
The professional isolation experienced by novice Heads of Primary State Schools during their professional and organisational socialisation

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Abstract

This paper examines the professional isolation experienced by novice Heads of Primary State Schools during their professional and organisational socialisation. A mixed-method approach was adopted, with the data from an online survey providing an overview into this challenge, whereas interviews with novice school leaders helped gain a better insight into their experiences. Results show that the socialisation process itself and issues related to the organisational climate of schools seem to be major causes of professional isolation. The level of support newly appointed leaders receive from the Head of College Network (HCN) highly influences the level of isolation experienced. Major coping mechanisms which novice Heads of School believe reduce feelings of professional isolation include seeking support from peers and superiors and making personal and professional effort. This study highlights the importance of continuous support and professional development in helping novice leaders face the challenge of professional isolation.

Keywords

Professional isolation, novice Heads of School, coping mechanisms, support

Introduction

Prior to the 1990s, the Head of School was the manager responsible for the running of the educational institution where the main concern was that of maintaining the normal functioning of the organisation (Alvoid & Black, 2014). However, in this era of globalisation, technological advancement and accountability, Heads of School have also become leaders who shape the goals of their educational institutions, motivate others and initiate change. The

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role of the school leader has changed dramatically (Grodzki, 2011; Saidun et al., 2015) and has become strenuous and demanding.

Experienced school leaders manage to surmount the challenges they face in their position by applying the knowledge and skills they would have acquired over the years. Novice Heads of School are also expected to be as effective and efficient on their job from the very first day. Once they are entrusted with the position, they are required to meet high expectations with minimal guidance (Smith, 2014). Nevertheless, most often, newly appointed Heads of School lack the knowledge and expertise required to lead successfully (Spillane & Lee, 2014). Although some might have previously held other leadership roles, it is unwise to assume that such roles would have adequately prepared them for the position. Moreover, the preparation programmes they would have completed do not fully prepare them to be able to manage the daily demands of the job (Alvoid & Black, 2014).

Apart from the challenges which experienced leaders face, being in the early stages of their career, newly appointed Heads of School also face the challenges brought by their socialisation process, a process during which they learn the modes of behaviour and the way things are done in the new organisation (Sackney & Walker, 2006). Such challenges include adaptation to the new context and culture and balancing between the conflicting demands of the different stakeholders.

Novice Heads of School usually face these challenges with lack of support and feedback from colleagues and superiors (Cowie, 2011; Daresh & Male, 2000; Tahir et al., 2018). As a result, they feel anxious, frustrated and overwhelmed (Daresh, 2001). They also experience feelings of professional isolation which are exacerbated by the long working hours, large amounts of paperwork, excessive work pressure and poor networking with more experienced peers (Cushing et al., 2003; Howley et al., 2005; Kelly & Saunders, 2010; Santacrose, 2016).

This study focuses on the causes of professional isolation experienced by novice Heads of Primary State Schools during their socialisation process. Two further issues arise from this main theme, mainly the way novice Heads of Primary Schools cope with this challenge and the support structures they believe are needed to address this issue. This study is therefore based on the following research questions:

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- What are the causes of the professional isolation experienced by novice Heads of Primary State Schools during their professional and organisational socialisation?
 - How do novice Heads of School cope with this challenge?
 - What support do they believe they need to address this challenge?

The research by Stephenson and Bauer (2010) showed that isolation leads to physical and emotional burnout, impacting the quality of work life of the Head of School, whereas further studies by Federici and Skaalvik (2012) and by Bauer and Silver (2018) confirm the impact of isolation on the novice leaders' self-efficacy, job satisfaction, burnout and persistence. Shedding light upon the causes of professional isolation and the mechanisms Heads of School adopt to cope with such a challenge is therefore important if one is to plan effective support structures with the intention of equipping school leaders with the tools needed to lead schools effectively.

Literature Review

Career stages of headship

Since previous research has pointed out that novice Heads of School experience isolation during their early headship stages (0–3 years) (Izgar, 2009; Male, 2006; Shields, 2008; Stephenson & Bauer, 2010; Weindling & Earley, 1987), an understanding of the career stages of Heads of School and their socialisation process is paramount.

