We go back over 20 years to the time when one of the authors started conducting studies, supervising dissertations at undergraduate and graduate levels, and writing reflective papers on teacher induction in Malta. This should help the reader to understand the context in which the current study has been undertaken.

Teacher Induction in Malta

In Malta, teachers' professional development occurs in three phases: the pre-service phase, the induction phase, and the continuing professional development phase. This has not always been the case. Since the early 21st century various studies (e.g., Bezzina, 2002, 2006, 2007; Bezzina et al., 2004; Lia & Mifsud, 2000; Vassallo, 2000), were conducted as concern was being raised, mainly by the Faculty of Education at the University of Malta, that the Maltese system was only catering for the pre-service phase and the Continuing Professional Development Phase (CPD). Whilst catering for two important phases this model had two major shortcomings. Firstly, there was no link between the pre-service and the CPD phase. Once students graduated and were employed as teachers in the State or the Independent sector, they were entrusted with a full teaching load as from day one. The decision to seek professional support was left entirely in the hands of the novice teacher. Teachers, up to that stage, were not provided with support mechanisms at the school site that helped them settle down and be gradually induced into the teaching profession.

Studies have shown how NQTs felt a lack of support as they tried to settle in the schools. They saw themselves as inadequately prepared and reported being more likely to leave the profession and also unlikely to choose a teaching career if they were to start over.

While teaching practice was identified as the most relevant aspect of their initial teacher education program, first year NQTs craved more practice, more exposure and more experiences through engagement in schools prior to their full-time engagement (Bezzina et al., 2004; Lia & Mifsud, 2000). Similar to findings in international studies, the greatest challenges for Maltese NQTs were "coping with mixed ability classes", "class discipline", "curriculum demands" and "physical exhaustion" (Bezzina, 2006, p. 424). The transition also involves stress, uncertainty, frustration and sometimes despair. As Cefai et al. (2007) noted, NQTs who were able to collaborate with more experienced teachers were able to overcome this lack of preparation. In fact, NQTs identified cooperation, teamwork and resources, as essential for supporting their early professional development (Bezzina, 2006, 2007; Bezzina et al., 2004). This is an important point that we will come to later. One of the primary objectives for an earlier initiative to improve teacher education was thus to "nurture a culture of cooperation and collaboration" (Bezzina et al., 2006, p. 749).

This is, in fact, the role that induction can play. An induction policy has two main principles: an entitlement to support NQTs as they are inducted into the school system and an assessment against defined national standards. NQTs need to

have an individualized program of support during the induction phase from a designated tutor or mentor. Such involvement and participation require that school leaders and experienced colleagues provide professional support and introduce the organizational structures for this to happen. This perceived need was nearly two-fold greater for teachers in the first year of their career compared to their colleagues in their second and third years (Bezzina, 2006, 2007; Bezzina et al., 2004).

These studies, that were conducted locally during the 2000s, together with a drive to influence policymakers in the area of teacher professional development led to the recognition of the induction phase back in 2010. The appeal made in 2006 for the Maltese education authorities to embrace the concerns of NQTs and “lead to the institutionalization of the induction phase...” (Bezzina, 2006, p. 427) took place a few years later. In 2010 the induction program was officially launched.

This new induction program emphasized the induction phase as a means of providing the appropriate support during the initial phase of NQTs career (Attard Tonna, 2019). The induction program, managed by the Directorate for Education Resources, consists of both mentoring and appraisal components (OECD, 2021a; Malta Quality Assurance Department, 2013). Since 2010, Maltese State schools have mandated an induction program for NQTs (Attard Tonna, 2019). Since NQTs are less experienced in the daily tasks of teaching, induction programs allow NQTs to gain the appropriate motivational support, resources, and mentorship for the first two years of their teaching career (Daly & Milton, 2017; Han & Yin, 2016). Within this newly-developed program, mentors are expected to provide feedback and a checklist to ensure the induction program elements are successfully met (Attard Tonna, 2019). The program is regularly monitored and evaluated throughout the year to ensure it is meeting the set aspirations.

Effectiveness of Induction Programs in Malta

To evaluate the effectiveness of the induction programs, it is critical to understand the participants’ and mentors’ perspectives. Teacher stress as associated with teacher attrition has been problematic for many years in Malta (Borg & Riding, 1991), and the situation has worsened since recent reforms created a crisis in the teaching profession (Galea, 2020; Malta Union of Teachers, 2017; Micallef, 2017; J. Mifsud, 2017). Moreover, the novel induction program in Malta was developed out of necessity as NQTs felt unsupported in their roles and perceived themselves as inadequately prepared and incompetent (Høigaard et al., 2012; C. Mifsud, 1996).

