
The Impact of Positive Leadership on the Professional Growth of Primary School Teachers

Diane Pace Debono

Abstract

This paper presents the outcomes of a research study that examined the views of heads of schools and teachers on what positive leadership meant to them and the impact positive leadership can have on teachers' professional growth. The research followed a mixed-methods convergence model approach. Six heads of schools from church and independent schools participated in an online interview, and 106 teachers from all church and independent schools participated in an online questionnaire. The results showed that both heads of schools and teachers agree that positive leadership improves communication, trust and support between them. These factors allow teachers to be more innovative in their practices, which also contributes to their professional development and growth. The findings also highlighted the importance of key practices in positive leadership and revealed valuable information regarding the application of positive leadership in Maltese primary schools. Furthermore, the research also recognised that the impact of positive leadership on teachers' professional growth also influences the school culture. The research concluded that positive leadership is an effective approach to promoting professional growth in teachers and suggests recommendations for educational leaders to adopt positive leadership practices to support teacher development and enhance school culture.

Keywords

Mixed-Methods Research, Positive Leadership, School Culture, School Leadership, Teachers' Professional Growth

Introduction

Teacher quality is possibly the most influential school-level forecaster of student accomplishment (OECD, 2018). Leadership that puts an emphasis on supporting, evaluating and enhancing teacher quality is widely acknowledged as an essential element of positive leadership (Louis & Murphy, 2018). Hart

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(2022) maintains that values, beliefs and behaviours are disseminated through regular interactions, especially with the heads of schools.

Positive leadership includes three fundamental factors: focusing on people's qualities and skills, focusing on results, and focusing on vital human virtues (Wijewardena et al., 2014). Positive leadership should not be mistaken for a lack of accountability, efficiency, or responsibility. Its basic nature facilitates ownership and accountability (Wijewardena et al., 2014).

Locally, the challenges and demands placed on teachers are growing and shifting, particularly in light of the numerous new policies and frameworks. As an educator for many years in a primary school, the researcher was impressed by the strong leadership teams that were around her. Her leaders' constant support, open communication, and the strong relationships that were built throughout the years pushed her to learn new skills, take on new opportunities and attend online courses. All these elements helped the researcher grow professionally. These experiences encouraged the exploration of the role of positive leadership in primary schools and the impact this can have on teachers' professional growth.

Literature Review

Positive leadership emphasises the cultivation of positive attitudes and behaviours within teams and organisations through the use of positive psychology's branch of applied psychology known as "organisational behaviour" (Cameron, 2013). Positive leadership is a strategy that uses positive techniques in five key areas, which include constructing a positive structure, working with a positive purpose, generating a positive atmosphere, cultivating positive connections and participating in positive communication (Malinga et al., 2019).

Positive Leadership and Teachers' Professional Growth

Studies have shown a positive link between positive leadership, employee wellbeing and professional growth (Gauthier, 2015). Focusing on the concept of positive leadership is becoming an increasingly crucial component of initiatives aimed at making institutions better (Cameron, 2012).

Teachers' professional growth refers to the ongoing process of learning, development and improvement in the teaching profession. It includes the

acquisition of new knowledge, skills and attitudes that help teachers become more effective and efficient in their roles (Dinsdale, 2017). Professional growth is an essential aspect of a teacher's career, as it enables them to keep up with the latest developments and trends in education and to provide their students with the best possible learning experiences (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002). By engaging in professional growth activities, teachers can also enhance their job satisfaction and achieve personal and career goals.

Heads of schools play a crucial role in empowering teachers' professional growth (Hallinger, 2011). They can create a supportive and positive work environment that encourages teachers to learn, grow and take risks. By providing teachers with opportunities for professional development, such as workshops, conferences and mentoring, heads of schools can help teachers develop new skills, expand their knowledge and gain confidence in their abilities (Leithwood et al., 2008). Although teachers may be personally motivated to engage in professional development, positive leadership practices may establish a culture that influences the degree to which professionals work together within the school setting (Grosemans et al., 2015).

