Senior Leadership Team Communication and Educators' Stress: Implications for Policymakers

Steve Spiteri , Amanda Bezzina

Abstract

The way Senior Leadership Teams (SLTs) communicate with educators comprising teachers and Learning Support Assistants (LSEs) can make a difference on their stress. This paper examines this relationship in depth through the use of quantitative data collected from 296 questionnaire responses submitted by educators, and qualitative data elicited from eight interviewed participants (four SLT members and four educators working in Maltese primary, middle and secondary state schools). The study showed that when SLTs use different means of communication, create opportunities for educators to communicate, and are open to such communication, this reduces negative stress in educators.

Keywords

Stress, Distress, Eustress, Communication, Educators, Senior Leadership Team

Introduction

The Eurydice report (2021) ranked Malta in the fourth place amongst the countries where secondary school teachers experienced high degree of stress. In the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2020) stated that 13% of the teachers working in lower secondary or middle schools were not satisfied with their place of work and would have liked to change schools, and that there was a certain lack of satisfaction by teachers with their profession. Moreover, OECD (2020) showed that compared to the OECD average (18%), 28% of teachers in Malta said that they experienced a lot of stress at work. With this framework in mind, we were interested to analyse in more depth the way the communication by senior leadership teams (SLTs) affects the stress experienced by teachers and learning support assistants (LSEs).

Aims of the Research

The terms communication and stress have enthralled numerous scholars since they are not only pertinent to the educational sector, but are also popular amongst business studies students and service providers. This is because no organisation can thrive or uphold its reputation without effective communication (Radovic Markovic & Salamzadeh, 2018), and increased stress has been associated to increased absenteeism and employee turnover (Hassard et al., 2014).

For our research, we conducted a study across a number of primary and middle/secondary state schools which focused on two major research questions:

1. What type of communication do SLTs use to communicate with teachers and LSEs?
2. How is communication by SLTs affecting teachers' and LSEs' levels of stress?

Defining Stress

The World Health Organization (WHO, 2020) defined stress as "feeling troubled or threatened by life" (p. 11). Different scholars have disagreed about the definition of stress since stressors and stress responses are often interchanged (Wheaton & Montazer, 2010). Pearlin et al. (1981) stated that "the process of social stress can be seen as combining three major conceptual domains: the sources of stress, the mediators of stress, and the manifestations of stress" (p. 337), while Bolger and Zuckerman (1995) argued that the stress process is split into exposure and responsiveness to stressors. Galluch et al. (2015) stated that "stress is not a factor of the individual nor the environment, but rather an embedded ongoing process that involves individuals transacting with their environment, making judgments, and coping with issues that arise" (p. 3). In the Transactional Model of Stress, Lazarus (1966) and Lazarus and Folkman (1984) included the stressors as well as the factors within the individual's environment that affect stress. In summary, as Figure 1 indicates, when discussing stress the literature includes stressors, the effects of stress, the role of the environment on stress and the response to stress. This paper focuses directly on the stress that educators experience. In the following sections, particular focus will be presented on educators' stress.

Figure 1

The Relationship Between Causes and Effects of Stress
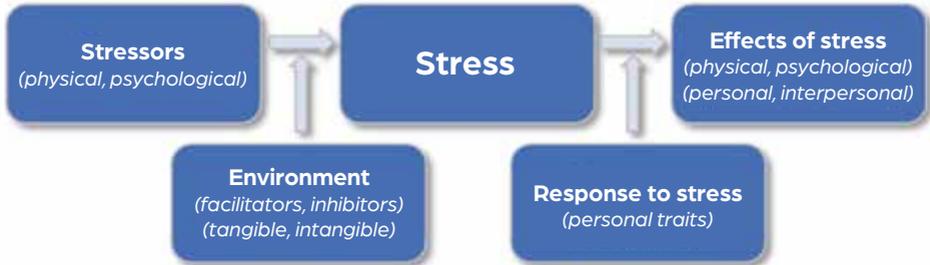
Causes of Educators' Stress

Educators (teachers and LSEs) carry out work that promotes developmental and academic growth among learners (Gluschkoff, 2017), while SLTs promote and manage environments that are conducive to the wellbeing of students and staff (Bredeson, 2000). Cockburn (1996) noted that irrespective of how experienced educators are, interpersonal relationships may affect stress. Similarly, Murphy (1995) speculated on the importance of interpersonal relationships at the workplace, while also noting the importance of inclusivity in decision–making exercises via communication.

