

Towards leadership processes for positive behaviour management and inclusive schools: Approaches, practices and recommendations from Learning Support Centre Leaders

Michelle Calleja Gafa'

Abstract

In this qualitative study, through the grounded theory approach, I explore the Learning Support Centre leaders' quest to support learners exhibiting social, emotional and behavioural difficulties to thrive and succeed. I aim to bridge the gap between Learning Support Centre leaders and Heads of School's response to behaviour management. To do that, in-depth semi-structured interviews with the Learning Support Centre leaders and educators were conducted. The findings demonstrated that leadership processes can play a major role in creating a cultural change for positive behaviour management. I also put forward valid contributions by Learning Support Centre leaders to offer Heads of School a better understanding of what can be done or changed in their leadership processes to avoid exclusion of learners from a young age as this tends to lead to ongoing intergenerational exclusion later on in life.

Keywords

School culture and climate, models of discipline, leadership processes, behaviour management, grounded theory approach

Introduction

In general, my role as Head of Department in Inclusion entails me to support school leaders so as to provide inclusion of quality to all learners, including learners exhibiting Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties. Regrettably, my everyday duties in mainstream schools make me aware that the number of learners exhibiting Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties is always on the increase.

Contact: Michelle Calleja Gafa, michelle.calleja.gafa@ilearn.edu.mt

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial reuse, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties may be indicative of underlying mental health issues (Department for Education, 2014), and/or have various social sources (Cefai & Cooper, 2006). These include societal and family-related issues, such as disadvantaged and/or unstable backgrounds (Elias et al., 2009). Migrant learners are also predictive of Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties as they might be going through relocation challenges, such as housing issues, financial hardships, and lack of social support (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019). Nevertheless, albeit often inadvertently, schools can also contribute to or exacerbate Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties. Some examples are lack of opportunities to learners to engage in their own learning (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009), the power and discipline issues exhibited by educators' attitudes (Hemphill & Hargreaves, 2009; Kyriacou, 1997), and the assumption of educators that learners of the same age band are at par with each other in their psychological and social levels of development (Cefai & Cooper, 2006). As a result of these flawed practices and assumptions, schools might view learners as the problem. I strongly concur with Cefai and Cooper (2006) that schools have taken various initiatives over the years to address some of the challenges. However, I still encounter educators in schools who think that the best and quickest solution is to educate these learners in segregation at Learning Support Centres.

At present, there are five Learning Support Centres in Malta which are intended for learners exhibiting Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties to help them gain the necessary skills in order to reintegrate into the mainstream school system and improve their future prospects (EduServices, 2017). However, various authors demonstrate that educating learners in segregated centres can have a negative impact. For instance, Polat and Farrell (2002) and Jahnukainen (2001) mentioned the negative impact of labelling after having to attend a segregated setting and the burden of experiencing another heavy loss of no longer being part of the mainstream school community (Cefai and Cooper, 2006). Another problem is that these learners may be viewed as failures by some staff members, parents, and the learners themselves (Cefai & Cooper, 2006). Additionally, Michail (2011) argued that exclusion from a young age tends to lead to social exclusion later on in life.

This study follows Abela and Smith La Rosa's suggestion in their influential research of 2007, which sought the voices of learners exhibiting Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties in segregated settings, to seek the

views of professionals working with these learners as they might have valid contributions to share and suggestions to make based on their first-hand experience. Although their study was carried out 14 years ago, and despite research on school leadership being a highly popular field of study that has grown exponentially, to the best of my knowledge, research on Learning Support Centre leaders' in their pursuit to help learners exhibiting Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties to thrive and succeed despite the setbacks remains uncharted. The overall goal of this article, therefore, after listening to the views and exploring the approaches and practices of Learning Support Centre leaders, is to offer safeguarding measures to school leaders to retain these learners in the mainstream school and eventually avoid social exclusion later on in life.

In the next section, I review literature on school leaders' influence on the school culture and climate, and their approaches and related practices in relation to learners' behaviour management. After the methodology, we hear the voices of Learning Support Centre leaders and their influence on all the Learning Support Centre community. This paper concludes by sharing valid contributions that should urge school leaders to rethink their approach, develop new practices and improve existing ones to help respond effectively to these learners' needs in the mainstream school. Indeed, leadership processes for positive behavioural management is the principal subject of this study.

Literature

This section considers the significant aspects related to school leadership and behaviour management. These are school culture and climate, leadership approaches and different models of discipline.

School culture and climate

There is a plethora of research providing evidence that when the school culture is safe and supportive, this is vital to learners, especially those exhibiting Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties. For instance, Griggs et al. (2009) and Kellam et al. (1998) proclaimed that in schools that hold a sense of community in which relationships between teachers and learners matter, undesirable behaviours are alleviated, and prosocial behaviours are enhanced. Similarly, Smith and Amushigamo (2016) noted that when school leadership pushes forward positive changes in the behaviour of its members, subsequently,

the learners' positive behaviours are promoted. Therefore, to help learners exhibiting Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties to thrive in schools, school leaders are responsible for shaping, enhancing and maintaining a safe and supportive school culture.

