
Educational Leaders' Stress: An In-Depth Analysis of the Maltese Context

Elaine Tabone Betts

Abstract

This study explores how Maltese Heads of College Networks (HCN), Heads of Schools (HoS), Assistant Heads of Schools (AH), and Heads of Departments (HoD), collectively referred to as Educational Leaders (ELs), define stress and what they consider as professional stressors. Qualitative one-to-one in-depth interviews were conducted, and it was concluded that ELs feel distress when they cannot control a situation and eustress when they feel driven to work harder. ELs explained that stressors they faced came from within and outside the school and from factors like learners, staff members, parents/guardians, unions, curriculum, the Education Department, and the COVID-19 pandemic. The outcomes shed light on the fact that ELs need more support and training in their profession and the opportunity to talk about what they are going through to minimise stress.

Keywords

Stress, Distress, Eustress, Stressors, Educational Leaders

Introduction

There is no question that teachers and school leaders are committed to working as hard as ever to support children and young people to flourish and reach their full potential. However, the contexts they are working in can be challenging (Garland et al., 2018, p. 2).

I wanted to shed light on whether the term stress is used as a “buzzword” (Clayton, 2014, p. 1) by individuals to describe tough situations which they go through (Chapman, 2018), or whether stress is used to mean actual “tension,

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pressure or even boredom" (Clayton, 2014, p. 1). Following research conducted, I narrowed down my focus and decided that the scope of the paper would be to answer the following research questions:

- How do ELs in Malta define stress?
- What causes stress in Maltese ELs?

The study also aimed to point out how ELs can be given more support to be able to perform their job efficiently without causing them too much distress. The paper will give insight gathered from literature to describe stress related to educational leadership. It will also give examples of different stressors brought forward in literature. After that, the data gathered through the conducted interviews will be analysed whilst comparing it and contrasting it with the literature found. Lastly, I will give my recommendations and conclusions.

Theoretical Framework

Stress

According to Hans Selye, the father of stress theory, stress can be described as the body's response to a demand made to it (1936) or, as described by Waghachavare et al. (2013), a change in the homeostasis. When we are stressed, our body produces stress hormones that enable us to act towards overcoming the stressful situation, positively or negatively. This physiological change helps the body regain its ordinary state (Chrousos, 2009; Coltrera & Leinwand, 2011; Linden, 2005). It is the same change which our ancestors went through thousands of years ago to help them survive different threats, like predator attacks or natural disasters (Segerstorm & Miller, 2004). Nowadays, the stress we experience is a result of what we consider a threat in our mind, like losing a job, and our bodies still react in the same physiological way (Segerstorm & Miller, 2004; Seaward, 2018; Tan & Yip, 2018). Stress can bring about enthusiasm when the change is for the better and tension when the change is for the worse. Selye was the first to present the term "stress" in 1936 after conducting research on rats. He discovered that responses in the adrenal cortex were responsible for the rats' stress when exposed both to undesirable and to rewarding stressors (as cited by Jackson, 2014), giving rise to the terms "eustress" and "distress" (Szabo et al., 2017).

Eustress and Distress

Eustress as described by Selye (1974) refers to positive stress which can rouse incentive and create a challenge to the individual (Melendez & de Guzman, 1983; Wack, 2021). This can also be seen in everyday tasks like meeting a deadline efficiently as it brings about feelings of accomplishment since the task falls within our abilities (Mills et al., 2018). Scott (2020) stated that without eustress life would be boring as it would mean neither overcoming hurdles nor aiming at improving. On the other hand, distress (Selye, 1974) triggers anxiety, creates unwanted feelings, and decreases performance, which can in turn ruin one's career (Melendez & de Guzman, 1983). A limited amount of distress can lead to individuals feeling bored, and when it increases to very high levels it can lead to feelings of fear, anxiety, or burnout (Tocino-Smith, 2021).

Occupational Stress

According to Harshana (2018), work stress, or occupational stress can be identified "as the relationship between a situation and employees' reaction towards it. When an employee cannot fulfil the demand she/he gets from the environment, he/she will get stress[ed]" (pp. 59–60). Hayes and Eddy (1985) have argued that stress occurs throughout life, from birth to death, with several events resulting in different stress levels. Many of these stress triggers are repeated throughout life. Occupational stress, which is a stress phrase describing constant stress at the workplace, is one example. It revolves around the lack of ability to deal effectively with stressors at work (Rees, 1997; Desouky & Allam, 2019). Researchers have identified working in education as one of the most stressful professions (Sorenson, 2007; Grant, 2013; Hilton, 2016; Gold & Roth, 1993). DeMatthews et al. (2018) confirm the intensity of work-related stress in ELs. According to Caruana (2020), long exposure to stress at work can affect the ELs' wellbeing. Campbell et al. (2007) state that educational leadership is stressful, and this does not just affect the ELs (Lazarus, 1990) but also the holistic wellness of the educational organisation (Kaufman, 2019). I concur with the research conducted that the profession of ELs is stressful and I wanted to investigate whether this situation is shared with local ELs.

