

Key Competencies for the Management of Educational Change: The Voice of Heads of Maltese Primary State Schools

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Abstract

Recent research indicates the importance of using competencies when handling educational change in the 21st century. In light of this, this study makes use of semi-structured interviews to delve into the views of nine Heads of Maltese primary state schools on the matter. It aims to identify their view on educational change in Malta and the competencies they make use of when managing such changes. The findings aim to contribute to the understanding of how competencies can be used by educational leaders to successfully manage change in the local context.

Keywords

Educational Change, Management of Educational Change, Key Leadership Competencies, Primary State Schools

Introduction

Educational change has become common in the 21st century, especially due to rapid technological advancements, changes in societal expectations, and evolving pedagogical theories (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; Darling-Hammond et al., 2019). In Maltese primary state schools, this day-to-day reality places significant pressure on school leadership teams to not only adapt but manage these changes effectively.

Recent international research has also highlighted the role of leadership

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competencies in managing educational change (Oreg et al., 2021; Jais et al., 2020). Several studies emphasise the need for educational leaders to possess specific key competencies such as strategic vision and emotional intelligence to guide their schools through change (Boyatzis et al., 2000; Fullan, 2020). Inspired by this focus, this research delves into the specific context of Malta to provide a localised perspective on what competencies are utilised by Heads of primary state schools across various colleges in Malta, focusing on two primary research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of Heads of Maltese primary state schools regarding educational change?
2. What key competencies do educational leaders use to manage educational change in local primary state schools?

By addressing these questions with the use of semi-structured interviews with several Heads of local primary state schools, this study seeks to contribute to the understanding of educational change and to identify the competencies deemed essential for the management of educational change. Next, the article presents a review of the relevant literature on educational change and leadership competencies both at an international and national level. After that, the methodology employed in this study is detailed. The section that follows outlines the research findings, after which a discussion that situates these findings within the local Maltese context is presented. The paper concludes with the limitations and suggestions for future research.

Literature Review

An International View of Research on Educational Change

Educational change management is crucial for the implementation of effective reforms within schools. Strategic processes aimed at guiding transitions as well as achieving desired outcomes in teaching and learning environments have been studied for years. Examples of such studies are the theoretical frameworks by Michael Fullan and John Kotter, which provide an understanding of how to manage change strategically and highlight leadership competencies regarded as essential for implementation.

Fullan's change theory focuses on the importance of collaboration and consistency, leadership and capacity building when managing successful educational reforms (Fullan, 2020). Fullan's theory highlights several key

leadership competencies. These include building and sustaining relationships, having a shared vision, and promoting a culture of continuous improvement. According to Kotter's 8-Step Change Model, some of the essential steps in managing organisational change are creating a sense of urgency, building coalitions, and communicating a clear vision, amongst others (Kotter, 2018). Public relations, collaboration, and communicating the vision are some of the leadership competencies emphasised by Kotter.

Recent research also emphasises the need for continuous professional development opportunities that match the vision (Darling-Hammond et al., 2019). Other leadership competencies deemed crucial in fostering a shared commitment to change include involving stakeholders and open communication. (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2020).

However, challenges such as resistance to change and the ability to maintain a change in the long term remain significant. Oreg et al. (2021) note the importance of understanding the underlying causes of the resistance and providing support and resources to address it. Accordingly, maintaining change requires ongoing monitoring, adaptation of strategies, and strong leadership to maintain the change and achieve long-term improvements. Hence, leadership competencies here include resilience, adaptability, problem-solving, and the provision of support.

Examples such as Ontario's whole system reform and England's academy schools' programme illustrate the application of effective change management strategies in diverse educational contexts. These highlight the importance of key leadership competencies such as collaboration and data-driven decision-making in achieving positive educational outcomes (Campbell et al., 2017; Eyles & Machin, 2019).

