

RESEARCH ARTICLE



Organization of Teacher Induction and Mentoring in Malta: School Administrators' Perspectives

Christopher Bezzina¹ and Benjamin Kutsyuruba^{2,*} 

¹*Faculty of Education, University of Malta, Malta*

²*Faculty of Education, Queen's University, Canada*

Abstract: This article addresses the area of mentoring of newly qualified teachers (NQTs) from a school administrator's perspective. The research underpinning this study demonstrates the pivotal role that school administrators can play in supporting the induction and possible retention of NQTs from quitting the profession if they engage more directly in the induction and mentoring process. This introductory study on the role that Maltese school administrators play in the induction phase helps to highlight the tensions that exist between policy and practice, between the belief that Maltese school administrators hold in being there to support NQTs and what actually happens in reality. The findings demonstrate how school administrators can enhance the program of support that NQTs are currently receiving, namely, by providing more structured time dedicated to being with the NQTs and teachers, helping in establishing and retaining stronger professional relationships with teachers throughout their careers, and working to strengthen the interconnectedness between initial teacher education, induction, and ongoing professional learning.

Keywords: teacher induction, mentoring, school leaders, principals, teacher learning, Malta

1. Introduction

Teacher attrition and the efforts to increase the retention of teachers in the profession continue to be issues of international concern [1–6]. Researchers and policymakers alike continue to ponder why many newly qualified teachers¹ (NQTs) are not remaining in the profession and leaving at increased rates [7]. In fact, studies show that most beginning teachers leave the profession in their first 2–5 years, and in some extreme cases, they leave before the end of their first year of teaching [8–9]. High turnover is, first and foremost, costly for educational institutions and school boards and, in turn, negatively impacts student learning [8].

All this is taking place in a continuously changing landscape of social, cultural, and political agendas, presenting an environment that is complex and difficult to navigate [10–13]. Educators find themselves facing educational reforms and directives that focus on a performativity culture based on standard-based or test-based accountability [14, 15]. At the same time, the context in various countries is seeing educators facing job insecurity, which raises anxiety and stress levels that impact teacher empowerment and autonomy [16, 17]. This focus on managerial control can

potentially lead to a decrease in teacher autonomy and result in job dissatisfaction and decreased work quality [18].

Such reforms and demands are exerting pressure on school leaders, requiring them to focus on executing directives rather than focusing on what truly matters—what Salo et al. [19] beautifully describe as “learning in and for professional practice.” For this to happen, school leaders need to nurture teacher agency, collaborative practices, and joint initiatives. This implies that school leaders need to work with and alongside their teachers [20]. Within such a context, teacher induction and, more importantly, the role school leaders play take on a new dimension.

In relation to teacher attrition, research has shown that participation in a comprehensive induction program contributes to the quality of teachers and to improved teaching practice, thus providing NQTs with a positive trajectory in their careers. In turn, the positive growth and improvements in teaching practice reduce burnout and attrition and increase job satisfaction [21]. In most education systems in Europe, a period of early career support, known as induction, precedes the award of a permanent warrant or certification [22, 23]. The induction process may include a combination of mentoring support, professional development seminars, reduced workload, and/or team teaching. Teacher induction that effectively incorporates mentoring as an integral programmatic component has been found to positively affect beginning teacher retention, helping reduce the waste of resources and human potential associated with teacher attrition [24–26]. Various studies have identified a number of positive outcomes as a result of high-quality teacher induction and mentoring programs including increased teacher effectiveness, higher

*Corresponding author: Benjamin Kutsyuruba, Faculty of Education, Queen's University, Canada. Email: ben.kutsyuruba@queensu.ca

¹The terms early career teachers, NQTs, and novice teachers are used interchangeably in the text to mean those teachers who have just started their careers and are in their first years of teaching.

job satisfaction and commitment, improved classroom instruction and student achievement, and retention of beginning teachers [27–30].

Research also indicates that school leaders' engagement is a major factor in teacher retention as they are vital in creating a supportive structure and conditions conducive to successful induction and socialization processes essential for the long-term sustenance of NQTs [31]. The socialization of beginning teachers and their acclimation into the school culture rests within the scope of the school leaders' role as they are viewed as the stewards of the vision, mission, and goals of the school [32]. The engagement of the school leader thus becomes critical for induction and mentoring programs to ensure that NQTs are slowly inducted into the school's culture and aligned with the vision, instructional focus, and priorities of the school [33, 34]. This is a role that only school leaders or leadership teams can truly fulfill.

The concern of teacher attrition is particularly acute in Malta mainly due to the ongoing policy reforms that have not addressed existing working conditions and salaries that are not commensurate with growing expectations.^{2 3 4 5} Given this context, it was deemed important to explore school leaders' specific roles and responsibilities within induction and mentoring programs, as well as the perceived impact of their engagement on program outcomes and effectiveness. It is worth noting that Malta's current induction program encourages mentoring support and various professional development activities, and its current format has been mandated since 2010 [23].