Stressors Faced by ELs

It is important to note that according to literature (Chapman, 2005; Garland et al., 2018; Whitaker, 2003), stressors can lead to both desirable and undesirable outcomes. According to Garland et al. (2018), teachers and school leaders work hard for learners to reach their full potential; however, this is quite challenging. Whitaker (2003) and Chapman (2005) argued that the intricacy of the ELs' duties can lead to stress, fatigue, and even exhaustion. In a study by Chaplain (2001), 55% of the ELs in the study said that they find their job stressful, and 88% admitted that they feel stressed most of the time. Similarly, in a study by Bezzina and Cassar (2003), it was pointed out that from eight ELs interviewed, "most of the Heads ... speak of the stress they are enduring" (p. 139).

Examples of the main stressors faced by ELs reported by different researchers include working with parents and the community, conflict among staff members, the curriculum, school discipline, and the COVID-19 pandemic. These stressors, one by one, will be explained in more detail below.

Working with Parents and the Community. Several local documents stress the importance of having a good relationship between the school, the home, and the community. For example, the document *For All Children To Succeed* (Ministry for Education, Youth and Employment, 2005) states that a home-school-community link should be created and promoted. In the document *National Minimum Curriculum* (Ministry for Education, 1999), the importance of this relationship was linked to the learners' educational development and effective learning, while the *Framework for the Educational Strategy for Malta 2014–2024* (MEDE, 2014) looks to build collaboration between schools, parents, and the community. According to research (Cutajar, 2016; Epstein, 2001; Epstein & Salinas, 2004; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Sheldon, 2003), when a school is a learning community with a strong relationship between the school, families, and the community, this improves the school, strengthens family dynamics, and invigorates the community, while at the same time increasing student achievement.

Even though the relationship between school, parents, and community is beneficial to all stakeholders, it can be a stressor for the ELs who must liaise with all involved, especially when conflict arises (Allison, 1997). According to

Waller (1932) and Hadfield and Chapman (2009), this is no easy task as parents and educators have always stood on opposing sides of the boundary. Bryk and Schneider (2002) describe this as a leadership challenge since it needs a change in beliefs and attitudes. According to a study by Cutajar (2016), cooperation between Maltese ELs and parents has never been easy.

Marschall and Shah (2016) have argued that ELs are the ones who need to lessen these burdens by planning and implementing school policies that welcome more parental and community involvement (Barr & Saltmarsh, 2014). Nevertheless, this can be stressful for ELs (Garland et al., 2018).

Conflict Among Staff Members. Conflict between staff members in educational organisations is common (Isabu, 2017), as it is an unavoidable part of working in an organisation while interacting with other people (Ghaffar, 2019; Isabu, 2017). Isabu (2017) and Catana (2015) have argued that when conflict increases, the organisation's performance tends to suffer. However, studies by DeDreu et al. (1999), Thomas (1992) and Tjosvold (1998) oppose this and state that under particular circumstances conflict at work can give rise to increased performance.

ELs must always keep an eye on such conflicts and provide positive and constructive guidance as what causes the problem is not the conflict itself but how it is managed (Ghaffar, 2019), and this is one of the ELs' main responsibilities (MEDE, 2018a, 2018b).

Curriculum. The curriculum can be described as the principles, aims, and educational strategies organised in educational organisations (Borg & Mayo, 2002). Another main responsibility of ELs is to ensure a smooth running of activities linked with the National Minimum Curriculum of 1999 (MEDE, 2018a, 2018b). Furthermore, according to the Education Act (Chapter 327) of the Laws of Malta, all schools are obliged to follow the principles of the NMC and abide by them. According to Betts (2013), ELs are responsible for the curriculum's implementation and monitoring process. Furthermore, Bottoms (2001) stated that educational accountability has shifted the ELs' role from placing teachers in the classes, making sure all learners had textbooks, and trying to get learners to school, to being accountable and responsible for the smooth running of the curriculum.