One significant aspect of the school culture is the school climate. According to Schein (1985, 1996), ideologies, morals, concepts, norms and climate are constructs of culture. Even so, climate is particularly important because it refers to the feel factor of the school (Samdal et al., 1998), which can encourage academic attainment and positive life development (Thapa et al., 2013). A good definition of school climate is provided by Freiberg and Stein (1999):

School climate is the heart and soul of the school. It is about the essence of a school that leads a child, a teacher, an administrator, a staff member to love the school and to look forward to being there each school day. School climate is about that quality of a school that helps each individual feel personal worth, dignity and importance, while simultaneously helping create a sense of belonging to something beyond ourselves. (p. 11)

There are various benefits that emanate from an optimistic and cooperative school climate. These benefits are affirmed by research-based evidence of high methodological quality (National Institute of Justice, 2018), which revealed that learners in such a school climate demonstrate better socio-emotional health, academic achievement, and school engagement (Wang et al., 2014; Thapa et al., 2013), as well as lower levels of absenteeism, truancy, and early school leaving (Peguero & Bracy, 2014; Thapa et al., 2013). Additionally, it is more likely that learners feel less oppressed and less resentful to school (Bear et al., 2015; Gottfredson et al., 2005). Furthermore, learners demonstrate decreased levels of substance use and violence, and fewer suspensions and exclusions are meted out (Bear et al., 2015; Thapa et al., 2013). Hence, learners decrease their involvement in antisocial and criminal behaviour (Klein et al., 2012; Hopson & Lee, 2011).

Leadership approaches

Schools are made up of asymmetric power structures, which are balanced in favour of those who lead and manage (Roy, 2020). If leadership is driven by power, a hostile and unpleasant atmosphere is likely to develop; however,

leadership driven by empathy helps prevent such a climate and equalises the power structures (Roy, 2020). Jones et al. (2018) described schools led by empathic leaders as "peaceful, productive, and positive places where all teachers can teach and all students can learn" (p. 3). Hence, an empathic leadership approach is likely to support learners exhibiting Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties. Coequal to empathic leadership is the leadership that loves, which is a new kind of leadership coined by Debono (2018) after his thorough investigation on Enhancing Positive Relationships for Effective Leadership in Maltese Schools. Debono's study (2018) demonstrated that school leaders who model a leadership that loves respect and diversity see each individual as unique and important to the school community, while ensuring that the fundamental right of each learner to reach their full potential is observed. Debono (2018) explained that this kind of leadership is especially crucial to meet the needs created by the turbulent world of nowadays, which is frequented by, *inter alia*, a high rate of fragmented families, injustices, and migration. Another leadership approach, one of whose characteristics is empathy, is charismatic leadership. Indeed, empathy, empowerment, and vision are the three components that constitute the charismatic leadership approach (Choi, 2006). The leader's enthusiasm and motivation enhance the followers' need for achievement, affiliation, and power (Choi, 2006). Emotions like affection and compassion reflect the relationship between the charismatic leader and the followers, in tandem with warmth and respect (Parry & Kempster, 2014). Charismatic leaders tend to increase the self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-worth of their followers (Choi, 2006). The leadership characteristics that have been mentioned so far are all embraced by the servant leader approach. Furthermore, Spears (2004) added the power to listen, help people heal, and create a community, as well as the commitment to see people grow, as other prominent characteristics of the servant leader. Evidently, this leadership approach starkly contrasts with the old perception of leaders who exert power to control, as it embraces the concept where leaders put their members first by caring and serving. Baldoni (2005) affirmed that the servant leader's care-and-serve approach is effective in the turbulent times experienced nowadays as it ensures sustainability.

On the other end of the leadership continuum is the authoritarian leadership style, which contrasts sharply with the leadership styles this literature review has explored so far. Authoritarian leaders involve simpler methods to maintain control as the same standards and consequences apply to all (Rightmyer, 2003).

In a school community, authoritative leaders imply overly precise and strict rules and regulations, where learners and other stakeholders are not allowed to speak up (Rightmyer, 2003). There is an emphasis on perfection; ongoing criticism of learners' actions; no allowance for mitigating circumstances; occasionally unachievable expectations; minimal praise, if any; and harsh means of discipline, such as corporal punishment. Additionally, it denies learners the right to apply the principles of self-government (Rightmyer, 2003). Cefai and Cooper (2006) stated that authoritarian educational approaches in schools aid in the creation and retention of Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties. It makes most learners comply only in the presence of the authority figure and revert to their usual behaviours in their absence (Rightmyer, 2003). Likewise, Rightmyer (2003) stated that this model tends to evoke resentment and uprisings among learners who are unable to govern themselves without a guard. Additionally, Senge (2000) argued that schools that train their members to obey authority and follow the rules will have poorly prepared their learners for the evolving world they live in. Likewise, Goleman (2000) strongly contested this type of leadership, which he refers to as the coercive leadership style. He argued that it risks having demotivated members because the do-what-the-leader-demands approach dampens employee motivation. Consequently, the educators' demotivation may impinge negatively on the learners' attitude to learning. Logically, the leaders' approach reflects on the practices of discipline they adopt at the schools they lead. Thus, the two contrasting models of discipline are investigated.