This article details a qualitative exploratory study that examined school administrators' perceptions regarding the induction and mentoring program that aims to support NQTs in Malta. Specifically, the study sought to understand the school administrators' views regarding the organization and mandates of teacher induction and mentoring programs in Malta and their role in it. This article describes the participants' perceptions in relation to the following two research questions:

- 1) How do school principals perceive the organization and mandates of teacher induction and mentoring programs in Malta?
- 2) What is the perceived role of school administrators in the induction and mentoring programs for early career teachers?

After reviewing the literature pertaining to the benefits of teacher induction and mentoring programs, the specific case of Malta is explored along with an overview of school administrators' perspectives of these programs. The research findings are presented based on qualitative data gathered from participating Maltese school

administrators: five heads of schools and one deputy head of school. (Although these roles are typically termed as school administrators, school leaders, principals, and vice-principals and often used interchangeably in the literature, as seen from the writing below, in the findings, we refer to participants as principals and vice-principals.) The article concludes with a discussion of research results, which are compared and contrasted with the extant literature, and concludes with a presentation of the implications for theory, practice, policy, and further research that can be undertaken.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Research context: Teacher induction in Malta

Teachers' professional development occurs in three phases: the pre-service phase, the induction phase, and the continuing professional development (CPD) phase. While the focus, prior to 2010, was placed on building partnerships with schools during the pre-service phase, the program, launched in 2012, aimed to reduce the high rates of attrition through a formalized induction program aimed at providing professional support to the NQTs at a critical stage in their profession. The Quality Assurance Department within the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education launched the program with a focus on a mentoring and appraisal scheme, one based on the creation of a welcoming school environment that supports NQTs as they are gradually inducted into the profession [35, 36]. Malta's induction program was developed thanks to various studies [37–39] that showed that NQTs felt unsupported and 'thrown into the deep end' with a full teaching load and associated responsibilities [19]. This coincided with a large number of NQTs leaving the profession within the first few years of joining the profession and expressing their opinion that they would unlikely choose a teaching career if they were able to start over [2].

The current induction program capitalizes on mentorship as a means to address particular needs faced by novice teachers in the school system.⁷ The mentor plays an important role in providing not only pedagogical support to NQTs but also the necessary socialization into school life and assists their immersion into the school culture.

In order to support NQTs' professional development, teacher mentors and induction coordinators must complete training courses provided by the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education. Prospective mentors must have at least seven years of teaching experience to be considered eligible to assume such a role. The induction coordinators are trained deputy heads of school who are nominated by the head of school to pair mentors and mentees. Their role is to support the mentors and monitor the mentoring process, ensuring that classroom observations can be undertaken.⁸ In addition, the pair must participate in four or more classroom observation sessions during the scholastic year, two in the first term and one in each of the following two terms. They are encouraged to partake in reflective practice following these observation visits through three or more compulsory formal post-observation meetings.

²Giulia Magri. "Not Enough": MUT directives to continue as union rejects new financial package." November 17, 2023. <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/mut-directives-continue-union-rejects-new-financial-package.1068066>

³Malta Union of Teachers. "Crisis in the teaching profession – MUT proposes solutions." January 16, 2017. <https://mut.org.mt/press-release-crisis-in-the-teaching-profession-mut-proposes-solutions/>

⁴Jeanette Mifsud. "MUT calls for changes to teaching to resolve 'profession crisis'." January 16, 2017. https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/national/73496/mut_calls_for_changes_to_teaching_to_resolve_profession_crisis#.ZERgynbMLg4

⁵Times of Malta. "Editorial: A teaching profession in distress." November 17, 2023. <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/editorial-a-teaching-profession-distress.1067679>

⁶The terms heads of school in the Maltese context are typically termed as school administrators, school leaders, principals, and vice-principals in other contexts and in the literature; hence, we use the terms interchangeably in the text.

⁷Eurydice. "Quality assurance: Quality assurance in early childhood and school education." March 17, 2025. <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/malta/quality-assurance-early-childhood-and-school-education>

⁸Eurydice. "Teachers and education staff: Conditions of service for teachers working in early childhood and school education." January 9, 2025. <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/malta/conditions-service-teachers-working-early-childhood-and-school>

2.2. Research on teacher induction and mentoring programs

Teacher induction is a long-term, comprehensive, coherent, and sustained professional development process, organized by a specific jurisdiction to acculturate, train, support, and retain new teachers and help them develop a lifelong attitude to learning [19]. Induction is viewed as one of the most useful ways to retain novices in the profession and help them address challenges that are often associated with NQTs, namely, problems with instruction and classroom management [40, 41]. Although the early years have been identified as the ideal time to focus efforts on interventions to improve the quality of experience, professional development, and retention [24], scholars have found that between 40 and 50 percent of beginning teachers throughout the world still leave the profession within the first five years of entry into teaching [1, 2, 6, 28, 42–45]. Therefore, the initial years on the job are considered to be the most formative for the NQT and crucial for a teacher's decision whether to remain or leave the teaching profession [15, 21].