Professional development is also correlated with supportive leadership since chances for communication and participation in decision-making contribute to the professional development of employees (Morris et al., 2020). Austin & Harkins (2008) discovered that leadership was essential for establishing learning practices that correspond with a shared vision, and for celebrating and acknowledging staff learning. Teachers who feel comfortable and appreciated by school leadership are more inclined to participate in decision-making and welcome chances to contribute to the improvement of the school (Austin and Harkins, 2008).

Cameron's Positive Leadership Model

Cameron's Positive Leadership Model emphasises four ways for leaders to encourage positive deviance within organisations: fostering a positive climate, developing positive relationships, engaging in positive communication and reinforcing positive meanings (Cameron, 2008). To activate these techniques, leaders should show gratitude, develop positive energy networks, find positive energizers and mentor employees. These techniques can help teachers' professional growth by acknowledging their strengths, celebrating good results and focusing on their strengths.

Murphy and Louis's Model of Positive School Leadership

Murphy and Louis' Model of Positive School Leadership focuses on leaders' traits, morals, basic principles, trustworthiness, and how they treat their staff and give them power (Murphy & Louis, 2008). Key characteristics of positive school leadership include understanding teachers on a personal and professional level, developing the school's culture by openly appreciating and commending their hard work and aptitudes, listening to and considering teachers' input in decision-making, and supporting them in navigating challenging situations (Peiró & Rodríguez, 2008). By focusing on these aspects, leaders can create a more supportive and effective environment for their employees, leading to improved performance and overall wellbeing.

The researcher's review of the literature suggested a research gap in that, although very little research was found on the impact of positive leadership in Maltese secondary schools, no literature was found in Maltese primary schools. Notwithstanding the conspicuous lacuna in literature with regard to positive leadership in primary schools, this study aims to start building a more refined understanding of the conditions required for the development of positive leadership in schools and of which positive leadership practices can be most effective for the professional growth of teachers.

Methodology

The Research Design

In this study, a mixed-methods research approach was used. Qualitative data was collected by conducting semi-structured interviews. Three heads of schools from church schools and three heads of schools from independent schools took part in six semi-structured interviews for this study. Although Malta has three main categories of schooling, namely state schools, church schools and independent schools, the researcher chose to focus her study on candidates from the latter two due to the period required to conduct the studies, which resulted in time constraints.

The quantitative data consisted of a questionnaire that was offered to teachers in 23 primary church schools and 10 primary independent schools. A total of 106 teachers participated in this online questionnaire (Table 1). The questionnaire explored teachers' views on positive leadership as well as potential drawbacks, and also the impact of positive leadership on professional growth

and school culture. Following a coding procedure, the themes the researcher focused on in this mixed-methods research study primarily concerned a definition of positive leadership in schools and the impact of positive leadership on teachers' professional growth and the school culture.

Mixed Methods Research

This study employed a mixed-methods research approach as the researcher felt that this best addressed the research problem. Through the convergence model (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), as seen in Figure 1, researchers integrate qualitative and quantitative methodologies to widen their evidence, enhance the credibility of their findings, and compare the results of one method with the results of the other (Creswell et al., 2003).

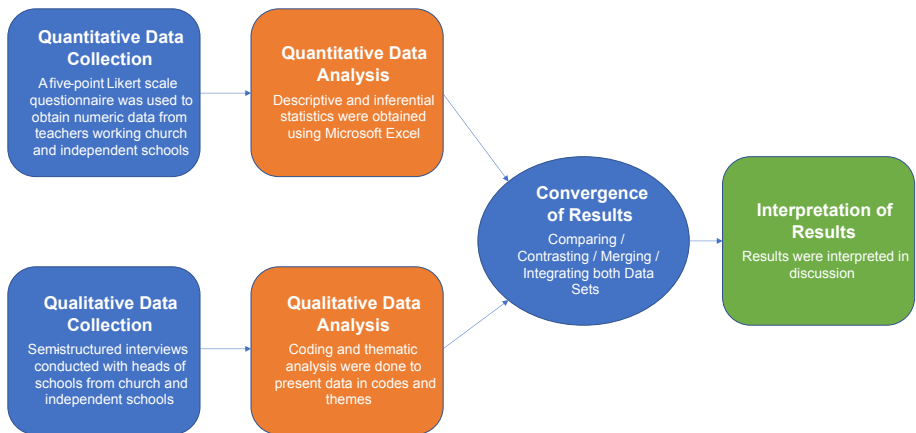
Table 1

Participants in the Questionnaire

	Church Primary School	Independent Primary School	Total
Target population of teachers	450	292	742
Number of respondents	43	63	106
Response rate	9.5%	21.6%	14.28%