The democratic model of discipline

The democratic model of discipline is based on a humanitarian approach where children are viewed as social beings who want to belong and be accepted (Rogers, 2017). The practices of this model involve building on the learners' positive aspects whilst avoiding the negative; acknowledging effort and improvement; encouraging learners to strive for improvement and not perfection; emphasising their strengths while minimising their weaknesses; encouraging independence and the assumption of responsibility; providing an abundance of encouragement and support, especially when they make mistakes; redirecting the need for power by giving them a leadership role; giving learners choices; finding legitimate ways to satisfy needs; enlightening learners to understand the reasons behind their mistaken actions; rewarding good behaviour; applying logical consequences that befit the learners' behaviour;

and allowing learners to play a part in decision-making processes (Gilholey, 2013). Providing counselling and training, assisting learners in recognising and selecting their goals appropriately, and discussing and reasoning with learners in order to help them comprehend their expectations are also components of the democratic model of discipline (Rightmyer, 2003). Thus, the democratic model of discipline allows learners to take ownership of their school-related aspects instead of forcing learners to adhere to teachers' requests (Charles, 2002). Evidently, the learner's voice is of paramount importance in the democratic model of discipline. This is encouraged by both the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations, 1989) and the *National Children's Policy* (Ministry for the Family, Children's Rights and Solidarity, 2017), which urge the child's voice to be sought in matters that affect them, taking into consideration their age and maturity. Lac and Cumings Mansfield (2018) remarked that it should be the norm of school culture to put the learners' voice in the centre, as this is a sign of genuine respect.

The punitive model of discipline

In opposition to the democratic model of discipline, the punitive model of discipline is characterised by non-negotiable commands or instructions that often fail to teach the learner the reason behind them (Bernard, 2014). The practices of this model include negative, reactive, harsh consequences; changes of placement; suspensions; expulsions; and corporal punishment (Gagnon et al., 2017). This model does not take into account the learners' circumstances, and consequences apply regardless (Michail, 2011). Additionally, this model of discipline assumes that the learners' behaviours were advertently done, and therefore, the penalty is considered as the correction of such behaviours (Morris & Howard, 2003). The punitive model has been found to decrease learners' school engagement, increase truancy rates (Bernard, 2014), and maintain an unpleasant, unsafe, and unengaged school community (Michail, 2011). For instance, school exclusions tend to disengage not only the learners but also their families and the community, while fostering discord and tension between these stakeholders (Michail, 2011). A number of authors still claim that in practice, schools tend to adhere to this approach rather than attempt a wider educational approach to train learners to become autonomous and responsible individuals (Maguire et al., 2010; Cefai & Cooper, 2006; Office of the Commissioner for Children, 2006). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), ratified by Malta in 1990, condemns this model of discipline

in schools and puts pressure on states to ensure that schools discipline learners in a manner that preserves their dignity.

Methodology

The grounded theory approach was applied to appraise and reveal the approaches and practices adopted by the Learning Support Centre leaders in order to form their working theory. Crooks (2001) explained that the grounded theory research method's principal usage is to reveal phenomena like social relationships and behaviours of a group, usually referred to as social processes. Punch (1998) explained that the grounded theory approach is absolutely not a theory in itself but it is "a research strategy whose purpose is to generate theory from data. 'Grounded' means that the theory will be generated on the basis of data; the theory will therefore be grounded in data" (p. 163).

In the same vein, Gray (2009) accentuated that the researcher's role in the grounded theory method should lead to the creation of theory by means of the data collected while eliminating any existing conceptions that the researchers might have. Hence, in order to develop and build theory, a deep exploration of the subject was paramount. Khan (2014) accentuated that in-depth, semi-structured interviews are a good way to obtain data in grounded theory research in order to explore a subject. Therefore, I opted for in-depth, semi-structured interviews as the main data-gathering tool. Furthermore, interviews allow for a social encounter during which one can note the interviewees' characteristics and behaviours, and also, as Williams and Moser (2019) stated, the researcher's presence encourages any possible thematic connectivity and contributes to the generation of theory during later analysis.

Conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews with all the available Learning Support Centre leaders was viable ($n = 5$). Besides, interviewing the whole Learning Support Centre leader cohort helped me considerably in gathering the full perspective of this specialised group. To enhance the credibility of this study, methodological triangulation was considered vital to the data collection process. Taking field notes, analysing documents, and interviewing educators (teachers and learning support educators) in addition to the Learning Support Centre leaders were considered necessary procedures for methodological triangulation.