The first years of teaching have been identified as critical years for education authorities to focus effort on interventions to improve the quality of the novice teachers’ experiences as soon as they go into full-time teaching (Jin et al., 2021; OECD, 2005). This highlights the crucial need for induction programs for NQTs to support their development and growth (Colognesi et al., 2020). Those who participated in the current Maltese induction and mentoring program felt better prepared and confident in their initial practice than those who did not have such support and owed their success to the pronounced structure, encouragement, and guidance that mentors provided (Shanks et al., 2022).

A large elements of induction programs focuses on mentorship. Mentorship is the process of matching experienced professionals with novice professionals to support the beginning of their career (Wong, 2004). Shanks et al. (2022) highlight that mentorship programs promote professionalism and combats isolation in the teaching profession. However, there are some important elements of mentorship that the school administration must consider. First, it is important that the mentor and mentee are at the same school. The Malta Quality Assurance Department (2013) recommends that mentors and mentees belong to the same school to ensure that the mentor is able to integrate the mentee into the larger school culture. This promotes the accessibility of the mentor and mentee to one another and fosters greater success (Abela Craus, 2016; Attard Tonna et al., 2017). When the mentors either do not teach at the same school as the mentees or do not have time to schedule meetings and observations with them, the NQTs do not perceive the relationship to be as beneficial (Abela Craus, 2016).

In addition, NQTs crave the expertise of same-subject colleagues. Although mentors and mentees frequently discuss general topics in meetings (e.g., classroom management strategies, school structure, and environment), there are perceived benefits expressed by NQTs of having a subject-specific mentor (McCann & Johannessen, 2009). Peixoto et al. (2018) suggest that same-subject mentorship might help to instill a sense of teaching self-efficacy and is a strong predictor of resilience for pre-service teachers.

Furthermore, Maltese mentors recognize the importance of matching individual personalities in the mentorship experience. Shanks et al., (2022) discuss the priority of harmonized personalities to encourage collaborative relationships with elements that are both personal and professional. Such relationships take time to build and are essential for the pair’s success (Ambrosetti & Dekkers, 2010). Moreover, a trusting relationship encourages openness and honesty while boosting their professional self-image and enhancing teacher well-being (Dreer-Goethe, 2023). Rather than judging mentees, mentors must offer a safe space where they empathize with their mentees and develop a greater sense of compassion (Attard Tonna et al., 2017). Also, positive reflection that includes feedback from mentors can provide a foundation for this safe space. For the experienced teacher, reflective practice develops leadership skills and self-awareness, while instilling a sense of professional agency (Attard Tonna, 2019; Attard Tonna et al., 2017; Attard Tonna

& Calleja, 2010). Moreover, the NQT offers new knowledge and strategies that can help potentiate change if their ideas are heard and appreciated by the experienced teachers (Bezzina et al., 2006; European Commission, 2010).

School Administrator Engagement

The research literature demonstrates that as leaders, school administrators are responsible for ensuring that teacher development and learning is adequately provided in their schools (Kutsyuruba & Walker, 2020). As Delp (2014) posits, how NQTs acclimate within their school is “primarily the responsibility of the principal as she or he publicly establishes the vision, mission, and goals of the school” (pp. 198–199). Several studies highlighted the expectations that school principals supervise and evaluate the performance of the new teachers (Abu Rass, 2010; Chatlain & Noonan, 2005). The principal’s role, thus, becomes critical in directly supporting NQTs and in creating a structure supportive of the induction process. As Totterdell et al. (2004) note, factors that improve the retention levels among NQTs are supportive working conditions, district policies that guide mentor assignments, high-quality induction support, professional development for second-year teachers, and strong instructional leadership among principals. Furthermore, studies show that principals’ engagement in induction and mentoring can positively affect NQTs’ retention and reduce the waste of resources and human potential associated with early career teacher attrition (Wood, 2005). Wynn et al. (2007) highlight that teachers who are more satisfied with their principal leadership are more likely to remain in the school district. However, there is limited empirical evidence directly linking the role of the principal or head of school with the retention of teachers (Long et al., 2012). Finally, in our previous research in Canada (Walker & Kutsyuruba, 2019), we found that NQTs appreciate supportive and positive administrators who encourage trust in relationships, provide feedback and development opportunities, allow experimentation, and create favorable working conditions.