In conclusion, key leadership competencies include public relations, building coalitions, forming a vision, resilience, adaptability, problem-solving, effective communication, the inclusion of stakeholders, continuous support and data-driven decision-making. Theories as well as practical strategies from successful case studies can aid educational leaders to manage the challenges of change as well as create environments that support continuous and long-term improvement in teaching and learning.

Educational Change in Malta

The educational setting in Malta has undergone significant change in the last two decades, driven by reforms aimed at keeping the quality of education at pace with international standards. The document "For All Children to Succeed: A New Network Organization for Quality Education in Malta" (MEYE, 2005), advocated for a decentralised educational system by organising schools into 10 colleges across the Maltese islands (Cutajar et al., 2013). This shift initiated a transition from traditional top-down approaches to more participatory bottom-up ones aimed at aligning educational practices with the needs of Maltese students and society (Galea, 2005).

Central to these reforms was the School Development Plan (SDP) framework introduced by the Education Division in 2004 (Bezzina, 2006), which aimed to empower educational leaders, particularly Heads of primary state schools. This framework required schools to formulate their goals every year, in alignment with national educational policies. Educational leaders were expected to become more accountable and foster a culture of ongoing improvement within their schools.

Another educational change was with the publication of the "Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014–2024" (MEDE, 2016), which addressed learning outcomes. This document pushed a change in assessment practices from traditional summative ones to formative approaches, generating a series of subsequent reforms aimed at addressing diverse educational needs. Such reforms included the Strategic Plan for Early School Leaving (MEDE, 2012), which promoted inclusive education through initiatives like "Education for All" (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2014) and moved toward a culture of respect and equality through the "Respect for All Framework" (MEDE, 2014).

The "Malta National Lifelong Learning Strategy 2020" (MEDE, 2020) and the "National Literacy Strategy for All in Malta and Gozo 2021–2030" (Ministry for Education, 2021) further aim at catering to the diverse learning needs of students throughout their educational journey while ensuring equal access to quality education.

While these reforms have been created to move Malta's education towards a more up-to-date one, they have not been without challenges. Testament to this are the concerns among educators and stakeholders about the pace

and magnitude of these changes, evident as early as a decade ago (The Malta Independent, 2011).

Despite the apprehension brought by the constant educational change in the local context, these documents and reforms are a testament to the importance of educational change to keep up with international educational standards as well as for the necessity of leaders to possess the necessary competencies for educational change management and long-term implementation.

Leadership Competencies

Recent literature highlights the importance of leadership competencies for the management of educational change as well as its long-term implementation and sustainability. The following sections give an overview of international and national perspectives on leadership competencies.

International Perspectives on Leadership Competencies

International research on leadership competencies highlights the following key competencies needed to manage change effectively:

Visionary Leadership. Such leaders have a clear vision for educational improvement that can inspire and motivate stakeholders (Hallinger & Heck, 2010). This vision serves as a guiding beacon for change, joining together the different efforts of stakeholders towards a common goal.

Transformational Leadership. Leaders who follow a transformational method strive to collaborate with their teams, empowering them. Transformational leaders promote a shared commitment to change (Leithwood & Sun, 2021). By doing this, such leaders support schools to adapt and thrive in changing environments.

Strategic Thinking and Planning. Leaders competent in strategic thinking develop plans that integrate educational policies with institutional goals (Sergiovanni, 2012). In this way, they ensure coherence in implementing reforms and improving resource allocation.

In conclusion, leadership in educational change entails inspiring and empowering stakeholders to embrace and drive meaningful and long-term educational change through effective communication of the vision.

National Perspectives on Leadership Competencies

Research on leadership competencies within Malta's educational context is relatively limited. However, the Maltese Ministry for Education and Employment (MEDE) policy documents outline expectations for educational leaders to manage and implement educational change.