Various models of headship career stages have been proposed. Watts (2012) identified three major headship phases: "early headship (0–3 years)", "middle headship (3–10 years)" and "late headship (more than 10 years)", whereas Earley and Weindling (2007) mapped out six stages of transition through headship, beginning with the preparation process to headship and ending with the last stage referred to as the "plateau". The preparation stage is characterised by professional socialisation during which conceptions of headship are developed. In the first months following appointment ("entry and encounter"), Heads of School face the reality of the new school and embark on their organisational socialisation process as they attempt to understand "the

complexities of the situation, the people, the problems and the school culture" (Earley & Weindling, 2007, p. 75). During the next stage ("taking hold", 3–12 months) novice leaders start introducing organisational changes which affect the school culture.

The model proposed by Kelly and Saunders (2010) is quite similar. The first phase ("motivation and preparation") corresponds to Earley and Weindling's (2007) "preparation stage". However, Kelly and Saunders refer to this period as "anticipatory socialisation" of Heads of School whereby they gather "social and technical experiences to qualify them for the job" (Kelly & Saunders, 2010, p. 131). According to their model, the professional and organisational socialisation of novice Heads of School kicks in during the second phase ("entry, orientation and immersion"), a stage in which novice leaders continue their previous learning through formal induction, acquire information about their schools, build networks with peers, establish professional relationships and try to reshape the school culture. As their professional and organisational socialisation progresses, Heads of School enter the third stage ("control and action"), in which the new incumbents manage to establish their professional identity and apply further changes in line with the needs of the school.

The model by Kelly and Saunders (2010) focuses on the first year of appointment of Heads of School. On the other hand, Earley and Weindling (2007) outline further stages in the headship career. During their second year ("reshaping stage"), major changes which reshape the school are implemented whilst in the third and fourth years of their headship position, Heads of School fine-tune previous innovations and introduce further changes ("refining stage"). Heads of School build upon planned changes from their fifth year onwards ("consolidation stage") until they reach the last stage of leadership ("the plateau").

Despite minor differences, these models basically share the same characteristics, especially with regards to the early stages following appointment. Both models view the "entry" stage as crucial in headship career. Following the "preparation phase", this stage is fundamental as Heads of School require more than the knowledge gained from leadership programmes and previous experiences in order to be effective leaders (Stevenson, 2012). During this transition stage to the headship role, newly-appointed Heads of School undergo their socialisation process, an important process through which novice

Heads of School learn the required skills and knowledge in order to successfully lead their schools.

Professional and organisational socialisation

Research about headship transition has encompassed two major categories for the socialisation process of Heads of School: professional and organisational socialisation (Earley & Weindling, 2004; Higham et al., 2015; Male, 2006). Professional socialisation usually begins with the pre-appointment of the post (Daresh, 2000) and is defined as the process whereby Heads of School prepare themselves to the headship position through their informal experiences and formal training (Bengtson et al., 2013). Throughout this process they learn the knowledge, skills and behaviour required for the role of the Head of School. Within this study, the term "professional socialisation" will be used to refer to the process in which novice Heads of School acquire further skills and knowledge throughout their early headship career. This incorporates formal induction training, professional development and informal experiences novice Heads of School go through during their induction phase.

The phase immediately following appointment marks the onset of the organisational socialisation process which involves acquiring the knowledge, values and behaviour required to become a member of the organisation and the immersion within its culture and context (Weindling, 2003). According to Van Maanen and Schein (1979) organisational socialisation is "the process by which one is taught and learns 'the ropes' of a new organisation role" (p. 211).

Becoming a school leader involves ongoing socialisation (Kelly & Saunders, 2010). The socialisation process which features predominantly in the first years of school leadership is considered to be quite challenging (Walker & Qian, 2006), with novice Heads of School experiencing a sense of "shock" (Daresh & Male, 2000). As soon as they assume their role, newly appointed Heads of School have to adapt to the context and culture of the new organisation and, having the utmost responsibility for the school, they are expected to make a lot of decisions without any support (Crow, 2007; Spillane & Lee, 2014).

