

# The Role of the Senior Leadership Team in Promoting Class Teachers' Wellbeing in Primary Schools

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## Abstract

This paper examines the present situation of class teachers in primary schools and the possible strategies that school leaders can employ to promote teachers' wellbeing. An explanatory sequential mixed methods research design was used. The first phase involved distributing two online surveys, one for class teachers and one for SLT members, in seven Maltese primary schools. The data from the questionnaires were integrated and analysed to formulate the interview questions held with Heads of Schools (primary). Findings revealed that the support from school leaders is essential to enhance teachers' welfare and that strategies including an open-door policy, shared decision-making, teambuilding activities, and the enforcement of curriculum time help sustain a whole-school approach toward teachers' wellbeing. Following the research findings, the last section of this article concludes the study by tying it to practice and presenting an action plan that school leaders can use. This research also presents the ideas of this action plan in a user-friendly website<sup>1</sup> aimed at giving the right tools to school leaders to bring about the change needed in the lives of educators.

## Keywords

Wellbeing, Class Teachers, Senior Leadership Team, Primary Schools, Strategies, Action Plan

## Introduction

Teaching can be a rewarding profession involving influential and meaningful work. However, the expectations teachers place upon themselves and the expectations placed upon them by others make the teaching profession among the most stressful (Larrivee, 2012). A Eurydice survey (Davydovskaia et al., 2021) suggests that one crucial cause of burnout for Maltese teachers is keeping up with the changes put forth by the authorities. While education

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systems worldwide are evolving, fewer people are attracted to teaching. Because of this, teacher shortage and frequent turnover are experienced worldwide (Viac & Fraser, 2020). Malta is no exception; the number of teachers who resigned from the profession increased by 119%, from 26 in 2008 to 57 in 2018 (Parlament ta' Malta, 2019). The dangers of work stress and its effect on educators' wellbeing are significant barriers to the teaching profession in Malta (Attard Tonna & Calleja, 2018). When facing such challenges, educational leaders must understand teachers' wellbeing and its implications on their performance. Albeit research on teachers' wellbeing is vast, research on essential leadership skills and actions to create a positive school environment that enhances a whole-school approach toward teachers' wellbeing is lacking as most researchers focus only on the teachers' perspective (Haber, 2020).

This study seeks to understand the role of school leaders in promoting class teachers' wellbeing in primary schools. It aims to evaluate how educators perceive the term *teacher wellbeing* and its implications on teaching and learning. It also seeks to show the importance of school leaders promoting their teachers' wellbeing by implementing strategies to address stress, anxiety, and reactions to continuous changes, encouraging a positive environment in their schools. Finally, the study also aims to provide a practical programme for three scholastic terms that the School Leadership Team (SLT) can use as a strategic development plan for their schools.

This study is therefore based on the following research questions:

1. What is the role of the SLT in promoting class teachers' wellbeing in primary schools?
2. How do SLT members and class teachers understand the concept of wellbeing?
3. How does the class teachers' wellbeing impact their work performance?
4. What strategies should SLT members use to help improve teachers' wellbeing?
5. How can these strategies be implemented in practice to enhance teachers' wellbeing in schools?

Additionally, the Irish Department of Education and Skills (2019) links wellbeing to many protective and risk factors. WHO (2014) identified discrimination, oppression, inequality, and poverty as significant risk factors within our society that increase a person's vulnerability and decrease their wellbeing. Kern et al. (2014) suggest that positive emotions are frequently associated with positive results, including hope, physical vitality, life satisfaction, and gratitude. WHO (2010) also conclude that wellbeing is "influenced not only by individual attributes but also by the social circumstances in which persons find themselves and the environment in which they live; these determinants interact with each other dynamically" (p. 2).

