

## **Primary School Teachers' Perceptions of the Leadership Role of the Assistant Head in Malta**

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### **Abstract**

This study explores teachers' perceptions of the leadership role of assistant heads in primary schools in Malta. It draws on teachers' voice to shed light on the intentional role that assistant heads have in supporting staff and cultivating co-learning relationships. Carried out during a period of ongoing reform in Malta, this research adopts a qualitative design within a constructivist epistemology. A web-based survey taken up by 130 teachers was then followed by three one-to-one in-depth interviews. Data analysis included manual coding following a thematic analysis approach. Findings suggest that teachers recognise the assistant head: (1) as an instructional leader providing educational and emotional support and (2) as a critical friend that engages in dialogue, listens and cares. We conclude that the contemporary assistant head may act as catalyst to support and inspire teachers towards self and school improvement by undertaking deliberate steps that include intentional self-development, leading visibly, reverent listening, purposeful dialogue, care for the wellbeing of those who experience their leadership, and supporting a collaborative work culture.

**Keywords:** assistant heads, intentional leadership, primary school, teachers' perceptions, teaching and learning, school improvement

### **Introduction**

In Malta, the Job Descriptions Handbook (MEDE, 2007) defines the purpose and position of an assistant head as one whose responsibility is to be efficient in the management of the human, physical and financial resources of the school, and also effective in offering professional leadership in the implementation and development of the curriculum. To make this happen, assistant heads can foster a collaborative instructional climate within which they intentionally work closely with teachers to help them develop insights

about classroom practice that could eventually lead towards school improvement (Lee & Nei, 2017).

Within a school context, assistant heads lead from the middle and, hence, act as link persons between teachers and the school head. According to Hargreaves and Shirley (2019), leading from the middle 'can create more efficient systems for implementing top-down priorities on the one hand, or build collective capacity to address and activate the democratic and professional aspirations of local groups and communities on the other' (p. 93). Because of this critical role, Celikten (2001), for example, suggests that assistant heads need to be regarded as leaders of pedagogy. We think that this form of instructional leadership is particularly important in times of change and particularly when teachers are required to make sense of and enact the practices promoted by policy makers (Spillane, 1999).

The study reported in this paper was conducted in 2019 during a time in which schools in Malta were inundated with reform proposals and policy implementation (see MEDE, 2017a; 2017b). As the final policy brokers (see McLaughlin, 1990), teachers are the main intermediaries of educational change. Hence, in this study, we gather data from 130 primary school teachers in Malta. More specifically, we are interested in teachers' perceptions of the leadership role of assistant heads. We focus on perceptions because we intend to investigate teachers' experiences of the role of assistant heads, their views of them as leaders and their interpretation of their leadership role. By giving a voice to teachers, we attempt to understand their day-to-day working experiences and relationships with assistant heads and needs for support. Towards this end, we adopt a constructivist paradigm drawing on teachers' individual and collective meanings

In what follows, we provide a review of literature on the leadership role of assistant heads as instructional leaders and on teachers' perceptions of assistant heads as educational leaders. Next, we present information about the research context, the research purpose and questions, and the methodology adopted. Following our presentation of the findings, we discuss the implications and provide suggestions on the leadership role of assistant heads, pertinent to both Malta and similar contexts internationally.

## **Literature Review**

### *The leadership role of the assistant head*

Over the years, the assistant heads' role has evolved from solely supporting school heads in the day to day running of the school to guiding and collaborating with teachers to improve pupil learning. Literature pertaining to

the impact that assistant heads may have on instruction and how this may be achieved, is however still scarce (see Arar, 2014). Given this lack of research on assistant heads as instructional leaders and how this role is perceived by teachers in contributing towards school improvement, we will first discuss the roles and responsibilities of assistant heads as instructional leaders and then explore literature on teachers' perceptions of this role.

### *The assistant head as an instructional leader*

In an era of continuous restructuring and reforms in schools, assistant heads are expected to support and empower teachers for the improvement of pupil learning (Celikten, 2001; Lee & Nie, 2017; Wise, 2001). According to Copland and Knapp (2006, p. xiii), the higher purpose of an assistant head is 'to build coherent, collaborative educational systems that deliver equitable learning for all pupils. This means that, as educational leaders they need to consciously develop: (i) themselves as leaders, (ii) their overt behaviour to build positive relationships, and (iii) their leadership for learning. Like Irvine and Brundrett (2016), we think that newly appointed assistant heads need to cultivate themselves as leaders and develop a different set of skills than that of a classroom teacher.