The field notes were used to observe and record other relevant matters,

such as the upkeep of the Learning Support Centres, the physical setting and ambience, notice boards, posters, and anything I came across. Document analysis also acted as a supplementary tool for methodological triangulation, which helped with corroborating the findings from the interviews. The documents I analysed were the school development plans, which consisted of a strategic plan for improvement, the school behaviour policies, the school vision and mission statements, and other relevant documents, such as behaviour and learning contracts, as well as letters and notices to parents. These documents served as another source of data. Semi-structured interviews with educators aimed to investigate further the Learning Support Centre leaders' approaches and practices.

The principal participants of the study were the Learning Support Centre leaders. All of them were cordially invited via email to participate in a face-to-face interview at their respective Learning Support Centre. I randomly chose one teacher and one learning support educator from each Learning Support Centre (n = 10). I started collecting the actual data after receiving clearance from the Ethics Board of the Institute for Education, the Ministry for Education, and the director of the National School Support Services. Several measures were taken to guarantee the participants' anonymity. Any information that could lead to the participants' identity was avoided. A fictitious name was given to each participant. To further preserve their identities, all the participants were given male names; however, this does not mean that all the interviewed Learning Support Centre leaders were male. Moreover, I have not included the names put forward by the Learning Support Centre leaders in the suggested recommendations to prevent readers from making any connection with the Learning Support Centre leader. Another measure taken in this report to protect the participants' identity is that when discussing the findings, I speak of a heterogeneous sample across-board rather than analyse the leader and educators from a particular Learning Support Centre one by one. The reason behind this approach is to avoid putting the leader and educators of a particular Learning Support Centre under the spotlight.

Data analysis in the grounded theory method adopts a systematic approach which involves using a three-phase coding system in order to generate theories (Williams & Moser, 2019). This is carried out through open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Open coding is the first step of the coding process, which requires the researcher to identify emergent

concepts and themes on a wide scale for organisation. This is carried out by sifting through the informants' responses and assembling similar words or short sequences of words gathered from the data in an organised and systematic way (Williams & Moser, 2019). The data gathered from each participant are constantly compared for similarities (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The second stage of the coding process is axial coding. During this step, more sifting of the data collected is required. The transition from open coding to axial coding involves refining, aligning, and categorising the broad themes (Williams & Moser, 2019). Therefore, during this stage, the researcher identifies relationships between the categories and takes note of any connections (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). As a result, the core codes start to emerge (Williams & Moser, 2019).

The third coding stage is selective coding, whereby the researcher can select and assemble categories of data from the previous stage (axial coding) in cohesive and meaningful expressions (Williams & Moser, 2019). This suggests that selective coding "fuels expressions" and assists in "the construction of meaning" (Williams & Moser, 2019, p. 53), as categories are integrated in order to identify a core category on which the grounded theory is to be based (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Each stage of coding is essential in achieving the study's goals as it allows researchers to submerge themselves in the data. Indeed, the three-phase coding system provides researchers with the opportunity to reflect throughout the data analysis process by developing a deep and nuanced approach (Williams & Moser, 2019). Eventually, this systematic coding approach enables the researcher to create a theory and "construct deeper theoretical meaning" (Williams & Moser, 2019, p. 46).

Findings

Learning Support Centre leaders provided different descriptions of what their role entails. For instance, Anthony described his role as a motivator, role model, mentor, and good communicator. He stated that he puts effort into building a good relationship with every stakeholder and so described the most important aspect of his role to consist of "having a good relationship with the teachers, with the parents, with the home-base school and with the students, obviously." Darren feels that in his role, he has to act as "a lot of persons in one person to serve these students". Ben stated that the Learning Support Centre's dynamics require special qualities from the leader; because of the specific cohort "you need to be more empathic with these children, here you have to be a very good listener, their listener, a lot."

Although Learning Support Centre leaders agreed that they have to be flexible in accordance with each learner's needs, they are rarely authoritative in order to avoid power struggles. Additionally, Learning Support Centre leaders reported that if they try to control learners, the latter will feel judged again like when they were in their mainstream school. They added that this approach would lead them to fail as leaders. Indeed, Ben remarked that "students hope that not a lot of screaming awaits them. No, they don't want someone who shouts at them; you have to take more the mothering approach and show them [you are] trying to understand them".

The Learning Support Centre leaders expressed that their main practices include listening to understand the learners; regularly talking to learners on an individual basis, sometimes even on a daily basis to help certain learners reason things out; and offering them guidance and advice. Both Edmond and Clyde mentioned that they deem it important that they start anew and that they are not interested in labelling, diagnosis, and history. Edmond explained this eloquently:

I always start afresh with them because if we want to give them a second chance, you can't stick to what's written down because then you start discovering a new character, new traits, new dispositions, and you start discovering more the positive aspects. If we stick to referral forms, to diagnosis, to assessments, we are bound to limit them, so I always start afresh.