In 2016, Camilleri highlighted the strategies and challenges educational leaders face in Malta (Camilleri, 2016). A year later, Bezzina and Cutajar (2017) noted the role of educational leaders in Malta, particularly focusing on how leaders face changes in the educational setting. The National Policy on Educational Leadership in Malta (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2020) also provides an understanding of leadership practices and reforms. Furthermore, dissertations and theses, such as Agius's (2018) exploration of transformational leadership within Maltese schools, offer an in-depth analysis of competencies needed by educational leaders in the local context. Fenech (2019) also delved into the perspectives of local educational leaders. Such studies provide firsthand accounts of educational leaders facing educational change in Malta.

Competencies play a vital role in effectively managing educational change as they contribute to achieving success. Malta's local views emphasise the practical use of these skills to tackle difficulties and achieve favourable educational results (Gambin, 2018).

Methodology

Research Design

This study made use of a qualitative method of gathering data. The main data-collecting approach used to get detailed perspectives from those directly involved in the issue being studied was semi-structured interviews (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). This type of research methodology was chosen because of the nature of subjective experiences in this study and the recognition that social events are intricately connected to individual circumstances (Gaudet & Robert, 2018).

Participants and Sampling

The research delved into the perspectives of nine Heads of primary state schools in Malta who met the following specific criteria: (a) currently holding the position of Head in a primary state school, and (b) possessing a minimum of

five years experience in a headship role. Purposive sampling was used for the selection of the participants to ensure rich insights into the topic being studied.

Data Collection

Interviews were conducted during October, November and December of 2022. Some interviews were conducted face-to-face, while others were held via Microsoft Teams to adjust for practical limitations. A semi-structured interview including twelve questions was developed to guide the discussion. Three of the questions focused on definitions of educational change and its management. The rest were focused on key competencies used for educational change management, seeking the participants' perspectives on the importance of vision, coalition, involvement of stakeholders, building on change, and facing obstacles.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a thematic approach. This involved identifying recurring themes within the data collected (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Thematic analysis was chosen for its ability to provide a nuanced understanding of the research topic, allowing for the exploration of both expected and emergent themes (Creswell et al., 2007). The analysis process adhered to the six-step framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), ensuring rigour and systematic exploration of the data.

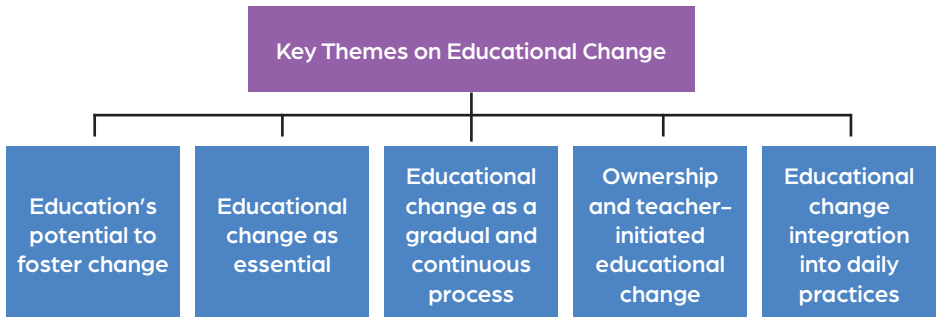
Ethical Considerations

Ethical procedures were carefully adhered to throughout the study. Research ethics approval was applied for. Consent forms were distributed and signed by the participants. Pseudonyms were used for all participants mentioned in the article to maintain anonymity and confidentiality.

Results and Discussion

The first research question required the research participants to provide their perceptions regarding educational change. This section provides an examination of educational change as defined by research participants who regard it as a complex, multifaceted concept, being both a tool and a process. The information gathered from these answers matches recent literature on educational change, which emphasises its complex, context-dependent nature and the importance of participation by stakeholders. Figure 1 shows the key themes.