Borg and Debono (2007) showed that a source of educators' stress is conflict with their colleagues, which could partly be attributed to inadequate communication. Other sources of stress in Borg and Falzon's (1991) study are lack of recognition for good teaching, pressure from SLTs, administrative work, and attitudes and behaviours of other teachers, which might result from inadequate communication. Stress from communication also featured in the study done by Vella (2007), where an educator noted that "to do just one item for the school you may have to talk to three, four, five people and then you realise that the first person contacted should have tackled the problem" (p. 42).

Unsurprisingly, Agai–Demjaha et al. (2015) reflected that "teaching is considered a highly stressful occupation, with work–related stress levels among teachers being among the highest compared to other professions" (p. 484).

The Effects of Stress

While stress tolerance varies amongst individuals (Mroczek & Almeida, 2004), Han et al. (2012) noted that when individuals are unable to manage stress, this interferes with how they function. Beheshtifar et al. (2011) argued that "a small amount of stress may positively encourage workers to work harder [while] excessive stress may result in negative effect" (p. 60). In the United States, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2014) noted that the effects of stress can be manifested in any of the following areas: bodily sensations and physiological effects, negative emotions, cognitive difficulties, questionable behaviour and social conflict.

Nelson and Simmons (2003) noted that "both positive and negative stimuli produce an undifferentiated stress response in the body" (p. 14). The impact of stress can be mitigated by emotional literacy, which is the recognition, comprehension, correct expression and regulation of emotions (Hillson & Murray–Webster, 2006). With too much stress, employees may experience presenteeism, where they are unable to perform to their full potential as their attention is directed elsewhere (Bhui et al., 2012). Hussain et al. (2018) noted that "stress that takes place in the working environment has harmful effects on employees' behaviour which ultimately affect personal and organizational productivity negatively" (p. 243). Dietz et al. (2017) argued that distress affects teams through decreased cooperation, ineffective communication and reduced coordination. In both the causes and effects of educators' stress, communication features and has an important role. In the next sections, we will define communication and its role in stress management.

Defining Communication

The term communication evolved from the Latin word "communicationem", which means to make common, to share and to impart (Harper, 2023, para. 1). According to Velentzas and Broni (2014), it refers to "the meaningful exchange between two or a group of people" (p. 117), while according to Keyton (2011), it refers to the process of passing information from one person to another and reaching a common understanding. Both definitions include senders and receivers but disregard the physical or non–physical means used to communicate and the time differences between synchronous and asynchronous communication which could affect this "meaningful exchange". For the aim of the paper, communication is defined as the process of imparting information from the sender(s) and its deciphering by recipient(s), which is affected by the medium and the time it takes for the message to reach the receiver (Figure 2).

Figure 2

A Process Model of Communication
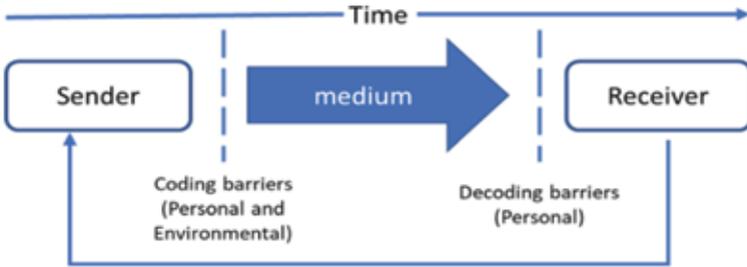
The Link Between Communication and Educators' Stress

Stress and communication can be linked together either because the content, the medium used for transmission, or the location can cause stress, or because a stressful situation could influence how one communicates (De Nobile et al., 2013). Thus, communication could be a stressor, or it could occur because of stress (Figure 3).