#### **(i) Developing oneself as a leader**

Ng (2017) argues that leadership starts with self-leadership, that is, adopting strategies that help personal growth and raise one's levels of leadership. Hence, change starts from within and an investment in self-leadership can help in the development of leading others (Browning, 2018). The process to developing oneself as a leader requires one to become knowledgeable and confident towards consciously recognising the end goal of school improvement (Nelson, 2016). According to Scerri (2013), to bring about the desired changes, leaders need to invest in developing both themselves on the inside (personally) as much as on the outside (professionally). This implies that as leaders they should intentionally engage in critical practice (Foster, 1989) that involves reflecting on their character and understanding one's own behaviour in order to better fulfil their responsibilities. In the process of understanding self and others, assistant heads need to earn themselves 'referent power', that is, 'power that stems from the ability of a leader to acquire a following through charisma' (Weller & Weller, 2002, p. 6).

#### **(ii) Building positive relationships through listening**

Since working in educational settings involves dealing with people at different levels, creating and nurturing healthy relationships is crucial (Debono, 2018). According to Crippen (2012), healthy relationships are built on and nurtured through respect, collaboration and a caring approach. Rud and Garrison (2010)

specify that adopting reverent listening, defined as ‘the recognition of the need for aid and sustenance by others and the good of human relationship and communion’ (p. 2779), is key to cultivate respect and care in a school organisation, and that such listening is transformational to school leadership. Reverent leaders, hence, listen to those in need, are humble and respectful (Rud & Garrison, 2010), and accept that their knowledge is incomplete unless they listen to other standpoints (Waks, 2010). Since listening is both an individual and a shared process (Low & Sonntag, 2013), it requires assistant heads to invest in ongoing, timely and clear communication and dialogue, as well as to adopt a care ethic. When it comes to relationships, leaders need to intentionally dedicate time to build relationships with teachers while looking after them to address their specific needs. This approach usually necessitates assistant heads to be open for dialogue while seeking to build a safe and non-threatening environment within which they learn with and from teachers.

### **(iii) Leading for learning**

Literature shows that assistant heads are central for the improvement of teaching and learning, particularly through their behaviours, strategies and priorities to create a school climate conducive to growth (Glanz, 2004; Leithwood et al., 2006). Bezzina (2013) uses the term ‘leading visibly’ to emphasise the role of educational leaders in showing that pupil learning is the shared mission of the school community and not solely that of teachers. This approach involves what Hargreaves and Shirley (2019, p. 104) term as ‘collaborative professionalism’. This term, first introduced by Hargreaves and O’Connor (2018), refers to ‘how teachers and other educators transform teaching and learning together’ (p. 4) for the benefit of pupils. Applied to middle leadership, this approach involves assistant heads working closely with and caring for teachers as they pursue their challenging work to ensure the success and wellbeing of all pupils. Hence, when working with teachers, assistant heads do not act as experts by imposing ideas and judging the instructional practices enacted by teachers. Instead, their work takes the form of purposeful collaboration that engages them in ongoing professional dialogues with teachers, aimed towards improving pupil learning (Glanz, 2004). This leading-for-learning approach, therefore, involves consciously empowering teachers to take more responsibility, become more autonomous and see themselves as co-leaders for school improvement.

#### *Teachers’ perceptions of the assistant head as an educational leader*

In response to leading for school improvement, Harvey and Sheridan (1995) developed a scale, entitled ‘Perception of Deputy Principals Responsibilities’, to identify how primary school assistant heads are expected to contribute to school effectiveness and improvement. Similar to Arar (2014) and Muijs and Harris (2003), their study indicates that the administrative and staff

management tasks were expectations that teachers revealed about the roles of assistant heads. Moreover, the study by Harvey and Sheridan (1995) suggests that teachers also expected assistant heads to contribute towards change through curriculum management in their attempt to support teachers in putting policy into practice. This resonates with the findings by Leaf and Odhiambo (2017) which show that assistant heads in three of four high-performing secondary schools in Australia had a key role in instructional leadership, improving pedagogy for both pupils and teachers.

Research indicates that assistant heads recognise their instructional leadership role in monitoring and assisting teachers (Leaf & Odhiambo, 2017; Wise, 2001). However, while the way assistant heads assume this role is likely to depend on their personal dispositions and school context, we think it is important to understand how assistant heads may contribute to the educational functions of the school and to examine how their educational leadership roles are influencing teachers and possibly shaping their work. This aspect is brought forward by Sun and Shoho (2017) who suggest research that examines how school heads, teachers, pupils and parents view the assistant head's job, roles and duties. To do this, we focus on teachers' perceptions (their professional experiences, views and interpretation) of how assistant heads are or could support them in their teaching and practice development, and we examine this within the Maltese educational context.

### **The Research Context, Purpose and Question**

Education in Malta is compulsory from five through to the age of sixteen, as is defined in Chapter 327 of the Laws of Malta – The Education Act (Eurydice, 2019). There are three types of schools: state, church and independent. The first six years of compulsory education are covered in primary schooling. Pupils attending primary education are between five and eleven years of age. All schools are bound by learning outcomes set by the Learning Outcomes Framework (MEDE, 2017a). Local statistics show that 1994 teachers and 253 assistant heads are employed in primary schools (NSO, 2019).