## Literature Review

### Teachers' Wellbeing

Organisations need engaged employees who feel enthusiastic, energetic and dedicated to their work (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008). Researchers have worked on various positive indicators for subjective wellbeing (SWB). Diener (1984) defines SWB as happiness, or more specifically, satisfaction with life and the experience of positive emotions. Judge et al. (2001) assert that to achieve subjective wellbeing there must be job satisfaction, while Bakker and Leiter (2010) add that to achieve a good level of occupational wellbeing, individuals need to engage actively in their work and find happiness in what they do (Warr, 2007).

This study is concerned with this type of wellbeing and predominantly involves examining teachers' wellbeing and the various reasons why fewer people are attracted to the teaching profession. Multifaceted interpretations of the term wellbeing have made it difficult to define and measure (Opdenakker & van Damme, 2000). However, after going through various literature, the researcher adapted the definitions of wellbeing given by WHO (1947) and Diener (1984) and presented a description of teachers' wellbeing that applies to the Maltese context. It defines teachers' wellbeing as "*a positive attitude towards the profession that allows good physical and mental health and overall contentment*".

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## What Affects Teachers' Wellbeing?

Teacher demands are very high and ever-growing (Bransford & Darling-Hammond, 2012). Teacher stress is pervasive and can be seen across many countries and in different educational sectors (Gray et al., 2017), resulting in lower job satisfaction and frequent burnout (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2016). The latest Teacher Wellbeing Index by Education Support UK (2020) claims that workload continues to be the primary concern that causes talented people to leave the profession. It also states that 63% of educators in England consider leaving the job due to workload, whilst 53% report personal wellbeing and mental health as a factor in this decision. Furthermore, according to Schleicher (2018), teachers are expected to equip students with specific cognitive skills and encourage the development of non-cognitive skills (such as collaborative skills and self-confidence). They must cater to their students' individual needs and collaborate with parents and other educators to help their students develop holistically. These dynamics make the teachers' job particularly demanding.

## Teacher Wellbeing During a Pandemic

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the educational field has experienced immense changes. Schools worldwide underwent sudden closures, and educators had to adapt to remote learning to continue their jobs amid a series of stressors and unusual circumstances that may have affected their wellbeing and mental health.

The increasing usage of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) as the primary source of teaching and learning has created various challenges for students and educators, including a lack of access to adequate resources and tech-illiteracy (Ramij & Sultana, 2020). Multiple studies show that teachers' stress and anxiety levels increased due to COVID-19. In Germany, educators experienced a medium-to-high amount of stress during lockdown (Klapproth et al., 2020), while in the United Kingdom, educators reported high anxiety levels (Allen et al., 2020). Other studies in China by Huang and Zhao (2020) found that 35.1% of educators and students presented with stress symptoms and 21% with mild anxiety.

All the aforementioned studies and others (Hidalgo–Andrade et al., 2021) conclude that there seem to be more challenges ahead with the recent COVID–19 outbreak. Therefore, policymakers and educational systems worldwide need to take our educators' mental health and wellbeing more seriously. There is a need to provide institutional support and resources to enable wellbeing. Besides this, Collie's (2021) study showed that autonomy–supportive leadership could lower the somatic burden, change–related stress, and emotional exhaustion.

### Teacher Wellbeing and Support in Malta

Over the past two decades, the Maltese education system has undergone various reforms, starting with the 2006 amendment to the Education Act and the introduction of the National Curriculum Framework in 2012. The NCF proposed a “universal education entitlement built around eight Learning Areas, inspired by the EU eight Key Competences Framework” (MEDE, n.d.).<sup>2</sup> This framework would serve as the keystone for learning and assessment throughout the years of compulsory schooling. The main objective of the Learning Outcomes Framework is to “free schools and learners from centrally–imposed knowledge–centric syllabi” (Attard Tonna & Bugeja, 2016, p. 170).