Various studies have demonstrated that the assignment of mentors to NQTs was the most widely detailed aspect of school administrator’s role within teacher induction and mentoring processes (Abu Rass, 2010; Bianchini & Cavazos, 2007; D. L. Bickmore et al., 2005; Fantilli & McDougall, 2009; Gordon & Lowrey, 2017; Roberson & Roberson, 2009). School administrators are usually directly involved in determining the frequency of novice-mentor interactions through mentor selection and assignment, providing mentor training, facilitating meeting times and guiding topics, and overseeing and supervising mentoring relationships and evaluation of program quality, and, to a lesser degree, directly mentoring NQTs (Pogodzinski, 2015; Sunde & Ulvik, 2014). Other direct duties of principals include implementing policies or programs for supporting NQTs, providing resources, managing workload, offering opportunities for professional development, and assigning supporting staff and classrooms (Desimone et al., 2014; Glazerman et al., 2010; Gordon & Lowrey, 2017; Hellsten et al., 2010; Roberson & Roberson, 2009). As Kyrrou et al. (2020) argued, principals can shape an amicable and collegial climate at school by providing support to NQTs. They can do so by building relational trust, providing role clarity, and engaging in reciprocal communication that helps NQTs alleviate or ameliorate difficulties. School administrators who express positive attitudes toward and recognize the potential of the mentorship approach in supporting professional development tend to enhance the quality and amount of collaboration among colleagues while both nurturing and encouraging and organizing regular meetings (Engvik & Berit Emstad, 2017). Administrators can also shape mentoring relationships via general workload manageability, executing their administrative duties, ensuring access to resources, and enhancing the quality of relations with NQTs (Pogodzinski, 2015).

Indirectly, school administrators’ beliefs, actions, practices, and policies impact specific teacher outcomes by shaping the nature of the environment and overall school culture (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003). In terms of administrator engagement in the development of NQTs, it is usually manifested through promoting school culture that is based on supportive and shared leadership practices, growing professional relationships among new and experienced teachers, and creating opportunities for nurturing shared values and developing a common purpose (Desimone et al., 2014; Glazerman et al., 2010; Gordon & Lowrey, 2017; Roberson & Roberson, 2009). Effective programming and school administrators’ support can improve NQTs’ morale and strengthen their self-concept (Cherian & Daniel, 2008; Wood, 2005; Wynn et al., 2007). Furthermore, school administrators need to ensure that support is constant and that the structures institutionalized for NQTs get the ongoing support needed (Birkeland & Feiman-Nemser, 2009).

However, the administrative or evaluative capacity can potentially create tensions in the principal’s capacity to foster growth-oriented professional development for NQTs (Cherubini, 2009). The duality of mentor-evaluator role can cause issues between school administrators and NQTs, where the distinctions between formative and summative assessment and performance review can be blurred, ignored, or even misrepresented (Cherubini, 2009). In addition, administrative demands can leave school leaders often unengaged with the NQTs and lead to the failure of induction programs (Attard Tonna, 2019). Prior to the current induction program, Bezzina’s (2006) study into the perceptions held by NQTs about their professional development noted the lack of professional support being given by the school.

Studies have shown that mentors involved in induction programs in Maltese schools feel that school administrators should be more involved. Bezzina (2002) suggests that the responsibility of proper teacher induction and continuing professional development rests in the hands of the school leaders. Mentors feel that if the leaders are more engaged, there is potential for whole school involvement in the mentoring process and that all staff members can contribute positively to the NQT’s professional development (Attard Tonna, 2019; Bezzina et al., 2006). In fact, the European Commission (2010) report specifically states that “the competences and commitment of school leaders are important for

creating a coherent induction system and a collaborative learning culture in the school” (p. 24). While measures must be taken to ensure their vital involvement for program success, there currently is a gap in the literature on how leaders are and should be involved.

Unfortunately, the school environment often prevents opportunities for mentors and mentees to collaborate with school administrators as they typically do not provide the necessary accommodating environments (Attard Tonna, 2019). The demand for teamwork was stressed prior to the current program being introduced and school leaders must make efforts to provide such an atmosphere in order to fulfill this demand (Bezzina, 2006). Yet, the duties of the school administrator in the induction program are not clear. The perceived lack of awareness regarding the various aspects involved in mentoring may be encumbering the program’s effectiveness (Attard Tonna, 2019). While the Masters degree in Educational Leadership and Management is a requirement for headship in Malta, the program does not provide sufficient emphasis on their engagement with staff, nor does it educate these leaders about the mentorship program (Bezzina, 2001). This knowledge is essential in order to effect change in these specific areas and provide the atmosphere necessary for collaboration among colleagues. Bezzina (2008) suggested that various programs have to be offered to address the multitude of needs within this realm; one course simply cannot capture all the issues that educators face within the school.

Methodology

Research Design

This article is based on the exploratory qualitative study that examined the perceptions of heads of schools regarding the induction and mentoring program support for NQTs in Malta. Specifically, the following research question from the study is dealt with in this article: a) What is the role of school administrators in induction and mentoring programs for NQTs?

Sample and Data Collection

Participants in this study included heads of schools in primary and secondary schools across Malta. Data collection processes involved qualitative interviewing. After an invitation had been sent to the heads of elementary and secondary schools across Malta, five heads of schools and one deputy head agreed to participate in the study (see Table 1). All names are pseudonyms. Individual interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner (Hays & Singh, 2012) in the fall of 2018, lasting, on average, for 45 minutes and providing rich descriptive data. One of the interviews involved both a head (Matt) and a deputy head (Gregory) from the same school. In terms of types of schools, we had representation from three State-run schools, one religious (Catholic) school, and one independent school.