Given this, mentoring needs to be viewed as a major component of induction programs along with orientation and professional development activities. Mentoring can be an effective support mechanism for beginning teachers when used in conjunction with other components of the induction process [45, 46, 36, 47]. In addition to many professional benefits like coaching, guiding, advocacy, counseling, help, protection, and feedback, mentoring programs have the potential to offer personal benefits for NQTs, such as building self-confidence, reducing stress, and increasing motivation and learning [47, 48]. At the same time, failure to appropriately match a mentor with a mentee, unsuccessful teacher/mentor dyads, lack of willing and/or able mentors, lack of mentor training, or individual factors (e.g., burnout, lack of professional respect, judgmental approach) may render mentoring support ineffective [49]. In general, induction programs help novices transition into teaching, overcome challenges, and grow professionally. However, researchers have found that social, cultural, and structural factors can leave both a positive and negative impact on mentoring initiatives [26, 50, 51]. This helps to highlight the important role that school leaders play especially through transformational leadership (TL) [20]. TL is to us the linchpin on which this study permutates. The study builds on the evidence [10, 20] that successful school leadership is transformational in nature, and this serves as the framework for our study.

2.3. Effectiveness of teacher induction program

The international literature highlights what tends to constitute an effective induction program for teachers. Abdallah and Alkabi [26] argue that effective programs are always highly structured, emphasize collaboration, and focus on professional learning. The focus on collaboration is crucial and emphasizes the role of effective experienced teachers in facilitating and demonstrating good practices [24]. Although induction programs are not simply about mentorship [26], it is important for the larger school community to support the induction and integration of NQTs into the school community [50, 51]. Professional learning and development have been deemed essential for career development, reaching aspirations, and fulfilling goals [19].

More specifically, in induction programs, although mentors and mentees frequently discuss general topics during meetings (e.g., classroom management strategies, behavior, etc.) that are perceived as beneficial by all NQTs, subject-specific mentors are identified as ideal for the mentoring role [52]. Perhaps most important for the partnership's effectiveness is that the mentor and mentee teach

at the same school. Ideally, the mentor is accessible to the mentee [52, 53]. When the mentors either do not teach at the same school as the mentees or do not have time to schedule meetings and observations with them, the NQTs do not perceive the relationship to be as beneficial as those who experienced greater accessibility to their mentors [52]. Overall, those who participated in the current Maltese induction program felt more confident and better prepared in their initial practice than those who did not have access to such support, likely owing to the pronounced structure, encouragement, and guidance that mentors provide on an ongoing basis [36, 53].

2.4. Role of school administrators in supporting NQTs

Empirical evidence reinforces the role that school administrators can play. First, their organizational role is that of creating a structure supportive for the induction process to succeed. Second, playing the role of instructional leader brings out direct engagement with NQTs. Third, the way they engage and support NQTs throughout their journey has been deemed critical. Finally, their involvement in mentor selection [26, 54] can leave an impact on the relationship between mentor and mentee. Specifically, actions undertaken by school administrators perceived as helpful by NQTs in various studies include providing a collaborative school culture and context [50, 51], offering encouragement and motivation [55], engaging in both formal and informal interactions [56], providing instructional support [57], creating a supportive climate [56], resolving challenges faced by novices [57], and creating conditions for building good emotional and pedagogical relationships with other members of staff [58, 59]. Some scholars found that NQTs' morale improves and their self-concept strengthens when school administrators nurture a warm and inclusive school culture, exhibit supportive and shared leadership, create the opportunity for shared values, and promote professional relationships between novice teachers and experienced teachers [30, 57–58].

School administrators who express positive attitudes toward and recognize the potential of the mentorship approach in supporting professional development tend to enhance the quality and amount of collaboration among colleagues [38, 60]. From a policy perspective, it is the role of the school administrator to meet with the NQTs early in their induction and participate in classroom observations and meetings for the purpose of formative appraisals. Unfortunately, the school environment often prevents opportunities for mentors and mentees to collaborate as school administrators typically do not provide the necessary accommodating environments nor do they participate in the induction process as advised [38]. Research on the Maltese teacher induction program has indicated that mentors feel that school administrators should be more involved in the induction process. As suggested by Kutsyuruba et al. [25], the responsibility of proper teacher induction and CPD rests in the hands of the school administrators. Mentors felt that if the leaders were more engaged, there would be a greater potential for whole school involvement in the mentoring process and that all staff members could contribute positively to the NQT's professional development [55]. While the current mentorship program in Malta certainly supports the professional development and self-efficacy of NQTs, quality assurance efforts must be taken to ensure that it is being executed effectively [34].

Totterdell et al. [61] suggested that high-quality induction support and commitment to mentor assignment, working conditions, professional development for novice teachers, and strong instructional leadership positively influenced retention levels in districts that were part of their studies. Other scholars have argued that school

administrators' commitment to the development of NQTs either supports and promotes the retention of teachers or else undermines the success of induction and results in teacher attrition [24, 62]. However, as noted by Abdallah and Alkaabi [26], there is limited empirical evidence directly linking the role of the school administrator in the induction process with its impact on the retention of teachers. We contend that more studies on these issues are needed.