Research on teachers' wellbeing in Malta is minimal (Mizzi, 2018). Literature suggests that teachers' wellbeing is not given significant attention, since 71% of teaching staff claim to be dissatisfied with their working conditions (Attard Tonna & Calleja, 2018). The same study found that student misbehaviour, co–education in secondary schools, lack of legal support and low salaries are directing educators away from the profession. A study by Mizzi (2018) explores the major factors known to affect teachers' psychological wellbeing in Maltese state secondary schools. In her research, Mizzi explained that teachers' overall rate of resignations in European countries is considered very high. The findings of her study showed that teachers' wellbeing in Maltese state secondary schools is conditioned by various factors, mainly school population, workload, collegiality, physical environment, leadership practices and organisational support. Interviewed teachers support the need for more emotional awareness during teacher training. This study also suggested that transformational leaders can promote positive strategies and practices such as teamwork and equality among staff. These strategies enhance teachers' wellbeing.

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Two similar studies on teachers' stress are the ones conducted by Borg and Riding (1991) and Cassar and Formosa (2011). The findings of both studies suggest that an average of 35% of the participants consider the teaching profession stressful or highly stressful. However, the main difference between the two studies is that Borg and Riding concluded that job-related stress affects more males than females, while Cassar and Formosa concluded the opposite.

In 2020, the Ministry for Education and Employment created a set of recommendations for the wellbeing of school educators. These were adapted from a video series by the University of Malta (2020) and feature five basic strategies that teachers can adopt: social support, a growth mindset, self-regulation, mindfulness, and self-care.

Furthermore, employers in Malta are responsible for ensuring the health and safety of all employees, including their psychological and emotional wellbeing (Ministry for Health, 2020). In this respect, the Maltese government is committed to preventing harassment and bullying and providing a supportive work environment for all teachers working in state schools (People and Standards Division, 2021).

Malta also offers various support for teachers' wellbeing. Within the People and Standards Division, the Employee Support Programme (ESP) is one of the direct support services provided to public service employees, including educators working in state schools. This professional support service offers confidential support and counselling to those experiencing personal and/or work-related difficulties. As part of the European Social Fund Malta 2007–2013, the ESP published two handbooks: *Managing Mental Health at Work* and *Guidelines for Managers on Employee Wellbeing*. These two handbooks can be found on the People and Standards Division website.<sup>3</sup> The ESP also supports managers, including school leaders, "to identify and respond to the needs of employees experiencing personal, emotional and/or behavioural problems which are interfering with their work-life balance" (People and Standards Division, 2021, p. 24).

Furthermore, the NGO The Richmond Foundation offers various counselling and training services for persons with mental health problems. One of their primary services is Healthy Minds Work, which supports employees experiencing work "burnout, anxiety and depression" by giving them self-care tips and

resiliency skills. The Richmond Foundation offers various workshops to help employees understand the common signs and symptoms of anxiety and also help them adapt to different changes. It also provides professional guidance on maintaining a balance between work and life (Healthy Minds Work, 2018).

### School Leaders

School leaders "are a primary instrument, or leveraging factor, in the flourishing of schools and the assurance of wellbeing for teachers, staff, students, and school families" (Cherkowski & Walker, 2018, p. 129). Enabling teachers' wellbeing is an essential first step in school-wide wellbeing programmes to promote student wellbeing (Quinlan, 2017). This research aims to study the role of school leaders in promoting class teachers' wellbeing in primary schools.

Leadership is an essential component in a school because, besides improving school climate and environment, it also plays a vital role in enhancing school outcomes by influencing the capacities and motivations of educators (Pont et al., 2008). A leader can use multiple leadership styles according to the situation at hand. After evaluating a problem, a leader can apply a style that best fits organisational needs and work environment. Cuban (1988, p. 190) tells us that "there are more than 350 definitions of leadership but no clear and unequivocal understanding as to what distinguishes leaders and non-leaders".