Table 1. Demographics of Interview Participants

No	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Teaching Experience	Administrative Experience	School Level	School Type
1	Matt	M	50+	15	7	Primary/ Secondary	Religious
2	Gregory	M	50+	6	4	Primary/Secondary	Religious
3	Anastasia	F	40+	7	4	Primary	State
4	Albert	M	50+	30	20	Primary/Secondary	Independent
5	Sophia	F	40+	20	8	Primary/ Secondary	State
6	Anthony	M	50+	7	2	Primary	State

Data Analysis

All research ethics guidelines have been adhered to by the researchers. Participants’ responses were audio-recorded and transcribed at a later date. Our research team – authors and two research assistants – then used deductive and inductive strategies following the standard coding processes for etic and emic data analysis approaches (MacMillan & Schumacher, 2005). First, using NVivo 13, the researchers collaboratively used the inductive method for themes to emerge from the data (Jebb et al., 2017). Once general themes were established, the remaining data were analyzed in both an inductive and deductive manner to draw on previous themes and allow for new themes to emerge (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Both etic and emic codes were subsequently combined into categories and then into patterns or concepts (Lichtman, 2013). This article draws on selected data from the interview questions that inquired into the heads of schools’ engagement in teacher induction and mentoring programs and their experiences of supporting NQTs as school leaders.

Findings/Results

The findings are organized based on the two overarching themes: a) how the heads of schools support NQTs; and, b) advice for new heads of schools working with NQTs. Based on these overarching themes, subthemes were developed based on each larger theme. The findings are presented and discussed in the following sections.

How do the Heads of Schools Support NQTs?

Researchers first asked the heads of schools to describe how they support the NQTs within their school community. More specifically, the aim of this question was to enquire about what supports and resources they provide NQTs in their role. Participants were also asked about the mentorship scheme within the school and processes for mentor assignments for the NQTs. Many of the heads of schools have indicated a combination of five factors that support the NQTs including: a) sharing the school vision and providing feedback; b) personal qualities of the head of school; c) building relationships in a welcoming environment; d) providing professional development opportunities; and e) head of school's role in mentoring programs.

Sharing the School Vision and Providing Feedback

For the majority of the participants, the support that they felt was important for NQTs, which they themselves could provide, was sharing a clear school mission and vision with the NQTs. In relation to this idea, the heads of schools also explained the idea of providing NQTs with feedback on how they were progressing toward achieving the school vision. For example, Matt, the head of schools, explained how he introduces NQTs to the school community:

After an introductory interview, we then hold an induction meeting for new members of staff, be it new recruits or even NQTs, where we explain both the school vision and the school mission, school policies, and even we explain how to use the internal infrastructure such as the management system of the school, and systems, so on and so forth. In this way, the teachers will know what is expected of them, what our culture is, and how we go about doing things.

Matt is describing the process of inviting novice teachers to discuss the school community and what the expectations are in their new role. Similarly, Albert spoke about the importance of the human aspect and communicated with new teachers to explain what they do as a school community. Albert explains that connecting on a human level is crucial for success. Whether the teacher is simply new to the school community or has just started his/her career as a NQT, Albert undertakes the same induction process to invite them into the unique school community. For example, he provides in-house professional development sessions throughout the year. He says he also organizes various meetings with the novice teachers to discuss administrative issues such as data entry and health and safety matters.

Another principal, Anthony, shared the idea of visiting the NQT in their classrooms throughout the year, so as to monitor their growth toward the achievement of school goals. It is common for Anthony to observe the teacher in the classroom to encourage and motivate teachers whilst at the same time providing constructive feedback on areas that need to be addressed. He notes that this builds a strong relationship with new teachers and encourages collegiality. He went on to explain that if he noticed that an early career teacher was facing a challenge, he would provide that teacher with support through their own expertise or inform the head of the department that they may need some support.

In addition, Sophia spoke about supporting NQTs by implementing a team approach with the senior management team:

We do have a program where when teachers are new to the school, we do visit classes regularly...We make it a point to visit all teachers, but with new recruits, it's a little bit more intense. So, it's a bit more specific. We give much more feedback, and we do set up meetings with them maybe once a term, one-on-one, where we discuss issues pertinent to them settling in and addressing their immediate personal and professional needs.

Sophia notes that through these classroom visits, she, as the head of the school, was able to support the NQTs within the school by providing them with both descriptive and analytical feedback on how they could grow as educators.

Personal Qualities of the Head of the School

The personal qualities and character traits of the heads of schools was another type of support that they provided to the novice teachers. Through their own personal characteristics, they were able to create a connection with the NQTs that allowed them to assist those who needed their support. The personal attributes included being supportive, understanding, empathetic, compassionate, and approachable.