3. Research Methodology

Given the literature that sees the positive impact that school administrators can have on beginning teachers, it was felt that such a study within the Maltese context would help us address a current gap in the local research that so far has focused on teachers as mentors and their mentees. Such findings would help us better understand the context in which they operate and appreciate the challenges and opportunities that school leaders face to engage with the induction program.

To this end, we conducted an exploratory qualitative study to examine the perceptions of school administrators regarding the induction and mentoring program for NQTs in Malta. Specifically, two research questions guided this study: (a) How do school principals perceive the organization and mandates of teacher induction and mentoring programs in Malta? (b) What is the perceived role of school administrators in the induction and mentoring programs for early career teachers? Participants in this study included heads of schools in elementary and secondary schools across Malta. To avoid terminology overlap, henceforth, we will refer to the participants as principals and vice-principals. Data collection processes involved qualitative interviewing. After an invitation had been sent to the principals of elementary and secondary schools across Malta, five principals and one deputy principal agreed to participate in the study (see Table 1). Participants represented both elementary and secondary schools. All names are pseudonyms.

Individual interviews were conducted in the fall of 2018 in a semi-structured manner [63], lasting an average of 45 min and providing rich descriptive data. One of the interviews involved both a principal (Matt) and a deputy principal (Gregory) from the same school. In terms of types of schools, we had representation from three state-run schools, one religious (Catholic) school, and one independent (fee-paying) school.

All research ethics guidelines have been adhered to by the researchers. Participants' responses were audio recorded and transcribed, upon which the researchers analyzed the data deductively (i.e., stemming from the literature review) and inductively (i.e., emergent from the data) following standard coding processes for etic and emic approaches to data analysis [64]. First, we used the inductive method for themes to emerge from the data [65]. Once general themes were established, the remaining data were

analyzed in both an inductive and deductive manner to draw on previous themes and allow for new themes to emerge [66]. Both etic and emic codes were then combined into categories and categories into patterns or concepts [67]. To ensure the trustworthiness of the data analysis, member checking was conducted. This article draws on selected data from interview questions that inquired into the participants' perceptions of the organization of the induction and mentoring program, its impact on the professional growth of NQTs, and changes and improvements needed for the early career teacher support system.

4. Findings

The findings are organized based on the three overarching themes: (a) principals' perceptions of the current organizational aspects and mandates behind teacher induction and mentoring programs in Malta; (b) the perceived role played by school principals in induction and mentoring programs for NQTs; and (c) the changes and improvements deemed necessary for the organization of the teacher induction and mentoring program. Based on these overarching themes, subthemes were developed based on each larger theme. The findings are presented and discussed in the following sections.

4.1. The organization and aims of the induction and mentoring program in Malta

The organization and aims of the induction and mentoring program play an important role in ensuring that early career teachers feel supported during their initial years in the profession. Many of the interviewees commented on the structure of the program in relation to how it was conducive to continuous professional growth and creating a culture of lifelong learning with the school as a center for learning. The three broad themes that emerged from them are articulated as key foci of the teacher induction and mentoring program: (1) promoting professional growth and teacher retention; (2) engaging experienced teachers as mentors; and (3) promoting the culture of lifelong learning. The following subsections explore each in turn.

4.1.1. Professional growth and teacher retention

The school principals' main focus in describing the structure of the program was in relation to how it promotes continuous professional growth and helps with retaining teachers in the school. Up to some years before the induction program was introduced, induction was carried out by the senior management team. The program's focus has now shifted to be in the hands of an experienced teacher mentor working with the mentee. The school principal's role within the program was identified as central to its

Table 1
Demographics of study participants

No.	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Teaching experience	Administrative experience	Type of school
1	Matt	M	50+	15	7	Elementary and secondary
2	Gregory	M	50+	6	4	Elementary and secondary
3	Anastasia	F	40+	7	4	Elementary
4	Albert	M	60+	30	20	Elementary and secondary
5	Sophia	F	40+	20	8	Elementary and secondary
6	Anthony	M	50+	7	2	Elementary

implementation. They were to welcome the NQTs, pair them up with an experienced teacher, explain the mission and vision of the school, conduct classroom visits, and provide resources and feedback on the progress of the NQT. One of the school principals, Anastasia, began by explaining that the structure and organization of the program helped transition teachers into their new positions, and as a result, they wanted to remain teachers at the school.

Similarly, Sophia noted that the organization of the program provided a great deal of support for novice teachers throughout the scholastic year. This included a contact person in the form of a mentor and a series of seminars that the NQTs participated in. The senior management team was responsible for pairing up the mentee with a teacher who would ideally teach at the same grade level and/or subject and for ensuring that there was alignment and potentially a greater connection between them. Mentors and mentees decided on the scheduling of meetings held throughout the scholastic year. While being kept in the loop, the principal met with the mentor and/or mentee to discuss progress as the year unfolded.