In Malta, the 2017 sectoral agreement between the Government of Malta and the Malta Union of Teachers saw an increase in schools' capacity building entitlement of assistant heads to cater for widespread responsibilities of school leadership teams. At the time, the Minister of Education had stated that teaching in 21<sup>st</sup> century classroom has brought about unsurmountable challenges (MEDE, 2017). Indeed, to address pupils' learning needs, teachers today need more day-to-day support from the school leadership team; support that is specifically focused on improving teaching and learning. However, while schools in Malta are called to nurture a community of professional educators to ensure the educational entitlement of pupils and meeting their needs (MEDE, 2017b), local research shows that teaching is still a matter of

sink-or-swim. In Malta, schools do not always uphold a working environment which offers time for collaboration, during which teachers engage in dialogue and ongoing inquiry to improve teaching and learning (Attard Tonna & Shanks, 2017). The 'egg-carton' school culture (Lortie, 1975) leads teachers to work in isolation, more often than not adopting an attitude of individualism which may foster a feeling that they need to cope with teaching challenges on their own. As Vella (2018) noted, in Malta, senior leadership teams need to provide class-based assistance to help teachers deal with day-to-day situations and to create collaborative opportunities for teachers. Drawing on a recent survey with over 700 teachers in Malta, Attard Tonna and Calleja (2023) had concluded that cultivating collaborative practices may support teachers in Malta to recognise that working together can result in better teaching and learning outcomes.

The purpose of this study is to focus on the voice of primary school teachers in an attempt to understand their day-to-day experiences, needs for support and expectations of their assistant heads. In our approach, we recognise that 'reality is subjective because it is constructed from the individual perspectives of participants engaged in the study' (Dickson, 2016, p. 6). Hence, the research reported in this paper draws on a constructivist paradigm to gain an understanding of individual and collective meanings and to uncover day-to-day realities of how teachers experience the leadership role of assistant heads. Additionally, this study aims to provide a lens which focuses on the potential benefits of the role of the assistant head, and how it can create closer links with teachers working in their classrooms. For the purpose of this study, and the gaps identified in the literature, we are guided by the research question: *What are the perceptions of primary school teachers in Malta on the role of assistant heads as instructional leaders?*

## **Methodology**

This study, which is part of a research project designed to investigate the leadership roles of assistant heads, draws on qualitative research design. The research design involved first identifying patterns of personal meaning gleaned from qualitative data emerging from an online survey and one-to-one interviews with teachers.

### *Data collection instruments*

Data were collected first through a web-based survey with primary school teachers across Malta. Following analysis of the survey data, other qualitative data was gathered through face-to-face interviews from a sample of survey participants. The aim of conducting interviews was to gain a more in-depth understanding of teachers' professional experiences, views and interpretation

of the role of their assistant heads. Both data collection instruments were piloted with two teacher-colleagues to ensure that the questions were clear and serve their intended purpose.

### **A web-based survey**

In the first phase of data collection, a web-based survey (see Appendix 1) generated data from a mix of closed and more open-ended questions. The survey required participants to provide demographic data and answer questions related to teachers’ understandings, views and experiences of the roles and responsibilities of assistant heads. It was disseminated online through a number of social media education-related Facebook pages as well as on LinkedIn. The 10-minute survey, taken by 130 primary school teachers, was open from April to May 2019.

### **Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews with teachers from each of the three sectors within the Maltese educational system were conducted by the first author. Briggs and Coleman (2007, p. 209) define a semi-structured interview as one in which ‘the researcher broadly controls the agenda and process of interview, whilst leaving interviewees free, within limits, to respond as they best see fit’. Hence, the more close-ended and less challenging questions were followed up by more challenging and open ones. The interviews (see Appendix 2), which were conducted in August 2019, consisted of 11 open-ended questions. These questions probed teacher-participants to describe their perceptions, experiences and relationships with their assistant heads. Each interview, conducted face-to-face, took approximately 30 minutes.

#### *The participants*

This study uses a purposeful sample (Etikan, 2015) of teachers. Through purposeful sampling, we could have a more homogenous and representative sample of primary school teacher population within each of the three sectors (state, church and independent schools) of the Maltese educational system (see Table 1). Survey participants, who chose the opt-in preference, were then selected at random – one from each educational sector (see Table 2 for details about each participant) for a follow-up interview.

Table 1. Teacher survey participants

<b>Gender</b>		
<b>Female</b>		<b>Male</b>
122		8
<b>Education sector</b>		
<b>State</b>	<b>Church</b>	<b>Independent</b>
74	45	11

Teaching experience (years)			
0 to 5	6 to 10	11 to 15	16+
29	28	23	50

Table 2. Information about teacher interview participants

Code	Gender	Education sector	Highest level of education	Teaching experience (years)
Teacher 1	Female	Church	Post-graduate degree	9
Teacher 2	Female	Independent	First degree	27
Teacher 3	Female	State	First degree	15

### *Data analysis*

The quantitative data from the survey were analysed using cross-tabulation and descriptive statistics to record the frequency of respondents to particular characteristics, for example, describing the roles of assistant heads. For the more qualitative data, an inductive approach to analyse data sets from both the survey and interviews was adopted.