The Learning Support Centre leaders reported that when misbehaviour occurs, it is important for them to listen to the voice of the learners in addition to that of the educators. Then, after listening to both perspectives, they evaluate things and apply the skill of merging the educator and learners' perspectives together so that they understand each other better and thus restore their relationship. This practice fits in with the restorative justice approach which seeks to resolve conflicts and prevent harm through a variety of methods and practices. Thus, this approach prevents relationship-damaging incidents and resolve them if they do happen. Indeed, when asked about this approach, Learning Support Centre leaders reported that they would like to implement this approach further; however, they lack training in this regard.

Furthermore, they clarified how, many a time, the punitive approach does not work as these learners would have been through a lot in their lives to the

extent that some of them would have already been on probationary periods. Alternatively, they work with consequences administered according to the level of the manifested inappropriate behaviour and which are negotiated with the learners. Moreover, the Learning Support Centre leaders elucidated that the learners are not to be judged as they are victims of other problems and the heavy baggage they have to carry along. They explained how instead of blaming and punishing them, they seek ways to teach them skills for life, for instance by modelling the right communication skills. Darren explained this clearly:

It doesn't help if I try to act like the policeman; I am not the court. I also had students who were already in jail, who made use of illegal substances, so very streetwise. Not even a counsellor or social worker because they have been through social workers and counsellors both at home and at school for long periods of time. We have to show them that our approach is different; we want them to learn and to grow up healthy physically, mentally, and emotionally. We try to give them the skills for life; for instance, we are working on how they prepare themselves for an interview.

The Learning Support Centre leaders mentioned different activities and strategies that are carried out to support the learners in their Social and Emotional Literacy. One such strategy is circle time, which helps educators to touch down with the learners' feelings and tackle any issues before they escalate. Some Learning Support Centre leaders implement strategies to help learners monitor and control their feelings like the 'traffic light system' and the '3Rs—regulate, relate, and reason'. Learners are also trained to ask for time out when they feel the need to calm down or reorganise themselves. Moreover, Learning Support Centre leaders adopt a cross-curricular approach in order to vary the activities and learning styles so that sedentary time is kept to a minimum. Short, structured breaks, like brain breaks or movement breaks, are included in the learners' timetable. Some Learning Support Centre leaders mentioned that although the timetable is adapted to meet the learners' needs, the daily schedule is kept as fixed as possible for stability. Additionally, they provide learners with ways to exhibit anger and frustration appropriately, such as through using a punching bag or physical exercising. Moreover, the Learning Support Centre leaders explained that they ask learners to make choices in decisions that affect them, such as when choosing an outing or a reward.

The Learning Support Centre leaders' responses suggest that they dedicate

considerable time to the parents. As they deem it necessary to foster strong relationships with them, they listen to them, act in a humble and empathic manner, and guide parents/guardians to the best way forward. They do not go behind the parents' back; on the contrary, they seek to work with the parents/guardians in all matters that involve their children. The Learning Support Centre leaders explicated that if they act as heads of authority, show lack of understanding, or dictate or judge the parents, the latter would shy away from them. The findings also demonstrate that the Learning Support Centre leaders have an open-door policy and make themselves available for the educators too. Constant communication with the educators is a common practice, and they schedule briefings and meetings very often. The Learning Support Centre leaders prefer to discuss matters, ask for opinions and feedback, and negotiate with their educators before taking decisions.

The Learning Support Centre leaders reported that at the Learning Support Centres a culture of collegiality has been cultivated. They explained that Learning Support Centres are composed of small communities where members are like a second family because they approach their members with an attitude of care and respect. Educators too reported that there is a sense of unity between them and described the Learning Support Centre as their "second family". Educators added that this climate is significant to support each other in times of stress. They also stated that they find support from the Learning Support Centre leaders because they make themselves available on the premises and are always ready to help them as necessary.

In a nutshell, the working theory of Learning Support Centre leaders that was generated through the grounded theory approach and a systematic coding analysis is: Learning Support Centre leaders adopt the servant leader approach and they are oriented towards the well-being of the Learning Support Centre's major stakeholders, primarily the learners, educators, and parents. Their leading role is complemented by social and emotional competencies. They practise the democratic model of discipline and adopt distributed leadership traits. Maintaining a nurturing and positive climate at the Learning Support Centres is also a priority.

Discussion and conclusion

Learning Support Centre leaders' approaches and practices play a major role in the success of learners exhibiting Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties.