Even though it is very challenging to define leadership, there are specific skills that a leader should possess to create a positive working environment. A healthy working environment can improve performance and productivity (McGuire & McLaren, 2009). When school leaders cultivate a positive atmosphere, it influences employees' attitudes towards their job and coworkers (Nguyen & Hunter, 2018). One essential factor in creating a positive working environment is ensuring employees are happy and healthy. Therefore, taking care of their wellbeing is vital. According to van der Vyver et al. (2014), school leaders that display respect in their style can contribute extensively to teachers' wellbeing. In contrast, a lack of care may reduce teachers' experiences of quality working life and wellbeing.

Moreover, many teachers experience stress and anxiety since they are exposed to highly stressful school environments (Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2016). Additionally, Evers et al. (2014) found a correlation between absenteeism

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and poor occupational wellbeing. Every leader provides direction, implements plans, and motivates people in their own style. Some leadership styles may facilitate optimal performance (Antonakis et al., 2003) and enhance teachers' professional wellbeing (Yildirim, 2014), while others may contribute to teacher burnout and anxiety (Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2016).

### Whole-School Support

Haber's (2020) research focuses on the perceptions of seven SLT members regarding a whole-school approach to wellbeing in secondary schools. The findings of Haber's study identified four areas of a whole-school approach to wellbeing: the school culture and environment, the curriculum, relationships and partnerships, and training and support.

Furthermore, one of the aims of this study is to develop a wellbeing programme built on a whole-school approach that responds to the evolving needs and changes within schools. This programme will be concise and designed around the needs of Maltese primary school teachers to help them positively manage or overcome significant wellbeing challenges. Programmes for teachers' wellbeing frequently involve positive behaviour interventions and mindfulness training that help teachers assess their own wellbeing accurately. This ameliorates teachers' resilience and enables them to care for the wellbeing of their colleagues, resulting in better-quality education (Curry & O'Brien, 2012). McCallum and Price's (2010) research with novice teachers suggests that including wellbeing programmes in their training will equip them with the skills and support to confront the various stressors encountered in their new profession. This will make it easier for them to adapt, eventually improving teacher retention and wellbeing in schools (McCallum & Price, 2010).

### Methodology

Even though the literature on teachers' wellbeing in Malta is relatively scant, studies suggest that most teachers claim to be discontented with the current job conditions in Maltese schools (Attard Tonna & Calleja, 2018; Borg & Riding, 1991; Cassar & Formosa, 2011; Davydovskaia et al., 2021; Mizzi, 2018; Haber, 2020). As many scholars suggest, a whole-school approach to wellbeing is needed to tackle the various difficulties and challenges educators face in their profession (Mizzi, 2018; Haber, 2020; Lester et al., 2020).



Since this research aims to give class teachers and SLT members a voice regarding the topic of wellbeing, a mixed methods research design was employed. MMR has various advantages that make it ideal for this particular study since it aims to provide a framework to guide the researcher in the implementation and ensure that the final design is rigorous and high-quality (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

This study employed the explanatory sequential design. This type of design involved two phases: the collection and analysis of quantitative data, followed by the collection and analysis of qualitative data to broaden the data collected in the first phase of the research.

Phase one of the research included the distribution of online questionnaires to SLT members and class teachers in seven primary states schools in Malta and Gozo. From the participants who returned the questionnaire, most class teachers (40%) were between 36 and 45 years old, while nearly all SLT members were between 36 and 55 years old. Eighty-five percent of class teachers and 65% of SLT members were female. The results from the questionnaires helped increase the generalisability of the collected data and, eventually, informed the qualitative design used in phase two more validly. The data collected from the questionnaire was integrated, analysed and compared. It was used to inform and shape the design of the semi-structured interview questions with six Heads of Schools, which was the second phase of the research.

Data analysis began immediately after data collection of each respective phase. Quantitative data from the online questionnaires and basic demographic data from the interviews were analysed using descriptive statistical procedures, whereas the thematic analysis approach proposed by Braun & Clarke (2006) was employed to analyse qualitative data.