Figure 1
Key Themes on Educational Change



Key Themes on Educational Change

Education's Potential to Foster Change. Lara, one of the participants, referred to Nelson Mandela's statement that education is a weapon which can be used to change the world, to give her perspective on educational change. In her view, educational change has the power to change mentalities and cultures. This opinion is also echoed by numerous scholars who argue that education is the key to progress (Sahlberg, 2021). However, education reform critics argue that reforms tend to neglect taking into consideration inequalities and socio-economic barriers limiting the impact of educational change (Biesta, 2020). Thus, effective change initiatives must take note of the particular setting where change is to be implemented and address challenges beyond classrooms for lasting change.

Educational Change as Essential. Participants agree on the need for educational change, echoing Fullan's (2020) call to adapt education to today's fast-changing world. However, critics note that rapid educational change may sometimes focus too much on the achievement of economic goals, in this way neglecting educational values (Giroux, 2019). Hence, debates on how to tackle educational change whilst taking into consideration the quality of the change is crucial for it to be successful on a long-term basis (Biesta, 2015).

Educational Change as a Gradual and Continuous Process. According to Lara, educational change should happen gradually, a view which coincides with Lieberman's (2007). This idea is also present in Kotter's (1996) 8-Step Change

Model, which suggests steps like creating urgency, building a team, setting a clear vision, involving stakeholders, removing obstacles, celebrating small successes, and making changes part of everyday school life. However, critics argue that these models may not consider each school's complex settings, making it harder to create long-term change (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009; Smylie, 2009).

Ownership and Teacher-Initiated Educational Change. Participants of this study insisted that top-down change is the one that is resisted most. Hargreaves and Fullan's (2012) views coincide with this, noting that such changes often ignore teachers' perspectives, thereby failing. Accordingly, Ann and Mark mentioned how crucial it is for teachers to believe in a change for it to be successful. This also reflects concerns highlighted in recent studies that centralised reforms may limit teachers' freedom to innovate (Hargreaves, 2019; Smylie, 2009).

Educational Change Integration into Daily Practices. Tom, one of the participants, emphasised the importance of educators integrating change practices in their daily teaching plans and their schemes of work. However, while Fullan (2020) agrees with the inclusion of a change in school routine, moving from theory to practice remains a challenge (Smylie, 2009). In Hargreaves & Shirley's (2009) view, a long-term change must address deeper instilled routines, such as cultural norms.

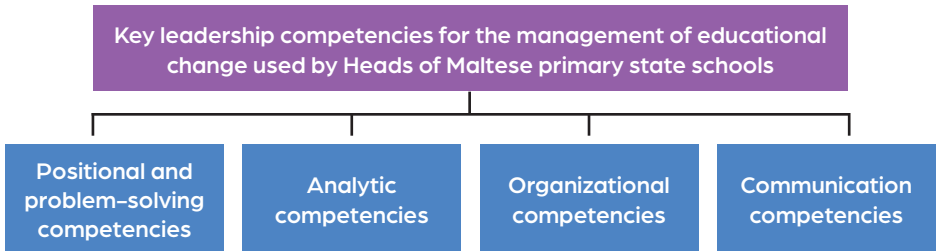
Heads of primary state schools interviewed in this study noted the complexity of educational change coinciding with research that change is highly dependent on the particular circumstances of every school. Participants stressed the importance of teachers taking ownership, making changes gradually, and aligning them with daily practices if educational change is to be successful. Their opinions contribute to how educational change is to be perceived if it is to be managed successfully.

Key Competencies for the Management of Educational Change

The second research question investigated the key competencies perceived as essential by participants for effectively managing educational change in Maltese primary state schools. Their insights contributed to identifying crucial competencies pivotal in educational change management. These are shown in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2

Key Leadership Competencies for the Management of Educational Change Used by Heads of Maltese Primary State Schools



Positional and Problem-Solving Competencies. Recent studies note that successful educational leadership goes beyond technical skills, requiring a solid grasp of how to handle challenges and make decisions (Bush, 2020). Accordingly, participants stressed that leaders should have specialised knowledge and a clear plan based on research. Case in point was Lara’s view that effective changes need a clear direction and goals.

