

The teaching profession - Michelle Attard Tonna and James Calleja

Opinion

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Teachers are mentioned quite often in local media and are sometimes under attack or criticised as failing to serve the changing needs of society, or of benefitting from too many holidays throughout the year.

There is also a widespread perception that teachers have free time on their hands, as can be evidenced from a number of part-time employment opportunities targeting teachers specifically. Teachers themselves, in Malta, are very vocal about the 'low value' they are being attributed in society, as can be evidenced in the frequent discussions that arise on social media platforms and in the media.

They also regularly voice their concern over the fact that they feel too controlled and scrutinised by the education authorities, in their day-to-day practices and claim that they should be trusted more, as professionals, to do their job in the way they know best.

In our role as teacher educators, we are intrigued by the above, in particular by the way teachers are acting and interacting in, and reacting to this context.

It is important for us to know more about what motivates people in Malta to choose to become teachers, and how these motivations change over time. Efforts to keep teachers in the profession, doing effective work, can only be sustained if one understands the factors attracting teachers to be part of and remain in the teaching profession. It is also worthwhile exploring whether motivation can be enhanced or changed as a result of particular types of professional development programmes teachers engage in.

Within the current situation of local institutions struggling to find enough teachers and with less people being attracted to take up the profession, we immersed ourselves in this topic to explore the factors that influence people to become teachers and to remain in the profession. This article is the first in a series of three, and aims to highlight the factors that influence people to become teachers and to remain in the profession.

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investigating how in-service teachers were experiencing this phenomenon.

We were specifically interested in understanding whether the current state of affairs had a direct or indirect impact on the teaching profession as experienced by practitioners in local schools. In addition, we also investigated how and why other educators (whom we refer to as administrators – assistant heads of school, heads of school, college principals, education officers and other education officials including policymakers) had pursued a different path venturing into a role that took them outside the classroom.

We have thus conducted a research study to understand how teachers in Malta see their work and their career, and presented the results of this study in a seminar organised for educators yesterday.

The research consisted of an online survey, which 1,019 respondents took between February and July of 2017.

Of these respondents, 755 were teachers with a teaching responsibility at the time of the survey.

“ Teachers fare well with proper administrative support. If teachers are supported adequately, they are less likely to resign ”

Very important insights ensued from this study, among which the notions of job and career satisfaction, teachers' disposition for career progression, teacher attrition and teachers' initiatives for professional learning are the most prominent.

For instance, it is reassuring to see that the major source of job satisfaction for the respondents of this study is the act of teaching itself, yet also of concern that only 18 per cent of teachers would choose to remain in the classroom if they are presented with another career opportunity.

These and other perceptions recorded are important to understand the processes of identity and self in becoming and being a teacher. Although many teachers may experience a compassion for learners and a passion for teaching, there is also fear, anger and stress which is inherent in teaching itself, and as a result of the contextual factors they work in.

Job satisfaction and professional morale can be influenced by the public's attitudes towards schools, student attitudes toward learning and the declining status of teachers – all factors which Maltese teachers are currently experiencing.

In Malta, teachers also have little opportunity for advancement and vertical mobility in their chosen profession, and many of them (94 per cent of the teachers participating in this study) do not feel they earn an adequate income (compared to their workload and level of competence) while their prestige is damaged by the sense (or perceived sense) of lack of respect which is often directed at teachers.

An important phase of this research study has been the evaluation of the current educational discourse surrounding teachers, and the constraints and opportunities that teachers in Malta are faced with on a daily basis.

One important recommendation that we could make from this evaluation is that teachers fare well with proper administrative support. If teachers are supported adequately, they are less likely to resign, and structurally initiated initiatives may motivate teachers.

We also recommend that teachers should not experience top-down reforms and frequent interventions, and any reforms or policies introduced should respect the culture in which they are meant to evolve.

For new frameworks to be effective, the cultural and contextual factors that frame the learning that takes place need to be kept in mind. We are also of the opinion that

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context where being a teacher is not necessarily a mark of high social esteem, it is important that the government provides a career path with clearly laid down criteria for promotion which will impact positively on teacher job satisfaction.

Without job satisfaction, the best teachers will continue to leave teaching, compromising quality education. Finally, we trust that the latest sectoral agreement (December 2017) signed between the government and the MUT will trigger positive changes in the way teachers progress through their careers and attract more people to this noble profession.

This article is adapted from a published report which presents the full results of the research study, and which can be accessed through this link:

https://issuu.com/iblmaths/docs/teachers_lives_careers

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