From the very first day, they are left alone with the expectation that they hold enough knowledge and expertise to be successful in their new role (Smith, 2014). In fact, research has shown that the socialisation of newly appointed

Heads of School is usually an individual process whereby the learning about the role occurs through trial and error and prior personal experiences (Crow, 2006; Hart, 1991). This adds to the challenge since novice Heads of School frequently report that such prior experiences are often limited and that they usually lack expertise in various aspects of their work (Fullan, 2007; Spillane & Lee, 2014). Newly appointed Heads of School often struggle to understand the nature of their responsibilities, in the new context within which they find themselves (Daresh, 1986). As a result, they are frequently overwhelmed and they often report strong feelings of loneliness during their first years of headship (Brazier & Bauer, 2013; Crow, 2007; Hart, 1991; Kelly & Saunders, 2010; Spillane & Lee, 2014).

Professional isolation and its causes

This study defines professional isolation as the feelings experienced by Heads of School when they are not satisfied with the relationships and support they receive in the work environment (Dor-Haim & Oplatka, 2019; Tahir et al., 2017; Wright et al., 2006). Weindling & Earley (1987) describe professional isolation to symbolise the "initiation ceremony of leadership" as it is almost inevitable that newly appointed Heads of School experience a sense of loneliness.

Several factors can be linked to the causes of professional isolation. Research about headship has proved that long working hours, excessive amounts of paperwork, loss of predictable routines and work pressure are amongst the major causes of isolation amongst school leaders (Cushing et al., 2003; Howley et al., 2005; Santacrose, 2016). Peterson (2002) points out that heavy workloads and time constraints contribute to the problem as less time is left to communicate with the school staff. Furthermore, high expectations are placed on Heads of School from various stakeholders. Heads of School are simply expected "to know" and school is often viewed as the cure for all of society's illnesses.

Another heavy burden Heads of School carry is that of decision-making. According to Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski (2002) this is a major cause for feelings of isolation experienced by school leaders. Spillane and Lee (2014) argue that the loneliness and solitariness of novice Heads of School stem from such ultimate responsibility.

Another issue is that of structural loneliness. No one else in the school holds the same position as the Head of School. This makes it even more difficult for school leaders to feel a sense of belonging to the school community since all other school members are subordinates and there are no "real colleagues" inside the school (Kelchtermans et al., 2011). The feeling of isolation is aggravated when Heads of School feel uncomfortable sharing school matters with staff or asking for support.

In trying to identify the causes of professional isolation for novice Heads of School, it is also important to take a closer look at the socialisation process of new leaders and the 'sources of socialisation', meaning all those who influence the socialisation process of beginning school leaders, mainly assistant Heads of School, teachers, students, parents and the community at large. It is quite common that, through formal and informal social mechanisms, organisations do their utmost to "protect against the intrusion of new members, values and beliefs" (Hart, 1991, p. 469). This impacts the socialisation process of newcomers in the school community.

Studies have shown that the school's staff may be one of the causes of professional isolation among novice school leaders (Oplatka, 2012; Watts, 2012) by withholding information, resisting changes or putting the authority and values of the new school leaders under test (Crow & Matthews, 1998). Such challenges carry even more weight when new Heads of School feel unfamiliar with the values and norms which dominate the school culture. This exacerbates the newcomers' lack of belonging (Dor-Haim & Oplatka, 2019).

As the new Head of School sets foot in their office, other sources of socialisation, mainly parents, the local community and various organisations come forward with the intention of trying to influence the values, knowledge and skills promoted within the school. Heads of School have to react to such external pressures. They have to act as "gatekeepers" balancing competing demands (Kelchtermans et al., 2011), ending up exasperated and lonely.

Novice Heads of School need a lot of support during their early career stages. Support in dealing with difficult situations and emotional support are essential to help reduce the level of loneliness they experience (Dor-Haim & Oplatka, 2019). Unfortunately, lack of support and feedback from peers and superiors have been identified as major causes of professional isolation in a

number of previous studies (Cowie, 2011; Daresh & Male, 2000, Tahir et al, 2018).