Collaborating with stakeholders was seen as crucial if an educational change is to be successful. According to Nora, another participant, having the stakeholders on board can be a game changer. This view is also supported by Fullan (2020) and Leithwood et al. (2021), who argue that by working together with the stakeholders, there is a greater sense of ownership, thereby reducing opposition.

Emotional intelligence and building consensus were also seen as important leadership competencies when managing educational change. This converges with research in that leaders must handle challenges through dialogue and respect for different views (Fullan, 2002). This also echoes Goleman’s (2013) findings that emotionally aware leaders improve communication and resolve conflicts.

In conclusion, effective educational leadership requires an agreed-upon vision. Teamwork, effective communication and emotional intelligence were also considered key competencies for the management of educational change. Together with awareness of current research, leaders can be better prepared to manage and foster lasting change. However, the challenge of applying an

educational change in school settings remains real, highlighting the need to train leaders who can use theory as well as competencies in their management.

Analytic Competencies. Heads of primary state schools who participated in this study regarded analytic competencies, including data collection, analysis, and evaluation, as crucial for the management of educational change. Mary, one of the participants, emphasised, "Our schools are full of data; you just have to look for it", recognising the importance of using data to make decisions and following current research on utilising evidence-based methods in educational leadership (Fullan, 2020).

Leadership competence was further discussed in terms of conducting internal audits and analyses to comprehensively assess the school's current state. Mary noted, "Gathering feedback and conducting SWOT analyses are crucial for informed decision-making and managing change to improve", resonating with research advocating for systematic evaluation and strategic planning in educational settings (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). However, the differences in the school settings and cultures make data collection challenging, sometimes also due to the limited resources available (Leithwood et al., 2021).

Organisational Competencies. Effective organisational leadership was viewed by participants as aligning every decision with a shared vision to foster ownership and cohesion among stakeholders. Mary stated that "everything is interrelated with the vision, and everyone must know it to create a strong sense of ownership", reflecting the importance of vision alignment amongst stakeholders. Lara stressed gradual educational change, echoing Lieberman's (2007) finding that meaningful change requires sustained effort. Accordingly, Kotter's 8-Step Change Model provides a step-by-step approach to ensure that change is deeply embedded in educational practices. Concerning organisational competencies, Stoll and Fink (1996) assert that effective leaders foster a culture centred on a shared vision, improving the ability of an organisation to endure and recover from challenges, while also being able to adjust and thrive in changing circumstances. Participants also emphasised the need for substantial support for educators during change processes to mitigate feelings of helplessness and burnout.

Nevertheless, there are still difficulties in adequately assisting educators amid intricate educational settings (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012), emphasising the continuous requirement for leadership that combines vision alignment, persistent

endeavour, and strong support systems to effectively and enduringly navigate educational change.

Communication Competencies. Effective communication is considered a very important competency for leaders to manage educational change. The participants stressed the importance of involving educators in shared decision-making. They also highlighted how practising active listening can help a leader to fully understand the perspectives and needs of educators. In this regard, Paul, a participant in this study, emphasised how leadership charisma is an essential leadership competency to possess as a leader, in addition to administrative skills. Such a comment aligns with the significance of a leader's interpersonal skills when managing educational change (Paul, personal communication, October 19, 2022). Trust was seen as a vital element for the successful management of change because, as Sue underscored, when educators have confidence in their leader, they will work harder towards the change. Whilst, if not, an authoritarian type of leadership might ensue (Sue, personal communication, November 23, 2022). In this regard, Nora emphasised teamwork and collaboration with stakeholders, noting, "You cannot work alone" (Nora, personal communication, November 28, 2022).