Figure 3

The Relationship Between Communication and Stress
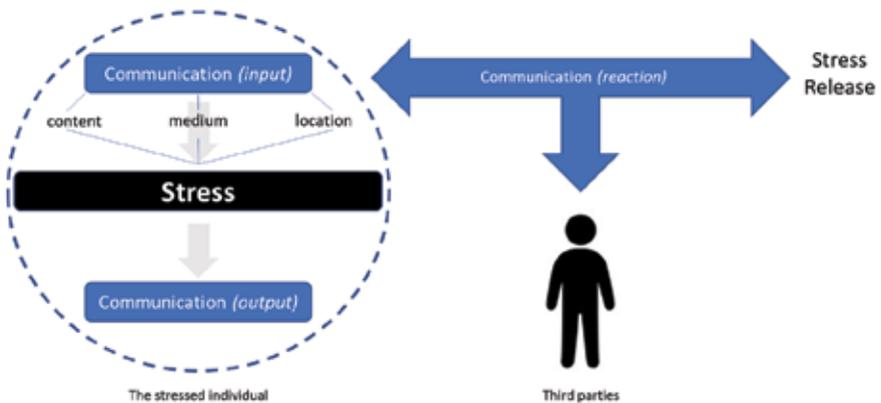
Research shows that when senders do not code messages properly, it creates a problem for receivers (Erven, 2002). The medium used could also affect the communication process, since receivers might disapprove of the medium. Physical barriers, including noise and clutter, are often overlooked, but they can severely limit the effectiveness of communication (Erven, 2002). Stress can be effectively managed through emotional literacy (Coppock, 2007; Killick, 2006; Morris, 2002), which, according to Killick (2006), is all about how we communicate with each other. Unless individuals understand emotions, express interest and care, and show empathy, their communication may be ineffective (Morris, 2002).

Methodology Used for the Research Study

Our study focused on educators' stress and the way SLTs communication affects such stress. For this reason, we included educators (teachers and LSEs) and also SLTs as participants. Participants in our research worked in either a Maltese primary school (for children who are 4–10 years old), middle school (for students who are 11–13 years old) or secondary school (for students who are 14–16 years old). A mixed method approach was adopted. According to Ivankova and Creswell (2009), "mixed methods research, with its focus on the meaningful integration of both quantitative and qualitative data, can provide a depth and breadth that a single approach may lack by itself" (p. 136). Quantitative data was gathered from educators (teachers and LSEs) via an online questionnaire, while qualitative data was gathered from SLTs through semi–structured interviews. Out of the 359–participant sample, there were 296 returned questionnaires, yielding an 82.5% response rate. Out of these, 112 respondents were educators working within primary (37.8%), 84 within middle (28.3%), and 100 within secondary (33.8%) state schools. For this research, two Heads of Schools (HOSs), two Assistant Heads (AHs), two teachers and two LSEs working in primary, middle and secondary state schools were interviewed. Apart from being asked for their consent to participate in the study, HOSs were asked to identify AHs, teachers and LSEs who might be willing to participate. Questionnaires were used so that a generalised idea about the research could be obtained, while semi–structured interviews were chosen to collect richer data, which would have been difficult to obtain in questionnaires (Bryman, 2012; Cohen et al., 2017; Dworkin, 2012; Saunders et al., 2016; Stuckey, 2013).

This study assumed a cross between interpretivism and positivism. Interpretivists look for meanings and intentions behind individuals' actions,

including behaviour and interactions with others in society (Chowdhury, 2014), while positivists assert that only the knowledge which is confirmed by the senses can be recognized as knowledge (Bryman, 2012).

Ethical Considerations

Approval to gather data from the participants was obtained from the Institute for Education and the Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation (MEYR) Research Ethics Committee (MREC). Permission was granted to disseminate the questionnaires in four primary and four middle/secondary state schools and to conduct interviews within these schools. Simple random sampling was applied to randomly draw the participants from the eligible schools.

Prior to being interviewed, participants were asked to sign a consent form, while questionnaire respondents were presented with a copy of the informed consent form on the web landing page. In the consent form, participants were informed that they can stop their participation when they want to, they will remain anonymous and that they will face no harm. Interviews required more attention due to inadvertent disclosures, so interviewees were assigned unique codes during the data analysis, and while transcribing recordings, it was ensured that personal details were omitted or pseudonymised.