They approach others with an attitude of care and respect, and this infiltrates the whole Learning Support Centre community and is yielding good results. The findings also demonstrate that if leaders are to care enough for learners, they cannot care less about educators and parents. The literature also highlights the effects of caring leaders on the rest of the school community; as caring leaders are known to attend to educators' needs (Gray & Gardiner, 2013), they encourage teachers to manifest caring behaviours towards learners (Oplatka, 2007), thus creating a community of care while empowering others (Warin, 2017). Learning Support Centre leaders encourage school leaders to promote and make these values visible on a daily basis by adopting an engaged leadership, which involves taking a balanced approach between in- and out-of-office duties.

The findings clearly suggest that the Learning Support Centre leaders do not judge or blame the learners or their parents. Instead, they view parents/guardians as partners and work collaboratively with them for the best interest of the learners, thus avoiding the blaming game that is usually created between the school and home. As for the learners, the Learning Support Centre leaders do not view them as the problems, and this disposition helps them be empathic with them. As shown by the interviewed Learning Support Centre leaders, the focus should be on the structure and the services as the means to respond effectively to the learners' needs and not on the learners as problematic individuals (Reed & Swaminathan, 2016). Learning Support Centre leaders suggest school leaders to take a transformational journey in order to change the culture of how their school community approaches learners exhibiting Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties and infuse a positive behaviour management school system. This can be achieved by fostering professional learning communities where educators are provided with the necessary training. This is essential because the implementation of a positive behaviour management system in schools undeniably requires specialised skills and a more professional attitude. O'Reilly et al. (2018), in fact, stated that research has suggested that educators tend to report a lack of "skills and training" (p. 451) to respond effectively to the needs of learners exhibiting Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties. Training changes the way educators think and act and helps them feel supported, thus reducing resistance. For instance, with the necessary training, the whole school community can learn to create a learner-centred school culture. James and Prout (2015) stated that there is only one way that this can be done – by placing the learner at the centre of discussions

that concern them. Eventually, this allows school leaders to understand the world from the learners' point of view and be flexible, even in terms of timetable and teaching styles, for instance. Such practices align with the democratic model of discipline, which, as indicated by the findings, leads learners to cooperate more and increases their self-worth as they feel recognised and acknowledged. Ultimately, as shown through this study, a nurturing and positive school climate is created where all stakeholders, especially learners, feel happy and connected. Hence, based on this study's positive outcomes, school leaders should embrace the democratic model of discipline in the school culture.

The importance of social and emotional intelligence stands out in the findings. For instance, since Learning Support Centre leaders are role modelling all the time, they are aware not to exhibit behaviours that they do not expect from others. Learning Support Centre leaders recommend more training in Social and Emotional Literacy for the whole school community. This has also been suggested by Brackett (2018), for the reason that when Social and Emotional Literacy permeates a school, the whole school community is transformed. Social and Emotional Literacy programmes may focus on teaching learners the right communication skills, cooperative skills, problem-solving skills, moral reasoning, the language of emotions, and the right ways to express emotions and to comprehend what their expectations are. These may be woven in with other areas of the curriculum content as well as in the school and classroom climate. Eventually, Social and Emotional Literacy programmes will serve as preventive and proactive measures to emotional dysregulation and/or anti-social behaviours.

Both the findings and the literature suggest that school leadership processes are largely responsible for the learners' prosocial behaviour and progress. A positive behaviour management approach provides the right support to learners, which might lead them to experience success in their mainstream school and thus, avoid facing exclusion. Additionally, such an approach is likely to increase their chances of social inclusion in future environments.

Notes on contributor

Michelle Calleja Gafa is a Head of Department in Inclusion and an adult education coordinator with a focus on the inclusion of students in schools and on lifelong learning for persons with disabilities and migrants. Michelle conducted research on autism-friendly schools with the University of Birmingham and recently on leadership processes for positive behaviour management with the Institute for Education.

References

- Abela, A., & Smith La Rosa, M. (2007). Maltese youngsters with very challenging behaviour speak about school. *Journal of Maltese Education Research*, 5(2), 62–85.
- Baldoni, J. (2005). *Great motivation secrets of great leaders*. McGraw Hill.
- Bear, G. G., Yang, C., & Pasipanodya, E. (2015). Assessing school climate: Validation of a brief measure of the perceptions of parents. *Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment*, 33(2), 115–129.
<https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1177/0734282914545748>
- Bernard, S. D. (2014). A comparison of punitive and non-punitive truancy program outcomes in an urban school district [Unpublished Doctoral thesis]. Walden University.
- Brackett, M. A. (2018). Intelligence we owe students and educators: When schools recognize that emotions drive much of how and what we learn, students and educators flourish. *Educational Leadership*, 76(2), 12–18.
- Cefaj, C., & Cooper, P. (2006). Social, emotional and behavioural difficulties in Malta: An educational perspective. *Journal of Maltese Education Research*, 4(1), 18–36.
- Charles, C. M. (2002). *Building classroom discipline* (6th ed.). Longman.
- Choi, J. (2006). A motivational theory of charismatic leadership: Envisioning, empathy, & empowerment. *Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies*, 13(1), 24–43.
<https://doi.org/10.1177%2F10717919070130010501>
- Crooks, D. L. (2001). The importance of symbolic interaction in grounded theory research on women's health. *Health Care for Women International*, 22(1–2), 11–27.
- Debono, D. (2018). *Enhancing positive relationships for effective leadership in Maltese schools* [Unpublished Doctoral thesis]. University of Sheffield.
- Department for Education. (2014). *Special educational needs and disability code of practice: 0-to-25-years*.
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/send-code-of-practice-0-to-25>
- EduServices. (2017). *Learning Support Centres*. <https://eduservices.gov.mt/en/special-education-and-resourcelearning-supportcentres/learning-support-centres-lsc>