Nevertheless, this is not easy, especially with changes in the curriculum. According to Jones and Anderson (2001), changes in the curriculum should be prioritised and a clear picture of how they will affect staff members and learners should be taken. ELs should also be a “change agency” (Fullan, 2014, p. 123), taking an active role in leading the change (Bezzina & Cassar, 2003).

School Discipline. Keeping school order and discipline is an important role for ELs (MEDE, 2018a, 2018b; Leithwood et al., 2004; Rogers, 2011), even though disciplinary problems are very common in classrooms (Farmer, 1999; Kiptala et al., 2011). Studies have shown that a big portion of class interruption is taken up by such issues (Arwood-Barton et al., 2005; Little, 2005). Recurring disciplinary problems often end up in front of ELs as, ultimately, they are responsible for the smooth running of the educational organisation (Eshiwani, 1993; Hartzell & Petrie, 1992). One of the main reasons ELs face a lot of stress when dealing with disciplinary actions is that this affects the relationship with learners and their families (Caruana, 2020), and the stress increases if parents are not willing to support the ELs’ decisions (Moloi, 2002).

COVID-19 Pandemic. The U.S. Department of Health & Human Services described the COVID-19 pandemic as an infectious disease having a major impact on our lives, resulting in challenges which might be considered stressful (2021). Globally, ELs and educators had to face unmatched settings while trying to maintain continuity in the educational process (UNESCO, 2020). This changed the learning environment drastically (Gatt et al., 2020), and in Malta it was no different (Busuttill & Farrugia, 2020). According to a Harvard study, schools were quick at finding ways to reach learners in their homes (Simon, 2021). However, since not all learners had access to digital devices, this was a struggle for many (Simon, 2021). According to Long, “COVID just revealed how serious ... inequities are” (as cited in Simon, 2021, p. 4).

On one hand, online teaching, although difficult, brings forward new opportunities. Learners can study anywhere and at any time (Zammit, 2021), especially through asynchronous or recorded lessons, and lessons can be rewatched to clarify unclear points (Zammit, 2021). On the other hand, according to Kelly (2020), ELs had difficulties coping with the educational changes brought by the pandemic, and this resulted in high stress. Ninety percent of the ELs in her study admitted that they faced an increase in work-related stress, with 70% admitting that they felt close to breaking down during 2020 (Kelly, 2020).

This next section will deal with the methodology used to gather the data for the paper.

Methodology

A qualitative methodology was applied when conducting this research. A guideline for the questions I was going to ask was prepared; however, I opted for the semi-structured interview type as I needed the freedom to enquire further or ask participants to elaborate on their answers if needed. After conducting pilot interviews and reviewing some of the questions, I moved on to the actual data gathering. I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with fourteen ELs working within two colleges in Malta. Two were the HCNs; six were primary HoSs, three from each college; three were primary AHs; and three were primary HoDs. The colleges were chosen randomly from the colleges in Malta. Random sampling helps to ensure research validity as randomisation minimises the influence of possible confounding variables (Thomas, 2020). The interviews were conducted through MS Teams. While transcribing the interviews, I created edited transcriptions in which I cleaned up grammatical errors and false starts. The transcripts were then sent to the respective EL for a final approval. Data was then organised by creating codes and themes for the provided information.

Ethical Issues and Considerations

There are various areas which were taken into consideration when dealing with ethical issues. The participants were given information on the research before conducting the interviews. Their participation was voluntary, and they knew that if they wanted to withdraw from the study at any time, they were free to do so. I could not keep my research anonymous since I was the one conducting the interviews; however, I took all necessary precautions to keep the participants' identity confidential. The participants' names and colleges were omitted, and they were referred to by a code. In the case of my research, no threat of harm was present, and the participants could also opt not to answer any of the questions. When communicating results, it is important that the issue of plagiarism is taken very seriously (Polonsky & Waller, 2004). Claiming others' work as one's own is an unacceptable ethical issue when communicating the results of research (Polonsky & Waller, 2004). I took a lot of care to make sure that my findings were correctly referenced and that credit was given where it was due.