Table 3. Inductive coding, categories and themes

Codes	Category	Theme
Organised Supports Motivates Knowledgeable Communicates Trustworthy Collaborates Guides and advices	Character traits Roles and responsibilities	The assistant head as an instructional leader providing educational and emotional support
Reliable Reachable Close relationship Practical Acts in a timely manner Available to listen Cares for others	Disposition to lead Intentional leadership	The assistant head as a critical friend to engage in dialogue, who listens and cares

This process helped us develop theory from the patterns of meanings emanating from participants' viewpoints and realities about their roles as teachers and their experiences of working with assistant heads. To analyse open-ended questions, both Nvivo software as well as manual coding were used. Codes were assigned inductively, selecting these from the words and descriptions provided by participants, and then sorted into potential categories that informed the emerging themes (see Table 3).

## Findings

Findings shed light on teachers' views about strategies that assistant heads use or may adopt to develop meaningful relationships for school improvement. Presented in this study are teachers' perceptions – their experiences, views and interpretations – on how assistant heads support them and their practice.

*Teachers perceive the role of the assistant head as that of an instructional leader whose role is to support them educationally and emotionally.*

Data show that teachers acknowledge the importance of technical and administrative tasks, such as, setting up and operating school policies and procedures, and ensuring the smooth running of the school. According to these teachers, operational duties such as the setting up of timetables, providing replacements and supervision duties, pupil welfare responsibilities and non-classroom activities, are vital to the smooth running of schools. One teacher also mentioned the many facets of assistant heads' responsibilities.

*their [assistant heads] responsibilities range from attending and conducting assembly, planning and organising activities, communicating with parents by email or by answering calls to attending various meetings with parents and level leaders, observing lessons and catering for discipline matters.*

(Teacher 2, Interview)

However, survey data show that 38% of these teachers also felt that apart from sustaining vital organisational routines, the main role of a assistant head is that of an instructional leader who is there to monitor and promote effective teaching. As one teacher put it:

*apart from helping in the general running of the school, an assistant head's main role is to ensure that the curriculum is being adhered to as well as delivered in an appropriate manner through good quality teaching.*

(Teacher 1, Interview)

This duty is also acknowledged by the local Ministry of Education and Employment as it requires an assistant head to offer professional leadership in the implementation and development of the National Curriculum Framework (MEDE, 2018). Indeed, in addressing pupils' learning needs, teachers nowadays feel the need for more day-to-day support from the school leadership team – support that is specifically focused on improving teaching and learning for all. For 63% of our survey respondents, the primary source of instructional support comes from the assistant head for four key reasons, namely: (i) hierarchically an assistant head is the person to consult; (ii) the assistant head's role provides a link between home and school; (iii) an assistant head is easier to reach; (iv) an assistant head liaises with the head of school.

Data from this study indicate that the work of the assistant head is also largely defined by the needs of the other school members. Over a third of teachers see the assistant head as one who is heavily involved in the micro politics of the school. According to them, the assistant head should prioritise educators' professional needs and invest in building relationships. For these teachers, it is beneficial for an assistant head 'to create a positive atmosphere, positive interactions between pupils and teachers, teachers and teachers, parents and teachers, administration and teachers' (Teacher 2, Interview). Another teacher mentioned the importance of an assistant head's concern for teachers because 'the relationship with the assistant head affects my motivation, my productivity and my effectivity' (Teacher 3, Interview). Hence, according to these teachers, those in leadership positions need to focus their attention on building, maintaining and strengthening relationships with all stakeholders, but particularly teachers. Bloom (2004) also refers to this quality of leadership when stating that, 'school leaders fail not because they lack brains, determination, knowledge and technical skills, but because of what is characterised as style and people skills' (p. 1). This affective need may be more strongly felt in the primary school context to break down teacher isolation which, as Attard Tonna and Calleja (2023) argues, binds teachers to spend most of their time with pupils in their classrooms – a situation that might appear less startling for secondary school teachers who usually spend more time with colleagues in staffrooms. In the next sections, we discuss teachers' perceptions of assistant heads as instructional leaders and their views of how assistant heads provide support.

*Teachers perceive the assistant head as a key person to monitor and promote effective teaching and learning.*

In order to promote effective teaching and learning and to be an instructional leader, Copland and Knapp (2006) state that the assistant head needs to demonstrate the capacity to work closely with and coach teachers and caregivers towards improving teaching and enhancing learning in every classroom. In the present study, almost all respondents (93%) view assistant heads as key persons to support them in improving teaching and learning. Teachers also expressed a need for assistance to improve pupil learning outcomes as well as to help them grow as professionals. Indeed, 3 out of every 5 mentioned that their main source of instructional support comes directly from their assistant head.