Figure 1

The Researcher's Research Design of this Study



Note: This model was adapted from *Advanced Mixed Methods Research Designs* (p.63), by J. W. Creswell, V. L. Plano Clark, M. Gutmann, & W. Hanson, 2003, Sage. Copyright 2014 by Science and Education Publishing.

Reliability, Validity and Generalisability

Mixed methods research is increasingly recognised for its reliability, validity and generalizability (Lakshmi, 2019). The researcher conducted a thorough and methodical study, collecting data from various sources through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with primary school teachers and heads of schools. This aimed to strengthen the validity and reliability of the collected findings by ensuring transparency, limiting biases and following guidelines.

The questionnaire was designed to cover all relevant areas and improved validity by considering the research questions and aspects of Cameron's Positive Leadership Model. The researcher had discussions with the dissertation supervisor and piloted both instruments to ensure effectiveness. The study's findings cannot be generalised to all school leaders and teachers in Malta, so future research should aim to include samples from all educational institutions in Malta.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations extend beyond the researcher and participants, including the entire research process from question formulation to dissemination of findings. The study was conducted without harm to participants and followed rigorous ethical guidelines from the Institute for Education. Participants were informed about the study's purpose, their rights and the anonymity of their responses. Permission was granted by the primary heads of schools, and data was securely stored and password-protected, so only the researcher and supervisor had access. The study followed the Data Protection Act and GDPR to protect participants' identities. Interviews were audio-recorded, and pseudonyms were used during the study.

Limitations and Mitigation Methods

The study faced limitations and employed mitigation methods to address them. Some originally selected heads of schools declined participation due to work overload, leading to rescheduling or finding new participants. An online questionnaire was used, but the return rate was low, possibly influenced by conducting the study at the beginning of the scholastic year. Follow-up communication and reminders to heads of schools were sent. Some heads of schools were hesitant to distribute the questionnaire to teachers due to their existing workload. The increase in educators seeking further studies has led to more requests for questionnaires to be conducted, so heads of schools mentioned that they need to be selective and just choose a few.

Data Analysis Strategies

Thematic analysis was employed for qualitative data, while Microsoft Excel was used for quantitative data. Following the steps of thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2013), qualitative data was gathered from the two open-ended questions in the questionnaire conducted with teachers and from the semi-structured interviews conducted with six heads of schools. The transcripts were first read several times so that the researcher became familiar with the data. Codes were then generated in search of the initial themes for each category. The procedure led to the identification of specific themes like trust, support, communication, relationships, professional growth and the school culture. Common trends and patterns were evaluated, combined, compared and interpreted. The results from the quantitative and qualitative data were integrated to produce a final interpretation of the findings.