Reliability, Validity and Trustworthiness

Abowitz and Toole (2010) argued that mixed method studies benefit from increased data reliability and validity. Assuming a confidence level of 95% and a margin of error of 5%, 359 participants out of the 5393 educators working in primary and middle/secondary state schools were required. However, a return rate of 82.5% (296 responses) was achieved, yielding a margin of error of 5.43%. While Faber and Fonseca (2014) argued that "using a sample smaller than the ideal increases the chance of assuming as true a false premise" (p. 28), the fact that data gathered from the questionnaires was triangulated with data gathered from interviews helped to minimise this risk. Moreover, the random sampling technique that was adopted in this study not only helped to minimise researcher bias, but also further contributed to the study's credibility and reliability.

To enhance reliability, validity and trustworthiness, before the interviews were conducted and before the questionnaires were administered there was

a piloting phase (Majid et al., 2017). The questions were amended accordingly to make them easier to understand and to answer. Furthermore, a research diary facilitated reflexivity throughout the research journey. Robson (2002) defined reflexivity as "an awareness of the ways in which the researcher as an individual with a particular social identity and background has an impact on the research process" (p. 22). Thus, reflexivity alerts researchers to bias throughout the entire process.

Results and Analysis: The Voice of the Educators and the Senior Leadership Teams about Communication and Stress

Following each interview, recordings were transcribed and forwarded to the interviewees to confirm accuracy. Table 1 highlights acronyms used for participants and their roles. Throughout the analysis of results, these will be presented to refer to what they actually shared.

All data from our research was analysed through a thematic approach. Important excerpts from the transcripts were marked, while personal notes were kept which were invaluable in eliciting the themes and subthemes. Subsequently, marked excerpts were copied in a separate spreadsheet programme. Some themes that were originally organized separately were found to be either closely related, or more fitting under a different theme. In addition, data from the questionnaire was also included in the analysis. The following are the four main themes that emerged from our research data.

  Theme 1: Type of communication used by Senior Leadership Teams
  Theme 2: SLTs' communication as a stressor
  Theme 3: SLTs' communication as a reliever of stress
  Theme 4: Educators' reaction to stress

Table 1

Participant List and Roles

Participant	Role
LSE1	Learning Support Educator 1
LSE2	Learning Support Educator 2
TCH1	Teacher 1
TCH2	Teacher 2
AHOS1	Assistant Head of School 1
AHOS2	Assistant Head of School 2
HOS1	Head of School 1
HOS2	Head of School 2

Table 2

Different Ways of Communication

		1	2	3	4	5	Total
		...					

		1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**Total**
Members of the SLT	**1**	18	1	5	3	1	**28**
use different means	**2**	3	17	4	23	2	**49**
of communication	**3**	2	31	26	23	3	**85**
in different	**4**	0	19	27	43	11	**100**
circumstances	**5**	5	11	0	2	16	**34**
	Total	**28**	**79**	**62**	**94**	**33**	**296**

Communication with members of the SLT takes place via different ways.

Note: 1 — lowest agreement, 5 — highest agreement

Type of Communication Used by Senior Leadership Teams

Teachers and LSEs who answered the questionnaire were positive about the different ways SLTs communicate with them at school (Table 2).

Table 2 shows that members of the SLT mostly use different means of communication in different circumstances, as there were 134 educators who

ticked 4 or 5 on a 5–point Likert scale. Similarly, results show that communication with SLT members is used in different ways, since there were 127 educators who ticked 4 or 5 on a 5–point Likert scale. SLT interviewees affirmed that they communicate with educators using a blend of in–person and virtual methods, where face–to–face was the most prevalent, followed by emails and school intercom. From this research, it seems that face–to–face communication takes place in different places, including SLTs' offices and the school yard. Interviewees revealed that SLTs regularly communicate via formal (Curriculum Time and staff briefings) and informal means (Messenger chat groups and WhatsApp). Interviewees noted that formal communication mostly takes place physically and is backed up by written communication. This concurs with Prabavathi and Nagasubramani's (2018) view that one of the functions of written means of communication is for record–keeping. Informal communication occurs mostly via non–physical means. HOS2 stated that informal communication is enhanced by in–person interactions, such as during morning admission. Interviewees further noted that face–to–face communication takes place in different places around the school, including areas that are quiet and those that are heavily frequented, which Wheaton and Montazer (2010) noted may exacerbate or alleviate stress.