Findings indicate that teachers recognise five key characteristics as sources of instructional support to them, namely that assistant heads (i) have extensive teaching experience which they can share, (ii) are knowledgeable of policies and school context and the challenges teachers face, (iii) work closely with teachers and are available when needed, (iv) cultivate and support

collaborative work among teachers of same year groups, and (v) can conduct ongoing class observations aimed towards instructional improvement. Next, we discuss each of these.

**(i) Teachers view assistant heads as having teaching experience and able to support both newly qualified and experienced teachers**

Teachers, particularly newly appointed teachers, appear to seek the support of more experienced educators. For example, Interviewee 2 said that, 'through their experience, assistant heads can help teachers to face and overcome challenges'. This interviewee added that 'assistant heads may act as coaches setting goals for the team and inspiring them to meet their objectives'. For half of the teachers taking the survey, assistant heads provide teachers with motivation and knowledge to improve their classroom practice. Teachers also recognise the assistant head's role in supporting and coaching the development of instructional practices. Teachers view that assistant heads can act as coaches, advisors and role models due to their teaching experiences and leadership skills. Their role, according to teacher-interviewees, would be to help 'in improving teaching' (Teacher 3), 'in resolving daily challenges' (Teacher 1) and 'in boosting confidence' (Teacher 2). Since teaching is a lonely profession, particularly for the primary school teacher, this request and expectation appears critical. Teachers seek praise, encouragement, appreciation but also guidance - whether they are newly appointed or more experienced.

**(ii) Teachers view assistant heads as knowledgeable in bridging theory with practice**

In this study, teachers appear to recognise the role of an assistant head as a leader with knowledge about policies and theory. As one teacher noted, assistant heads 'can offer not only experience but also thorough knowledge of current policies and practices thus bridging theory to classroom practice' (Teacher 3, Interview). These teachers appear to expect an assistant head to not merely be knowledgeable, but to 'pass on information in a convincing way' (Teacher 1, Interview), supporting them in resolving their difficulties when implementing reforms or new directives. Also, the assistant head 'can provide policy guidance and set goals which are achievable' (Teacher 2, Interview) for teachers. This means that the assistant head is perceived as an agent of change but also as one who can support and evaluate the educational outcomes of specific policies on both teachers and pupils. Teachers also see the assistant head as a leader who is sensitive to the school context and to how change may affect teachers' practice at particular moments in time.

**(iii) Teachers describe assistant heads as working closely with them and being available when needed**

Teachers participating in this study view assistant heads as working at shop-floor level with them. Hence, they expect them to be within reach and in a position to offer timely support. Teachers perceive the assistant head as 'the person who is most likely to be reached and can give teachers the best advice' (Teacher 2, Survey). Assistant heads' proactivity and immediate intervention appear to be valued. During her interview, Teacher 1 stated that:

*being in touch with what is happening in classrooms is a must'. She added that, assistant heads need to 'visit classrooms, take an interest in pupils' work to know what they are learning.*

According to her, being present is likely to make a difference not only to teachers but particularly to the pupils. Towards this end, Shirrell and Spillane (2020) invite school leadership teams to take 'the strategic decision to place themselves in locations within their school building to maximise their access to, and potential to interact with school staff' (p. 10).

Teachers expect the assistant head to be knowledgeable about pupils and in close communication with parents. As one survey respondent said:

*the assistant head knows pupils and parents well and can offer good insights on how best to approach delicate situations ... is also a good link with the school head in the case of serious issues.*  
(Teacher 51, Survey)

Assistant heads appear to be in a position to safeguard teachers from pressures emanating from stakeholders and issues which might expose or interfere with their teaching. For teachers, the assistant head 'acts as a mediator with other entities' (Teacher 13, Survey) and, hence, can adopt both buffering strategies to protect the core tasks of teaching and learning while also adopt bridging strategies to in order to cultivate parental support.

**(iv) Teachers see assistant heads as key persons to instil collaborative thinking and to ensure continuity and collaboration among class and year teams**

These teachers see assistant heads as key to creating collaborative opportunities that may help them reflect on, discuss and eventually discover new ways to improve their practice. According to these teachers, assistant heads can do this by structuring, for teachers, time for planning both within their year level as well as across levels. Drawing on their experience, teachers noted that assistant heads collaborate with teachers and encourage them to

work as a team. According to one teacher, teachers and assistant heads should 'work as a team and share ideas' (Teacher 99, Survey), particularly when time for such collaboration is provided by the school and used as intended. It appears that when teachers work within a non-hierarchical network of professionals, collaborative learning is enhanced and a positive change is brought about. Teachers seem to value assistant heads who 'enable teachers to look beyond their classroom walls' (Teacher 40, Survey). In other words, they value leaders who seek to build and promote a culture in which everyone is aware of their interdependency and collective vision. This reflects 'systems thinking' in which, as advocated by Bezzina (2008), members of the organisation understand how parts of the whole are interrelated. However, Attard Tonna and Calleja (2023) warn that schools in Malta may be far from investing in structures and processes to pursue a more collaborative work ethic. Also, they note that more often than not, teachers need to make up for this by finding their own ways of collaborating, within and outside school hours.