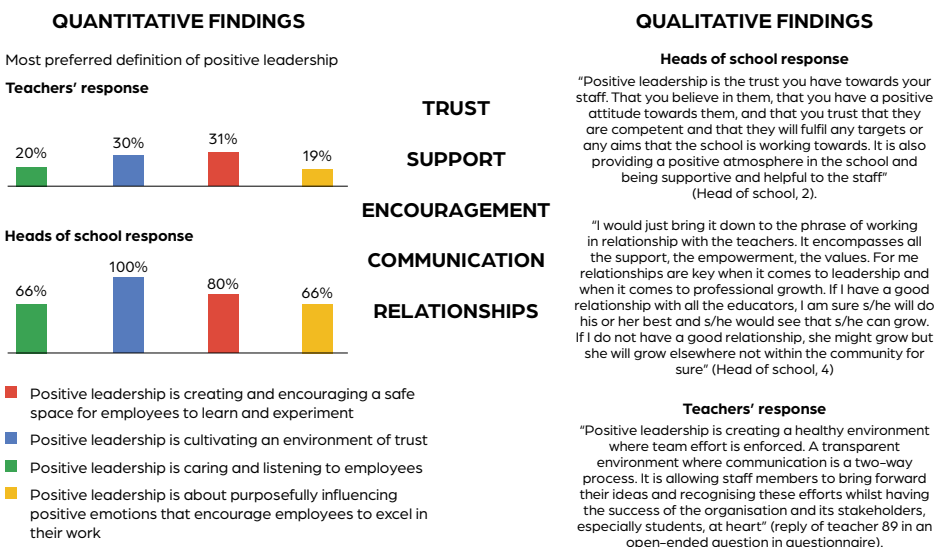
Results and Discussion

Positive Leadership

Teachers and heads of schools view positive leadership as a style where heads of schools emanate positive characteristics by supporting their teachers and communicating well. Trust between the teachers and the heads of schools was mentioned as a determining factor. The qualitative and quantitative findings clearly indicate a convergence in opinions by both teachers and heads of schools on what positive leadership means to them. Figure 2 integrates these pertinent responses. Heads of schools mentioned the ever-increasing role and responsibilities they have in schools and how important it is to face challenges with positivity. This resonates with Cameron's (2008) belief that in an ever-changing world, leaders often mention that they want to become more effective in their role.

Figure 2

Integrated Findings from Responses of Teachers and Heads of Schools on Positive Leadership



Trust, Support and Communication

The findings indicate that both teachers and heads of schools mention that trust is an element that needs to be in place for professional growth in teachers to occur: "Trust is very important because if a person feels trusted, they take more risks and become stronger at what they do" (H2). Teachers agree that they are supported by their heads of school because the heads are visible and easily accessible. In fact, 65% of the teachers in church schools and 74% of the teachers in independent schools feel that they are supported by their heads of school precisely for this reason. Lucey and Burke (2022) stress the importance that positive leaders are present and visible and also interested in their colleagues because they know what a difference it makes to the levels of communication and trust between the two.

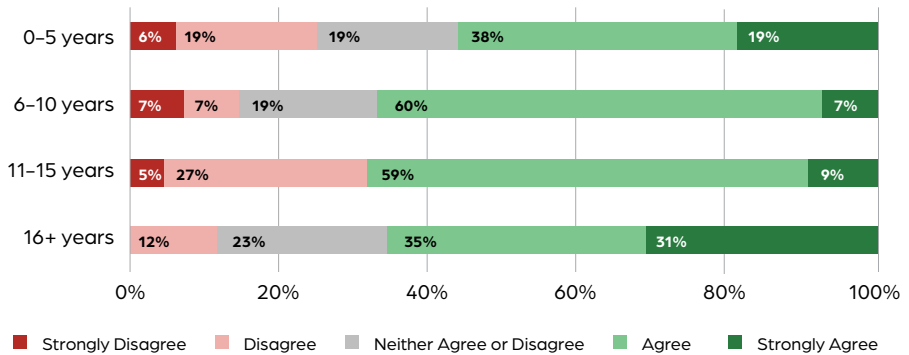
Teachers and heads of schools play a crucial role in fostering a positive environment through open, two-way communication, which requires a horizontal approach where knowledge is shared. In independent schools and church schools 70% and 67% of teachers, respectively, responded positively to their heads of school, fostering a two-way communication approach.

All heads of schools believe they have good communication channels at school and they need in-person connections, but workload demands and time constraints can hinder quality. Gordon (2017) emphasises the importance of how and when effective communication takes place. Murphy and Louis (2018) also argue that "principals, whether introverts or extroverts, must recognise that if they want to develop solid, trusting relationships with teachers (and others), they need to get out of their offices, initiate exchanges, and do so in a positive manner" (p. 57). Furthermore, some teachers also mentioned that "positive leadership should help anyone if this is done through the right communication" (T39) and that "a positive head at school works hard to create a transparent environment where communication is a two-way process" (T89). Cameron (2013) claims that positive communication is a crucial aspect of positive leadership and an essential component of his Positive Leadership Theory.