4.1.2. Engaging experienced teachers as mentors

The participants explained that experienced teachers played an important role in the organization of the program as they mentored the NQTs. During this process, experienced teachers developed a mentoring relationship with the NQTs, which usually continues well after the end of the program. It was emphasized that this first step in the mentor–mentee relationship serves as an essential stage in strengthening the bond between teachers as the years go by. Such an engagement was described by all the participants as “fundamental” to establishing a professional and often personal bond between teachers. Furthermore, Anastasia emphasized the significance of having experienced teachers engaged in mentoring, stating that the NQTs are more comfortable speaking to an experienced teacher regarding topics, such as classroom management, than discussing the issues with the school principal. Matt echoed the same views when he explained: “We have teachers, more experienced teachers, that have the attributes to engage in meaningful ways with the NQTs.”

4.1.3 A culture of lifelong learning

The induction program was perceived by school principals to be designed in such a way as to encourage NQTs to develop a growth mindset, one focused on lifelong learning. Participants noted that this school culture was created by the school principal, who provided feedback to the NQT on their successes, on issues that needed to be explored further, and on how they could grow professionally. The school principals spoke about the idea of creating an atmosphere within the school that encouraged individuals to learn from their mistakes. Matt, for instance, described that he worked hard to nurture a professional learning community, one in which all teachers were learning with and from each other. He explained that teachers share this growth mindset with their colleagues, which encourages other teachers to question their practices. Greg described the impetus of the induction program as to create a culture focused on professional growth. He argued that,

As a school, we were obliged to provide certain professional development courses, but we are lucky enough that teachers take it on themselves to explore varied learning opportunities to enhance their knowledge and skills.

Similarly, Sophia explained that novice teachers at her school were provided with the opportunity to attend seminars and that she provided support and guidance in identifying new learning opportunities.

4.2. Role of school administrators in induction and mentoring program

On this theme, the foundational aspect of the school administrators’ involvement in the program was based on being a supporter of NQT development. In this regard, the central role identified was that of establishing and maintaining trusting relationships with NQTs. In connection with relationship building, others explained that the essential component of the program is based on creating a sense of belonging to a team of teachers (e.g., a year group). Lastly, most of the participants explained that their engagement in the program consisted of sharing the school’s mission and vision, discussing what they meant to the school, and providing feedback to NQTs when their views were sought.

4.2.1. School administrator as a supporter of NQT development

Research study participants described the role of the school administrator as being supportive of NQTs’ development by providing resources and feedback mainly during the first two years. One participant, Anastasia, explained that her role as principal was to ensure that NQTs feel comfortable and at ease and to approach her for help and advice if and when needed. She described her role as “being a support for the NQT.” As the principal, she strived to convey to new teachers that they should feel at ease approaching her for advice and guidance. Anastasia emphasized that she created a conducive atmosphere by ensuring that all teachers understood that it is natural to make mistakes. She made sure that NQTs appreciate that she trusts and believes in them, so as to make sure they remain engaged and motivated. She believed that if teachers were happy, students would also be happy. She went on to describe that as a supportive school principal, her role is to ensure that teachers feel empowered and motivated. These were identified as key elements for remaining in the teaching profession and, more importantly, remaining at the school. Similarly, Alfred explained that the role of the school principal is to ensure that there is positive support for the early career teachers at the school, which would increase the likelihood that they remain in the school community.

4.2.2. Building trusting relationships and teamwork

When referring to the organization of the program, the school principals spoke about the importance of building trusting relationships as an essential component of the organization of the program. The participants shared how respect was the foundation stone for developing trusting and lasting relationships. They also expressed the importance of building these types of connections from the very beginning.

Anastasia shared that mutual respect and trust between the school principal and NQT were essential in nurturing relationships. She continued by explaining that in order to build a good relationship with the NQTs, she makes the mentees feel comfortable by initially assigning them responsibilities that relate to their individual strengths. She has conversations with them to understand what subjects they want to teach and where their interests lie. Anastasia also described that in order to have a positive relationship with NQTs, she ensures that they feel trusted, which contributes to their level of engagement. Anastasia spoke about the important role that confidentiality plays in building a trusting relationship between the mentor and the mentee. She emphasized that she did not need to know everything that was being discussed or shared during the mentor and mentee conversations and that this helped to generate trust in the relationship and, most importantly, the role that mentoring played.

In addition, Sophia explained that relationship building between the mentor and the mentee is important. Sophia highlighted that school principals can facilitate lasting relationships through the mentorship program and how such a program can create long-term support between the NQTs and the more experienced teachers.

One of the key aspects of the program was aimed at helping NQTs develop supportive relationships with various staff members at the school. Having a supportive system and a network from which the NQTs can receive advice, support, and resources was seen as pivotal for helping teachers develop and grow professionally. In addition, the program was aimed at growing NQTs' sense of belonging, which allowed them to build relationships, establish a network of support, and ensure that they do not feel alone or isolated. As a result, school principals noted that feeling included and welcomed through the program helped to nurture the growth of successful first-year teachers.