## **Findings and Discussion**

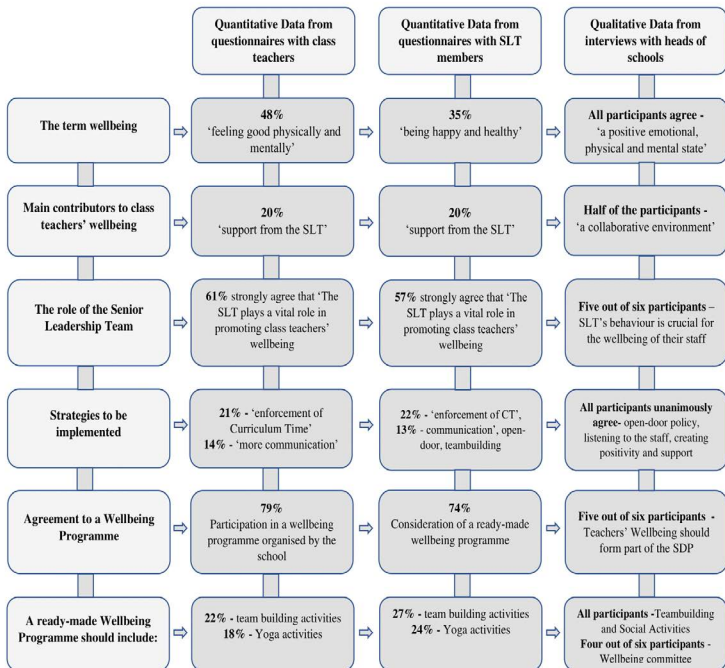
Figure 1 shows a joint display of the datasets, and the researcher used it to discuss the three datasets. A visual display that brings data together makes it possible to draw out new perceptions that risk being ignored if information from quantitative and qualitative results are left separate (Fetters et al., 2013). This figure shows that with regards to the understanding of the term wellbeing and

the role of the SLT, qualitative analysis confirms the findings of the quantitative analysis since both provide similar information. Due to this confirmation, the results have greater credibility.

Regarding the strategies the SLT should implement to enhance teachers' wellbeing, the quantitative analysis shows that the enforcement of curriculum time is an essential strategy that needs to be implemented. School leaders should ensure that class teachers have time to plan and communicate with their colleagues. This strategy was not directly mentioned during the interviews, although one of the Heads said that the long hours in class due to COVID restrictions are an added burden on the teachers.

**Figure 1**

*Integration of quantitative and qualitative analysis*



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### Research Question 1: What is the Role of the SLT in Promoting Class Teachers' Wellbeing in Primary Schools?

The findings of this research show that all class teachers (78 participants) and SLT members (23 participants) believe that support from the SLT is one of the main contributors to teachers' positive wellbeing: 61% of class teachers and 57% of school leaders strongly agree that the SLT is vital in promoting teachers' wellbeing. School leaders play an essential role by allowing educators to engage in their work effectively (Brotheridge & Lee, 2008) and with higher levels of confidence and commitment (Anari, 2011) by assisting them in coping with the burdens of the profession.

The second phase gives a stronger answer to this research question. It is interesting to research the school leaders' perspectives since they are the ones who stand on the frontline and are responsible for reducing the challenges faced by their teachers to improve their performance. Half of the Heads of Schools interviewed admit that the role of school leaders is to lead by example since teachers tend to mirror their leaders' behaviour. This confirms Whang's (2021) research, amongst others, on the different virtues of school leadership, emphasising various traits, including leading by example which creates a sense of mutual dependence and encourages others to provide additional support to reduce teachers' stress.

Moreover, the interviewed participants also state that the SLT should enable school members to collaborate in solving problems. Participants mentioned different levels of shared decision-making that they find themselves comfortable using since they admit that this can sometimes be challenging and time-consuming. However, research shows that teachers who take part in shared decision-making feel more empowered than teachers who do not (Blasé & Anderson, 1995; Bogler & Nir, 2012; Geuenert, 2000; Kenan & Yildiz, 2017; and Leonard & Leonard, 2003, all cited in Bardwell, 2021).