Figure 3

Questionnaire, Question 3. Findings According to Teaching Experience

3. I often share the strengths and challenges I face in class with my Head of School



Relationships

Both heads of school and teachers agree that developing professional relationships is a vital component of positive leadership. Teachers and heads of schools were asked about strengths that they share and challenges that they face in class. As Figure 3 shows, 65.1% of teachers agree that they have a relationship with their head of school that allows them to share both the strengths and challenges they face in class. Cameron (2012) suggests that leaders who foster positive relationships by recognising their employees' strengths and challenges can enhance their performance. It is significant to note that 25% of teachers in the 0-5 years of working experience bracket do not agree with this statement. Newly qualified teachers may need more support from their heads of school in order to share their strengths and challenges.

Data also revealed that heads of schools placed emphasis on the quality of their relationships with their teachers and finding the right time to establish them: "I have a fixed empty time slot daily dedicated solely to educators who need to speak to me" (H1). Debono (2018) also highlights the challenge of strong connections with staff, especially in primary schools. Some heads of schools find time to meet teachers challenging: "We have curriculum times weekly, which I try to attend every now and then" (H1). Mintoff (2021) argues

that for relationships to flourish, time for communication must be made. When findings were compared between heads of schools and teachers, this issue of time also emerged in some responses from the teachers in the open-ended questions of the questionnaire: “If they came to my class more often, I would feel appreciated and motivated to grow further because they found the time to be with me” (T50), and “in a positive leadership–teacher relationship, one feels motivated to grow professionally, but unfortunately it’s a top–bottom approach where teachers have to do what they are told” (T30).

Professional Growth

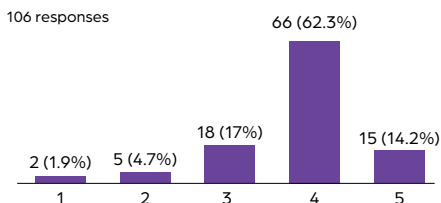
Findings in this section indicate that positive practices by heads of schools contribute to professional growth in teachers. When teachers were asked which three main aspects would help a teacher grow professionally, 72% believed that learning new skills and content was the main aspect, while 64% believed that support from leaders was the second most important aspect. Results from the interviews show that heads of schools highlight the importance of support from leaders, support from colleagues and good communication as determining factors that help teachers grow professionally. King (2011) emphasises the importance of continuous support and training for education system transformation.

Figure 4

Teachers and Heads of Schools’ Views on Being Innovative in the Classroom vs. Professional Growth

Quantitative results / Teachers’ responses

8. My Head of School inspires me to be innovative and grow as a professional. 1=Strongly Disagree 2=Disagree 3=Neither Agree or Disagree 4=Agree 5=Strongly Agree



Qualitative results / Heads of School and Teachers’ responses

“I like to give teachers a lot of freedom as long as it is in line with what the curriculum states” (H4)

“I respect and trust that they know what they are doing and I encourage them to try new things and be innovative” (H3)

“When leaders encourage us I feel trusted and appreciated and more motivated to try innovative things” (T39)

Results were merged to compare findings. 62.3% and 14.2% of teachers agreed and strongly agreed respectively, and all HsoS also agreed with the statement: “My Head of School inspires me to be innovative and grow as a professional”.

Positive leadership that focuses on employees' strengths can motivate teachers to invest in their professional growth. Supportive actions, such as knowing a teacher on a personal and professional level, are crucial for their personal and professional growth (Gordon, 2017). Heads of schools also mentioned how they encourage teachers to problem-solve, as to them, this demonstrates an important area for teachers' professional growth: "If I manage to enact action in doing, every teacher will take care of their growth areas, both individually and as a team" (H4).

The findings in Figure 4 clearly indicate that there was a convergence in opinions by both teachers and heads of schools when they were asked whether their head of school inspires them to be innovative and grow as professionals. This resonates with what is mentioned in an educational policy by the OECD (2016), which states that "innovation is a driver of growth and should lead to improved outcomes in the quality and equity of learning opportunities" (p. 1).