Anastasia described herself as being a head of school who supported the novice teachers at the school by being approachable and empathetic in understanding their needs. She believed that this type of connection was important in helping NQTs feel supported, which in turn impacted the overall success of the school:

I'm a very approachable person. I always said that I haven't forgotten my days in the classroom, and I know that teaching is very demanding, and I also believe that the teachers have to be given a lot of support because they are ultimately the wheels of our education system. If the teacher is not functioning or is not supported, you've lost the battle before it even started.

Anastasia is describing the importance of supportive relationships between administration and teachers to facilitate a positive learning environment. Sophia also stated the importance of being supportive and fostering a team spirit. She

described how she works as part of a team to support the NQTs through their administrative role, but also through assigning a mentor.

Albert also explained the importance of being supportive when it comes to working with the novice teachers. He went on to describe how he is supportive by providing advice to the NQTs and letting them know he is available and believes in them. Albert emphasized the idea that he explains to the novice teachers that they have learned theoretical knowledge and bring it with them into the classroom but how they also need to incorporate the soft skills that are required for teaching, such as being adaptable and receptive to the students as learners:

This is reality. I'm going to face a class. And sometimes, one of the biggest challenges is, "What am I going to do now?" I said this, "You've got the theoretical preparation but now you need to adapt. You need to have your feet on the ground, and you need to try to see the subject the way the kids see it. That's something which is very important.

Building Relationships in a Welcoming Environment

The participants highlighted having a deep and unwavering commitment to building relationships with the NQTs as a way of supporting them in their first two years in the profession. This theme is about creating a supportive system and a network from which the NQTs can receive advice, support, and resources. This was a recurring theme as it was highlighted in five of the seven questions, which illustrates the important role that building relationships plays in supporting NQTs. In addition, a sense of belonging allows novice teachers to build relationships and a network of support, as well as ensures that they do not get overwhelmed with the sense of being alone and isolated in their profession. As a result, feeling included and welcomed helps to nurture the growth of successful first-year teachers.

Anastasia emphasized the importance of building a relationship with NQTs from the very beginning. She explained the importance of fostering the growth of a relationship between the NQT and the senior management team: "I introduce them to the assistant head, because the assistant head also plays a supportive role with the NQT. So, the first thing we do is we try to build up a relationship." She went on to describe that nurturing the growth of a relationship does not mean just a working relationship; it is sincere and requires a level of compassion and care. She describes how successful relationships are more about learning about the person, their skills, and their professional development needs. Anastasia also explained how it is important to help build relationships between the NQT and other teachers within the school community. She does so by providing educators with the time to come together and support each other in their teaching and have designated time to support each other. This resonates with the findings of Leck and Orser (2013) who highlight the need for 'connection' and 'feeling safe' to open up and speak one's views and opinions.

Similarly, Albert stated that it is important to build a connection and a rapport with the NQTs:

I also do believe that it's important that the Head of School has the right link because, ultimately, in our role, whether we like it or not, we have the biggest influence. We can affect people.

He went on to explain that he builds a relationship with the NQTs by showing his appreciation for their role as a teacher. As their roles are challenging, he thinks it is necessary to show appreciation for their dedication and support. Albert also explained how he provides NQTs with emotional support that comes not only from the head of school but also from the assistant heads. He builds a relationship with the teachers by being empathetic and understanding of what they are going through. Albert explains to the NQT that they are not alone in how they are feeling, as he felt the same way as a first-year teacher. He explains to them that "It's okay to express your emotions openly ... to cry. I've done it in my first year of teaching." Albert also continued to emphasize the importance of ensuring that NQTs do not feel alone when he is creating a relationship with them. He emphasizes that teachers need to feel supported and accompanied by others in their school to be successful. This point supports the literature that highlights the important role that school leaders have in communicating expectations to NQTs and in empathising with the challenges that novice teachers face (Engvik & Berit Emstad, 2017).

Furthermore, Anastasia described how she felt it was important to ensure that NQTs felt welcomed at her school from the very first day. She explained that this played an essential role in ensuring that teachers were on board and felt happy. Anastasia went on to state that it is not hard to ensure that people feel included but that it had a big impact on how the rest of the school year would play out. She noted that NQTs need to feel that sense of belonging as they are supported but also involved in school matters.

Providing Professional Development Opportunities

The heads of schools described that support for the NQTs comes from the senior management team and from the relationships that are built within the school, as well as from professional development opportunities within and outside the school. The chance to grow professionally allows novice teachers to gain confidence in their teaching practices and allows them to grow in areas by which they have been challenged. By learning how they can improve their instructional techniques, NQTs can enhance their level of teaching and feel successful in their position.