- Elias, H., Mahyuddin, R., & Noordin, N. (2009). Understanding the misbehaviour of at-risk students: contributing factors. *International Journal of the Humanities*, 7(4), 133–143. <https://doi.org/10.18848/14479508%2FCGP%2FV07I04%2F42664>
- European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice. (2019). Integrating students from migrant backgrounds into schools in Europe: National policies and measures. Eurydice Report. Publications Office of the European Union.
- Freiberg, H. J., & Stein, T. A. (1999). Measuring, improving and sustaining healthy learning environments. In: H. J. Freiberg (Ed.), *School climate: Measuring, improving and sustaining healthy learning environments*. Falmer Press.
- Gagnon, C. J., Gurel, S., & Barber, B. R. (2017). State-level analysis of school punitive discipline practices in Florida. Hammill Institute on Disabilities: Behavioural Disorders. *Sage*, 42(2), 65–80. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0198742916688652>
- Gilholey, M. (2013). *The democratic discipline model: Rudolf Dreikurs [slideshare]*. https://prezi.com/knhfc_2tzxb/the-democratic-discipline-modelrudolf-dreikurs
- Goleman, D. (2000). *Leadership that gets results*. Harvard Business School Publishing.
- Gottfredson, G. D., Gottfredson, D. C., Payne, A. A., & Gottfredson, N. C. (2005). School climate predictors of school disorder: Results from a national study of delinquency prevention in schools. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 42(4), 412–444. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0022427804271931>
- Gray, D. E. (2009). *Doing research in the real world* (2nd ed.). Sage.
- Gray, N. L., & Gardiner, M. E. (2013). Educator-peer workplace bullying: Why leadership must address incivility and create quilt of caring in the school. *Journal of School Leadership*, 23(5), 823–845.
- Griggs, M., Gagnon, S., Huelsman, T., Kidder-Ashley, P., & Ballard, M. (2009). Student-teacher relationships matter: Moderating influences between temperament and preschool social competence. *Psychology in the Schools*, 46(6), 553–567. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.20397>
- Hemphill, S., & Hargreaves, J. (2009). The impact of school suspensions: A student well-being issue. *ACHPER Healthy Lifestyles Journal*, 56(3/4), 5–11. <https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/IELAPA.201002487>
- Hopson, L. M., & Lee, E. (2011). Mitigating the effect of family poverty on academic and behavioural outcomes: The role of school climate in middle and high school. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 33(11), 2221–2229. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2011.07.006>
- Jahnukainen, M. (2001). Experiencing special education: Former students of classes for the emotionally and behaviourally disordered talk about their schooling. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, 6(3), 150–166. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1363275201006003003>

- James, A., & Prout, A. (2015). Introduction. In: A. James, & A. Prout (Eds), *Constructing and reconstructing childhood: Contemporary issues in the sociological study of childhood*. Routledge.
- Jones, S. H. (2018). Oppositional defiant disorder: An overview and strategies for educators. *National Association for Music, Education General Music Today*, 3(2), 12–16. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1048371317708326>
- Kellam, S., Ling, X., Merisca, R., Jalongo, N., & Brown, H. (1998). The effect of the level of aggression in the first grade classroom on the course and malleability of aggressive behaviour into middle school. *Development and Psychopathology*, 10(2), 165–185. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0954579498001564>
- Khan, S. N. (2014). Qualitative research method: Grounded theory. *International Journal of Business and Management*, 9(11), 224–233. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/ijbm.v9n11>
- Klein, J., Cornell, D., & Konold, T. (2012). Relationships between bullying, school climate, and student risk behaviors. *School Psychology Quarterly*, 27(3), 154–169. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0029350>
- Kyriacou, C. (1997). *Effective teaching in schools* (2nd ed.). Nelson Thornes.
- Lac, T. V., & Cumings Mansfield, K. (2018). What do students have to do with educational leadership? Making a case For centering student voice. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education*, 13(1), 38–58. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1942775117743748>
- Maguire, M., Ball, S., & Braun, A. (2010). Behaviour, classroom management and student 'control': enacting policy in the English secondary school. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 20(2), 153–170. <http://doi.org/10.1080/09620214.2010.503066>
- Michail, S. (2011). Understanding school responses to students' challenging behaviour: A review of literature. *Improving Schools*, 14(2), 156–171. <http://doi.org/10.1177/1365480211407764>
- Ministry for the Family, Children's Rights and Solidarity. (2017). *National Children's Policy*. Malta: Ministry for the Family, Children's Rights and Solidarity.
- Morris, R. C., & Howard, A. C. (2003). Designing an effective in-school suspension program. *The Clearing House: A journal of educational strategies, issues and ideas*, 76(3), 156–159. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00098650309601994>
- National Institute of Justice. (2018). *Creating and sustaining a positive and communal school climate: Contemporary research, present obstacles and future directions*. US: Department of Justice.
- O'Reilly, M., Adams, S., Whiteman, N., Hughes, J., Reilly, P., & Dogra, N. (2018). Whose responsibility is adolescent mental health in the UK? The perspectives of key stakeholders. *School Mental Health*, 10, 450–461. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12310-018-9263-6>