### Research Question 2: How do SLT Members and Class Teachers Understand the Concept of Wellbeing?

In the literature review, this research developed a working definition of teachers' wellbeing as *"a positive attitude towards the profession that allows for good physical and mental health and overall contentment"*. This study confirms this

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definition since most participants acknowledge that wellbeing is a state of feeling happy and healthy physically and mentally.

In the second phase of this research, Heads of Schools reinforce this definition of wellbeing and add that wellbeing is finding a work-life balance. One Head of School stated, "The teacher job is a 24-hour job. Teachers spend weekends preparing lesson plans, filling up referral forms, and answering our emails. Teachers need to take care of their social life first". Finding a good work-life balance includes balancing the behavioural, emotional and time demands of career, family and other personal duties (Clark, 2000; Hill et al., 2001). It also helps teachers be more productive in their work fulfilment, personal responsibilities, and family affairs. In this study, the researcher explores the various elements that significantly affect class teachers' work-life balance status. Amongst other factors, Heads of Schools mention that the constant changes, lack of respect, challenging students, pressure from social media and the present pandemic times affect class teachers' wellbeing and the quality of work-life balance significantly.

The present study confirms the importance of relationships and good collaboration. When participants were asked to list the main contributors to positive wellbeing in schools, 20% of teachers and SLT members confirmed that good collaboration between educators is essential for the wellbeing. This is also emphasised by Huppert (2009), who also gives importance to relationships in his work on psychological wellbeing. Lyubomirsky et al. (2005) add that to boost subjective wellbeing, one must have supportive relationships, but having high subjective wellbeing in turn leads to better social relationships. Thus, positive relationships may cause and be caused by contentment. Regrettably, as mentioned in the interviews with Heads of Schools, teaching became a lonely job during the COVID-19 pandemic: "Schools are enjoined to keep the size of each bubble as small as is feasible" (MEDE, 2020, p. 4). Also, due to a shortage of teachers, peripatetic teaching staff are being redeployed to classes. Thus, as a health recommendation, class teachers are expected to stay with their students throughout the whole school day. All this and the introduction of staggered break times cut teachers off from their routine conversations and interactions with their colleagues. Being a teacher is a demanding career (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011), and COVID-19 has pushed aside some heart-warming, relational positives for teaching and replaced them with increased demands and stress (Jones & Kessler, 2020).

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### Research Question 3: How Does the Class Teachers' Wellbeing Impact Their Work Performance?

The educator's job is considered highly stressful in many places worldwide (Jepson & Forrest, 2006). All participants agree that teachers' wellbeing impacts their work performance. The findings of this research show the different ways this happens. Nearly 20% of the questionnaire participants admit that high stress levels lead to poor performance. 25% of the participating class teachers reveal that positive emotions lead to better performance. This confirms the work of various scholars. In a study by Sutton and Wheatley (2003), teachers reported experiencing positive feelings such as happiness and pride when they witnessed progress from their students. The present research agrees that the teachers' emotional mindset on their engagements and emotions are crucial to success in both work and professional development (Lei et al., 2018). These individuals tend to display more significant control over their feelings, and usually use antecedent-focused emotion regulation strategies. (Gross & Thompson, 2007). In this way, they turn a negative situation into a positive one by looking into it using positive feelings (Gross & John, 2003; Tamir et al., 2007). Eighteen percent of the questionnaire participants acknowledged that having happy and healthy teachers makes students happy. Therefore, this confirms that wellbeing affects teachers' and students' academic performance. Evidence from academic studies supports this (Glazzard & Rose, 2019; Zee & Koomen, 2016). Eliminating all stressors associated with teaching is not possible; however, mindfulness training may be a practical strategy for improving teachers' emotional health (Mansfield et al., 2016).