Findings and Discussions

Defining Stress

When asked to define stress, ELs talk about distress, mainly about the feeling of lack of control: "As soon as I feel I'm not in control, when my mind tells me, 'Today you will not make it'" (HCN2). This leads to a "brain block" (AH1), a "brain drain" (AH2), or the feeling of "drowning" (HoS2). Other aspects brought forward included working towards unrealistic deadlines and having a heavy workload. ELs commented on the fact that they do not mind working towards deadlines, provided that they aren't ones which "aren't conceivable" (HCN2), or ones which fall within a short time frame (AH). This confirms what Harshana (2018) and Tocino-Smith (2021) concluded when they stated that being unable to fulfil assigned tasks leads to feeling distressed. Dealing with various responsibilities which tire out ELs was also mentioned when defining distress. One AH mentioned emotional tiredness and the idea that he feels stressed when he is very tired and cannot give back as much as he would like, confirming studies by Boyland (2011) and Queen (2004), who mention fatigue as a sign of physical stress. In fact, according to one HCN, putting on a mask and not showing one's true feelings is also a sign of stress.

On the other hand, when probed further they also talked about eustress, which was described as something that enabled ELs to set deadlines and become motivated. Not all ELs agree that eustress is a motivating agent, and some stated that one cannot perform well under any kind of stress. However, other ELs stated that they feel that eustress helps to set realistic deadlines and motivates them to work towards a goal. AH2 went further and said that eustress is "something I need", and HoD3 stated that she "would want" attainable deadlines to avoid procrastinating. This confirmed the idea of Mills et al. (2018) that eustress can be found in everyday tasks, like meeting a deadline. According to HoD1, eustress is a "driver, in a way, to keep working hard". Similarly, HoD2 described it as "an extra boost to keep pushing harder". Contrary to all this, HoS3 stated that "deadlines do not stress me unfortunately", and therefore eustress does not affect him.

Main Stressors Faced by Maltese ELs

Similarly to what was researched, the findings have shown that ELs face stress coming from both within and outside the school. Stressors coming from within the school include staff members and conflict they might face. Even though one EL mentioned that conflict is “normal” (HoD2), one third of the ELs interviewed mentioned that dealing with staff members can be difficult and conflict can cause stress. HCN2 and AH1 stated that they feel angry when they see that not all staff members are being just with their peers or not everyone is “giving the same input” (AH1). Staff members who do not abide by deadlines can also cause stress to ELs. They specified that they were not talking about unrealistic deadlines, as already mentioned, but attainable ones which staff members still miss. The lack of staff members in schools is another stressor ELs face. “When you don’t have staff enough... it’s something which causes stress because you need to see how you’re going to take care of the children, but you don’t have enough” (AH2). This also links with stressors coming from unions. In fact, one AH mentioned that what causes him the most stress is that unions are, rightfully, fighting for the interests of members, but at the same time forgetting the interest of the learners. He pointed out that learners are suffering because of some decisions taken by unions: “It gets to me that children are not put as the top priority” (AH1). According to one HoS, abiding by union directives can cause stress because if ELs try and put the learners on top of their priority list, and they face these oppositions, then it is difficult to do one’s job effectively.

Only one EL mentioned learners’ behaviour as a major stressor: “It’s the social problems which are causing behavioural problems not the disabilities as such, and it’s causing stress across” (HoD1). These behavioural problems in turn cause attention problems and social interaction difficulties in learners, and this increases stress, since ELs might not have the necessary skills in dealing with such behaviour: “I think it affects everything generally and we are not necessarily well equipped to deal with these as such” (HoD1). One HoS mentioned that this stressor affected her in the secondary school, but not in the primary. Another HoS went further and commented on the fact that “once learners in her school are given a rule, they are better than adults, because they obey” (HoS1). This contradicted studies by Farmer (1999) and Kiptala et al. (2011), which state that discipline is one of the major stressors in educational leadership.

ELs mentioned that not being available themselves or being too available to help are also stressors which they must face. Making oneself "extra available" (HCN1) is also a stressor; however, he is pleased with the fact that whenever a problem arises all the stakeholders mention that he was available to help. These issues can give rise to contradicting views, as ELs should make themselves available while at the same time allow time to do their own work without interruptions.

Stressors coming from outside the school include dealing with parents and guardians who might be arrogant, do not understand the school procedures, or feel the need to attack the ELs on social media. ELs understand that parental involvement in schools "is very, very important" (HoS3). Another AH believes that when parents do not work together with the school for the wellbeing of the learners, the situation becomes a struggle for ELs "to deal or talk or discuss any particular topics" (AH3). He also believes that this has something to do with the area one is working in. In some areas, parents tend to work hard and collaborate with the school but this does not extend to all areas. Another AH added that sometimes parents do not understand school policies, and therefore cannot collaborate. Such parents are not numerous but cause stress to the ELs: "These cause a lot of stress, yes, because they refused to co-operate, or they have their own opinion, they don't understand why for example, this decision is taken" (AH2).