**(v) Teachers expect assistant heads to conduct purposeful class observations for instructional improvement**

In Malta, assistant heads are obliged to mentor newly qualified teachers and to offer professional support so that all teachers can appropriately implement pedagogical duties (MEDE, 2018). To do this, the assistant head is encouraged to observe teachers in the classroom and to provide constructive feedback to promote teacher growth as well as to enable a professional learning culture (MEDE, 2018; Robinson, Hohepa & Lloyd, 2009). Survey data reveal that most teachers (over 90% of survey respondents) appear comfortable when they are observed by the assistant head. Given that primary school teachers in Malta generally work in isolation (see Attard Tonna and Calleja, 2023) and their main point of reference is the assistant head, this finding might not appear surprising. In particular, our respondents noted that they seek professional collaborations with assistant heads when there is a trusting relationship and when they are confident that feedback is given constructively.

*we have a good relationship and I know that any criticism would be constructive, well-intended and communicated in a respectful manner.*

(Teacher 108, Survey)

*with constructive criticism, I would feel comfortable and do whatever it takes to improve my teaching strategies.*

(Teacher 43, Survey)

This purposeful observation and collaboration, intended to improve teaching (see Glanz, 2004), involves a dialogic process that engages teachers in ongoing instructional dialogue with the assistant head. As suggested by local policy (see MEDE, 2018), such a process requires a mentoring approach through which assistant heads support, challenge and stimulate teachers towards new

thinking – the ultimate purpose of which is the enhancement of pupil learning and achievement.

*Teachers perceive the assistant head as a critical friend with whom they can engage in dialogue, who listens and cares*

Survey respondents rated the affective leadership role of supporting the personal needs of staff and pupils as the second most important function of the assistant head. For teachers in this study, the assistant head is expected to understand the emotional states of educators and pupils, manage one's emotions and respond to the situation in a way that may be helpful to the person/s concerned and to the organisation. Survey respondents describe having a trusting relationship with the assistant head when they (i) are listened to in order to empathise, (ii) are cared for their wellbeing, (iii) engage in ongoing communications with them and (iv) lead by example.

**(i) Teachers value assistant heads who create interpersonal relationships by empathising and understanding their situations**

Teachers appreciate when the assistant head is not only present physically but also mentally, empathising with the teachers' classroom realities. Teachers value leaders who intentionally understand emotions. For example, teachers appreciate 'being valued as professionals, encouraged and empowered' (Teacher 3, Interview). While forming relationships, however, teachers expect the assistant head to aspire to the common good,

without either focusing on, nor leaving behind any member of staff. As one teacher explained, the assistant head:

*needs to be fair and value all of them ... they need to dedicate time to teachers so that they feel valued, comfortable to approach them and give their feedback.*  
(Teacher 1, Interview).

According to these teachers, assistant heads may develop teacher motivation and efficacy when they have 'a let me feel how you feel attitude' and an 'I can reach you attitude' (Teacher 2, Interview). This teacher also mentioned that unless there is an attitude where assistant heads attempt to understand the challenging journey of teaching, the chain of collaboration is likely to be broken.

**(ii) Teachers value assistant heads who intentionally handle each person and situation with care and dedication**

Data suggest that teachers value assistant heads who establish meaningful relationships with teachers and pupils alike, and when they are deeply committed to the welfare of others. For Teacher 1, the assistant head's intentional caring 'is more of a manner rather than a specific action'

(Interview). Others mentioned that this care ethic transpires through a sense of genuineness and honesty and in making oneself available. As another teacher said, assistant heads need to:

*have pastoral care as their goal ... especially with some children who come from backgrounds with a lot of difficulties, sometimes even illnesses, sometimes social problems; with staff as well as with parents.*  
(Teacher 3, Interview)

The expectation seems to be that assistant heads need to extend their support to pupils' wellbeing, providing them with emotional care.

**(iii) Teachers appreciate assistant heads who find time for intentional dialogue that build and strengthen relationships**

Two-thirds of survey respondents describe relationships and dialogues with assistant heads which are reminiscent of invitational leadership, that is, dialogues in which both parties intentionally show respect on both a personal as well as a professional level. Teachers appear to value assistant heads who practise idea-based rather than role-based leadership. As opposed to the traditional model of leadership which is vested in one person, idea-based leadership implies that the ideas of all members of the team are listened to and considered.

Along these lines, one teacher advises assistant heads not to stay in their office but instead:

*be with teachers informally ... get a feel of the happy teacher, the stressed teacher, and the one who is going through hell at home ... like that you can reach them.*  
(Teacher 2, Interview)

As another interviewee commented:

*I think the job of the assistant head, more than dishing out orders and telling you what to do, is about listening ... listening becomes a priority because only through listening can s/he then support and ultimately make informed decisions.*  
(Teacher 1, Interview)

The act of listening is seen as an approach conducive to building friendships. Moreover, opportunities for listening are valued by teachers, particularly when interactions take the form of informal chats.