Participants emphasized the concept of working as a team in assisting the NQT in adjusting to their teaching position. Anastasia explained that at her school, teacher induction efforts included time for the NQTs to meet with other teachers during a specific period of the day. This is referred to as "curriculum time." Curriculum time takes place since schools avail themselves of support teachers. During this part of the day, the teachers were able to plan lessons together and have opportunities to co-teach as well. In addition, there were also heads of department who worked alongside NQTs with their lesson planning and provided them with feedback when conducting classroom observations.

4.2.3. Sharing school mission and providing feedback

Some of the participants described the importance of promoting professional growth in NQTs by ensuring that teacher induction and mentoring efforts aligned with the school's mission and vision. Anastasia shared that she always had her mission for the school in mind when speaking with the early career teachers and getting input from them on where they wanted to go. She highlighted that she did not just share with them the school mission but also encouraged them to learn about it and worked with them to consider it as they created a shared mission—a mission that also brings purpose to their work.

Similarly, Albert spoke about providing teachers with support by consulting them to see what they needed to help them achieve the shared school mission. He noted that:

Last year, one of the areas of development was mental health. We invited, first and foremost, a speaker who introduced the area of mental health, and the importance behind personal mental health. Then, issues related to wellbeing and mindfulness were also discussed. Such topics which were developed through presentations and discussions led us to incorporate them in the school curriculum. This became an important part of our mission.

He went on to explain that the school's mission guided his observations when he conducted informal visits to the classrooms where NQTs were teaching. Albert noted that he would conduct formal observation sessions and then, during a post-observation session, provide them with both positive comments and highlights of areas that could be improved. During these formal observation sessions, Albert also takes note of how the NQT is growing in the area of building a good and engaging rapport with the students through the implementation of effective teaching techniques that meet student

needs. Albert also explained that he introduces the NQTs to a teaching practice template, aligned with the school's mission, so that they get familiar with it. Other principals adopt similar engagements to ensure that teacher growth occurs in alignment with the school's mission and vision.

Anastasia made sure to observe NQTs in the classroom and then held post-observation sessions to provide constructive feedback. She tried her best to start by referring to the aims of the lesson and engaging in a discussion on how the lesson unfolded and addressing the aims set. Discussions focus on the way the NQT feels this was achieved and whether or not particular aspects or parts of the lesson could have been addressed differently or improved. Similarly, Albert supported early career teachers by helping them identify what their needs were and encouraged them to attend professional development courses. He explained that he even arranged a teacher's timetable so that she could leave work early enough to attend a professional development course taking place in the late afternoon.

4.3. Recommended changes and improvements for organization of teacher induction and mentoring program

When asked about what changes and improvements they would like to see made to the support system for early career teachers, all but one of the principals described the need for more time to be spent with the NQTs. Some explained how this could be done by increasing the frequency of meetings between the senior management team and the NQTs. Others stated that more time needs to be dedicated for meetings with early career teachers. This could take place if the school principals were less inundated with bureaucratic work. Lastly, participants described that they felt the program needed to be more organized and structured so as to effectively support novice teachers.

4.3.1. More time spent with NQTs and less bureaucratic work

The theme of time resonated with the majority of school principals, as they described that they wanted more time to be with teachers. They also voiced their opinion that they desired having more time to visit classrooms. The theme of being inundated with bureaucratic work also emerged. In relation to time, Anastasia described that she did not need more time for classroom visits, but that she would prefer to use the extra time to build deeper relationships with her staff. She emphasized the importance of relating to staff and needing more time to connect with them. Although it requires additional time management skills, she did this in order to engage in more meaningful ways with all her staff.

Similarly, Greg explained that when his school grew from having only 23 teachers to having a staff of over 170 educators and ancillary staff, he also described wanting to have more time to spend with the teachers. Albert felt the same way that he needed more time to support NQTs and thus be in a better position to address the goals of the induction program. Anthony explained that he wanted to dedicate more time to conducting classroom visits because he enjoys helping the NQTs grow professionally. He wants to spend what he described as more "dedicated time" with NQTs and would like this to be built into his job.

In relation to having extra time, the principals spoke about using the time to hold more meetings with the NQTs. They wanted more time to speak with the novice teachers in order to provide them with feedback, advice, and professional development opportunities. Matt noted that teaching, especially within an elementary school

context, can end up being very lonely unless time is factored into the timetable for teachers to meet up. He went on to describe the idea that he would like to have more meetings with novice teachers instead of only meeting up in relation to administrative matters. At the same school, Greg, the deputy principal, explained that he misses the frequent meetings with the NQT because of the lack of quality one-on-one time. Anthony explained how he felt he needed to spend less time visiting the NQTs and more time dedicated to carrying out office work because the education authorities were more worried about the paperwork being completed on time and less about the number of classroom visits and engagements principals have with their staff members.