Coping mechanisms to reduce professional isolation

A few studies have explored the strategies that newly appointed leaders adopt in reducing feelings of professional isolation. Howard and Mallory (2008) report that Heads of School try to build supportive relationships with the people around them. Similarly, the study by Tahir et al. (2017) concluded that establishing good relationships with teachers and reaching out to other Heads of School were the two coping mechanisms mainly adopted by novice school leaders. Burmeister & Hensley (2004) argue that when Heads of School manage to build healthy relationships with the school staff, feelings of loneliness amongst school leaders decrease.

Walker and Qian (2006) also highlight the importance of working with veteran school members. These people are usually quite competent colleagues, and novice Heads of School can draw on their wisdom and experience (Sorenson, 2005). In addition to this, school leaders share their feelings with other stakeholders in the school, mainly the assistant Heads of School, the school psychologist or the school counsellor in order to reduce the loneliness experienced (Dor-Haim & Oplatka, 2019). In order to satisfy their need of belonging and to cope with feelings of loneliness, Heads of School also reach out to colleagues (Kelchtermans et al., 2011).

Distributed leadership is considered to be the best way Heads of School have for developing their support system. Apart from developing stronger relationships, this type of leadership enables task distribution and reduces task overload which is one of the major causes of professional isolation (Howard & Mallory, 2008). Distributed leadership enhances teamwork, and since the staff shares a common vision and mission for the school, goals are more easily accepted, as they are viewed to be the collective goals of all school members rather than the personal goals of the Head of School (Tahir et al., 2017).

Support structures aimed at reducing professional isolation

Proper support and guidance are important in ensuring the success of newly appointed Heads of School (Alsbury & Hackman, 2006). In this respect, Woods et al. (2009) pinpointed the importance of collaboration and networking with

other Heads of School as a means of professional development; sustaining and rebuilding their confidence through mentoring or coaching; and improved support and information. Peer support networks and professional learning communities enable school leaders to share experiences and provide opportunities for collaboration, whereas professional development opportunities help inexperienced leaders in gaining the necessary skills and knowledge for their leading endeavour. Helping novice Heads of School strengthen their personal and interpersonal skills is also an important aspect of their professional development.

Novice Heads of School “need to be nurtured” (p. 555) and given support as they face different challenges and make difficult decisions (Boerema, 2011). Adequate support structures include elements of listening, concern for well-being and encouragement (Santacrose, 2016). The support of a mentor or coach is viewed as “an absolutely essential part of socialisation and professional formation” (Daresh, 2004, p. 502). As a matter of fact, studies have shown that both coaching and mentoring reduce feelings of loneliness as the newly appointed leaders have a confidant with whom they can speak and on whom they can rely.

Within the Maltese context, the HCN is directly in charge of the induction, support and training of the newly appointed leaders. One of their main responsibilities is to mentor and assist Heads of School. HCNs are also expected to create opportunities for networking where school leaders meet and exchange ideas, experiences and good practices. Furthermore, all Heads of School within the college form a Council of Heads. This council meets monthly under the supervision of the HCN. Together, they collaborate and discuss policies and practices, achievements and challenges within the college and their schools.

Heads of School in the study by Camilleri Dimech (2016) acknowledge the importance of this type of support. Nevertheless, one Head of School in this study feels that being ultimately responsible for all decisions is a burden which has to be shouldered without any support. This school leader suggests the formation of further networks where Heads of School are able to share experiences and discuss decisions. Another Head of School proposes the idea of having a mentor as a form of support in the early career headship stages. Although the support provided by the college system is helpful, school leaders

in the Maltese context “still feel lonely, isolated and stressed” (Camilleri Dimech, 2016, p. 89).

Following the setting up of the Institute for Education in 2015, novice school leaders are also expected to attend specialised phase-sessions as part of their professional development. These workshops are aimed to increase the skills and knowledge of the newly appointed leaders.