### Research Question 4: What Strategies Should SLT Members use to Help Improve Teachers' Wellbeing?

The results shown in Figure 1 substantiate the need for leaders with specific skills and behaviours to create a positive working environment, including good communication and listening skills. School leadership behaviours have been linked to teachers' emotions (Berkovich & Eyal, 2017) and wellbeing (Berkovich & Eyal, 2018). The correlation analysed in this study shows a strong correlation between communication, trust and an effective support system. Participants who feel that the SLT in their school trusts them, listens to their needs and communicates well with them also believe that their school has an effective support system. This means that listening to the teachers can enhance the

emotional climate in the school and create an environment that fosters care and attention (Brackett & Katulak, 2007). This research confirms Bass's (1999) theory of transformational leaders, which suggests that transformational leaders work in a team, ignoring their self-interests most of the time, in order to recognise and work on the change needed through influence and inspiration.

Research Question 5: How can these Strategies be Implemented in Practice to Enhance Teachers' Wellbeing in Schools?

All research participants agree that schools should develop an educators' wellbeing strategy. Seventy percent of class teachers are willing to participate in a wellbeing programme. Additionally, more than 70% of SLT members are eager to organise a wellbeing programme that includes various strategies and activities to help improve their teachers' wellbeing. The enforcement of wellbeing programmes for employees is a practice that is widely used in many European countries (White, 2020). As evidenced by the correlation analysis presented in this research, the participants who believe that the SLT has a vital role in teachers' wellbeing also consider it very important to implement wellbeing care through the SDP. This was also confirmed in the second phase of this research. Nearly all Heads of Schools agree that teachers' wellbeing should be addressed by an action plan or a sub-action plan, even on a national basis.

## Limitations

This study has some potential limitations that were taken into consideration. The first set of limitations are associated with the methodology. MMR requires significant effort and expertise since it involves using two different methods. The explanatory sequential design requires substantial time and resources to plan and implement. Designing and implementing one method by drawing on another research tool's findings can prove very challenging. Therefore, particular attention was given when writing the questions for the questionnaires. Preparing a detailed timeline and meeting the research study's deadlines was essential to avoid negatively affecting the research. Since it is necessary to test the understanding of the questions, pilot questionnaires and pilot interviews were held before data collection. The data analysis methodology is another area of potential limitations. Most qualitative methods, such as interviews, cannot be genuinely replicated and verified per se. To limit this shortcoming, all interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Moreover, even though a vast amount of research on teachers' wellbeing can be found internationally,

there is limited prior research locally. This significant constraint encouraged the researcher to choose this topic because it presented the need for further developmental study in the area.

## Recommendations

Given its findings, this research suggests that all schools should have a wellbeing programme to help teachers face the profession's challenges. Since the researcher is a member of the SLT in a Maltese state school, she is also aware of the current challenges faced by school leaders and is not willing to add a burden on them. Therefore, this research also includes an action plan to help the school leaders implement this recommendation. This action plan is also available online.<sup>4</sup> All the subsidiary research questions' findings intertwine and enhance the main research question's conclusions. The results are also consistent with the literature. Even though wellbeing cannot be precisely defined, the participants' understanding of teachers' wellbeing was centred on feelings of contentment, good physical and mental health, job satisfaction and work-life balance. These match the working definition developed by the researcher after reviewing the literature. The findings also suggest that collaboration with the rest of the educators is essential for safeguarding teachers' wellbeing in Malta. This research shows that teachers need imperative skills to improve their wellbeing. They need to be emotionally literate and model healthy emotional regulation. School leaders and professionals often require a consistent approach to social-emotional support. The current findings deepen our understanding of the contexts within which teachers work during the current pandemic. The results show that the continuous changes in the curriculum and the lack of enforcement of curriculum time due to the shortage of replacement teachers create more stress in the teaching profession and are detrimental to teachers' wellbeing. As suggested by participants, this research shows that the present situation in Malta still has a long way to go to improve teachers' wellbeing effectively. This research forecasts that teachers need a good work-life balance to enhance their wellbeing. In a detailed descriptive study of employee work-life balance, Padma (2013) found that lower work-life balance leads to higher absenteeism and employee attrition. Another implication of this study is the teachers' right to disconnect from work-related matters, also mentioned by EurWORK (2021). This research suggests that school leaders should refrain from sending emails after school hours, except in the case of emergencies. They are encouraged to use the 'Send Later' option and can also encourage their teachers to remove access to work emails from their smartphones. This will allow them to check their work emails solely from their work computer.