Findings from the questionnaire indicated that half of the teachers (50.9%) dialogued with heads of school about what they felt was important for their training during professional development days. This shows that teachers are not often consulted. Farrugia (2021) mentions that in recent sectorial agreements with the Malta Union of Teachers (2018), teachers are required to attend management-driven Community of Professional Educators (CoPE) training sessions. However, although the system is designed to provide teachers with greater freedom to pursue their own professional development and growth, more needs to be done. Findings also revealed that 65.1% of the teachers have been encouraged to attend professional development courses by their heads of school, and this was verified by the heads of schools interviewed, who all mentioned that they inform their teachers about courses and encourage them to attend. However, H2 also added that "we do inform them, but rarely do they follow them as they are very, very busy." This is resonated in a study by Azzopardi (2020), where findings indicated that "teachers reported low participation rates in self-sought opportunities such as attending voluntary conferences and postgraduate courses" (p. 77).

When heads of school were asked whether they followed up or knew what courses their teachers were following outside school, not all of them were informed by staff members whether they were following any courses or not. H1 mentioned that at school they dedicate specific time during professional

development days to allow teachers to share good practices: "If I know that you have a talent, I encourage you not to keep it to yourself but to share it with the rest of the community" (H1). This viewpoint is similarly emphasised by Blanch et al. (2016), who mention that positive leaders should establish an environment in which employees' strengths are perpetually developed and utilised, resulting in enhanced performance.

A sizeable number of teachers, 79.3%, agreed that it is up to each teacher to discover ways to increase professional growth and engage in self-sought professional learning, and this could imply that there is a bottom-up approach to professional development design and attendance. However, in a study by Zammit (2020), results showed that the majority of teachers are naturally driven to pursue self-sought professional development, but lack of time due to family responsibilities is the biggest deterrent. Positive leadership, according to Gordon (2017), also includes purposefully influencing teachers' growth, so perhaps more could be done by heads of schools to follow up on what courses their teachers are following and offer rewards or other forms of appreciation that would encourage and motivate teachers further.

Positive School Culture

Findings revealed that there was consensus among both heads of schools and teachers in that both fully agreed that the relationship between positive leadership and teachers' professional growth can make a positive difference in school culture. As shown in Figure 5, 93.8% of the teachers were of the same affirmative opinion that the relationship between positive leadership and teachers' professional growth can make a difference in school culture. All the heads of schools also concurred with this statement. This indicates that when findings were compared, teachers and heads of schools valued the relationship that there could be between positive leadership, teachers' professional growth, and subsequently the school culture. This resonates with the findings in a study by Schreiber (2019), whereby the researcher identifies that "school leadership consistently rises to the top of the list of factors that significantly influence school culture (p. 57). Sergiovanni (2006) also states that heads of schools play an essential role in the health and happiness of the school's students and staff. Heads of schools also agree: "Yes, absolutely. If you model a collaborative leadership style, that is what they see. At the teachers' level and also in the classroom. It goes literally in parallel" (H4).

Teachers were also asked to give reasons why they thought that the relationship between positive leadership and teachers' professional growth could affect the school culture. They communicated: "Professional growth can be encouraged in different ways towards the teacher, from simply acknowledging positive work to better working incentives" (T2), and also "if leadership is positive, then teachers feel safe to accept new opportunities for professional growth" (T29).

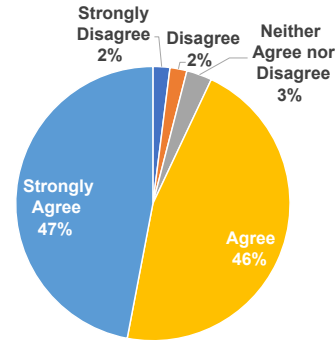
Synopsis of Results and Discussion

Many factors can lead to professional growth; however, due to the limitations of the study, only a few of these factors in relation to positive leadership were explored. As indicated by the emerging themes, findings in this section suggest that the link between positive leadership and teachers' professional growth is greatly conditioned by how heads of schools and teachers go about cultivating all of these characteristics. Both heads of schools and teachers agreed that trust, support and communication are important factors in enhancing positive relationships between the two parties. They also concurred that positive leadership is an important element in fostering professional growth in teachers, but despite this acknowledgment, applying a positive leadership approach is challenging, not least because it competes with other pressing job demands. The interpretation of the findings, which analysed and integrated responses from heads of schools and teachers in church and independent schools, are just a few of the components needed for teachers' professional growth. However, the overarching question was how positive leadership impacts professional growth in teachers, and all the components analysed and discussed have contributed to answering the research question.