Methodology

Since local research about the subject is quite scarce and the study aims to gain valuable insights into the feelings and experiences of Heads of School during their early headship career, a mixed method approach was preferred as it enables the incorporation of both quantitative and qualitative approaches to explore the complexity of the school leaders' world.

A sequential explanatory design, encompassing two phases, was used during this research. The aim of the first phase of the study was to provide a general idea of the phenomenon of professional isolation as experienced by Heads of School. The internet-based questionnaire which was sent to all Heads of Primary State Schools at this exploratory stage managed to yield quantitative data in relation to the research questions. The outcomes of this quantitative research method were essential to inform the second phase of the study (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). Moreover, the analysis of this survey data facilitated the identification of participants for the second phase and helped to determine issues which required further investigation. This meant that the qualitative data could be used to follow up, refine and elaborate upon the quantitative findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The semi-structured interviews during the qualitative phase consequently aimed to explore and gain a better insight into the experiences of novice Heads of Primary Schools.

During the first phase of the study all the Heads of Primary State Schools in Malta were asked to participate in an online survey. The response rate for this study was 57%. As soon as the data from this first phase was gathered and analysed, arrangements were set to hold interviews with the Heads of School with three years or less experience in the post, who had shown an interest in participating in the second phase of the study. Since three novice Heads of School were interested in participating, interviews were held with all those

who volunteered. In view of the fact that the school leaders interviewed led schools in different colleges, demographic characteristics could be observed. An additional insight could be added to the study since one of the Heads of School interviewed did not experience feelings of isolation during her initial years of headship. This enabled comparisons between those who felt isolated and those who did not.

Data analysis began immediately after data collection of each respective phase. Quantitative data from the electronic survey and basic demographic data from the interviews were analysed using descriptive statistical procedures, whereas the thematic analysis approach, proposed by Braun & Clarke (2006), was employed to analyse qualitative data.

Findings and discussion

The quantitative phase

Similar to the findings from research in different countries (Espuny et al., 2020; Grodzki, 2011; Patuawa, 2006; Watts, 2012; Weindling & Earley, 1987; Shields, 2008), the results emerging from this study confirm professional isolation as one of the challenges experienced by novice Heads of School during their professional and organisational socialisation. Survey results showed that most novice Heads of School experience feelings of professional isolation throughout the early stages of their career as only 24% of the total respondents of the online survey specified that they did not feel professionally isolated during their first three years of headship.

Causes of professional isolation

Survey participants were asked to identify the causes of professional isolation, in relation to the complexity of the job, during their first years of headship in a primary state school. Workload and paperwork (72%); conflicting demands (53%) and bearing ultimate responsibility for decision-making (50%) are the three major causes of professional isolation, followed by time constraints (44%) and work pressure (39%).

As regards structural loneliness the majority (91%) of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that even though they were at the top of the school

hierarchy, they still felt they are a member of the school staff and 89% felt that they have real colleagues inside the school. A relatively high percentage of respondents also felt comfortable in sharing feelings and dilemmas with the senior leadership team members (80%) and with the educators in the school (75%). Results also showed that 80% of the respondents felt confident to ask other school members for help in difficult situations.

Based on previous research, Kelchtermans et al. (2011) point out that within the traditional organisational structure of a primary school, where the position of the Head of School is hierarchically superior to that of the staff, feelings of structural loneliness are common. These results, however, indicate that it is not the case with Heads of Maltese Primary State Schools. A total of 86% of the respondents also agreed that it was easy for them as school leaders to feel a sense of belonging both as a Head of School and as part of the school community. This feeling of belonging expressed by Heads of Primary Schools in the Maltese context can be interpreted as further reinforcing the previous results, implying that the hierarchical position of the job does not seem to cause structural loneliness.

As regards to the sources of socialisation, 89% of respondents agreed that they had the support of the school staff, of the Assistant Head/s of School (78%) and of the parents and other members of the school community (86%). The majority of respondents also agreed that school staff was cooperative from the very beginning (70%). These figures indicate that sources of socialisation do not seem to be a cause of professional isolation for Heads of School within this study. Another important result which emerged was that although 47% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that it was easy to become familiar with the new school culture, a significant number of respondents neither agreed nor disagreed (39%), or disagreed (14%).