On a national level, this study also considers introducing a four-day work week as an excellent practice to improve teachers' wellbeing. According to *The Economic Times* (2022), Belgium has become the latest country to announce four-day work weeks. The agreement also introduces the right to disconnect after regular working hours for companies with more than 20 employees. Amongst other countries in Europe adopting the four-day work week are Denmark, Iceland, Spain, and the Netherlands who also offer flexible working conditions and employment benefits. In a Thomson Reuters article by Kellem (2022), the researcher discusses a recent poll organised by Survation, a market research agency based in London. In this poll, almost 75% of the participants supported a policy for a four-day working week in the UK. Additionally, 61% of teachers believe a four-day week would improve their teaching, while 69% think that a shorter week would make them more likely to stay in the profession.

## **The Final Conclusions**

One evident concept that emerged throughout this research is that the SLT plays an essential part in the wellbeing of the teachers. This research concludes that the skills school leaders possess, the strategies they use, and the environment they create can either make or break a school. Being accountable for all this can be very challenging, therefore, they need support from the education authorities and the other stakeholders working with the school. This research also offers tangible recommendations for school leaders to promote teachers' wellbeing.

## **A Way Forward**

The researcher believes that this study should serve as an eye-opener on the current situation faced by Maltese class teachers. Furthermore, the research findings suggest that educational authorities should offer more resources to tackle the various difficulties currently faced by primary school class teachers. The primary sector needs more human resources to support a whole-school approach that includes staff and students' wellbeing. Additional replacement teachers and psychologists should be available in every school. Finally, SLT members are encouraged to use the proposed action plan to promote teachers' wellbeing in their schools. This action plan can be adapted to include all educators or only some of them, according to the school's needs.



The practical strategies suggested in the action plan, and in the website are aimed to set the ball rolling for educational authorities to ensure a good level of wellbeing in our schools and manage the many parameters in our educational environments. Tackling teachers' health and wellbeing in schools and the various issues related to it is a long journey. The findings of this research should be considered as the beginning for the implementation of more research and innovation on teachers' wellbeing. Additionally, the website provides the right tools for school leaders to bring about a positive change in the lives of Maltese teachers.

## Notes

1. This research also offers various practical activities and ideas. These resources are available for download from the website prepared by the researcher titled *Supporting Educators' Wellbeing: An Action Plan by Deborah Montebello*. The link for this website is [www.educatorswellbeingactionplan.wordpress.com](http://www.educatorswellbeingactionplan.wordpress.com).
2. <https://www.schoolslearningoutcomes.edu.mt/en/pages/about-the-framework>
3. OPM-Mental-Health.pdf (gov.mt)
4. [www.educatorswellbeingactionplan.wordpress.com](http://www.educatorswellbeingactionplan.wordpress.com)

## Notes on contributor

**Deborah Ann Montebello** was a primary school teacher for 16 years and currently works as an Assistant Head of School in a primary state school. She has also spent some years working as a Head of Department Prefect of Discipline. Deborah holds a B.Ed. (Hons) degree in Primary Education and a Master's Degree in Applied and Educational Leadership with the Institute for Education. Her main interests are primary education, digital literacy, and educational leadership.

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