From the data analysed, trust and collaboration were perceived as key competencies to foster educators' interest. Nevertheless, trust and collaboration continue to face obstacles in the face of organisational complexities (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2020). Leaders need to be adept at taking advantage of these variables if they want to implement change, make decisions that include all stakeholders, and create an atmosphere where long-term gains in education may flourish.

Recommendations for Heads of Primary State Schools in Malta

The results of this study suggest that local educational change initiated by educators is more successful compared to reforms enforced by higher authorities. From the data gathered in this study, it is recommended that educational leaders possess the following competencies when managing educational change.

Communication Competencies

In managing such endeavour, effective communication and assisting educators in their needs to improve their practice is essential.

Shared problem solving

This can be done by including educators in cooperative conversations to identify the type of educational change that should be implemented and find practical solutions.

Informed Decision-Making

This should be done by conducting internal audits, evaluating past successes, and performing SWOT analyses to ensure informed decision-making and determine what educational change is needed. Being competent in such decision-making is beneficial for an educational leader in choosing the most appropriate course of action.

Supporting Bottom-Up Educational Change

Educational leaders in Maltese primary state schools are encouraged to enhance their charisma, attentive listening, proficient questioning techniques, and empathy to assist them in establishing a system of shared decision-making. The role of leaders in such a system is to encourage cooperation, provide feedback, and support the process of change.

Recommendations for Future Research

The researcher recommends that future studies focusing on the management of educational change within the local Maltese context involve a broader range of participants, including assistant heads, and perspectives from church and private schools. Expanding the research participants in this manner will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the competencies needed for leadership competencies in various educational settings across Malta.

Since it was noted by the participants of this study that educators are known to be resistant to top-to-bottom educational reform, it would be intriguing to find out if performance bonuses could encourage and enable leaders and educators to work together more effectively in managing such educational changes. As a notion, this aligns with Kotter's 8-Step Change Model, emphasising the importance of short-term wins, in that recognising and rewarding early successes can build momentum and boost morale, thereby fostering a more engaged approach to educational change.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. It focused only on primary state schools in Malta, limiting the generalizability to other types of schools. The small sample size, though adequate for qualitative analysis, may have affected the robustness of the conclusions. Additionally, reliance on self-reported data from school Heads could have induced bias.

Conclusion

Several educational changes have been introduced in the Maltese educational system in the past two decades. These have meant new challenges for educational leaders in primary state schools, encouraging democratic practices and increased administrative autonomy (Cutajar, 2007), and requiring leaders to be more adept in managing educational change.

Research on educational change management promoting leadership competencies has prompted the researcher to explore the perspectives of Heads of primary state schools in Malta regarding educational change and the competencies they deem crucial to manage it effectively. Participants, each with over five years of leadership experience in Maltese primary state schools, were asked for their perspectives.

From the data gathered from the first research question about educational change, it was highlighted that the most successful educational change in Maltese primary state schools was attributed to initiatives led by educators.

Regarding the second research question, Heads of primary state schools noted various competencies that according to them are necessary for the management of educational change in Malta. Key competencies identified include empowering staff, active listening and questioning for shared problem-solving, communicating a clear vision, and serving as role models to foster a sense of purpose. Analysis for problem-solving was considered crucial.

In conclusion, providing support, respect, and empathy for bottom-up educational change was considered essential for effectively managing educational change in Maltese primary state schools.

Notes on Contributor

Jennifer Peresso is an educator and researcher affiliated with the Institute for Further Education. She holds a Master's degree in Applied Educational Leadership, with her research focusing on leadership competencies in managing educational change. Jennifer's publication, *Key Competencies for the Management of Educational Change: The Voice of Heads of Maltese Primary State Schools*, addresses the critical role of educational leaders and their competencies in managing educational change in primary state schools in Malta. This study employs semi-structured interviews with nine Heads of Maltese primary state schools to explore their perspectives on educational change in Malta and the competencies they utilise in managing these changes. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how educational leaders can effectively employ competencies to navigate and implement change within the local context.

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