A high percentage of respondents disagreed (54%) or strongly disagreed (22%) with the statement expressing professional isolation from the HCN. A low percentage of respondents strongly agreed (3%) or agreed (14%), whereas 8% neither agreed nor disagreed. This means that most Heads of Primary State Schools did not feel professionally isolated from their HCN during the initial years of their headship career.

Coping mechanisms and support structures

Novice Heads of School prefer to build relationships with the school staff as the best way to minimise loneliness (94%). Other coping mechanisms used by the majority of the respondents include adopting a distributed leadership approach (86%), having a strong sense of moral purpose (77%) and reaching out to other Heads of School (54%).

Heads of School believe that collaboration and networking with other school leaders are the best way to reduce feelings of isolation (86%). Other important support structures chosen by the majority of the respondents include mentoring (63%) and induction courses during the first year of headship (60%). Professional Development Opportunities (49%), induction courses prior to the first scholastic year in the post (46%), and Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) (43%) were also chosen by a high percentage of respondents.

The qualitative phase

Four themes were identified following analysis of data from the qualitative phase: Socialisation into the Profession, Organisational Climate, Professional Effort and Support Matters.

Socialisation into the profession

The main challenges faced by the interviewees in this study included coping with the initial shock experienced upon taking on the role (Daresh & Male, 2000) and getting familiar with the school culture. Feelings of happiness and excitement following appointment are usually accompanied by an overwhelming feeling of responsibility once the school leaders set foot into the new school and come to terms with the requirements of the job. As one of the Heads points out, "There is a great sense of responsibility ... erm, the feeling is overwhelming." Feelings of fear and insecurity together with feelings of isolation also characterise the early stages of headship. As an interviewee explains, "It suddenly dawned on me that I was alone."

Once the novice school leaders found themselves in the position, pressure was high. Entry into the profession is not easy and socialisation into the profession is a difficult process. This echoes research in the Canadian context carried out

by Sackney and Walker (2006) and Grodzki (2011), who argued that amongst other things, following appointment, novice Heads of School felt unprepared to perform the role, experienced fear of failure and felt lonelier than expected. Being the only person in charge with no peers around, and experiencing feelings of isolation, novice school leaders struggle with the socialisation into their new role (Brazer & Bauer, 2013; Spillane & Lee, 2014).

Interviewees also pointed out that gaining familiarity with and immersion into the school culture was challenging. Although novice leaders in this study did not feel threatened by the culture of the school, it is, however, within this aspect of the organisational socialisation process of the novice leader that issues of lack of belonging emerge. Newly appointed leaders experienced further feelings of lack of belonging when the norms and values which dominate the school culture did not match theirs. Such findings are similar to the findings by Dor-Haim and Oplatka (2019) and in line with studies by Dávila and García (2012) which found a correlation between identification with organisational values and a sense of belonging.

Organisational climate

An analysis of the interview data revealed that, although the term itself was never mentioned, the organisational climate of Maltese schools seems to be another significant factor causing professional isolation to novice Heads of School.

Excessive amounts of paperwork and heavy workloads are often considered to be major causes of professional isolation (Cushing et al., 2003; Peterson, 2002). In fact, survey results within this study confirm this in the local context. However, interviewees expressed different perspectives, justifying the amount of paperwork to match the position or considering it to be an issue of time management. Nevertheless, the issue of time constraints emerged throughout the interviews. This tallied with the survey results as the time constraints option was chosen by almost half of the survey participants. Moreover, all interviewees remarked that they could not attend all the training sessions within their induction course due to lack of time and availability. Heavy workloads, excessive amounts of paperwork and time constraints thus seem to impact the time left for participation in training and collaborative endeavours and contact time with others.

Whilst planning support for novice Heads of School, it is therefore important to consider different ways of helping them deal with these challenges. Cushing et al. (2003) suggest reducing some of the responsibilities of the school leader by allowing them to delegate some technical aspects of their job to their assistants, the school secretary or teacher leaders. Newly appointed Heads of School should also be supported in further developing leadership skills such as time management and prioritising.