**(iv) Teachers believe that assistant heads should lead by example and are key in creating a supportive environment for teachers and pupils**

Data suggest that teachers seek leaders to follow and admire. Teachers expect assistant heads 'to be role models and to support teachers by being the first example' (Teacher 111, Survey). Leading by example is interpreted by teachers as being perceived as 'credible, honest and of moral character in order to influence others' (Teacher 1, Interview). It appears that these teachers seek authentic leadership which necessitates 'consistency between what they [assistant heads] say and what they do' (Teacher 3, Interview). Since assistant heads are likely to be the persons working closest with primary school teachers, leadership by example is seen by these teachers as a fundamental approach for professional support, motivation and learning. As a result of the potential close relationships that teachers may build with assistant heads, this facet of the leadership approach of assistant heads appears critical.

### **Discussion**

The present study draws on teachers' perceptions of the roles of assistant heads. Results indicate that, according to primary school teachers in Malta, assistant heads play two key roles: (i) they monitor, support and promote effective teaching and learning practices, and (ii) establish a co-learning relationship as they engage in dialogue, listen to and care for teachers. These results suggest that teachers perceive assistant heads as instructional leaders. Similar to the study by Leaf and Odhiambo (2017), our findings indicate that the instructional support that teachers receive usually comes directly from assistant heads.

Besides ensuring the efficiency of school organisational structures, teachers in the present study view assistant heads as being in a position to offer the immediate support they need, particularly because they are within reach. Such 'management-by-walking around' is advised by Weller and Weller (2002, p. 138) who argue that this approach may help leaders to detect and diagnose difficulties in a timely manner. Similarly, Robinson et al. (2009) note that leaders who prioritise teaching and learning can help teachers to make a difference in pupil learning. Our study contributes a key reason as to why assistant heads can make this difference towards pupil learning. According to our teacher participants, the assistant head may facilitate and alleviate a challenging situation because they usually have a more holistic and thorough knowledge of pupils and their family circumstances. Furthermore, assistant heads in the present study are perceived as sensitive to the professional context and the ways in which changes may affect teachers and pupils at that particular moment in time. This adds to Robinson et al. (2009) who argue that when leaders connect at individual, organisational and cultural level they create

connections which are educationally influential towards change. Hence, assistant heads may offer instructional support not merely by being knowledgeable about the latest policies and directives, but by passing on this information to teachers in a timely and convincing way. This approach is corroborated by the findings of Lee and Nei (2017) indicating that teachers perceive assistant heads as being in an ideal position to provide more individualised instructional support since they work directly and closely with them.

Findings also suggest that teachers are supported and inspired on their journey towards self and school improvement by assistant heads who take deliberate steps towards instructional support. According to Kubicek (2012), this approach to intentional leadership involves an understanding about how leaders and their colleagues learn by being intentional in investing time to professionally develop both teachers and the school organisation. Our data indicate that when assistant heads give priority to the professional needs of teachers, through acts of listening, empathising, engaging in continuous dialogue and in caring for individual members of staff, teachers feel more motivated and such motivation may positively influence their teaching. Teachers report feeling comfortable when they are observed by the assistant head especially where there is a trusting relationship and feedback is constructive. They tend to see assistant heads as critical friends and coaches who are present to discuss teaching methods and to stimulate intellectual thinking and new ways of doing things. Our findings resonate with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2012) report which highlights that school leadership is effective when it prioritises the provision of support that enables and develops teacher learning. Moreover, creating and supporting a culture of collaborative professionalism (see Hargreaves & Shirley, 2019) is also an increasingly important and recognised responsibility of school leaders. The general perception of teachers in our study is that assistant heads need to actively collaborate with teachers, listen to them and consider their ideas and initiatives.

## **Conclusion**

The present study, which draws on teachers' perceptions on leadership roles, sheds light on the central and deliberate role that assistant heads play to ensure ongoing communication and to cultivate co-learning relationships that are aimed to support teachers' practices and professional development. In the knowledge that 'leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school related factors that contribute to what pupils learn' (Leithwood, 2004, p. 5), we provide insights into leadership roles of assistant heads that teachers in Malta perceive as essential to improve teaching and, consequently, pupil learning. Notwithstanding the limitation that this study specifically draws on the Maltese context and on data as reported by teachers, we still feel that the implications we provide are worth consideration and are likely to inform

school contexts that, like Malta, are experiencing ongoing change. Moreover, while this study was carried out in pre-COVID times, we feel that such implications and the suggestions that we offer will be useful to schools in present and post-COVID times.