Anastasia explained how she provides training and guidance for the NQT as a way of supporting them through professional development. She allows them the space to try out things and learn and receive professional guidance along the way. Similarly, Albert described that he supports the NQTs by helping them develop professionally through their participation in a one-year induction program. Throughout the year the NQTs are made aware that the head of school is there to guide them. He guides them through the induction process and supports in any professional development activities they require.

The Supportive Role of the Head of School in the Organization of the Mentoring Program

The organization of the mentoring program plays an important role in ensuring that NQTs feel supported during their initial years in the profession. The interviewees described the role of the head of school as being supportive, such as providing resources and feedback on progress toward achieving the goals of the school community. All participants explained how the role of the head of school is to support NQTs throughout their first two years of teaching.

Anastasia explained that her role as the head of school is to ensure that NQTs feel comfortable to approach her for help and advice. She described her role as being a support for NQTs, describing herself as 'a point of reference' for any concerns, including classroom management issues. Anastasia emphasized that her role as head of school was to support novice teachers by ensuring that they understand that it is okay to make mistakes. She ensures that the NQTs understand that she trusts and believes in them, and nurtures that sense of belonging. She went on to describe that as a supportive head of school, her role is to ensure that teachers are happy and feel successful so that they remain in their teaching position at the school. She does so by ensuring that they are not only settling in the school and their teaching assignment but being adequately provided with opportunities to engage in various school initiatives:

Because I believe if the teachers are not happy, well, that will backfire at some point in time and what happens is the teachers will start asking for redeployment. So, what I do is I try to keep the teachers happy. Actually, I go to the teacher and tell them, what do you want. What are your strengths, what are your areas of expertise, and what would you like to be involved in? What can you contribute to other aspects of school life?

Anthony described that as the head of school he provides a great deal of support for NQT in their first year of teaching. When teachers successfully move into their second year of teaching, the head of school continues to support them but in a less intense manner. Anthony described how he pairs the newly qualified teacher with an experienced teacher who helps to support the new teacher in transitioning into the position and in developing professionally through reviewing lessons and syllabi. This engagement has been found to enhance peer learning as the NQT starts to engage with a more experienced teacher in focused areas of professional learning. This, Anthony noted, helps to strengthen the bond with other colleagues as they share ideas and reflections on teaching and learning, both through informal discussions and more structured meetings.

This helps to reinforce the argument that the best, possibly the most effective support, comes not from a supervisor (i.e., the head of school) but from a colleague who is possibly teaching in the same year group or subject (Colognesi et al., 2020). The 'weaning off' process that Anthony has institutionalized helps to emphasize this point.

Advice for New heads of schools Working with Beginning Teachers

The role of the head of school is a demanding position and one of the many responsibilities that a head of school has is to support NQTs as they find their way in the teaching profession. Just as novice teachers are provided with advice in order to be able to face challenges and overcome obstacles so as to be successful, it is helpful to provide new heads of schools with suggestions on how to effectively support NQTs. The participants shared various ideas that heads of schools could use to support newly qualified teachers. These were grouped into four main themes: a) being empathetic, appreciative, and supportive; b) showing one's presence within the school; c) promoting a sense of optimism to motivate staff; and, d) openly communicating and actively listening to early career teachers.

Be Empathetic, Appreciative, and Supportive

The idea of empathy and appreciation is seen as an essential aspect of effectively supporting NQTs as it was emphasized in many of the other responses. In order to support NQTs, the heads of schools feel that it is important to develop a relationship with them. At the very foundation of these relationships, is the sense of empathy and appreciation. The participants described how they created positive trusting relationships with NQTs by being empathetic and recognizing their hard work and dedication.

Anastasia explained that one of the most important aspects of supporting NQTs is to "Be one of them. Don't forget you're a teacher at the end of the day. Don't forget your days in the classroom." She also emphasized the idea of working together as a team to support each other and helping each other out if one member of the team requires more support.

Similarly, Albert explained that it is important to encourage and support NQTs by letting them know that you are there for them. He says "encourage and support. Support is not a top down engagement." A similar sentiment was expressed by Anthony, who explained that NQTs are the future of the profession and the head of school must support them:

NQTs are our future. So, you have to take good care of them. That's very important. So, for a Head of School it is essential to take good care of all the team but especially of the new ones, to keep them in ... in your fold because sometimes after the investment in their professional development they might tell you that they wish to leave the school, they wish to find a school closer to home. So, it's really important that when you invest time, you're helping them settle in.

In addition, Sophia emphasized the importance of showing appreciation for all the new knowledge and ideas that young teachers bring with them into the teaching profession. They bring new ideas to the profession and Sophia highlights the importance of recognizing their potential. Sophia reiterated how it is important to acknowledge the contributions that NQTs bring to the school community as well. It is important to let novice teachers know that they are contributing to the school community in many singular ways. Sophia summarized her thoughts by stating how a head of school should appreciate the skills of new teachers and allow them to share their innovative ideas with others.