All principals agreed that if they were going to dedicate more time to their NQTs, there had to be a shift away from bureaucratic work. The principals categorically stated that they wanted to spend less time doing administrative work and more time visiting novice teachers in their classrooms and providing them with feedback during regularly scheduled meetings. Anthony echoed the same type of sentiment when he explained that the focus on bureaucratic tasks keeps piling up. Anastasia also described getting so caught up in completing paperwork and writing emails that she did not have as much time to spend with her staff. For induction programs to be successful, the administrative burdens have to be lightened. All principals suggested the recruitment of administrative, nonacademic staff to handle a lot of the issues that current school principals have to fulfill, eating valuable time that could be dedicated to educational matters.

4.3.2. More structure and organization in the program

When asked to identify ways through which the induction program could be improved, one of the participants focused on the structure and organization of the program. As this study brought out, the school principals desired a program that had more structure and was organized in a more formal manner. Sophia described that she wanted the program to be more structured and to have a more organized way of recording and tracking the progress of the NQTs. She went on to explain that at the beginning of the year, the senior management team has a very structured role in sharing the school's vision with the novice teachers, but as the year unfolds, the school principal relies more heavily on the mentor. Greg was of a similar opinion, arguing that he would like the program to have more of a formal structure that is maintained throughout the school year.

5. Discussion

School principals in Malta emphasized the importance of an organized mentorship program that can allow them to be more directly involved. They spoke about how programs can be conducive to positive outcomes and presented a number of practical suggestions aimed at improving the induction program currently in place. One main theme that emerged from our analysis is that principals can create an effective mentoring program if and when they introduce TL practices. All participants highlighted the importance of supporting NQTs especially in their first years of teaching. More specifically, participants highlighted the need for unconditional support and guidance without judgment to build trusting and long-lasting relationships with NQTs. Alongside the importance of creating a positive and supportive relationship with NQTs, school principals noted that they must focus on the creation and support of the mentor–NQT relationship and ensure that the NQTs are adequately supported through this program. This emphasis also aligns with literature on the outcomes of induction programs and the role

school principals play. Principals noted that it is crucial to provide NQTs with adequate support and resources to ensure they are empowered and engaged. As echoed by the research participants, to retain teachers in the profession, NQTs must feel a sense of belonging and need to know that they are listened to and supported along the way. Principals acknowledged that loneliness can creep in so easily that they had to make sure that they supported the NQTs in their work together with their assigned mentors.

In addition, participants noted the importance of supporting NQTs' growth by providing feedback and helping them address challenges as they arise. This resonates with Ingersoll's [68] findings that the school principal can be a resource for resolving challenges faced by novice teachers. Aside from mentors facilitating a positive relationship, participants also highlighted the school principal's ability to create a warm and supportive culture for all teachers, and this is mirrored through the way they relate to others in their daily encounters. This aligns with research that has focused on school principals as "leaders" expressed in their ability to create conditions for building good emotional and pedagogical relationships in schools [55–58].

Participants emphasized four themes in relation to programs that are conducive to professional growth for NQTs, namely: (1) *the structure and organization of the program*, (2) *sharing the school mission and providing feedback on growth*, (3) *supportive relationships and teamwork*, and (4) *a culture of lifelong learning*. As the school principal organizes the induction program, assigns mentors, and is a part of the management team, they play a crucial part in ensuring the success of the program. Although the mentorship program is mainly between experienced teachers and NQTs, some school principals create the space for mentorship to occur in a structured manner and organize activities that support NQTs during their journey. Similar to the literature [56], school administrators are able to create a supportive environment to produce a successful and growth-oriented program.

There is limited literature highlighting the role of induction programs in effectively communicating the school's mission and goals. Participants discussed how the induction program can be conducive to growth through clearly outlining the overall goals of the school and communicating with their NQTs on how they can get there. Within this, participants noted the need to consider feedback from NQTs as they hold a wealth of knowledge and new ideas to help the school community grow. In addition, for the program to be conducive to professional growth and learning, participants discussed the importance of NQTs in developing supportive relationships with other teachers in the school. This team dynamic creates a safe space for NQTs to gain feedback from professionals in the field together with the appropriate resources.

One important point that is worth elaborating upon is the move from informal observations to formal ones. The use of an observation sheet provided an opportunity to discuss with the novice teachers both positive aspects observed and others that needed to be addressed. This provided a platform for reflection and action and hence development. It also highlighted the importance of personalized learning experiences [10] that are job-embedded [69, 70]. Kennedy [71] highlighted the interconnectedness between teacher recruitment, initial teacher education, and ongoing professional learning. This "interconnectedness" also helps to retain teachers within the profession if and when they find a supportive, respectful, and collegial atmosphere. This study helps to reinforce this point.

Such connectedness promotes professional development and collaboration throughout the whole school community. Alongside this, school principals have the ability to promote continued professional growth through facilitating a culture of lifelong learning.