Another stressor revolves around the "overload of emails" (AH2) received and the fact that technology has become so important in our lives: "Sometimes it helps, because it's more accessible" (HoD2). An HoS commented that this helps her in her job: "Well, the more you get things done quickly, the better. So, if you have seen an email and tackled it, it's better" (HoS3). However, what is important is that one has to "decide on [the] limits" (HoD2) and know when to "cut off from the mobile, internet, emails, etc., and say stop" (HoS2).

The COVID-19 pandemic has also caused stress due to uncertainty on what was going to happen, replacement duties being carried out, learners' absenteeism, and lack of human contact. AH1 commented on the fact that educators were worried about learners who "escaped the system". HoS3

stated that scholastic year 2020–2021 was stressful because the pandemic hit the school “like mad”, with many learners and staff members testing positive or in quarantine. The curriculum was also mentioned as a stressor since this is what schools are all about: “Curriculum definitely causes stress, because ultimately we have to work around it” (HoS2). She explained that working with the Learning Outcomes Framework is a new concept and that “in education, change is constant” (HoS2). It is a very rapid change. Educators must be “willing and ready to adopt this constant change” and keep up with it, which according to her is “very difficult” (HoS2). She believes that it is a stressor on educators as well as on ELs who need to support the teaching staff.

Recommendations

Since the research conducted was qualitative, one cannot draw generalisations as the sample size was relatively small (Hamel et al., 1993; Yin, 1994). I also had an active role in the data collection (Myers, 2000). However, even though my qualitative research might not be generalisable, it has other exclusive features which make it extremely appreciated in the education community (Myers, 2000), such as the fact that it was analysed in-depth through the one-to-one interviews conducted.

As the findings show, ELs are stressed and feel that some stressors could be avoided. From the data elicited from the interviews, I have brought forward the below suggestions to reduce the amount of stress faced by ELs.

Firstly, the Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation [MEYR] should ensure schools are equipped with the required staff members to diminish as much as possible the problems ELs are facing due to lack of staff members. More educators should be employed and, if need be, more incentives brought forward to encourage people to join the education profession.

Decisions taken by MEYR should be taken in a timely manner, so that ELs have enough time to make the required arrangements for the implementation of policies. This also applies to decisions linked to the curriculum. MEYR should make sure that ELs are well-informed about changes taking place. MEYR should also work with unions as much as possible to make sure that ELs are not placed in the middle of issues that make them even more stressed like, for example, when a union gets involved in issues and tries to overstep.

MEYR should also work on raising more awareness of how important the school–parent relationship is. They should provide more insights on the excellent work done by ELs to help parents or guardians side with ELs for the holistic wellbeing of learners.

Effective training sessions and professional development sessions specifically designed for ELs need to be planned and carried out. These sessions need to be targeted to specific stressors which the ELs face (Darling–Hammond et al., 2009), and they should integrate theories with practical examples (Camilleri Dimech, 2016). This requires long-term sessions so ELs would have the opportunity to reflect on the practices brought forward.

As explained by several ELs in this study, ELs need the time to talk amongst themselves and share their stories. Knowing that other ELs are going through similar experiences reduces the feeling of loneliness. As some ELs said, the leadership position is a lonely chair. However, if they are given the time to discuss and collaborate, the stressors they face might be reduced.

Conclusion

All this should go together with meaningful, realistic policies brought forward by MEYR. ELs are expected to handle stressors coming from all directions: MEYR, staff members, learners, and parents. Therefore, policymakers must recognise the importance of ELs' wellbeing, which should be reflected in the policies. In the list of educational policies provided by MEYR, the mention of wellbeing is limited to that of children (MEDE, 2021; Ministry for Education, 2021) and youths (Maltese Parliamentary Secretariat for Research, Innovation, Youth and Sport, 2015). While both the Malta National Lifelong Learning Strategy 2020 (MEDE, 2020) and Respect for All Framework (MEDE, 2014) tackle the improving of everyone's wellbeing, there is no mention of ELs and how they can cope with occupational stress. There is also no policy mentioning the wellbeing of ELs. I believe it is time for this to change. A policy should be built focusing solely on educators, including ELs, to promote wellbeing, ensure that they are trained on the topic, and ensure that they know how to obtain it. Different stressors could be highlighted in the policy and ways to overcome them could be suggested.

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Notes on contributor

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