Show your Presence within the School

The role of a head of school consists of many aspects, one of which is the administrative work that is required to be completed. The participants described that much of their time is spent on the administrative responsibilities associated with the position, which takes away from the time that they can spend supporting teachers in general and NQTs in particular. As a result, some of the participants stated that their advice for new heads of schools is to make time to step away from their office and to show their presence within the school by walking around the school and visiting classrooms. Albert emphasized the importance of walking around the school and specifically going into the classrooms to identify issues that may be unfolding and thus be able to support NQTs directly and with immediacy.

It's not only through talk. It's a question of how to do things. I believe very much in moving around the school. ... I spend enough time in my office as necessary but most of the time, it's after school hours. During the school hours, for example, I like to be, as much as possible, where the action is, whether in the playground or in other areas. ...I want to be there to support my staff as much as possible.

He went on to describe that this is important in ensuring that problems can be solved before they escalate. He explained that this type of support helps NQTs when they feel overwhelmed by a problem:

Some teachers might feel a little bit intimidated of not knowing how to handle a particular situation the teachers know I'm there and they're going to support me doing it. It makes all the difference. It's not just verbal support but it's also a presence. That is important.

By being present in the school, Albert explained that the head of school can contribute to creating a supportive work environment. As he put it "...you create the right atmosphere; you create the right environment to keep them on board with you." Sophia also emphasized the importance behind her presence so as to let NQTs know that you are there for them and available even if it is for a chat. This narrative helps to emphasize the importance behind 'visibility' which, in turn, builds trust between NQTs and other members of staff (Jack, 2023).

Promote Positivity, Optimism, Courage, and Motivation

As some of the heads of schools explained, it is important to ensure that NQTs do not feel discouraged. As a result, when providing advice to new heads of school, they described the importance of motivating and encouraging NQTs to stay positive and optimistic. Anastasia shared that NQTs must be encouraged and kept motivated, and Albert similarly noted that NQTs need ongoing support and encouragement. He went on to emphasize the importance of maintaining a positive school climate so that NQTs are not influenced by negativity. Albert highlights that negative self-talk is contagious and promoting a positive attitude and enthusiasm is key.

Open Communication and Active Listening

When developing relationships, it is important to maintain an open level of communication and to actively listen to others. As illustrated in the responses of the participants, nurturing the development of positive trusting relationships is one of the key components in supporting NQTs. As a result, some of the participants provided advice to new heads of school, which related to implementing the use of effective communication skills when helping NQTs.

Matt suggested that new heads of schools should be clear when communicating with NQTs so that they understand what is expected of them:

Initially it is a question of guidance. Support them. Help them understand what needs to be achieved and how to go about things. I think it's more a question of communication. They can slowly embrace and support the school vision the more they are invited to get involved in positive and fruitful interaction.

Anastasia brought out an interesting point related to how parents at times react when their children are assigned an NQT. Parents often want more experienced teachers to teach their children. Anastasia acknowledges this delicate

situation emphasizing the importance of actively listening to the parents whilst showing them how important it is to show solidarity towards the NQTs:

You bring the parents in; you listen to them. You see what their concerns are and then you present them with another point of view, and you start the conversation. I believe it's important to personalize matters. Bring out examples from my own life, my own experiences. If it's a new teacher, I explain to them that I too was a new teacher many years ago, and how things evolved from there. Once you have the parents on board, things start looking better.

She went on to explain that as the head of school it is important to listen to the needs of the NQTs so that you can effectively support them. She said: "I am one of them. I listen to their concerns. I try to address their needs so as to facilitate their life as teachers." This resonates with the research findings (e.g., Van Engen, 2012) that empathetic listening is one of the most important components of communication.

Discussion

The findings suggest that heads of schools play a central role in the NQTs induction phase in Malta. Many heads of schools are involved with supporting NQTs through sharing the school vision and providing feedback, approaching teachers with compassion, empathy, support, and understanding, through professional development opportunities and mentorship programs. It is crucial for heads of the school to clearly communicate their own school vision and support NQTs' development towards this vision. The participants in our sample also highlighted the need for a head of school to possess characteristics such as empathy, understanding, compassion, approachability, and supportiveness. In addition, participants noted that both sides – administration and NQTs – must be open to collaboration by actively listening and providing feedback. However, collaboration needs to be authentic and genuine. As Kyrou et al. (2020) found in the Greek education system, not displaying the same sensitivity and interest towards all NQTs demonstrated favoritism in principals' actions and had negative impact on the overall collegial climate in schools. Instead, NQT participants in their study highlighted the importance of equal treatment of beginning teachers and the benefits of their active participation in decision-making in schools.