Participants specifically carved out space for all teachers to attend professional development sessions, such as conferences and workshops, outside the school, both during and after school hours. As research suggests, school principals have this pronounced ability to facilitate a school climate and culture that is indicative of learning [35, 53]. Principals, through their actions, can influence the attitude and work practices of others by also embarking on professional development and learning opportunities.

Moving forward and looking toward improving the existing induction programs for NQTs, school principals described the need for more dedicated time with NQTs and less focus on administritivia. As the concern of NQTs leaving the profession dawns on Malta, it is crucial to designate time for school principals to facilitate and have a more direct and engaged involvement in the program. In addition, participants noted the need for clear organization and structure throughout the scholastic year and not simply at the beginning. It is crucial to have school principals involved throughout the induction process as they have the capacity to support professional development and nurture lasting relationships [38, 60]. This would take them beyond the induction phase and into the CPD phase that runs throughout a teacher's career. Such an involvement places the principal at the center of the professional development and learning cycle of teachers and not one limited to the induction phase. This is where the leadership dimension stands out [72]. The international literature presents teacher professional learning as an indispensable element of the description of effective school leadership. Effective learning practices like observation, feedback, collaborative planning, and mentoring require a concerted effort to plan, implement, and sustain them. As noted by Abbaspour et al. [73], "they require supportive policies, technology integration, and overcoming barriers to enhance teacher practices and student outcomes." Principals can play a significant role [73, 74], one that the principals in this study wish to undertake.

5.1. Study limitations and research implications

This exploratory study has a number of limitations. We recognize a small participant sample. While this allowed for a more in-depth understanding of the perceptions of school principals about the induction and mentoring program, the generalizability of these findings cannot be assumed. A mixed-method examination, with quantitative and qualitative data collection methods, would enhance the results. Although state-run, religious, and independent (fee-paying) schools were represented, a greater sample of participants from each of the school types would be beneficial to compare the nature of programs and their variations based on the type of school. Only one of the interviews involved an administration team (principal and deputy principal). It would be helpful to extend the scope of the study to include other members of the senior management team (e.g., deputy principals and heads of department) to obtain a deeper understanding of the school leader's engagement in induction and mentoring programs. This would help us explore the culture of learning within the school. Finally, given the growing interest in mentoring and the limited focus on the role principals play, longitudinal studies would offer insights into how mentoring can be approached from a more holistic perspective.

6. Conclusions

This introductory study on the role that principals can and wish to play in the induction and mentoring program helps to appreciate the tensions that exist between policy and practice. Most importantly, this study helps us to engage with the role that principals can

play in the induction phase and not merely focus on the role that mentors play. The significant role that they can play has been highlighted in this study and needs further exploration. Principals can be viewed as an important piece, potentially the missing piece in the puzzle that helps us to appreciate the role that principals can play in teacher retention in Malta.

A number of points are worth highlighting. First, we see that principals can enhance the professional support that NQTs are being provided in Maltese schools as they help them settle down in the schools and, more importantly, in the teaching profession. Second, another important point raised by school principals is one that would see them dedicating more structured time to the area of instructional leadership. Currently, the focus is on the transformational dimension as principals noted the role they play in facilitating the induction and mentoring program through the creation of a supportive learning environment. This is aimed at ensuring that the aims of the induction program are fulfilled. Such a role focuses on the principal, who can be described as a *culture setter*, one who ensures that she/he creates a warm, conducive, and welcoming environment for NQTs. At the same time, it is through their direct role that they create a *culture of learning* that does not only focus on mentor-mentee relationships. It goes beyond to capture a learning climate for all teachers. Keywords that highlight the pivotal role of the principal include *engagement, involvement, motivation, and empowerment*. While it can be argued that mentors, through their formal capacity, can do this, it is the principal who can create a more formalized approach and ongoing support that sees the mentee going beyond a one-to-one relationship and extends to the whole school. The study shows how induction and CPD come together. What stands out is that even though working within a centralized and bureaucratic system, principals can create and encourage changes that help liberate teachers from the shackles of dependency [10].

At the same time, principals expressed concern. Their call is directed at the education authorities and policymakers in particular, to seriously review the roles that school principals currently carry out and undertake the necessary steps to provide schools with the human resources that will elevate the administrative work that principals undertake. This would allow them to focus on the educational roles that practically all educational policies highlight should be the focus of school principals [20].

We do encourage further studies involving the perceptions of principals in relation to the induction and mentoring program. We deem this an introductory study in Malta as all other studies have focused on the role that mentors or teachers play in the induction phase. This should provide policymakers with deeper insights into the significant role principals can play beyond the administrative role they currently undertake. This will help us look at the induction phase not as separate from the CPD phase but as the initial step in developing the school as a professional learning community, which sees school leaders and teachers working together and learning with and from each other.

Ethical Statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by Queen's University General Research Ethics Board. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest to this work.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support this work are available upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Author Contribution Statement

Christopher Bezzina: Formal analysis, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Benjamin Kutsyuruba:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Software, Validation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Resources, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Supervision, Project administration.

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