When asking teachers and LSEs about the regularity of communication with SLTs, the dominant response was 4 on a 5–point Likert Scale for middle and secondary school respondents, while for primary school respondents it was 3 (Table 3). This does not necessarily mean that SLTs within primary schools do not communicate with educators as much as middle and secondary school SLTs do, but could imply that educators feel constrained between their classroom walls, thus limiting such opportunities or providing less meaningful interactions. In fact, TCH1 reflected that "in a primary setup communicating could be more difficult…you don't have time for yourself … break–time is inexistent". This reaffirms Wood and McCarthy's (2002) statement that "teachers working alone in their classrooms, and scheduling constraints that make finding time to meet with peers virtually impossible, can cause teachers to feel disconnected" (p. 2).

To further analyse whether communication between SLTs and educators varies according to the time of day in which it is carried out, respondents were asked whether communication with members of the SLT takes place at different times (Table 4). Participants in all three settings mostly concurred that communication with SLTs occurs at different times. In fact, while fixed time slots for daily (e.g., staff briefings) or weekly (e.g., Curriculum Time) communication

Table 3

Frequency of Communication

Members of the SLT communicate with me on a regular basis.

		1	2	3	4	5	Total
Which type of School do you Work in? 1 = Primary School, 2 = Middle School, 3 = Secondary School	1	9	16	42	38	7	**112**
	2	9	8	24	34	9	**84**
	3	12	17	27	34	10	**100**
Total		**30**	**41**	**93**	**106**	**26**	**296**

Note: 1 – lowest agreement, 5 – highest agreement

Table 4

Communication During Different Times of Day

Communication with members of the SLT takes place at different times of day.

		1	2	3	4	5	Total
Which type of School do you Work in? 1 = Primary School, 2 = Middle School, 3 = Secondary School	1	11	9	28	48	16	**112**
	2	7	6	17	34	20	**84**
	3	11	9	23	43	14	**100**
Total		**29**	**24**	**68**	**125**	**50**	**296**

Note: 1 – lowest agreement, 5 – highest agreement

were noted by some interviewees, most interviewees agreed that virtual means of communication catered for communication at different times whenever face-to-face communication was not possible. This concurs with Apulu et al.'s (2010) view that ICT helps organizations function more efficiently and effectively.

Table 5

Opportunities to Communicate with SLTs

I have enough time and opportunities to communicate with the SLT after school hours.

		1	2	3	4	5	Total
I have enough time and opportunities to communicate with the SLT during school hours	1	14	5	4	2	2	**27**
	2	12	50	22	9	1	**94**
	3	5	13	13	7	11	**49**
	4	4	25	17	30	1	**77**
	5	27	15	2	3	2	**49**
	Total	**62**	**108**	**58**	**51**	**17**	**296**

Note: 1 – lowest agreement, 5 – highest agreement

Respondents of questionnaires were asked whether they had enough time and opportunities to communicate with SLTs during and outside working hours (Table 5). There were 121 respondents who expressed that they did not feel they had enough time to communicate with SLTs during normal working hours, scoring 1 or 2 on a 5–point Likert scale, while 126 respondents felt the opposite, by ticking 4 or 5 on a 5–point Likert scale. Table 5 also shows that 170 educators feel that they struggle to communicate with SLTs after school, by ticking 1 or 2 on a 5–point Likert scale. For both of these questions, the 2 out of 5 on a 5–point Likert scale was the prevalent response.

Some interviewees argued that the type of communication they had in place catered for all instances where educators felt the need to communicate with SLTs, both at work and at home. AHOS1 noted that educators were free to contact her via Facebook Messenger as early as 6:00 a.m., while TCH2 described a situation where the Assistant Head at her school communicated with her in the evening. Conversely, both participants were partial to communication within normal working hours. AHOS1 noted that she turns the notifications on her mobile phone off so that she only communicates if she wants to, while TCH2 remarked that "sending messages in the evening does not help because that is family time".