One of the interviewees also gave insight into why the hierarchical structure of the position is not regarded as a source of professional isolation. Adhering to the structural hierarchy of the school is important and has its value, and maintaining one's position in the hierarchy is seen as an important characteristic of an effective leader and a means of maintaining order. An effective school leader lets staff members know what is expected of them and sets high expectations (Tosh & Doss, 2019). It is indispensable for the smooth running of the organisation and the efficacy of schools.

However, Heads of School have pointed out other causes of professional isolation which are directly related to the hierarchical structure and the organisational climate of our schools, including high expectations from the school members and the various stakeholders. Heads of School are simply expected to know.

Bearing ultimate responsibility for decision-making is another major concern for novice leaders. The school staff regards the Head of School as the person solely responsible for whatever happens within the whole organisation. This attitude is the result of the organisational climate within the school, creating an invisible gap between the school leader and the other school members. As Spillane and Lee (2014) argue, novice Heads of School "struggle with feelings of professional isolation and loneliness as they transition into the role that carries ultimate responsibility and decision-making powers" (p. 433). An interviewee also noted that the burden of decision-making is intensified when they have to balance conflicting demands or when there is lack of support from superiors.

According to Campbell et al. (2006), in the early stages of their career, Heads of School experience loneliness as they are not fully familiar with the organisational climate of the system, whereas within the Turkish context, school leaders experienced feelings of loneliness due to excessive workloads,

hierarchy and having to act as gatekeepers (Korumaz, 2016). Similarly, in this study, newly appointed Heads of School experience professional isolation as a result of the organisational climate, mainly time constraints, high expectations, responsibility of decision-making and balancing conflicting demands.

Personal and professional effort

Novice Heads of School make personal and professional effort to overcome feelings of professional isolation. They start preparing as soon as they come to know in which school they will be leading and, whenever possible, they work closely with the outgoing Head of School, the school secretary and assistant heads.

Newly appointed leaders also spend time learning and observing the school culture and refrain from making unnecessary changes in the first few months following appointment. By showing respect for the existing school culture, they minimise resistance from staff and are more easily accepted as a member of the group. This helps them experience feelings of belonging more easily, reduces feelings of isolation, and paves the way to building strong relationships with the school members.

Building relationships with school staff is also key. Assistant Heads of School, the school secretarial staff and other veteran staff are invaluable sources of socialisation for novice Heads of School as they are equipped with knowledge about the school's rules, routines and procedures, knowledge which is indispensable for the newly appointed leader in the early stages of the headship career (Crow, 2007). Similar to the findings by Earley and Bubb (2013), building relationships with these staff members was crucial on the first days following appointment.

Novice Heads of School also adopted distributed leadership approaches and emphasised the importance of building solid relationships based on honesty, trust and open communication with all the school members and with the other stakeholders. This enables dialogue, which in turn promotes confidence.

Support matters

The importance of individual support and feedback in the initial stages of the

career emerged as a major theme in all the interviews. The interviewee who did not experience professional isolation in the initial stages of the career clearly expressed that the support provided by the HCN was crucial. On the other hand, the remaining Heads of School who experienced loneliness explained that the lack of this type of support was a major cause for feelings of professional isolation.

Being new to the role and not having enough knowledge and established connections, novice Heads of School turn to their direct supervisors for help. Studies have shown that, during the early stages of their career, when they are still mastering the demands of the position, novice Heads of School need a trusted supervisor, a point of reference who they can refer to without the fear of being judged (Silver et al., 2009). Being able to share problems and exchange ideas is essential for the professional development and psychological well-being of school leaders. This ties back to the issue of decision-making as, when novice Heads of School are supported in facing different challenges and making difficult decisions, feelings of professional isolation are reduced (Boerema, 2011).