Findings indicate that teachers in our study view assistant heads as leading with intentionality, that is, adopting and embracing leadership with an instructional purpose. An emerging aspect of assistant heads, that we think deserves further investigation, is their approach to intentionally listen to teachers. The implementation of a listening pedagogy, as outlined by Low and Sonntag (2013), recognises leaders as active and powerful agents for both their own and teachers' professional learning and development. Locating listening at the centre of leadership (Rud & Garrison, 2010), hence, implies that assistant heads intentionally listen rather than talk so that through teachers' talk they may discern experiences, bridge potential gaps between their own and teachers' perspectives and, in the process, create and cultivate robust professional working relationships.

The implication, drawing also on the work of Lee and Nei (2017), is that being closer to the teachers in their daily work practice, assistant heads may also have more opportunities to stimulate teachers' innovative thinking and encourage them to initiate classroom-based innovations. Applying this approach requires assistant heads to have empathy and adopt an attitude of being there for and with teachers. They, hence, need to develop patience to listen, have the courage to hear what might be critical and disturbing and to deliberate with less defensive filters. Paying heed and attending to the professional needs of teachers is particularly challenging for leaders who are overburdened with a multitude of tasks and working in school contexts that are fast paced. This leads us to suggest further research, involving ethnographic studies and participant observation methods, to gather data about how assistant heads work with and relate to teachers. A grounded approach, we think, may lead to deeper insights into how teachers can benefit from intentional leadership that aims to develop teachers instructionally, emotionally and professionally.

## Appendix 1: Web-based questionnaire

### Section A: Basic Information

1. Gender:
 

Male	Female	Other
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2. Years of teaching experience:
 

1 to 5 years	6 to 10 years	11 to 15 years	16+ years
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3. Educational sector:
 

State	Church	Independent
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### Section B: Kindly answer the following questions:

4. The roles and responsibilities of an assistant head are diverse. Tick the 3 most important responsibilities.
  - Sees to the educational and emotional needs of pupils.
  - Supports the personal needs of staff and shows empathy.
  - Sets up and operates school policies and procedures.
  - Organises professional development.
  - Monitors and promotes effective teaching and learning.
  - Ensures the smooth running of the school and plans outings.
  - Collaborates with external stakeholders.
  - Facilitates collaboration between all members of staff.
  
5. In case you require help in dealing with pupil or parent issues, whose assistance would you seek? (Tick just one option)
  - a colleague
  - the assistant head
  - the school head
  - someone else

Give a reason for your answer

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

	<i>Never</i>	<i>Once in a while</i>	<i>Most of the time</i>	<i>Almost on a daily basis</i>
To inform pupils about events				
To speak to a pupil				

To observe a lesson				
To support the teacher				
To gather information from the teacher				
Called in by the teacher for a specific reason				
To observe a pupil				

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

- Motivated
- Organised
- Compassionate
- Plans Strategically
- Ambitious
- Efficient
- A listener
- A leader
- Charismatic
- Trustworthy
- Supportive
- A critical friend

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

Yes                      No

Please explain your answer

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9. How comfortable would you be should an assistant head observe your class?

- Extremely comfortable
- Moderately comfortable
- Not comfortable at all

Give a reason for your answer

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

	<i>Strongly disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Strongly agree</i>
I feel classroom observations by the assistant heads are useful in our school					
I feel that classroom observations help me refine my teaching and are of support					
I feel classroom observations are a means of ensuring quality teaching					
I feel assistant heads have the necessary knowledge and experience to carry out classroom observations					
I think assistant heads can be very supportive					

11. Which of the following statements best describes my typical work-related dialogues with the assistant head?

- The assistant head initiates a conversation to inform me about duties and responsibilities.
- The assistant head initiates a conversation about duties and responsibilities followed by a discussion about a course of action.
- There is an exchange of ideas and genuine collaboration in which my views are considered and taken on board.

12. From your experience, assistant heads:

	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Agree</i>
Empathise with and meet individual needs			
Empower staff to come up with initiatives			
Believe in working collegially			

Mentor educators to enhance the quality of teaching			
Develop a respectful relationship with staff			
Develop individual and collective capacities			

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

Opt-in:            Yes            No

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix 2: Teacher interview guide

1. To start with, do schools need assistant heads? Please state why/why not.
2. Which are the three most important goals of an assistant head?
3. Which practices can an assistant head undertake to improve teaching and pupil learning?
4. Does an assistant head visit your class regularly? What for?
5. Describe a time when you and the assistant head collaborated effectively to make a positive difference for pupil learning. What were your goals?
6. How, in your opinion does an assistant head support teachers?
7. Describe a time when you felt supported by an assistant head.
8. '*Collaboration is having an honest and open dialogue on ways to best help pupils achieve to their full potential.*' (Hoffman, P. 2014). What kinds of dialogues do you engage in with assistant heads? On which issues?
9. Which practices by an assistant head hinder teacher performance and which practices increase teacher motivation and teacher efficacy?
10. '*Teachers and pupils alike work better when they are cared about.*' (Day, C. 2004). Do you feel valued by the assistant head? How?
11. If you were to take on the role of an assistant head, what strategies would you use to build relationships with educators?

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