The feeling that there is not enough time for communication between SLTs and educators was further noted by the interviewed HOSs. HOS1 explicitly noted that at times, certain pressing issues limit her availability to communicate with educators during working hours, while HOS2 reflected that "teachers are continuously delivering lessons making it difficult to find a viable time". AHOS2 summed up the sentiment voiced by these two HOSs when she said, "this makes me feel sad and uncomfortable because I don't have enough time to communicate what I would like to tell them". This finding was further confirmed in the questionnaire data whereby only 126 educators scored either 4 or 5 on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 being the lowest and 5 the highest, when asked whether their SLTs are always ready to listen to them This feedback echoed the sentiment of educators abroad, where Leonard and Leonard's (2003) study on US educators recorded that:

> A few of the teachers pointed out that they did not think it appropriate that teachers should be expected to utilize after-school time for collaborative activities, especially, as one elementary teacher noted, there is little opportunity to meet after classes since teachers "usually have children of their own or errands to run after school". (p. 5)

Data from interviews revealed that SLTs communicate with educators for various reasons, including providing support to cater for students' needs, giving feedback on initiatives, allowing educators to voice their concerns, and strengthening interpersonal relationships with colleagues. These concur with three of De Nobile et al.'s (2013) functions of communication, namely supportive, cultural and democratic freedom.

SLTs' Communication as a Stressor

Another important emerging theme was that of SLTs' communication as a stressor, which is congruent with Holmes and Rahe's (1967) Stimulus-Based Model of Stress. Data from the questionnaires revealed that teachers and LSEs who participated in this study had different opinions of the fact that the way SLTs communicate with them causes stress. Out of 296 responses, 128 educators believed that communication or the lack of communication could be stress-inducing. In fact, HOS2 argued that educators might feel stressed when communication is lacking, whereas HOS1 stated that "when it comes to communicating with [certain educators], I find it very stressful". AHOS1 reflected that her communication is not always perceived well by some educators.

On the other hand, most questionnaire respondents (mode = 4) agreed that SLTs communicate in a clear way, meaning that SLTs' communication is not only properly conveyed, but also correctly interpreted. In these cases, respondents argued that positive communication led to lack of stress. HOS2 explained that he takes extra care to "clearly convey the messages I need to communicate with them and ensure that they are not misinterpreted in any way", while LSE1 argued that if SLTs cannot express themselves adequately, this causes stress. Being able to transmit a message in a clear manner and having it interpreted accordingly is crucial to any organization because it reflects Bischof and Eppler's (2011) view that "the result of knowledge communication is the successful reconstruction of an insight, experience or skill by an individual because of the communicative action of another and is the more successful the more clear it is conducted" (p. 1455). In fact, when a Spearman correlation was performed to test whether there was an association between the clarity of SLTs' communication (Q11 in the questionnaire) and stress resulting from the way in which the SLT communicates with educators (Q19 in the questionnaire), the result showed that there is a low, negative association between the two sets of responses (r[294] = –0.15, p = .011). This result further corroborates Schneider's (2002) argument for the CBS formula (Clarity, Brevity, Sincerity) in preventing and addressing flaws in the communication process.

Questionnaire respondents were also asked about how comfortable they feel with the means of communication used by SLTs. Most of them said they were indeed comfortable with the means of communication. This was also reflected in the interviews. LSE2 stated that "there are no means of communication [used by the SLT] that make me feel more stressed than others", while LSE1 noted that she does not always appreciate virtual meetings and does not like to communicate via emails. TCH1 said that she felt comfortable with the many means of communication used by her SLT, while TCH2 stated she did not welcome written communication.

SLTs' Communication as a Reliever of Stress
In the previous theme, it emerged that teachers and LSEs participating in the study were happy with the ways and the frequency of communication from SLTs. Even though they recognised that communication can be a stressor, in reality SLTs do their best to keep communicating. This was appreciated by the participants in this study. Another important theme that addressed our research questions was the SLTs' communication as a reliever of stress.

Within the Transactional Model of Stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), SLTs' communication plays an important part as a reliever of stress. More than half of the respondents (163) ticked 4 or 5 on a 5–point Likert Scale, with 1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest, agreeing that proper communication can reduce the effects of stress.

However, 122 respondents neither agreed nor disagreed that SLTs' communication relieves them from stress. There were only 108 participants who ticked 4 or 5 for this question, implying that while respondents were aware of the benefits of communication in mitigating stress, current communication might be insufficient.