Figure 5

Integrated Findings Related to the Relationship between Positive Leadership, Teachers' Professional Growth and the School Culture

Do you think that the impact of positive leadership on teachers' professional growth also influences the school culture? (Teachers' responses)



“Teachers who are encouraged to grow professionally by their leaders will create a stronger school culture” (Teacher 4)

“As previously mentioned, when a positive environment is being fostered, the educator is more motivated to work and happier to come to school therefore this impacts the school culture as more teachers are happy to be there” (Teacher 11)

“I strongly agree because when people feel valued and appreciated via the positive environment that a leader creates it becomes second nature for them to expand their horizons, to try new things, things not to get stuck in the rut, and by so doing then the school's culture is enhanced and the school's values are enriched as well” (Head of School 1)

Heads of Schools and Teachers acknowledge that the impact of positive leadership on teachers' professional growth also affects school culture.

Social Implications of This Research Study

The impact positive leadership can have on teachers' professional growth cannot be underestimated. Findings in this study indicate that positive leadership in primary schools can have significant social implications for leaders, teachers, students and the school community at large. It fosters improved relationships, increased workplace engagement and a more connected school culture. Teachers and heads of schools perceive positive leadership as supportive, trusting and positive, leading to increased motivation and innovation. This environment also inspires future generations to pursue careers in education. By prioritising positivism and fostering a supportive school culture, leaders can create a more inclusive and productive learning environment for all students. This study highlights the importance of positive leadership in fostering a positive school environment.

Conclusion

This research highlighted the beneficial impact positive leadership has on teachers' professional growth. Results from this study showed that heads of schools play an impactful role in creating opportunities for school teachers to grow professionally, which is done by engaging in positive communication and offering trust and support. Positive school leaders also play an indispensable role in developing a positive school culture that promotes strong relationships with teachers. The overall attitudes of heads of schools appear to relate well to both Cameron's (2013) Positive Leadership Model and Louis and Murphy's (2018) Positive School Leadership Model.

Finally, the results from this study can be applied by heads of schools to deepen positive leadership practices that lead to increased professional growth in teachers. Teachers could also use this research to help them reflect on their professional growth, identify ways to improve, and make use of the opportunities available for this growth to occur. The findings in this research have provided the researcher with a strong conviction that positive leadership is needed in our educational system to improve present practices and face future challenges. For these reasons, school leaders who trust the transformation that arises through positive leadership should implement the discussed approaches and strategies to generate this positive environment of professional growth and positive culture in their schools.

Recommendations

This study found that positive leadership is beneficial for teachers' professional growth, with both teachers and heads of schools agreeing that it has several advantages in schools. It is suggested that further research should include a larger sample of teachers and heads of schools from Maltese state schools. Further research should include the involvement of assistant heads, students and parents to provide a broader view of the impact of positive leadership in various areas of the school. This study could serve as an initial resource for heads of schools in the primary sector, offering insights into the advantages of positive leadership. Additional training in positive leadership in primary schools is highly encouraged, and sharing positive practices with other heads of schools will be advantageous for leaders.

In the study, most teachers (72%) said that learning new skills was important for their professional growth. Teachers should be encouraged to take courses

locally and/or abroad and should be given ample time to share their learning with other teachers. Heads of schools should also be more interested in learning about the courses their teachers are following, as this could increase the possibility of teachers having different roles within the school.

Teachers are urged to make the most of every professional development opportunity so that they can expand their knowledge base and improve their own teaching expertise. A trusting work environment is fundamental to positive leadership, and heads of schools can reflect on their practices to enhance an environment based on trust. This will help schools understand the benefits of positive leadership and provide a foundation for supporting teachers' professional growth.

Notes on Contributor

Diane Pace Debono has a first degree in Youth and Community Studies, a post-graduate certificate of education in Personal, Social, and Career Development (PSCD), and a Master's degree in Applied Educational Leadership. Diane has a track record of successful teaching in the primary classroom, as well as being a level leader, SEL educator and mentor for teachers.

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