Participants in our study discussed the importance of sharing the school's vision and, in particular, noted the value behind presence in the classroom and elsewhere. As a participant noted, they commonly meet with the NQT to outline the school's vision, mission, and policy to ensure they are aware of the school's culture and how they can be part of it. The literature also discusses the impact of school administrators attitudes and the success of induction programs (Birkeland & Feiman-Nemser, 2009; Johnson & Birkeland, 2003). It becomes crucial for the school culture and work environment to promote improved teacher outcomes and reduce attrition (Wood, 2005). Furthermore, the scholarship in this area highlights the use of mentorship in the induction program as a tool for effective development (Abela Craus, 2016; McCann & Johannessen, 2009; Shanks et al., 2022). More specifically, Shanks et al., (2022) emphasize the importance of harmonized personalities, developing a trusting relationship, and collaboration.

Participants also suggest that heads of schools have to be involved in the induction process, even if they are not assigned mentors. Although on a less formal basis, senior administration consults with NQTs to provide support, guidance, and feedback after attending their classroom and also meet to discuss objectives set. The literature also suggests the importance of the school administrator's role in mentorship induction programs. School administrators have the ability to facilitate guiding topics and the frequency of the mentorship meetings (Pogodzinski, 2015). Although the participants did not highlight how they run their specific mentorship induction program, they did discuss the way they personally engage with NQTs, and what they do to ensure that the NQTs settle into the school, find supportive colleagues, and structures in place that will help them go through the challenging first few years of school life. The study has relied purely on the points that heads of schools have identified. They highlight the important role that they and their staff are playing in helping NQTs settle. At the same time, we acknowledge the ever increasing tasks that keep being added to the school leaders' workload (Bezzina, 2013). The role of the school administrator is often determined by others, and they have to follow the dictates of central authorities, which give them limited to no time to focus on what really matters – namely, the professional development of teachers and the improvement of teaching and learning (Bezzina, 2024; Debono, 2018). In spite of the national documents that speak of school administrators as leaders, the reality shows that they have limited autonomy to determine the way forward for schools.

Conclusion

This research affirmed that senior administration and heads of school, in particular, play a crucial part in induction programs in Malta. Aligned with the literature, findings showed that school administration has the ability to foster and facilitate community, respect, development, and success through clear communication and goal setting. The head of school must recognize the expertise NQTs bring to the school climate, and strive to promote an inclusive, welcoming, and supportive school community with clearly communicated goals and a vision of where they see the school going. Whilst this article focused on the role that heads of schools play in the lives of NQTs, it also helped to bring out the important

role that heads play in creating a culture based on sound values and practices that will help NQTs not only settle in the class or classes they teach but also settle within the school community.

Recommendations

There is no denying that mentoring is an essential tool for teacher education (Dreer-Goethe, 2023) and recognized as one of the most important components in the induction phase (Langdon et al., 2014; Shanks et al., 2022). In this article we have argued that heads of schools play a pivotal role in providing NQTs with both professional and pastoral support. Beyond that, they can be instrumental in creating appropriate mentoring programs that would see mentors and other school members directly involved in the induction and ongoing development of NQTs.

This article, which serves as an introduction to a complex arena, has aimed to present the role of mentoring from the perspective of school leaders, which, so far, is a missing dimension in the mentoring discourse in Malta. These introductory findings help to highlight the important role that school heads, as leaders, can play in creating an environment ideal for NQTs to work in and help leave a positive difference in teacher retention in Malta. Based on the findings, a system-wide commitment is needed to ensure that the school leadership teams are provided with the necessary training sessions and the support required to maintain mentoring for desired impact (Kutsyuruba & Bezzina, 2024). More in-depth research is needed, especially studies that include more heads of schools and other senior management members of staff to extend our understanding of the role and impact that school leaders have on NQTs. It is here that further research is required which adopts a triangulation approach that helps us gain a clearer and more detailed picture of the area under study. We also need to conduct research that involves the different stakeholders, namely school administrators, mentors and mentees through possibly case studies to help us better understand the realities of induction and mentoring within specific contexts.

Limitations

This study has a number of limitations. First, the participant sample is very small. While this allowed for a more in-depth understanding of the perceptions of heads of schools about the induction and mentoring program, the generalisability of these findings cannot be assumed. A mixed-method examination, with quantitative and qualitative data collection methods, would enhance the results. Although we had representation from State-run, religious, and independent (fee-paying) schools, a greater sample of participants from each of the school types would be beneficial for comparative purposes of program variations based on the type of school. Only one of the interviews involved an administration team (head and deputy head); it is important to extend the investigation to include other members of the senior management team (e.g., deputy heads and heads of department) allowing for a better and deeper understanding of the area. Finally, given the growing interest in mentoring and the limited focus on the role heads of schools play, longitudinal studies would offer insights into how mentoring can be approached from a more holistic perspective.

Ethics Statements

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by Queen's University. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Authorship Contribution Statement

Both authors have contributed equally to this paper.

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