A Spearman Correlation test concluded that the more members of the SLT value such communication, the greater educators are relieved from stress (r[294] = 0.23, p = <.001). Several interviewees were aware of how SLTs' communication could relieve stress. LSE2 stated that "if you communicate and discuss, you will reduce the level of stress caused by a situation". Similarly, TCH2 stated that "if there is something that is bothering me, and I am talking to you about it, [it] helps to reduce stress". HOS2 described a situation where some of his educators were feeling stressed due to an upcoming concert, but his communication alleviated their stress. Likewise, HOS1 remarked that educators often need to discuss their problems and that her communication with them helps them find acceptable solutions, thus reducing stress and implementing Harkness et al.'s (2005) recommendations that:

> The language of stress can encourage a powerless or victim stance, therefore what may be required are new discourses that take more of a human agency perspective; where experts, instead of teaching workers to cope with stress, facilitate accountability and respectful communication. (p. 132)

Encouragement in SLTs' communication was noted to reduce stress and to inspire educators. TCH1 noted that "[SLTs] are there to help you and not to judge you".

148 respondents agreed that SLTs' communication boosts their motivation, or else, SLTs attempt to motivate them. Since motivation is beneficial, this can be viewed as promoting positive stress. When a Spearman correlation was

performed to test whether Q18 (SLT members' communication motivates me to work harder.) and Q20 (The way in which the SLT communicates with me relieves me from stress.) were linked, a significant association between the two was established (r[294] = 0.38, p = <.001).

Educators' Reaction to Stress

Data from the questionnaire shows that stress resulting from communication is affecting educators holistically (Table 6).

Table 6

Educators' Reaction to Stress

Stress responses	Response level					
	1	2	3	4	5	Total
Stress resulting from communication affects me physically.	54	95	61	72	14	**296**
Stress resulting from communication affects me emotionally.	20	58	71	102	45	**296**
Stress resulting from communication affects me cognitively.	38	43	109	72	34	**296**
Stress resulting from communication affects my behaviour.	27	74	55	112	28	**296**
Stress resulting from communication affects my relationships with others.	42	59	72	60	63	**296**

Note: 1 – lowest agreement, 5 – highest agreement

Some interviewees also described how stress affects them. For instance, HOS1 referred to high blood pressure, and occasions in which she threw a tantrum due to stress. TCH2 said that "when I am stressed, I can't think straight", while TCH1 said that "there are certain instances that the stress is too much to carry, and it affects me physically [as] I get tension headaches". Both LSE2 and LSE1 stated that "if you're stressed you can't work properly", thereby affirming Burke et al.'s (1996) and Emerson et al.'s (2017) view that when educators are unable to manage stress effectively, they are most likely to negatively impact their students' engagement, be less productive, and as a result have diminished teaching effectiveness.

Limitations of Study

Due to time restrictions, including educators' Christmas recess, the desired target of 359 questionnaire responses was not met and after several attempts to attract more participants, a sample size of 296 participants was settled for. This study took place locally, and only included SLT members and educators working in state schools, excluding church and independent school educators. No distinction was made between regular class teachers, supply teachers and teachers who provide a specialised service.

Recommendations for Policymakers

Results from our research helped us to reflect on recommendations for policymakers. SLTs and educators can be granted adequate time and opportunities to discuss professional and personal matters, using means of communication which they find meaningful. While increased in–person meetings would be preferred by many, written communication should be given due consideration together with the channel through which it is communicated.

The Employee Support Programme provided by the People and Standards Division in Malta could be accompanied by more training sessions on educators' mindfulness and wellbeing during CoPE training sessions and Curriculum Time. This would increase educators' emotional literacy skills to help them deal better with stressful communication. Educators working within primary state schools could overcome lack of opportunities to communicate with SLTs if SLTs conduct informal daily short visits to each class. This would promote increased praise and constructive criticism opportunities.

Conclusion

The study presented in the paper was undertaken to better understand the relationship between SLTs communication and educators' stress. The research tools used in this study helped us to apply the theoretical framework to the local scenario. While this study is important to better understand the link between communication and stress in an educational context, further research in this area would yield results that, when combined with those highlighted in this study, would depict a more accurate picture. This study does not address what goes on within the classroom walls. However, it is aspired that by being increasingly aware of educators' stress and what SLTs can do to minimize stress through their communication with their staff, educators feel more empowered to provide meaningful learning opportunities for their learners.

Notes on Contributors

Steve Spiteri is an Assistant Head of a primary state school in Malta. He was a primary state school teacher for nineteen years. He holds an Executive MBA in Public Management from the University of Malta (UoM). His main research interests are primary education, educational leadership and management and ICT.

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