- Office of the Commissioner for Children. (2006). *A fair deal: A study on children and young people with very challenging behaviour*. Malta Office of the Commissioner for Children.
- Oplatka, I. (2007). Managing emotions in teaching: Toward an understanding of emotion displays and caring as non-prescribed role elements. *Teachers College Record*, 109(6), 1374–1400.
- Parry, K., & Kempster, S. (2014). Love and leadership: Constructing follower narrative identities of charismatic leadership. *Management Learning*, 45(1), 21–38. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1350507612470602>
- Peguero, A. A., & Bracy, N. L. (2014). School order, justice, and education: Climate, discipline practices, and dropping out. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 25(3), 412–426. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jora.12138>
- Polat, F., & Farrell, P. (2002). What was it like for you: Former pupils' reflections on their placement at a residential school for pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, 7(2), 97–108.
- Punch, K. F. (1998). *Introduction to social research: Quantitative and qualitative approaches*. Sage.
- Reed, C. L., & Swaminathan, R. (2016). An urban school leader's approach to school improvement: Toward contextually responsive leadership. *Urban Education Sage Pub Journals*, 51(9), 1096–1125. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0042085914553675>
- Rightmyer, E. C. (2003). Democratic discipline: Children creating solutions. *YC: Young Children*, 58(4), 38–45.
- Rogers, B. (2017). The work of Alfred Adler and Rudolf Dreikurs in reference to behaviours and classroom contexts and counselling of students with high levels of attentional and power-seeking behaviour. A short introduction. <https://www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/media/18290/29-adler-and-dreikurs-2017.pdf>
- Roy, D. (2020). Development and validation of an empirical model to study the mediating role of empathic school leadership in the motivation of high school students in India, *Metamorphosis. India Institute of Management*, 19(1), 7–20. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0972622520926294>
- Samdal, O., Nutbeam, D., Wold, B., & Kennas, L. (1998). Achieving health and educational goals through schools. A study of the importance of the school climate and the students' satisfaction with school. *Health and Education Research Theory and Practice*, 13(3), 383–397.
- Schein, E. H. (1985). *Organizational culture and leadership*. Jossey-Bass.
- Schein, E. H. (1996). Culture: The missing concept in organization studies. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 41(2), 229–240.

-
- Senge, P. (2000). *Schools that learn: A fifth discipline fieldbook for educators, parents, and everyone who cares about education*. Double Day Dell Publishing Group.
- Siraj-Blatchford, I. (2009). Learning in the home and at school: How working class children 'succeed against the odds'. *British Educational Research Journal*, 36(3), 463–482. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920902989201>
- Smith, C., & Amushigamo, A. (2016). The perceived influence of school leadership on learner behaviour in a Namibian secondary school. *Educational Management Administration and Leadership*, 44(4), 650–667. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1741143214559232>
- Spears, L. C. (2004). *The understanding and practice of servant leadership*. School of Leadership Studies: Regent University.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Sage.
- Thapa, A., Cohen, J., Guffey, S., & Higgins-D'Alessandro, A. (2013). A review of school climate research. *Review of Educational Research*, 83(3), 357–385. <https://doi.org/10.3102%2F0034654313483907>
- United Nations. (1989). *Conventions on the Rights of the Child*. United Nations, Treaty Series, 1577, 3.
- Wang, W., Vaillancourt, T., Brittain, H. L., McDougall, P., Krygsmann, A., Smith, D., Cunningham, C. E., Haltigan, J. D., & Hymel, S. (2014). School climate, peer victimization, and academic achievement: Results from a multi-informant study. *School Psychology Quarterly*, 29(3), 360–377. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/spq0000084>
- Warin, J. (2017). Creating a whole school ethos of care. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, 22(3), 188–189. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632752.2017.133197>
- Williams, M., & Moser, T. (2019). The art of coding and thematic exploration in qualitative research. *International Management Review*, 15(1), 45–55.