The HCN can also help novice Heads of School in applying the skills, knowledge and attitudes they would have developed through formal training and previous experiences to the situations they face in their new role. Offering guidance, encouragement and constructive feedback, the role of the HCN is important not only in helping out novice leaders to perform immediate tasks or solve specific issues, but also in building their overall professional knowledge (Qureshi et al., 2018) and in reflecting upon their own professional development needs (Tingle et al., 2019).

Such support is similar to a mentoring process. Mentoring gives novice Heads of School access to the guidance and advice of school leaders who are more experienced (Schleicher, 2012) enabling them to better face the challenges during the initial years of their headship careers. Mentoring also involves challenging novice school leaders by introducing them to different contradictory ideas in order to grow professionally. This helps to increase the novice leader's self-efficacy and alleviates feelings of isolation and anxiety (Boerema, 2011).

Novice school leaders in this study also reach out to other Heads of School

when they face challenges and problems. Newly appointed Heads seek help and support from peers who are more experienced in the role. Novice Heads of Maltese Primary State Schools meet other Heads of School during the Council of Heads' meetings. However, newly appointed school leaders highlight the importance of further opportunities for networking with other school leaders.

Collaboration and networking are also fundamental in establishing PLCs, which are yet another vehicle considered to help reduce professional isolation (Drago & Pecchia, 2016). PLCs allow school leaders to learn together and to apply that learning to the contexts of their own schools. In the local context, there seems to be an untapped potential to minimise feelings of professional isolation by augmenting opportunities for PLCs. These communities, which can be college-based or national-based, can also help novice Heads of School enhance their sense of belonging into the community of leaders and find the necessary support when mostly needed.

Recommendations

The results from this study are important in shedding light on the barriers which need to be overcome to minimise professional isolation. Individual support and guidance in the early stages of the headship career are essential to help newly appointed Heads of School cope with the school's organisational climate and socialisation into the profession. The HCN is directly in charge of the induction and support of the newly appointed leaders and has the responsibilities of mentoring and assisting novice leaders. However, as pointed out within this study, the level of support provided seems to vary within the different colleges. This means that an evaluation of the different types of support being given to novice Heads of School needs to be done so that the actual implementation of appropriate structures can be facilitated. HCNs should then ensure that within their college there is an effective mentoring system, since this type of support is ideal in helping novice school leaders deal with the daily demands of the job, providing them the necessary moral and emotional support, developing their leadership capacities and helping them with their socialisation into the profession. HCNs can also turn to experienced Heads of School to help with the mentoring process or can employ a buddy system in which newly appointed Heads of School are paired with more experienced school leaders who can offer help.

The establishment of networking and collaborative systems also facilitate

the socialisation process of novice Heads of School, providing a space to share the socialisation process with others and reducing feelings of professional isolation. Hart (1991) found out that Heads of School experience isolation when socialisation was an independent process. Establishing networking opportunities is therefore important for novice school leaders to reflect upon the different situations encountered and learn from each other's experiences.

This study also pinpoints the need for helping novice leaders with their professional development. Newly appointed Heads of School need to develop both their personal and professional skills and capacities to be able to build effective relationships with others and adopt distributive leadership approaches. The continuation of induction courses during the first year of headship are important as a passageway to introduce novice Heads of School to a network of peers and to lifelong learning programmes (Attard Tonna, 2013). However, for such courses and training to be effective, they need to be based on the needs of novice leaders and reflect the realities of the different school contexts.

Conclusion

The efforts, both personal and professional, made by novice leaders within this study to overcome the challenges faced, together with their commitment and determination to succeed in their role, was striking. Newly appointed Heads of School put in extra time and energy to be able to manage and lead their schools effectively and efficiently. However, having to cope with the challenges arising from their socialisation process and from the organisational climate of their schools leads to professional isolation if novice Heads of School do not find the required assistance. Support and guidance from other experienced peers and from their supervisors are imperative in helping novice Heads of School as they transition from career entry to the other stages within their headship career in which they feel more comfortable in their role. Effective support systems based on continuous professional development, individual support and collaborative endeavours with peers are key in reducing feelings of professional isolation and in helping newly appointed Heads of School to blossom into inspirational leaders who are able to lead today's complex educational organisations.

Notes on contributor

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